

FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Towards a human centred approach

Student

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Chair of Dwelling, "Designing for Care in an Inclusive Environment"

Thesis "Reinvigorating Elderly Homes"

I NEW INSIGHTS

As Raymond Lucas points out, what is always inextricably linked to any type of research is the question of *how* to find the answer?¹ It is the question of which methodology to use. By choosing a certain methodology, you choose a certain way of approaching your topic. This chosen methodology will influence the outcomes, since it consists of specific methods. It is a sort of lens through which the research will be looked at. In school, students are usually provided with specific research methods and adopt them, without further thinking. The lack of a critical consideration and a misconception in terminology is the result. We are never asked to think of why to apply which methods, the rationale for the design approach, i.e. the methodology. Having no knowledge of the different options, means a missed chance in having control and choosing the approaches that best fit the problems that are to be solved.

Jorge Mejía poignantly addressed the fact that during education, students have the idea that research is done only at the very beginning of the project after which the design follows, while actually, it is an iterative process.² Along the way, research could and should be done, strengthening the project at all levels. It would mean the methodology is amplified until the very last stage of the project, including the considerations for the final representation and visualisation of the project. This was quite a revelation, since it asks for a conscious process of doing research in those later stages, of which until now I have not been aware.

In the graduation studio *Designing for care in an inclusive environment* we are imposed with the question how elderly that are in need of care can stay part of society in stead of being excluded and put away in elderly homes. The amount of elderly will only grow in the future and current designs no longer meet the wishes of this frail group.³ During the first weeks of the studio, we got several small assignments introducing us to the concept of human centred and visual anthropological research. It is this way of doing research that the studio encourages us to do, coming from the conviction that people's daily lives are a rich source of inspiration and visualising observations is more convenient and convincing than writing them down. Before defining a research question, the studio arranged a weeklong stay in an elderly home. Observing and diving into the daily lives of elderly would lead to a fascination, e.g. specific research question, to structure the further research. This fascination from my fieldwork week is about the notion of independence in the lives of elderly. What struck me was the fact that the people in elderly homes don't live their lives, they are being lived and because of this their intrinsic motivation is weakened or gone. After studying literature, it became clear that this notion of independence, in combination with relatedness and competence, are key concepts for intrinsic motivation for life, something a lot of elderly are missing. What I want to know is how architecture can play a role in enhancing these conditions. The question I pose to myself for this paper thus is *How can I come to a design that contributes to and enhances the notions of independence, relatedness and competence for elderly?* Because the fieldwork week has already been done at the time of writing, this paper will discuss the already done research as well as the yet to come research.

II TOWARDS A HUMAN CENTRED APPROACH

Without people being aware of it, architecture forms a basic part of our everyday lives, surrounding us and shaping our actions by providing a stage for them. At the same time, architecture represents society and its ideas about how people should live. The best manifestation of this are the different architectural styles that have dominated certain periods in history in which the ideas on how to live also changed. If architecture thus shapes our actions and at the same time represents society, we are like puppets from our own society.

In the past years, housing for elderly has been dominated by the way the care system in the Netherlands was and is organised. Money and efficiency were decisive in the designs, resulting in an

1 Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 36.

2 Jorge Mejía, *Methods of architectural exploration, evaluation, and discovery* (Delft: TU Delft, Research Methods, 5 Sep 2019)

3 Birgit Jürgehake, AR3AD131 Dutch Housing Graduation Studio Designing for Care. Fall 2019. (Delft: TU Delft, 2019), 6.

architecture that is looked at from a practical perspective instead of a human perspective and elderly living in it as puppets. Echoing the studio's *modus operandi* and counteracting the current state of affairs, this graduation research will be based on a human centred approach: praxeology. Praxeology is the study of human action, of man in its environment and the environment as a stage for everyday life.⁴ It is an anthropological method, described as one of the most fruitful areas for a cross-disciplinary collaboration by Lucas.⁵ In his book *Research Methods for Architecture*, Lucas does not speak of an epistemic framework such as praxeology. The methodology he addresses, to which praxeology belongs, is ethnography. This empirical approach aims to unravel what people actually do instead of what they say they do by intensively studying them within their context for a longer period. Studying a specific group of people in a specific surrounding and departing from an exploration of social phenomena instead of measurable facts makes it a context led qualitative research. The most important method for data collection in ethnographic research is this participant observation, complemented with interviews.⁶ As Luigi Buti said: "The best source of information is the person for whom the designer is designing the product."⁷ What way better to look for how to incorporate the very human notions of independence, relatedness and competence into a design, than looking at how humans act upon them or value them in their daily lives?

Before the research question described above was formed, the ethnographic research had already started with a fieldwork week, observing elderly in their living environment and studying their daily lives. The hardest part of this fieldwork was not to judge or conclude too soon, but adopt the role of a neutral observer. Only after observing repeated behaviour (patterns), an explanation can be sought by connecting events or asking the people why they do certain things in a particular manner. It is here that the etic and emic perspective of the observer as the outsider vs the insider alternate, first neutrally observing and only after that looking at it from the subject's perspective. The main analytical tools used during the fieldwork week were sketching (use of space, people, spatial elements, movement, etc.), writing (stories, feelings, atmospheres, quotes), taking pictures (materiality, expressions, decoration, appropriation, etc.) and talking to people (socialising). After the week the enormous amount of data had to be systematically organised to find the underlying narrative. By categorizing everything, some themes popped up that after studying literature could all be related to the three concepts in my final research question: independence, relatedness and competence. With these notions in mind a critical analysis of the gathered data was done, making photo series and converting data into specific analytical drawings like flow maps, timelines and mappings to outline patterns. This analysis pointed out where and why current problems existed, providing some guidelines for a new design. What should be taken into account however, is the fact that the design will not be for the people living in elderly homes at this moment, but in the future. Because of this the findings from the analysis will have to be tested with this new target group and another research into their wishes needs to be done by for example interviewing them. Combining existing theories from literature (Gehl, Hertzberger, Heidegger and Sennet) and case studies should, next to the ethnographic research, provide more knowledge on how these notions could be or in the past might already have been incorporated in architecture.

III FROM WRITING TO DRAWING

If we look at the origins of the word ethnography, it says quite literally what it means. *Ethno* refers to (a group of) people and *graphy* to the describing of something. Its methods, observation and writing, have a long history. Already from the early sixteenth century travelers described their adventures and experiences when entering new lands and meeting new cultures.⁸ Whereas these travelers can be seen as passers through, the role of an ethnographer is really to live with and be part of the studied group. In his book *Writing Culture*, Clifford discusses the authority of the ethnographer. The danger of

4 Marieke Berkens, Praxeology (Delft: TU Delft, Research Methods, 12 Sept 2019), 2-3.

5 Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 9.

6 Linda Groat & David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 225.

7 Luigi Bandini Buti, *Ask the right question. A rational approach to design for All in Italy* (Springer Switzerland, 2018), 8.

8 Mary Louise Pratt, in James Clifford, *Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 35.

this authority is the possibility of the author to choose how to depict a certain subject. This depiction could be very implicating or directing, putting the object in a particular daylight.⁹ Important to note is that the ethnographers mentioned in Clifford's book, like Firth, Malinowski, Goethe and Geertz all studied ethnic groups and produced, as a final product, a piece of writing. So in its original form ethnography really is an anthropological method, not directly related to architecture.

Groat & Wang, in their book *Architectural Research Methods*, also emphasize these anthropological roots. It was in the early 20th century, when anthropologists wanted to understand culture from the natives' perspective, that ethnographic methodology really developed.¹⁰ They mention a woman, Piyyarat Nanto, who applied ethnographic research to the architectural field by studying the changed place experience of vernacular homes in Thailand due to modernization.¹¹ In her study, she used interviews to give her insights on the house's history, social differences, the daily lives of the families and how they perceive their homes. After this, she observed not only their lifestyle, but also documented the physical modifications of the house that accompanied it. The tools she used consisted of photographs, recordings (spoken and visual) and annotated plans of the complete living environment (inside, outside and surrounding), leaving her with appropriate material to conduct an in-depth analysis of the families' rituals, meaning and interpretation of home and the changes that had occurred over the years.

A more recent example is the work of Kaijima and Tsukamoto from Atelier Bow-Wow. Applying "architectural behaviorology", they look from a behaviorological perspective to how people live.¹² By extensive fieldwork and observations they have been creating an assemblage of people's life within cities from the perspective of these people themselves, the users. To communicate their findings, they searched for an appropriate way to express the users' actual needs, desires and usages.¹³ Each of their drawings is unique, accompanied by text and people "living" in the drawn spaces (Figure 1). They show an understanding of the house in relation to the residents and their wishes and do not represent idealistic ideas about how to live. With this they manage to represent the complex relationship between the users of space, the space and the built. The transformation of the architectural drawing from a notational system to something that can be used as ground for discussion, evaluation and as an effective way of mapping the manifold of events that effect and are affected by a design is what they call "Architectural Ethnography."

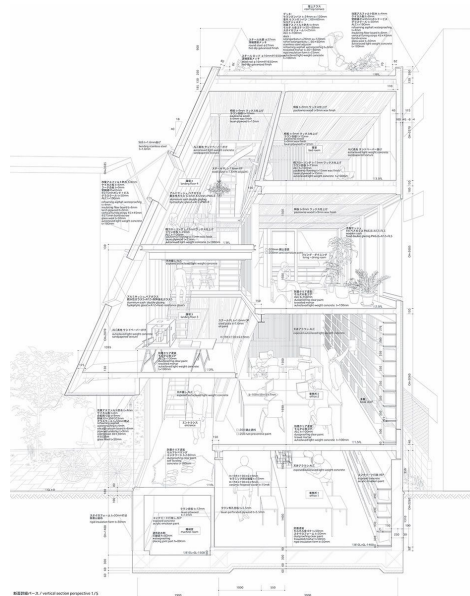


Fig. 1: House & Atelier, Shinjuku, Tokyo (Atelier Bow-Wow, 2005)

9 James Clifford, *Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 52.

10 Linda Groat & David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 224.

11 Linda Groat & David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 226.

12 Yoshiharu Tsukamoto & Momoyo Kaijima, *Behaviorology* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010).

13 Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stalder & Yu Iseki, *Architectural Ethnography* (Tokyo: Toto Publishing, 2018).



Whereas the books of Clifford and Lucas describe a piece of writing as *the* product of an ethnographic research, the work of Jan Rothuizen and Atelier Bow-Wow is mainly visual. This visuality dominating textuality creates a new sort of ethnography: “architectural ethnography”. It uses the same methods to gather data, consisting of observations and interviews, but assimilates it in a different way. The observations are not just written down, but, since the architectural language is a visual one, also sketched, after which shorter writings or quotes complement the final analytical drawings. It is this combination of written texts and visualizations that I think is useful for my research, since it is about how to translate three very human notions into something built.

Since the goal of this graduation project is to design a living environment that is based upon the wishes and habits of a group of people, doing praxeological and more specific ethnographic research seems to be very convincing. Though the research does not comprise an ethnic group, the concept of intensively studying the habits and lives of a group of people does make it possible to really

design something that is human centered and might give insights in how architecture can contribute to the notions of independence, relatedness and competence. As Berkens points out in her lecture, it is about looking at the actual users of a building, not the imagined ones.¹⁵

The care system has for too long dominated the architecture for elderly. It's about time that changed. The use of ethnography will give me the opportunity to study and observe how people are now using their homes and neighborhoods, what places are often visited by elderly, what makes them laugh, what makes them feel at home, like Piyarat Nanto did for the families in Thailand. If I look at the notions in my research question, the notion of independence for example is about being free from the control of others and having the possibility to do things by yourself. To know what makes elderly less independent at this moment and thus find out what should change, the close study of their daily lives is very important. It turned out that after comparing the day schedules of many residents of an elderly home, the people that needed care had 7 fixed moments during the day that they either got food, were being washed, had to drink coffee or participate in an activity. Their ability to choose what their days looked like was completely gone, since the time in between those moments was filled with waiting for the next fixed thing. In my design I will have to organize the program in such a way that it will be doable to give elderly the freedom to choose when to do what. Interviews with elderly and future elderly about what they find important regarding independence should give more insights in what else should be taken into account. Being able to buy your own groceries for example asks for a nearby supermarket, since elderly that become less mobile can't walk that far. By observing how less mobile elderly move and how far they can still go, some design principles and the maximum distance that is desirable can be found.

For relatedness, which is about the feeling of belonging and feeling related to a place, appropriation turns out to be an important aspect. Appropriation is about making something your own, resulting in a feeling of home. It is what Herman Hertzberger also describes as making space, leaving space¹⁶. In the elderly home only the common spaces in which people had put stuff of themselves were frequently used. Observing different target groups and their way of appropriating space, using for example Jan Rothuizen's method, could give me some guidelines and insights on why what is important and also include the aspects that can't be grasped by drawing only.

I don't know if I agree that the visual language is more convenient and convincing than a written one, as my studio claims. An image can indeed be very strong, but writing can be so refined when communicating a story or a feeling. For this I propose something that is in-between, like Rothuizen and Atelier Bow-Wow, but with even longer texts or small stories. Drawings are definitely important for architecture is something visual, but if we want to incorporate human feelings and in design, texts are needed as well. It is what phenomenological studies also embrace¹⁷. A touching story or strong sentence complementing a drawing, makes the image even stronger. I do think that other complementing research is needed as well, like studying literature and cases to find more grounded arguments and examples of how observed problems have been tackled in the past. However I am happy that this graduation studio encourages an anthropological approach to design and I think it would be good for anyone to adopt such approach. Maybe not as the only way, but at least as a part of every design process of which the design deals with people. Only one week of living with elderly has already given so many insights on how they live and what does and does not work, that it is a shame that this does not or barely happen in "real life", at architecture firms. If we could think a little bit more of why people want what, delve into their lives, unnecessary mistakes that make buildings less long-lasting could be prevented.

15 Marieke Berkens, *Praxeology* (Delft: TU Delft, Lecture Series Research Methods, 12 Sept 2019), 58.

16 Herman Hertzberger, *Lessons for Students in Architecture* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers 1991), 152.

17 Klaske Havik & Juhani Pallasmaa, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2014).

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