

BUILDING NARRATIVE

Pilot

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Lara Walter as:
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The Building/ The Translator
The Memorizer
The Observer
The Listener

ACT 1: PROBLEM STATEMENT

Bethel:

I once stood as a young proud, newly built structure, my walls perfectly aligned and my corridors streamlined for efficient use. Every detail was meticulously planned out to meet specific purposes. When the architects and planners left, they nodded with satisfaction, admiring their "finished" product. I was economical, functional, efficient, and most of all I was a real achievement, or so I heard them say...

I nurtured those who entered my doors, providing more than just medical care. I felt important: I was their host, their servant. I made my architects proud by keeping things smooth and did exactly what was expected of me.

In the world of blueprints and measurements, I was, as they said, complete!

Until one morning, I woke up, and an overwhelming feeling of unease came over me. Something felt... missing...

I looked through my corners and corridors, under my wooden floorboards and in hidden basements. Nothing had changed, yet everything seemed different.

That's when I noticed the silence... no crackling wood in my fireplace, no music in the living room, The doors locked, and windows shut... It is only then that it occurred to me: that everyone...had left.

Winter came and my windows froze for the first time. My tiles went cold, as I started crying through my roofs, flooding my floors with tears... When days turned into months, months into years.

I kept repeating to myself: "*I am functional and I'm efficient*" but soon I realized that had kept me standing but had failed to give me life. And I felt like it was only a matter of time until I would be deconstructed, divided, boxed up and sold to the highest bidders... with me, and my memories, erased.

Pause

Just as I had grown certain of my fate, I felt my front door creak open, as a hesitant yet eager sound broke the stillness that had settled over me for far too long. As the first of them stepped inside, the warmth of their presence rushed in. One by one, they filtered through my thresholds, filling my corridors. It was a moment of awakening, yet, after more than a decade, it was unsettling too...

They were...different from the precise architects or diligent doctors of my past. They were young,

energetic and always shifting. And they seemed to bring more chaos than order. I told them I was meant to be a backdrop for serious purposes, a provider of order and efficiency, yet here they were, sprawling across my staircases, sitting on my steps, climbing out of my windows and stepping onto my roofs...

"Excuse me", I tried, "I am NOT designed for this!"

But they set up their makeshift furniture, painted over walls, and hung vibrant cloth from my beams. And they brought music to my gardens...late night conversations to my kitchen.... stories to my living room...

And I slowly began to see that my purpose was not confined to the precise plans laid out by my architects. And the chaos they created wasn't disorder; it was... human, vibrant and messy!

I admit I was afraid at first, there is something daunting about opening up for change. I would not be the first one to be stripped of all my features, walls broken down, leaving no trace of who was there before.

But I noticed, they weren't simply overwriting me; they were *layering* themselves upon me. With each new arrival, I grew richer, fuller, and more alive, and those who departed, left behind pieces of themselves for me to keep. Each contributing to my changing atmospheres, when days turned into months and months into over 50 years...

I became a witness to their lives, and a participant in their day to day in which we both cared for and uplifted each other. I wasn't just a structure, to them I was a Friend!

- Pause -

For decades I've seen architects driven by this relentless need to solve problems, to tackle immediate issues and to build us to be precise and definitive.

I realize, I am one of the few ones lucky enough to have escaped this fate. But should we depend on luck?

I wonder if there's a way for them to move beyond the static approach that dominates their practice. If their design could unfold as a sequence instead of a solution?

So I need someone to tell my story. I ask for help—not to change or rebuild me, but to *translate* me.

Because after all this time, I believe I was meant to be this all along: a story in the making...

So what if narrative, becomes the architect...?

ACT 2: METHODOLOGY

The observer, the listener and the memorizer enter stage, each representing a method to approach the building's narrative.

The Observer, a neutral yet curious presence, steps in, studying the room. He speaks with a calm but intent voice. In his left arm he carries a drawing pad and around his neck an analogue camera. As he turns to Bethel, the Building, he speaks...

The Observer

Hello my friend, I see you.... I see you exactly as who you are.

I make sense of the world around me simply by looking, and as I am informed only by what I see, I am unconstrained by societal or architectural conventions.

My unbiased view allows me to reveal what lies beneath your labels and design. Your staircase becomes a seat when occupied, a step when needed, and a makeshift table in some cases. Your gardens are outdoor hallways in winter, but vibrant living rooms in summer... Both passage and meeting point.

To me, function is a word that is free from preconceptions and can only be truly understood by observing interaction.

Let me tell your story, because only I can reveal your "true" purpose.

The Listener enters, with a highly empathic and emotional demeanor, he carries only a tape recorder...

The Listener:

Hello my friend, I hear you... I hear you in countless voices.

I look further than what's right before me as my knowledge expands beyond the visible.

The words, "space" or "function" aren't just physical to me, they're not limited to walls and dimensions. They are about experience and atmosphere.

I understand you through listening to the people that live inside you, prioritizing emotional connection.

Let me tell your story because only I can understand your value!

The Memorizer arrives, dramatic, melancholic and wise. She carries a bright yellow map filled with photographs and letters, as she turns towards the building, she says:

The Memorizer

Hello my friend, I remember you... without a start or finish.

With my photographic memory I recall thousands of moments, happenings and events in just the blink of an eye. I have seen you grow into what you are, and how every trace left behind has added to your being.

You see, I have the gift of time, as it is not linear to me. I see the world in patterns, clusters, drawing lines across time. I simply cannot see outside of context.

You think memory only belongs to the people that lived in you? *No*, my dear—its woven into your walls, absorbed by these floors, rooted in every creak of your old frame. You co-created them, shaped them, kept them.

Let me tell your story, cause only I can understand your significance...

- Pause -

Listener:

Uhm excuse me... sorry, I couldn't help but overhear. But I believe it's not only the past that gives life to these walls; it's the experiences people have within them.

Memorizer:

Don't you see? When you walk into a room and feel something - comfort, nostalgia, even unease- it's not just because of what is happening in the moment. It's because of everything the room holds from before.

Observer:

You both complicate things with memory and emotion. I have seen these spaces change meaning moment by moment, based on how they're interacted with.

Memorizer:

Observer, what you see is only the surface. You don't realize the value of each interaction because you don't hold memory. You see "true" function, yes, but only fleetingly. Without my records, my patterns, how would you recognize its continuity that binds the space together over 50 years?

Listener:

But people don't live for the past; they live in the present. The spirit of this place isn't trapped in its history; it's currently still alive in all the people living there!

Observer:

Indeed, the reality of a space is in how it's lived... but... through everyday uses and unspoken actions.

Listener:

But Observer, these voices reveal the why behind those actions. Have you never wondered what makes them to climb on top of the roofs, take place on the staircase and gather in the kitchen? Without understanding what drives them, your observations remain silent, just images without depth.

Memorizer:

Yes but, while emotions might bring depth, memory provides foundation. Without that, your individual voices simply fade with time.

Besides, don't they all just tell the same collective story but just in different ways...?

Translator:

Interesting that you mention this...

All three characters look up to the new person that suddenly entered stage.

Listener:

(agitated) Uhm... Excuse me, we are having a private discussion

Observer:

Yes, so if you don't mind...

Mnemonist:

Who are you anyway?

Translator:

Allow me to introduce myself: I ...am the translator,

The listener:

(sarcastically) Oh great... another one we have to listen to...

ACT 3. EXPECTED OUTCOMES?

The translator, steps forward, seeming practical and unpretentious, as they remain calm and patient. They speak in a universal language. As they scrape their throat they approach the building:

The Translator:

Hello my friend... I, understand you, through every single layer

I am fluent in all languages, the tangible and abstract, the emotional and rational, the individual and collective...

But I am not here to complicate things any further, trust me, no... I'm supposed to make all of your lives much easier.

Memorizer:

(annoyed) What could you possibly add to the conversation that will make this less complex?

Translator:

Well, you're speaking such different languages you fail to see your common ground. But as I speak all of yours, let me try and translate this for you:

Observer, you see the purpose of space through how it's used and interacted with, correct?

Observer:

Correct...

Translator:

Listener, you attach value to space through the personal emotions and feelings tied to it, right?

Listener:

You are right

Translator

And memorizer, you're expressing its significance by embodying it's context and continuity, Not?

Memorizer:

Exactly.

Translator:

So, Each of you adds a layer of understanding to the meaning of space. But you just interpret it differently.

Now Imagine if you weren't simply speaking, but if I could make you communicate!

You could draw lines and connections between past and present, between feelings and functions, between visual and abstract. You could enhance each others' views!

My job is to create some sort of framework.... A common language between you three that makes these intangible concepts into something physical, and eventually into a design...

Observer:

Interesting... so with that framework in place, what are the expected design outcomes?

Translator:

Well... there are...none!

A stream of shock flows through the entire campus of the TU Delft, professors are shaking their heads, some tutors are fainting, students raising their eyebrows...

Mnemonist:

(hopeless) Sorry, but uhm, I though you knew what you were doing?

Translator:

Well, I do! But if this building has taught us anything, it is that we should not work towards an expectation but let us be guided by a process.

You see, when we aim at an end result from the start, we're boxing ourselves into a certain mindset possibly missing out on a lot of potential.

But if we approach the research and design as an unfolding story, rather than a problem-solving exercise, we allow the design process to remain open to transformation, and responsive to all your insights as they arise.

Observer:

So... you think good architecture comes from...aimlessness?

Translator:

No, not at all. But we are simply shifting the aim from a fixed product, to a process.

The building wasn't asking to be copied or recreated. It was asking to be an exploration!

And, in order for me to translate her narrative, into something to design with, I need all of your inputs first, open ended!

The next weeks each of you will do what you do best, Observe, listen, and memorize... And I will make sure you keep communicating to one another, that we find overlaps and merge your perspectives.

So let us build a story together!

And see, that is the beauty of narrative

It unfolds before your eyes!

THE END

RESEARCH PLAN: (2X A4 Elaboration to alternate form):

Abstract

Traditional architectural practices prioritizes functionality, efficiency, and problem-solving, often resulting in static and rigid spaces. This approach tends to overlook the evolving relationship between buildings and their inhabitants. Using Bethel, a former hospital in Delft now inhabited by a community for over 50 years, as a case study, this research explores how buildings can act as co-creators of human stories. Through ethnographic investigation, interviews, archival exploration this research shows how Bethel's transformation from a functional structure to a vibrant, layered space challenges conventional design principles and raises the speculative question: What if *narrative* takes over? Or more elaborate:

How could architecture move beyond static and predefined outcomes, using narrative to encourage engagement and leverage imagination as design tool, revealing the potential of vacant spaces to transform into meaningful environments that evolve with human stories and needs?

I. PROBLEM STATEMENT (ACT 1)

Throughout my studies in architecture, I have developed a deep interest in the human experience of space. Over time I've noticed that architectural culture, however, often seems to revolve around more "static" qualities. I argue this stems from a common belief that design is primarily a way to *solve problems*.

While this approach certainly has value, it also risks making the design too focused on a fixed outcome or predetermined solution, narrowing the scope to addressing immediate and tangible issues. This results in environments that may be physically efficient or functional but lack a deeper sense of belonging and meaning for the people that interact with them.

I believe valuable insights could be gained through narrative-driven design: uncovering untold stories and overlooked perspectives and using those as main inspiration for spatial development. Throughout my personal experience of living in a community of 30 people in a formerly squatted Delft hospital I have come to understand space as an ever evolving and living entity, and a reflection of those that interact with it. With over 50 years of existence, this community provides a wealth of stories and viewpoints of over 200 young individuals during transitional phases in their lives. They reveal not just the physical, but also the emotional and social layers of architecture. Layers that truly make this place into what it is, but that conventional design often overlooks. In this context, spatial production must be understood, not as a fixed solution, but as a part of an evolving sequence, that multiple actors contribute to at various stages. (Smith et al 2011, p28). I believe this process requires a fundamental shift: a commitment to embracing the power of imagination as a central design tool. Imagination allows us to move beyond solving immediate problems and instead opens doors to new possibilities—possibilities that are not predefined but emerge through curiosity, creativity, and collaboration.

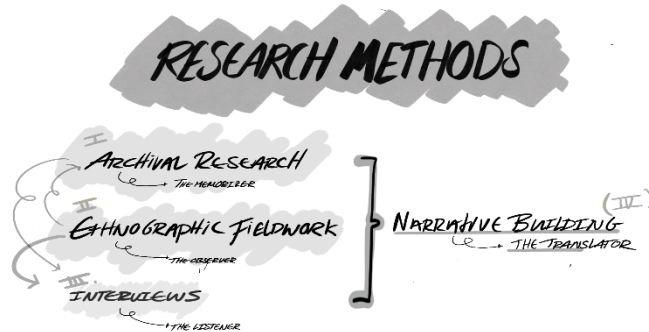
The goal of this project is therefore not to devise a "solution" to a specific problem but to *explore* how a narrative-driven approach to design might enable a more organic and even meaningful form of spatial development to the people involved. I'm emphasizing the importance of the design *process* itself, focussing on how spaces possibly could "emerge" from stories that are shaped by *human* perspectives and experiences.

This doesn't imply that I believe all architecture should abandon defined goals or functional intentions. But, by employing a more open-ended approach in this particular project, I want to investigate how pushing these limits can reveal deeper insights about the relationship between space and human experience. In turn, these insights could inspire elements in more traditionally structured projects, enriching their connection to the human condition, and hopefully enhancing architecture in its ability to meet both practical and human needs by asking the question:

How could architecture move beyond static and predefined outcomes, using narrative to encourage engagement and leverage imagination as design tool, revealing the potential of vacant spaces to transform into meaningful environments that evolve with human stories and needs?

II. METHODOLOGY (ACT 2)

To address the research question, this study employs a multidisciplinary approach inspired by three archetypes from the script: the Observer, the Listener, and the Memorizer, each representing a unique lens through which space can be understood. A fourth role, the Translator, will synthesize these perspectives into a cohesive framework.



1. Ethnographic research (Observing):

- Detailed fieldwork at Bethel, including sketches, photographs, and notes on spatial usage. & Analysis of how interactions shape the space's function and identity, focusing on patterns of informal use.

2. Interviews with residents (Listening):

Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with current and past inhabitants to capture emotional and experiential narratives & Exploration of atmosphere and the intangible qualities of space as perceived by its users.

3. Archival research (Memorizing):

- Archival research into Bethel's history, including the over 5500 photographs, documents, and personal accounts found in the communal archive. & Mapping traces of past activities and their integration into the present experience of the space.

4. Translation:

- Development of a narrative-driven framework that integrates observations, emotions, and memories.

III. EXPECTED OUTCOMES (ACT 3)

The goal of this project is not to work toward a fixed, predetermined output, as its essence lies in embracing open-ended exploration and creative discovery. By avoiding a rigid outcome, the project allows for the organic development of ideas, fostering innovation and adaptability. However, a few overarching outcomes are expected:

• Theoretical Contribution:

A redefinition of architectural design as an ongoing narrative process rather than a finite solution. The research will demonstrate how integrating observation, emotion, and memory can create spaces that evolve with their inhabitants.

• Case Study Findings:

A comprehensive narrative of "Bethel" highlighting its role as a co-creator in the lives of its inhabitants. This will include insights into how the interplay of human interaction, emotion, and memory shapes a building's identity.

• Visual Outputs:

An interactive map or storybook that visualizes Bethel's layered narrative, capturing its past, present, and evolving/projecting potential. Serving as a prototype for translation into design.

IV. TOWARDS DESIGN

The project should generate insights into how a narrative-driven process can transform perceptions of space, offering a model for reimagining *vacant structures* in meaningful ways, and empower people to engage with and take ownership of their own living spaces.

Rather than offering predefined solutions, the project should inspire imagination, encourage ownership, and challenge conventional views of architectural spaces. The proposal for a design could therefore be to design an immersive architectural/spatial exhibition within a vacant structure, in which the building/architecture itself is an integral part of the installation. The design will blend spatial design, storytelling, and human interaction, emphasizing the non-tangible aspects of architecture. This way visitors will explore the vacant building's latent potential, rather than its predefined goal...

