

RESEARCH ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS A TOOL TO LINK THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ASPECTS OF SPACE

INTRODUCTION

The research and evaluation that is necessary to redesign a monumental building is one of a historical nature. As society we value our physical environment based on history, we form a collective memory described in books, films and music or depicted in photographs, statues and monumental buildings. Within the studio of Heritage and Architecture the historical research can be divided in two lines of investigation, into the physical and the mental aspects of space. The physical aspects are based on the material of the built environments and the mental aspects are a social and cultural construction of a society in question. Both aspects require different methodologies and the link between the tangible and the intangible is important in the evaluation of the building.

To form this link the lecture on discourse and narratives given by Klaske Havik and the students was interesting. First of all I would like to mention that I share her concern that in 'our age of fast digitalized information and search media, students have ceased to read classical literature and poetry, and the crucial literary echo in human historicity and life is lost in the very conception of architecture. As a consequence, architecture atrophies into formalism and shallow aestheticization.'¹ Architecture is more than the visual experience, it is a multisensory embodied experience. Words can be a useful tool to describe that experience when it goes beyond a descriptive analyses of the functional and technical aspects. Narratives form a link between intangible and tangible parts of our lives: 'Novels and poetry weave the external physical space and the internal mental spaces of both the characters and the readers into a dialectic continuum'² A narrative can give a complete and comprehensible story about the human embodied experience, it is a memory in words and therefore a useful medium to research history.

Heritage is about memories of a community embodied in the physical environment, it is about social and cultural value. As architects, we research, analyze and make decisions on what is valuable, what should be part of our collective memory and what can be forgotten. Our understanding of what is heritage and how to deal with heritage is changing in recent decades. In a field that goes from preservation to adaptive reuse of monumental buildings the value shifts from the physical and material towards cultural and social value. Research shifts from the tangible to the intangible, from the physical towards the mental aspects of space and so the methodology is changing accordingly. The aim of this paper is to research if collective memory is a useful tool for architects that deal with adaptive reuse and which methodology and medium is suited to link the intangible memories to the physical aspects of space.

RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY

In the analyses of two schools we studied the social and cultural history. We did a historical research on the community that took part in the evolution of the building. The first step was to observe the physical environment to get a grip on the present condition of the buildings, this was done by visiting the site and using documents like the original drawings and historical photographs of the building. The evolution of the building in relation to the users was analyzed, how did social or cultural changes in the community affect the physical condition of the building? This was a research on facts, to try to get as much information as possible using historical maps, photographs and narratives available in the archives and on the internet. In this process of getting a complete story we linked the information we found on the buildings, an ordering, interpretation and selection of relevant facts was made. On the

¹ Juhani Pallasmaa, Foreword in *Urban literacy: Domicile in words, The scriptive approach to architecture* (Rotterdam: na010 publishers, 2015), 11.

² Juhani Pallasmaa, Foreword in *Urban literacy: Domicile in words, The scriptive approach to architecture* (Rotterdam: na010 publishers, 2015), 11.

basis of history an evaluation was made on what should be preserved or can be forgotten. This historical research justified our position on the collective memory of the place. To evaluate these buildings an investigation on a broader perspective was made, research into the evolution of education and Catholic architecture in the Netherlands was done. Without this cultural framework there is no way to say if these specific buildings have value and on what scale they have value. If something is of international, national or local importance makes a difference in the possibilities for intervention in the monumental building.

The methodological debate on collective memory can be traced back to a grave misunderstanding of the concept itself. Collective memory is a social, political and cultural construct made by and for a community, 'collective memory is not history'³, it is a 'collectively shared representation of the past'⁴ As a community we chose what should be part of our collective memory and therefore it is different than individual memory or 'the aggregation of socially framed individual memories'⁵ which is called 'collected memory'⁶ by Jeffrey K. Olick. This distinction between individual and collective memory is often overlooked, 'as a result the nature and dynamics of collective memory are often misrepresented through facile use of psychoanalytical and psychological methods'⁷. In example: a survey or interview that researches individual memories cannot be part of the research into collective memory. Collective memory is a representation of the past which can be found in the "vehicles of memory" such as books, films, museums, music, rituals or commemorations, statues, memorial sites and buildings. When researching collective memory these mediums should be used to look at the social and cultural value. Unconsciously our methodology fits within the concept of collective memory, all our information came from second hand sources, from books written about the community that took part in the evolution of the building, and therefore this was already an interpretation of the past. When placed within a broader perspective the collective memory found could be evaluated and finds his meaning on different levels in society.

The second methodological problem in the research of collective memory according to Kansteiner is about communication, more specifically on the reception by the audience. Kansteiner mentioned in his article that the way in which the collective memory is researched does not look at the way it is perceived by the audience. 'As a result, the wealth of new insights cannot be linked conclusively to specific social collectives and their historical consciousness'⁸ Collective memory is a construct made by society, 'all memories... only assume collective relevance when they are structured, represented and used in a social setting'.⁹ The means of representation, or the methods of communication and media studies are an important aspect of research on collective memory. In a digitalized and globalized world the way in which collective memory is communicated becomes even more important. 'Physical and social proximity to past events and their subsequent rationalization and memorialization do not have to coincide.'¹⁰ Collective memories become a multimedia collage and the communication between memory makers, memory users and the 'vehicles of memory' becomes increasingly complex.

³ Wulf Kansteiner, Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. History and Theory, Vol. 41 (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2002), 180.

⁴ Wulf Kansteiner, Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. History and Theory, Vol. 41 (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2002), 181.

⁵ Jeffrey K. Olick, Collective memory: The two cultures (New York, Columbia university, 1999), 333.

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⁷ Wulf Kansteiner, Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. History and Theory, Vol. 41 (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2002), 180.

⁸ Wulf Kansteiner, Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. History and Theory, Vol. 41 (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2002), 179.

⁹ Wulf Kansteiner, Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. History and Theory, Vol. 41 (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2002), 190.

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RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The evolution of historical research is quite important in the formation of the concept of collective memory. A few concepts will be discussed in chronological order to understand how collective memory became relevant in historical research and which methods can be used to research this phenomenon. The first concept is called the 'cultural turn', it was a reaction against the view that 'a single history of the world can be framed, given enough evidence' it 'encourages focus on local, vernacular realities, rather than for instance, national histories'¹¹. It values what is stored in the memory of a specific culture. Clothing, implements and buildings become important aspects of culture and therefore of historical research. Related to the cultural turn the concept of a spatial turn was developed, this concept was based on the work of Henri Lefevre who said that the 'use of space is at once indistinguishably mental an social, which comprehends the entire existence of the group concerned.' According to the spatial turn 'public history cannot be separated from an engagement with the politics of space'.¹² These concepts form the basis of the development of collective memory because place the link between the tangible and intangible aspects of history. 'Both physical objects along with the subjective constructions of space that they are found in (or that produced them) become key issues in the historical analyses.'¹³ The third important concept was formed by the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, his posited that 'History is the ongoing evolution of a communal consciousness or mind. Communal consciousness is the sum of all consciousness of individuals in a society at one time - only the whole is more than the sum of the parts.'¹⁴ He named it 'Zeitgeist' which can be translated as 'spirit of the time'. A communal consciousness means that people act within the cultural framework of their time, the collective memory will be the representation of the spirit of that time. To clarify this with an example: the modern movement built according to the principles of light, air and space, their buildings had sufficient access to daylight, clean air and enough space for each user. This was the spirit of that time. When this principles are preserved for future generations the 'spirit of that time' becomes part of the collective memory.

MY POSITION IN THE METHODOLOGICAL DEBATE ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Collective memory can be a useful concept for architects that want to research the social and cultural aspects of space, but only if the methods and accompanying mediums can make the link between the physical and mental aspects of this space. A site visit should always be the starting point of research simply because the current condition will also be the starting point of your design. On site familiarity will also give the architect a first impression of the ambiance and it will fuel the imagination of the history of the building and its users. Using historical documents to research the social and cultural aspects of the past is a logical next step, documents have the advantage that it will always be a representation of the past because they are made, ordered and selected by a second hand source. An archive with historical photographs has been made by the community, within this archive they made a selection of the memories they want to preserve and using this source will give the architect an impression of the collective memory of the community. The third important step in researching collective memory is making a comparison between the object of investigation and similar objects on a broader scale. In our investigation we did research on the typology of schools and the evolution of education to place the schools we researched into a broader perspective. This comparison made it possible to evaluate the social and cultural significance of the objects in question, and the scale on which these values are important. Next to the methodology the medium used to research collective memory is important, the medium should make it possible to make a link between the physical and mental aspects of space. Narratives can make this link as has been mentioned in the introduction, in current architectural practice the use of words has been reduced and the emphasis lies on the visual

¹¹ Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural research methods*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2013) 176.

¹² Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural research methods*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2013) 179.

¹³ Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural research methods*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2013) 179.

¹⁴ Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural research methods*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2013) 187.

medium but I would like to argue for a more prominent place for narratives in researching collective memory. Historical photographs are a useful medium too, according to Daniel Sherman: 'Sight is the only sense powerful enough to bridge the gap between those who hold a memory rooted in bodily experience and those who, lacking such 'experience,' nonetheless seek to share the memory.' I would argue that narratives have that power as well and that 'images depend on words to provide them with meaning'¹⁵, but I agree that the visual experience is powerful and should be used in the research on collective memory. The last medium that will be discussed is the drawing, certain forms of drawings like sketches or diagrams can make the link, but only when these drawings reduce the physical space to its mental essence or ambiance.

The current methodology used by the Dutch monumental agency (Rijksdienst voor cultureel erfgoed) focuses on the preservation of monumental buildings, when they should focus on the adaptive reuse. Value is assigned to the physical aspects of space, specifically to the material used in the monument. In their evaluation the agency consider the social and cultural aspects but only if they lead towards specific materials or technologies used. One of the schools in our research is a national monument because the architecture of the façade represents Catholic architecture of that time, but the fact that it has two identical entrances for different social classes within the community is overlooked as a cultural value that represents the collective memory of the Catholic community. In recent decades the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage became a relevant topic, adaptive reuse instead of preservation because the original function had to change due to societal changes. The original way of evaluating heritage was no longer suited, when the focus lies on the preservation of material the room for intervention is limited and exactly this intervention is necessary to change the function. Architects started to look at the spirit of the place, in order to grab the essence of what should be preserved and make room to forget. Collective memory can be a useful tool in the transition between preservation towards adaptive reuse. The former factory complex of Philips in Eindhoven and the mining complex of Zeche Zollverein are good examples where research into collective memory leads towards social and cultural evaluation and possibilities for redevelopment.

Architects should always be aware of the cultural framework in which they make their design, especially in the field of Heritage, where culture and representation play a central role. Research on collective memory and the relation between the physical and mental aspects of space is important because the need for identity remains in a world where this link is getting more complex due to globalization and digitalization. Research into collective memory can help a community to preserve its identity, to maintain the relation between the community and the place they live, to make them feel at home.

At last I would like to mention that architects have a double function when it comes to collective memory, they are the memory users when they do research on social or cultural history and they turn into memory makers when they assign value to certain parts of history. Being aware of this double function and the methods and mediums that could be used to research and make collective memory is essential in the process of adaptive reuse of monumental buildings.

¹⁵ Wulf Kansteiner, Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. History and Theory, Vol. 41 (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley publishers, 2002), 191.