

MAPPING A NARRATIVE NETWORK

Research on Social-Spatial Narration of Moments

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Thesis "The spatial tellers"

I INTRODUCTION

Commonly, It is proval that research is specifically used to describe the contextual preconditions of the way an architectural project is framed, which sketches out the spatial, social, political, tectonic state of affairs related to a specific site; it addresses the specific types of knowledge coming out of these investigations¹; but noteworthy, the methods of research, as argued by Jorge Mejia Hernandez, are also expected to address the way this knowledge is instrumentalized², conceptualized or made operational along within an architectural design process³. Through the theoretical development on research methodologies from 13th century, and the rising of evidence-based and practice-based methods came into sight since 1960s⁴, there have been developing with various methods in concert of different critical scope that the term of project is approached.

That said, design requires means of research and representation specific to design. Over the course series of different ‘epistemic frameworks’, they all evidently came into consensus that doing research actually first ‘creates problems’ based on acquired information in relation to which in later design develop specific solutions in return⁵. Amongst them, the approach of spatial narratives presented by Klaske Havik most trickled my thoughts. After the further studying on the relative theory and practices, I can see my research methodologies are related to the narratological concepts and are unconsciously carried out in the way of social-spatial (or called as socio-spatial) narratives, as could be substantiated by the discourses of Pérez-Gómez⁶, Gottfried Semper⁷, Marie-Laure Ryan⁸ and others more recently.

So for the thesis research, I intend to explore the research methodologies to help establish research objectives, questions, and methods that both illuminate and substantiate individual project for the studio of Interiors Buildings Cities⁹. Contextualized within the studio’s freedom, it is quite flexible to determine one’s own ways of research according to his particular concern with the agency of citizens within urban conditions, the conditions of their agencies, manifestations of the political within the city. Personally, my design proposition is to REplace Katendrecht, the harbor as well as the first Chinatown in Europe set up by stranded Chinese sailors over time and now presented as a post-industry cliché (Image1), with a spatial network based on non-negligible social minority—Chinese—in representation of the quality of this original trans-culture harbor in value. Hopefully, the space will provoke the awareness and promotes local and global dialogue among people of all backgrounds that will transcend generational, geographical and cultural boundaries.

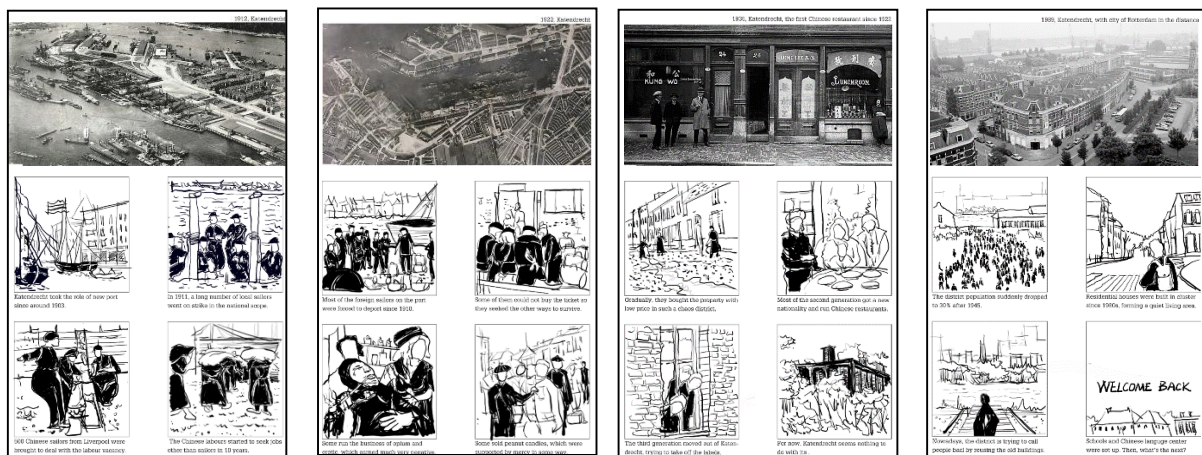


Image1. Moments of Space over time composed to Katendrecht as a story teller (photos via archive and strips drawn by self)

In order to gather information, determine questions and formulate the speculations for developing the design, my research program will include direct observation and interviews, literary studies, analytic drawings and writings hence the most important, narrative mapping, so as to better suggest and figure how these spatial moments can be experienced; this resulted in my research questions: What are the terms and principles for narratively analyzing the place? And how can the social network be inscribed in approach of spatial narratives?

II DISCUSSION ON SELECTIVE METHODOLOG

For setting up the proposed network in the site, it is primary to research the site by dive into the terms of: spatial territories (figuring site-specific characters and zones of different atmosphere), relevant domain and audience (finding places of interest, people who are interested, with emphasizes on how the people perceived and interact with the space), and social-spatial inquiry through stories (speculating what are expected to be the specific suggestions).

Hence, in search for how site-specific atmospheres can be studied and translated to responsible design approaches, after the basic knowledge acquired from archives, I on-site researched by walking around, sketching observations, watching people, talking to them with taking notes and recording footages¹⁰. All can be taken as an ethnographic research, a way of approaching social sciences, which “not only by the ingenious assembly or composition of materials but also by how we measure its emotional depth and richness – that is, how we read and internalize it”¹¹, positioned by Harry Mallgrave. This helps me to get ‘under the skin’ of the design problems and deeper understand the terms, including the relevant domain, process, goals and context of usability, and therefore better suggest a solution.

Terms of spatial territories: Combined with the central notions of Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*—legibility—also called imageability and visibility, the cityscape can be read and organize urban elements into a coherent pattern¹². “In the process of way-finding, the strategic link is the environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual. This image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action¹²”. Likewise, according to the characteristics of paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks, eventually came out of the portraits of different characters in this area. (Image2)

Terms of story tellers/ space audiences: To understand the interrelationship between the place and how the people experienced the site, I interviewed people involved in these six Chinese-related places—the Chinese church, Belvedere storyhouse in which holds Chinese night every Friday, a neighborhood center where teaches Chinese language, Photo Museum in which archive the history of Chinese sailors and so on—out of their own purposes, and for sure each is seeing the territory in his own retina-bias, regarding the space as a shrine or a salon or so (Image3). Therefore, I was able to get interpretations from a subjects’ perspective¹³. Their stories gave me unique insights in how the area would have sensed like, then could I perceive how people sensed around the spatial territories.

Terms of social-spatial inquiry through stories: “Places, are a collective accumulation of social narratives of spaces, and present spatial power dynamics¹⁴”, as said by Susan Forde. Trying to take distance from own perspective and, stand on experiences, needs and wishes of real characters. At the same time, it is supposed to embed all researches into develop atmospheric possibilities of places composing the proposed network: to think about each of the place itself as character: what does it tell? What is its role/identity/personality? In this way, the consequence is thus to develop a storyboard with a series of perspectives showing the different spatial experiences that the building would afford.

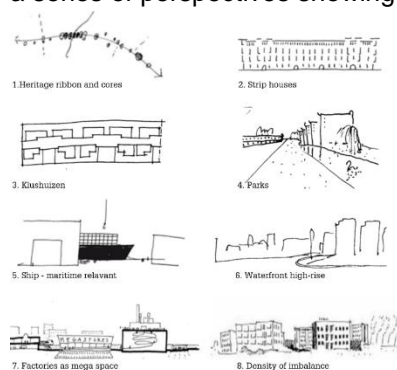


Image2. Portraits of space (drawn by self)

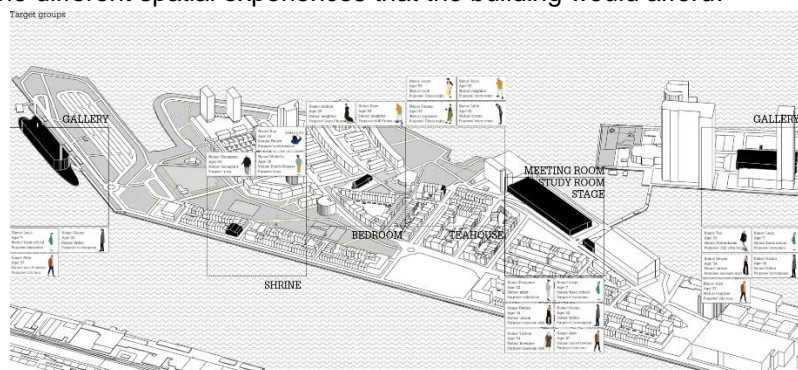


Image3. Mapping people involved in spatial moments out of own purposes (drawn by self)

III REFLECTION ON NARRATOLOGY: FROM PHENOMONOLOGY TO PRAXEOLOGY

Before reflecting on the evolvement of spatial narratives, it would be very proper to cite the words from *Invisible Cities* with respect. Although there are some critical reflections later, undoubtedly, it is a most enlightened reading material from common readers to professional architects.

*“There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening, with the odor of the elephants after the rain and the sandalwood ashes growing cold in the braziers”...
“Leaving there and proceeding for three days toward the east, you reach Diomira, a city with sixty silver domes, bronze statues of all the gods, streets paved with lead, a crystal theater, a golden cock that crows each morning on a tower.”¹⁵*

The invisible cities are very visible and tangible by translating sensory perception, memory and atmosphere, which tint the stories in terms of emotional depth and richness. The poetic narration is like a kaleidoscope literally unfolding the spaces where past and future possibility grow out of the prison of imagination. However, this translation, as Juhani Pallasmaa calls it, was established at the expense of a real phenomenological experience of the architecture that surrounds us. He stresses that architectural experiences are by nature “multisensory, embodied and existential.”¹⁶

At the same year when *Invisible Cities* was published, theorist Yifu Tuan in *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience*, advocates one should systematize the humanistic insights and go to the nature of experience, so that to “design of a more human habitat.”¹⁷ That said, the method of spatial narratives is descriptive, aimed more often to suggest than to conclude.

The evolution of spatial narratives is time-honored in recent decades. As mentioned, the spatial narratives as an ethnographic research, is a way of researchers observing and/or interacting with a study’s participants in their real life environment, and will in return substantiate the reasoning on a specific design problem. In this way, it is highly related to the methods of praxeology and phenomenology dated back from the early 20th century contributed by German philosopher Edmund Husserl. In Husserl’s description, phenomenology was defined as a concept break beyond the physical, psychological and empiricism constrain, and it evoke people’s rethinking of our perception of essences sited in the things¹⁸. Followed by generations of evolutions, the study developed into different fields with their own scopes and methods.

Both praxeology and phenomenology deal with human-related issues, however with different emphasizes. Praxeology ensures architects an objective position, observing and reasoning human activities as a neutral researcher. While phenomenology enables architects get involved into the researched target and learning through experiencing. Until recent decades, phenomenology of existence and sensory perception are two of the most noticeable scopes pushed to the background of architectural discourse. The main star-architects like Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor¹⁹ have conducted a lot of practices in this field.

While specifically speaking of the social-spatial narratives method, it should be more categorized as praxeological methods inscribed in epistemological framework, in my understanding. The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre In his book, *the Production of Space*, develops a theory that “space is not simply out there as a priori category but it is a result of complex social production which affects spatial practices and perceptions²⁰”. The bottom-up concept of daily social life that Lefebvre developed has the potential for sensing the real world we live in²¹.

Triggered by the unconsciously tacit ideas, which right respond to my methods of exploring daily life of network in composition of 6 seemingly independent buildings (Image4), I am asking myself if it is less about the architecture and more related to social science or anthropology. However, the understanding of social-spatial narratives really depends, on the projects. For me I have determined to work on the spatial narrative episteme as the primary step of the proposition. After figuring out the terms and principles for narratively analyzing the place, the pivotal research question remains how can the social network be inscribed in approach of spatial narratives divided into different topics? Suggested by English architects Alison and Peter Smithson in their book *Urban Structuring*, “A town is

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by definition a specific pattern of association, a pattern unique for each people, in each location, at each time²² The network is thus compared to a living organism, while each spatial moment should operate and reflect on the bodily system.

IV MAPPING A SOCIAL-SPATIAL NETWORK

In search for the possibilities of space in social depth and richness, I relate to the lecture of Havik about investigating spatial narratives. By reading more on narratology, as suggested in *Urban Literacy: A Scriptive Approach to the Experience, Use, and Imagination of Place*, to address the different perspectives that a narratives to architecture can provide, “the work proposes a triad of interrelated concepts: description, transcription and prescription” and the terms description, transcription and prescription together “supply a framework to address lived experience and develop tools for spatial research and design²³”. She mentions that this method of research should be seen as an addition to the more common methods in architectural research like phenomenology research and mapping, which are often image based. Like Havik mentions the method described by her can contribute to the very meaning of architecture, but notes that it is hard to describe in purely factual terms²⁴, instead, the spatial narrative adds another layer next to the more factual terms. It will work with the topic of transportable network in the space, since large groups of people constantly move through, utilize the places, perceive the places in different ways (Image3 as mentioned in Part II) and very much so have an opinion about the space. Hence there also woven into a traceable network that should be laid next to the mapping²⁵, as Marie-Laure Ryan also describes.

Therefore I would position myself behind Marie-Laure Ryan's suggestion--a hybrid form of research approaches—mapping and storytelling. The genealogical relations between maps and narratives, and how storytelling is done through maps is just simply with them. A strength of the map narrative is the acknowledgment of the limitations of maps' disembodied view from nowhere in expressing a subject's lived experience, and the remedying tension between visual cartographic purism and additive textual innovation to more fully tell a story. Left out of the conversation on maps and narrative is the ability of maps to distort or selectively narrate the stories that nations tell themselves about their collective identities. Instead, focus is directed more to the literary connections between maps and narrative, how they construct story worlds and fictive geographic imaginations⁸ In this way, I am able to map the stories geographically in the area (Image4). Different from hard data mapping, the mapping of stories makes it visible how the research led to the narrative, and how this in turn is translated in design. Therefore the narratives itself is preferably said not to be seen as a research method, but as outcome of research.

On another hand, as Ryan outlines, terms of strategic and emotional space, and their respective parallels with space and place, are noteworthy to be distilled. Where strategic connections to space often require a freedom of movement, emotional connections to space are often rooted in specific places, as seen Image5. Although the dichotomy of space as strategic versus place as emotional is admitted to not be quite all encompassing, the discussion nonetheless provides a starting point for understanding the general employment of space in narratology⁸.



Image4. Mapping geographic stories (drawn by self)

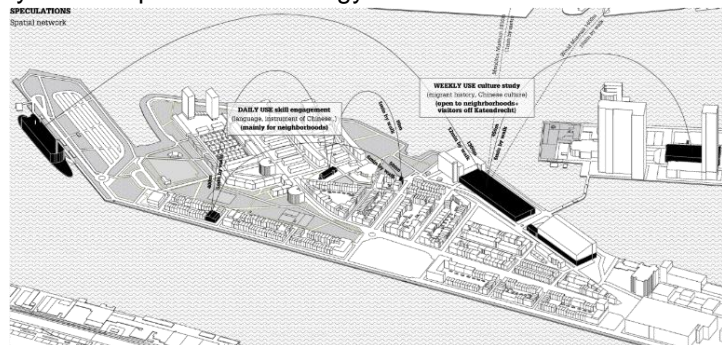


Image5. Mapping social network distilled by strategy and emotion (drawn by self)

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For my project, it will be challenging to suggest on how this invisible network can identify as public aimed for the minority community. As I received various answers to the question on how was Katendrecht experienced back in the days when it was dominant by a mixture of different people with their culture backgrounds, inevitably, I take consideration of own experience on-site now to filter the answers too, since I interpreted people's experiences with my words, as said "the mental map of the textual world is exclusively geared toward the mind that constructs it."²⁶ Nevertheless, I believe it is vital to read the spaces by opening the eyes and ears, of those rooted and inscribed in specific locations. Therefore, it would be very helpful to take social-spatial narratives one-way as approaches to better understand the context hence the architectural problems. And in return, it is supposed to suggest solutions and help potential audiences read and experience the spaces.

To conclude, spaces and places that make up the physical environment in which the characters of a narrative live and move, in search for this, a thorough methodology and analysis is crucial in my design project for Interior Buildings Cities. It is undoubted to always include people when set-up spatial forms into social network, so by overlooking people's stories and interests and using a narratological research approach. So, to answer the research question: What are the terms and principles for narratively analyzing the place? And how can the social network be inscribed in approach of spatial narratives? The methods coming from narrative framework of: 'reading' of people and 'writing' on spaces—description, mapping social-spatial inquiry—transcription, and epistemological suggesting--prescription, together helped to understand and study the site from a collective perspective. The spatial narratives form together an understanding of the social problematique: anchoring the characters of the spatial moments and thereafter routing so as to experience the social network.

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