

MATERIAL MATTERS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF CUREGHEM

Essay on research methodology for the course AR3A160

I SPOLIA

*The unique features and the organic history of a setting demand of the building artist an empathy and an ongoing engagement with the region, until he or she is able to grasp the particular qualities of living and residing in the inherited world there.*¹ S. Miroslav

The Lecture Series Research Methods made me recognise and judge my previously obtained knowledge of methods and tools. The lectures expressed the need of awareness towards the decision's architects can take in applying certain method(s) or sets of heuristics. This also includes the ethical responsibility the architect has in expressing his or her position. The methods discussed in this paper find their origin in my previous education in both landscape architecture and architecture. Firstly, the lectures made me realise that I have mostly practiced *unique* context-led research, but also that the methods and tools I used were never well-considered.² Secondly, it made me aware of the importance of having a collective understanding of methodological research, allowing architects to reflect and built upon different methods and their consequences.

The landscape architecture education at Wageningen University proposes methods that aim to solve social and environmental issues through analytic cartography, data analysis and contextual research, including interviews with stakeholders. The outcome(s) strives to be responsible in enhancing the genius loci, ecology, geology and social climate. The scales are chronologically investigated from large to medium-small (1:50). To my frustration, and as also discussed in the lecture '*Investigating Material Culture*' by E. Schreurs, this led to last-minute material choices and a lack of conscious material expression, hence my switch to architecture.³ In the master program of the Architecture track, I realised that the chair of Interiors, Buildings, Cities offered me a method that allowed one to move back and forth through the scales. Using the model as an interactive tool in the 'thinking-through-making' pedagogy allows the designer to be contextually reflective from the beginning of the research until the end of the design. Nevertheless, after the design was finished, there was no quantitative academic argument that the design would enhance the urban environment. Still, I never designed something that visually responded so well to its context. This made me aware that there are also values in qualitative research.⁴

At the chair of Urban Architecture, I attempt to apply a method that is able to respond to environmental, social and cultural urban issues. The topic of the research is developed in relation to the year theme *spolia*. A term from archeology, spolia are the left-overs or 'spoils' of a building, which find themselves back in a new structure, enhancing the continuity of space.⁵ The site is the neighbourhood of Cureghem in Brussels. Cureghem is on the edge of the residential city center and the industrial canal zone. This edge condition creates a mix of traditional housing, small-scale craft industry, large social housing blocks and garage-like industry. Organically grown, without a masterplan, this mix produced a spatial fragmentation including liminal spaces, spatial improvisations, left-over walls, and a lot of opportunities for unplanned ecological development and criminal activity. The aim of the research is to scrutinise the meaning of spolia through lens of material culture; 'Material culture is that segment of man's physical environment which is purposely shaped by him according to a culturally dictated plan.'⁶ This method allows to research object, architecture and landscape not as mere material bodies but as products of cultural activity. The research will look with an emic approach, from within the social behavior around spolia at the site, and an etic approach, from the outside mapping of environmental data.⁷ This leads to the question:

How can the method of material culture be applied in research in order to enhance the social and material environment of a fragmented neighbourhood?

The following paragraphs discuss the uses and value of the method.

II MATERIAL CULTURE: FROM GEOLOGY TO OBJECT

Before choosing the main research approach, the site was visited for multiple days in order to do interviews and observe the area. A series of interviews and photos assisted in finding the qualities and problems of the neighbourhood. The problems were defined as the deprived status of the public spaces, the lack of security on the streets. The research approach of material culture comes from archeology. It looks at object, architecture and landscape as if they are living beings, shaped by nature and culture and in constant dialogue with its own meaning. Archeologists use the method to write biographies of things. For instance, the meaning of sacred places in relation to gender or social status. (literature!) The maker of the object becomes crucial in understanding the meaning of the object. Furthermore, the later users and final 'rest-place' of the object shapes the life of the object. The approach looks at certain elements in the urban landscape of Cureghem in the same fashion.

The main elements are the soil, the ecology and the materiality. Inside these three elements the past and present anthropological use is revealed through historic photo and data analysis and precise drawings. For the precise

drawings a multiple day on-site investigation was done. Here all the walls and facades are filmed and photographed from both sides. The walls where there is human activity within radius of 10 meters are filmed for a longer time. Later the activity is drawn in a panorama-like drawing that shows the human behavior and historic evolution of the left-over walls. The soil and the ecology are analyzed by observing species of flora and fauna through photography, filming, researching soil-drilling data, geo-morphological maps and literature on urban ecology. The cultural production of left-over walls is researched by analysing maps and photos from the past and literature on the craftsmanship and industry that was present on the site in the past centuries.

In both the shaping of the walls and geology the focus was on tectonic behavior. Tectonics and material culture are interrelated in a way that they both look at the natural behavior of material and the way humans interact with the material. In the book style by Semper he searches for the base-form of objects through its past cultural development. He describes the tectonic as "...the product of human artistic skill, not with its utilitarian aspect but solely with that part that reveals a conscious attempt by the artisan to express cosmic laws and cosmic order when molding the material."⁸ The drawings in the book are corresponding to the way archeologist categorizes the different shapes of, for instance, primeval tools and vases. The culturally defined aspects of the tectonics in objects can also be seen in the geology of the natural landscape. The word tectonic does not only relate to the movement of earth, but also to the geological identity of space. The neighbourhood of Cureghem used to be a river valley landscape. The identity of a river valley landscape is formed by the character of the soil shaped by the alluvial sedimentation of the river. The river has shaped the identity of the usage of space through time; textile and brick factories. The usage shaped the unstable and fragmented identity of the neighbourhood compared to the surrounding urban area. Therefore, the tectonics of the landscape are the main spolia of the identity of the site at this moment. Drawing, filming and photographing from the view of material culture allows to see the relationships between, not only, material and culture, but also, nature and culture.

III TRADITION IN THE CITY

The theory and method of material culture is relatively new to architecture, however the focus on materiality and context is certainly not. Attention towards phenomenology and tactile architecture can be seen as equally concerned with the cultural and spatial integration of materials in architecture.

As discussed before, the tectonic research in relation to aesthetic expression is an established discourse in the field of architecture. For example, in the 'Integrating Material Culture Lecture by E. Schreurs, the discussed ongoing PhD research by E. Schreurs, aims to understand the characteristics of an iron column by analysing the cultural development and the making-process of the iron column. In the matter of spolia, and identity, David Chipperfield's approach in the Neues Museum can be seen as an example of integrating old and new spolia in a functional way. More literal is the recent approach of the office of Lina Ghotmeh. The office describes their approach to architecture as: "*Each of the firm's projects develops from thorough historical research into an exquisite intervention that enlivens your memory and your senses. This is an «Archeology of the Future» where every new gesture is drawn from the traces of the past.*"⁹ Both projects involve tectonic thinking not to portray a constructional logic. It is also a way to construct with cultural references. However, cities are naturally becoming collective spaces constructed by multiple narratives, identities and cultures. In such contexts it becomes impossible to determine which aspects of society are more valuable than others, moreover it might feel narrow-minded whenever an architect builds the design up on one traditional culture or material, dismissing more recent cultures and values.

Furthermore, it could be said that changing values in society have created a necessity in understanding material culture. Especially, the interdisciplinary discourse between landscape architecture and architecture in cities. Gradually more urban designs are inspired by landscape architectural ideas to improve green structures and climatic issues in cities. This urge of connecting to landscape can also be seen in the field of architecture. Simultaneously, there is the urge to revive the appreciation of the pastoral aesthetic. The pastoral aesthetic being the admiration of pastoral beauty; that of man-made, self-crafted, human-scaled architecture.¹⁰ Material culture is traditionally developed in the field of archeology, a field that has always been focused on understanding exactly this relation between nature and culture, human and material, tradition and object.¹¹ Therefore, material culture can be seen as a reaction to the anti-contextual megastructures that have been much debated in architecture and society in general.

Surprisingly, in the research process, the focus was automatically directed towards finding the 'core' contextual connection between nature and culture. The method for this was mostly researching historic data, photographs and cartography. As well as literature focusing on the genius loci of both the landscape and the architecture. The evolution of 'river valley – clay – brick – wall – façade – re-use' can be seen as a biography of the Belgium brick. Over the past decades renowned buildings, exemplary are those by Peter Zumthor, have been designed upon the same line of thought. These designs do not understand the character of the core material but also integrate a new valuable function, honoring a more immaterial identity of a certain context.

IV POSITION

Regarding the expression of traditional identity, the approach of material culture tends to focus more on the past than on future possibilities. In archeology and anthropology this is not problem, as the aim of the archeologist and anthropologist is not to design the future environment. Conversely, it is the responsibility of architects to respond to present-day issues of the built environment. I believe that focusing on future problems through material culture is achieved by solving the absence of existing identities, ecologies and atmospheres. So, material culture might improve the existing issues by solving the alienation from the materiality used in the built environment and absence of identity and atmosphere. However, the end-user experience, as discoursed in the lecture on praxeology, is not actively mapped.¹² Therefore, the research would have been stronger if it would have involved a specific user-related contextual issue. On site, there are issues in relation to social housing and criminality. Those issues could have been addressed with more attention in the research stage.

However, while thoroughly looking at objects, architecture and landscape, by filming and drawing, I automatically observe the praxis of the spaces. It becomes visible alongside which walls people walk from home to work, or, how people interact with green spaces. Therefore, the final detailed panorama drawing also includes human behavior. The method refers to typological research in a way that it researches the evolution of a certain object, but not a certain type. The fragmented and experimental context is too non-typological to do a research concerning one type. The sub terrain and terrain are mapped and integrated in the final drawing. The lecture of F. Hooimeijer “drawing the subsurface” supported the quality of the drawing by understanding the complexity of the sub terrain.¹³ In this matter, material culture can be seen as an interdisciplinary approach that inhabits a certain freedom in its interpretation.

I would like to position my thoughts on architecture in line with the work of Irénée Scalbert: *The Architects as Bricoleur*.¹⁴ In this work he is inspired by Bruno Latour’s ideas of the architect that shall be *premodern*¹⁵, making the best of both old and new techniques and embracing circumstance and accident in his craft, and therefore it is better to add, tamper and transform the contexts that lie before the architect.

Much earlier in the 1960s’, in the essay *Transformation* of Hermann Czech, this position was even argued more radically.¹⁶ In this essay he perceives the masterplan as something that can’t have any influence on decisions made on the smaller scale, therefore urban life can only be long-lasting by constantly transforming the smaller scale. Again, the architect can be seen as a bricoleur, but to be an attentive bricoleur you need to be an archeologist, documenting and evaluating the spolia of the past and the present.

So, how can the method of material culture be applied in research in order to enhance the social and material environment of a fragmented neighbourhood? Material culture can enhance the material environment by thoroughly understanding all the elements, from landscape to material detail, in order to judge the cultural, material and social value of every element in the total composition of the fragmentation. Thereby, the relation between the material spolia and the cultural identities of the neighbourhood can be enhanced to initiate spaces that improve the feeling of social material belonging. Furthermore, it is not possible to make a design considering one method only. It is my position that every context is different and the only way to find appropriate methods is by starting every project with attentive on-site observations. In the matter of spolia, we have to be careful with the decisions so we don’t over-historicize the spolia as mere historic decoration, as Umberto Eco expressed, this is ‘a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories; the absolute fake is the offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without death.’¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Šik Miroslav, Adam Caruso, and Pro Helvetia (Foundation). *And Now the Ensemble!* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2012) pp. 45

² Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016) pp. 11

³ From the lecture ‘Investigating Material Culture’ by ir. E. Schreurs.

⁴ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016) pp. 36

⁵ Richard Brilliant, Kinney Dale, eds. *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*. (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, 2011), pp. 232

⁶ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten* (N.Y.: Doubleday Natural History, 1977), pp. 7 Press.

⁷ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016) pp. 10

⁸ Wolfgang Herrmann, *Gottfried Semper: In Search of Architecture* (Cambridge: MA, 1989) pp. 151

⁹ Quote derived from <https://www.linaghotmeh.com/en/about/>. Also in the 2019 Domus interview derived from:

<https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/gallery/2019/11/10/interview-with-lina-ghotmeh-wouldnt-be-absurd-to-build-a-glass-skyscraper-in-beirut.html>

¹⁰ Nancy Duncan. *Landscapes of privilege: The politics of the aesthetic in an American suburb* (London: Routledge, 2004) pp. 43

¹¹ Alfredo González-Ruibal. *Archeology and the Study of Material Culture: Synergies With Cultural. The Oxford handbook of culture and psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): pp. 132

¹² From the lecture ‘Investigating Spatial and Social Practices’ by ir. M. Berkers.

¹³ From the lecture ‘Investigating Territorial Scales’ by ir. F. Hooimeijer.

¹⁴ Irénée Scalbert, *Architect as Bricoleur*, *Candide*, Journal for Architectural Knowledge No. 04 (07/2011) pp. 87

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1991)

¹⁶ Hermann Czech, *Essays on Architecture and City Planning*. (Zurich, Switzerland: Park Books, 2019) pp. 185

¹⁷ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. W. Weaver, (London: Picador 1987) pp. 30

