REINVENTING THE STANDARD WAY OF LIVING
Architectural history research in the field of praxeology

Student
Sebastiaan Nieuwenhuizen (4396405)
Chair of Dwelling, "Dutch Housing"
Thesis "Work/live community for self-employed without employees"

I   INTRODUCTION

The course research methods has according to the syllabus the objective to: 'foster a general awareness of the heuristic nature of architectural research, which — serving as a starting point — invites students to critically reflect on their own position within the larger knowledge systems of architectural practice'.[1] In other words the goal of the course is to provide an overview of different research approaches in relation to architecture. By giving this overview it is expected from the students to become aware what kind of research they are doing, so that it will result in the answers they are looking for. In the lecture about heuristics J. Mejía stated that the goal of the architect's research is not to find knowledge, but to make his knowledge grow.[2] Ray Lucas underlines this notion in his book Research Methods for Architecture, as he states that the potential of research in architecture is to contribute to the existing knowledge. This contribution can be ensured if the way in which you ask your question is right and if you apply the most appropriate and rigorous method.[3] The lectures have shown that there are a lot of good methods for architectural research. According to Lucas this doesn't mean that a researcher should restrict to a single method. The importance is to define the research and used methodology, so you can compare and justify the results with other research. Openness and honesty about the process and framework of the research is of importance. By placing the work within the intellectual debate of the discipline it is clear how the results are related to previous done research. This is essential for architecture to progress, so it becomes clear where the results originate from and other researchers and architects can build upon this.[3]

In this paper I will place my own research of my graduation project in the intellectual debate of the discipline. I graduate in the chair of dwelling. The chair describes its aim on the website of the TU Delft: 'The chair aims to investigate the architecture of dwelling against the background of changing lifestyles and new technologies, which make up our daily environment.[4] The chairs research is thus focused on contributing to the knowledge on how we build dwellings, on how people live and on the combination of the two: how can we build a dwelling that fits a certain or multiple way(s) of living. My research is therefore focused on a specific target group. The goal is to acquire more knowledge on how they want to live, what there needs are for a home and how this can be translated into a building. My research is focused on the self-employed without employees. In the Netherlands the amount of self-employed without employees is growing rapidly. As a lot of these people work in their homes they have very specific needs for their dwelling. Besides this they are vulnerable to a lot of risks and are heavily depended on a good social network to receive work. The current building stock isn't designed for people working at home, which can cause problems. This raises the preliminary research question: How to design a building which combines working and living that provides in the needs for self-employed without employees?

II   ARCHITECTUAL HISTORY RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF PRAXEOLOGY

Doing research in the chair of dwelling means most of the time as mentioned before that it focusses on a certain lifestyle. This means that the research is done in the methodology of praxeology: the study of human action and conduct. The main research methods of this methodology are observing how people live or interviewing people on how they live.[5] Because the current cities are not designed to for the combination of working and living[6], these research methods are not ideal to get more knowledge on the lifestyle where working and living is combined. Before 1900 the combination of working and living was the standard way of living.[6] For this reasons the research will be done towards the history of combining working and living. To find out how people used to live, the research is done on the hand of literature studies and the analysis of precedents. This raises the question of how architectural history research can add to the knowledge of praxeology and how this method fits into an established approach on how to engage with the users?

1.   M. Berkers & R. A. Gorny (2019) Syllabus lecture series research methods, Delft: Tu Delft, Fall 2019. (p. 6)
2.   J. Mejía: Lecture methods of architectural exploration, evaluation, and discovery,2019. accessed December 8, 2019, https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/192743/viewContent/1509594/View
3.   Lucas, R. (2016). Research methods for Architecture. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016. (p. 21)
4.   About Dwelling, TU Delft, accessed December 8, 2019, https://www.tudelft.nl/en/architecture-and-the-built-environment/about-the-faculty/departments/architecture/organisation/disciplines/dwelling/
5.   M. Berkers: Lecture Praxeology, accessed December 8, 2019, https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/192743/viewContent/1509577/View
6.   Hollis, F. (2015) Beyond live/work: the architecture of home-based work. London: Routledge, 2015, (p. 1-3)

According to Lucas architecture as a discipline is built upon the idea of precedents, and the close examination of earlier works. Researching existing architecture and transforming it into something new is the way architecture evolved over the past centuries. Even perceived ruptures and leaps such as the emergence of modernism are build upon past models. The research of earlier works seeks to understand the qualities of a building.[7] Clark & Pause emphasize this idea in their book 'Precedents in Architecture'. They state that when you study the history of architecture in a strictly scholarly sense you limit the knowledge to nothing more than names, dates and style recognition. But when you research to understand the buildings, how it came about in terms of design and commission, and how people used it, than history can become a source of enrichment for architectural design. The search in such kind of research is for a theory which transcends the moment in time and can be used to generate ideas with which to design architecture for the future. The technique for this search is the careful examination and analysis of buildings.[8]

Following these convictions, by researching the combination of work and living in cities throughout the history a theory on how this way of living is best possible will be the result. This theory will be compared with the current situation to determine what needs to change in the future so that a suitable living environment can be established for combined working and living. By researching precedents and how they were used, I acquire knowledge on how people used to live. This knowledge can be used to determine how a building can accommodate a lifestyle in which it is possible to both live and work.

III   DIFFERENT APPROACHES OF ARCHITECTS TOWARDS THE PUBLIC

When acquiring knowledge about a lifestyle by doing architectural history research, you put yourself in the role of an observer and interpreter. This has the advantage that you can focus on clear research questions, with clear answers. Another option is to have a fuller immersion into a culture. By doing this you avoid detachment from the facts on the ground, and a more immediate engagement with the people and their lives.[9]

These are examples of different roles that you can take towards the public. These different roles came into play at the same time architects and planners started to research how people live. The first research into this topic was done around 1860. The reason that people started to research how people live was because of the terrible living conditions in the cities, after the industrialization caused a great migration towards the cities. Before this architecture and architectural research was a representation of imperial, religious or economic power.[10] This new found interest in how people live became one of the main focus points for the modernist movement and the origin for a variety of architectural positions and approaches.

The first approach was to see the architect as syndicalist. In 1953 the group GAMMA (Groupe d'Architects modernes Marocains) took the temporary and ordinary workers environment of the shantytown as an example in which they saw the ingredients for a new architecture of dwelling. Their goal was to provide the basic and necessary structural elements which can afford these people the possibility to give a new expression to their own traditional conceptions. The dwelling culture of the bidonville was considered a meaningful basis to rethink architecture. Providing concepts in which worker culture could thrive was considered by them as the main goal for modern architecture.[11] The architects realized here that the unpredictable presence of the user is a threat for the status of the architect. That is why they started doing research on how they could accommodate the lifestyle of the working class into their designs.[12]

7.   Lucas, R. (2016). Research methods for Architecture. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016. (p. 35)
8.   R.H. Clark & M. Pause (2012) *Precedents in Architecture : Analytic Diagrams, Formative Ideas, and Partis*. United States, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons inc (p. xiii-xiv).
9.   Lucas, R. (2016). Research methods for Architecture. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016. (p. 10-11)
10.   Sennett, R. (2018b). Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City. UK: Penguin Books. (p. 21-23)
11.   T. Avermaete (2010) The architect and the public: empowering people in Postwar architecture, HUNCH no. 14 (Juli 2010) (p. 48-62)
12.   J. Hill (2000) The use of architects, Urban studies Vol. 38, No. 2, 2001, (p. 351-365)

The second approach was to see the architect as a populist. The populist architects were opposing the common practice in which designers were seen as a class of experts, who had developed a private way of looking at the manmade environment. The populist countered this by investigating what the aesthetic norms and standards of the masses were and they proposed a new theory for dwelling architecture from this point of view. Two different groups of populist can be determined. The first group, including the likes of Haskell, Venturi, Scott Brown, Alison and Peter Smithson, studied the popular mass culture in order to uncover suburbia's residential symbolism. The second group of populist, including the likes of Aldo van Eyck and Bernard Rudofsky, focused on the values of anonymous vernacular architecture. By researching this vernacular architecture they discovered the private history of a culture and tried to engage with the symbolism of ordinary people. The belief that humans and their lifestyles remain stable over time was the base of their research. This idea suggest that vernacular architecture can offer answers to modern questions. In this approach the architect held the function of interpreter of vernacular traditions and form giver.[13] The user was still seen as consistent, predictable and dependent upon existing conditions, which they are unable to transform.[14]

The third approach was to see the architect as an activist. In many cases the activist architect used his professional skills to represent a disempowered community and resist oppressive forces. Their goal was to call attention to urban problems through hearings with inhabitants and public debates. According to them urban designs should not be based on utopias, such as the modernistic utopias developed by CIAM but on the image of the traditional city. To realize this architects and urban planners went out of the studio and into the streets to fight for social and spatial justice in the city.[15]

The final and most radical approach is to see the architect as a facilitator. According to this approach the housing problem cannot be solved by architects. It is a problem of the people, and it can only be solved by the concrete will and action of the people themselves. The way how people live cannot be determined by architects and therefore the users should have at least an equal say in the design of the building. Architects and inhabitants would work side by side. John Turner even made a plea for architecture without architects: neighborhoods designed with local groups worked better since people were experts on their own situations and were given freedom. [15] With this approach users are seen as creative, they can create their own spaces or give new meanings to existing spaces, architects only need to facilitate them. When users are so close involved in the design process, it is possible to directly respond to their needs and desires. This is very effective at time of construction, but it doesn't necessarily increase the likelihood of the building or space responsive to future users.[16]

IV   POSITIONING AND EVALUATING OF RESEARCH METHOD

The chair of dwelling focusses on contributing to the knowledge on how we build dwellings, on how people live and on the combination of the two: how can we build a dwelling that fits a certain or multiple way(s) of living. This places the research done in this chair in the methodology of Praxeology: the study of human action and conduct. As seen in the previous part there are a lot of different roles that you can take towards the public. In this part I will place my own research method into such an approach and reflect which principles of this approach I adopt and which principles I chose to reject. I conclude this part with a summary to answer the previous stated research question.

13.   T. Avermaete (2010) The architect and the public: empowering people in Postwar architecture, HUNCH no. 14 (Juli 2010) (p. 48-62)
14.   J. Hill (2000) The use of architects, Urban studies Vol. 38, No. 2, 2001, (p. 351-365)
15.   T. Avermaete (2010) The architect and the public: empowering people in Postwar architecture, HUNCH no. 14 (Juli 2010) (p. 48-62)
16.   J. Hill (2000) The use of architects, Urban studies Vol. 38, No. 2, 2001, (p. 351-365)

My research fits within the approach of the architect as an populist. As I try to interpret the vernacular and other ways in which working and living is combined throughout the history to come up with a theory that is applicable to present and future problems. This research is close to the research of the second group within this approach. As mentioned before was the belief that humans and their lifestyles remain stable over time the base of their research. The user was seen as consistent, predictable and dependent upon existing conditions, which they are unable to transform. Nowadays on the other hand it is obvious that because of all the technological developments also our lifestyle has developed over time. This means that in my research I need to be alert if the results of the research are still applicable or wanted in our current way of living.

Research has also shown that users are not consistent, predictable and dependent upon existing conditions. In fact users in general make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules.[17] In other words when people use something they are constantly adapting it to suit their own needs. This is applicable for changing the language when you speak, as it is for rearranging the interior of your apartment. This notion, that people are adapting everything as long as they haven't designed it themselves to suit their own needs, is important to keep in my mind while defining a theory for how working and living should be combined so that it provides in the needs for self-employed without employees.

 This notion asks for a closer cooperation with the actual users or the insertion of a certain amount of flexibility in the design. Because the graduation design assignment is a fictive assignment it isn't possible to get in direct contact with the actual users. That is way my research will also look for polyvalence in historical examples. The term Polyvalence is introduced by Herzberger and he identifies it as a form that without changing itself can be used for every purpose and which, with minimal flexibility allows an optimal solution.[18] Polyvalence was very common in medieval houses. The manor house for example consisted out of a central hall with a series of small spaces around it. All the main activities took place in this hall, from dinner, to speaking justice and sleeping.[19] This idea is opposed to functionalism where each element has a single use, polyvalence proposes a single element that is suited to many uses. By the integration of these kind of elements users are able to appropriate the building to their needs and wishes.

So concluding: how can architectural history research add to the knowledge of praxeology and how fits this method into an established approach in engaging with the users? When the goal of architectural history research is to understand the precedents, how they came about in terms of design and commission, and how people used it, than this historical research can become a source for enriching architectural knowledge. This fits perfectly in the approach of the architect as a populist. The disadvantage of this approach is that it relied on the notion that people and their lifestyle remained stable over the years. Other research has already rejected this notion, but this doesn't mean that the approach isn't still valid. The research just needs to focus on the still applicable aspects of the historical lifestyles.

17.   M. de Certeau (1988), The practice of everyday life. Los Angeles: University of California press. (p. xi – xxiv)
18.   J. Hill (2000) The use of architects, Urban studies Vol. 38, No. 2, 2001, (p. 351-365)
19.   Hollis, F. (2015) *Beyond live/work: the architecture of home-based work*. London: Routledge, 2015, (p. 10-11)

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