

EXPERIENCE, MAP, PLAN

How to Engage Territorial Scale Research beyond Mapping

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I INTRODUCTION

The relevance of discussing different research methods is to be found in the very definition of “research as an expanded field of possibilities”¹. The research here mentioned is the “big R research”, as identified by Frayling², “whose subject or object exists outside of the person conducting the research and leads to discussable and shareable knowledge”³. Indeed, the importance of methodological discussion is exactly in the possibility to go beyond individual achievements reached via certain methods, embracing the potentialities that sharing a process could unlock. Therefore, being aware of the specific approaches that one could be using becomes almost a morally mandatory act towards the peer’s community – and beyond: research is ever evolving and transforming, thus to explicit one’s processes is to make these changes available for others to further develop. Moreover, the call for “openness and honesty about the process and framework”⁴ becomes topical within TU Delft, which offers a context characterized by such an impressive mix of international students, all coming with the most various and diverse backgrounds in education.

The organization of this faculty around several Chairs – each sharing a specific approach to Architecture – finds its *raison d’être* only in the possibility for students to consciously choose an explicit research-design approach, thus allowing everyone to follow the most suitable track according to their individual fascination or will. On the other hand, it is the role of students themselves not to accept those methods as given, but to critically position themselves to eventually challenge or embrace them, reflecting on their meaning, history and evolution, thus applicability to the real world.

The Transitional Territories Chair, hosting an interdisciplinary studio – architecture and urbanism – needs to make its methodological choices very evident. Therefore, it clearly identifies the main discriminant factor between urbanism and architecture – which used to be one single subject – in the understanding of their scales: indeed, both disciplines find common ground in their perception of space in different dimensions and extensions, which are finally represented through the process of drawing-mapping⁵. In any case, within the studio’s approach, both the design phase and the research process are understood as reaction to certain – site – conditions. Thus, this “site” is determined to be the “territory of the North Sea”. The studio finally aims to research on the specific understanding of its context – within a wide range of subjects such as natural phenomena, societal issues, political crisis – to then give it a precise definition: thus, context-led research is the proposed method.

Therefore, my thesis wants to further study the meaning of a “territory on sea”, or better the phenomenon of the *territorialization* of the sea. It appears to be an oxymoron, being the notion of territory ontologically rooted on land⁶, coming from the Greek notion of *némein* – *νέμειν* – which implies (1) to claim, appropriate; (2) to divide, distribute; (3) to graze, produce, exploit⁷. This sequence of actions, assumed to be the base for the definition of a geographical area as a – political, social, natural – territory, can be interpreted as a metaphor for growing rationalization. The definition of a territory indeed moves from a first exploration/experience of an unknown space, to mapping/control it and finally master-planning/ordering it. How can this sequence be applied to the sea, which is the limit-

¹ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 21.

² Christopher Frayling, *Research in Art and Design* (London: Royal College of Art, 1993), 13.

³ Selena Savic, “(What) is Research Appropriate to Architecture?”, *Contour* 1, (June 2014), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280880026_What_is_Research_Appropriate_to_Architecture

⁴ Luca, *Research Methods for Architecture*, 21.

⁵ Within the extensive studio literature: James Corner, “The Agency of Mapping” in *Mappings*, ed. Denis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 231-252; Laura Kurgan, *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology and Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2013); Jill Desimini and Charles Waldheim, *Cartographic Ground* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2016).

⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth* (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2003; first ed. *Der Nomos der Erde*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1950); Massimo Cacciari, *Geo-filosofia dell’Europa* (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 1994).

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea* (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2015; first ed. *Land und Meer*, Berlin, 1942).

less place of freedom – or will of freedom – by definition⁸? Is the territorialization of the sea, which we are witnessing today, dooming water to the same very fate of land, after centuries of urbanization⁹ - namely the almost complete alienation of the individual? Therefore, being the irrational sea-scape gradually transformed in a rationalized “land” of exploitation, my thesis wants to explore if there are any possibilities for a new notion of territory to be applied on the sea, challenging the coexistence of its irrational and rational components. However, this question raises a very topical methodological problem: if mapping the context – as the most direct way to read a territory – is meant to be a tool of rationalization and control, how to draw or map a territory in its irrational components? How to map something without ordering it?

II CONTEXT-LED ANALYSIS AND/VERSUS DIRECT EXPERIENCE

If the mapping process is fundamental to the understanding of big scale events and phenomena within the sea-territory, on the other hand it is not possible to deny the need to perceive – and then draw – a territory in its irrational elements, beyond mere context data: “the map is not the territory”¹⁰. Already envisioning the possibility for students to critically embrace different methods beyond context-analysis through territorial mapping, the studio organized a “nomadic” field trip, allowing the intense direct experience of different kinds of coasts, as well as the crossing of the sea via ferry, which turned out to be a very crucial moment. Therefore, it is possible to define my research method as composed by two different moments, separated by the ferry trip: a first one (A) based on context-led analysis through *rational* territorial mapping and a second one (B) which is instead based on direct experience and can be described as *irrational* space navigation or performance.

(A) Embedded in the studio organization is a first phase of collective mapping of the North Sea, eloquently named “Atlas”, which serves as a common background for any future thesis development. Students are organized in groups for the context led research; to each team of four is assigned one of six lines of inquiry, to develop within a flexible scheme of two-plus-one moments: cartography and de-construction phases, and a last projection phase – this one being the very speculative proposal of alternative future scenarios. The group I was part of was appointed as “the Oceanic Project”. The aim was to map territories as political technology¹¹, thus as expression of power: indeed, “space only becomes territory through acts of bounding and making visible”¹², which are also necessary to identify a power-scape. Moreover, being power a very vague element to map, the group organized the context-based mapping as follows: the first phase of construction as a quantitative context analysis of visible consequences of power presence or absence, while the second phase of de-construction as a qualitative reorganization of data based on the dual nature of a territory as either island of power or productive-forgotten edge.

(B) However, an extensive context led research was proven to be not enough to really understand the sea as a territory or power-scape. Indeed, the experience of crossing the sea – a five hours ferry from Le Havre to Portsmouth, leaving before the sunset and landing at night – made immediately clear what the maps – and the context represented in the maps, at different scales – were not able to express after a month of analysis. It is not possible to observe the transformation of the sea-scape in time from the fixed point of view of a map, since the sea is ontologically a time-less environment made for movement¹³.

The representation of the irrational via mapping, the main analytic tool supported by the studio, appears thus to be limited and limiting; on the other hand, the direct navigation of the territory, which led to the fruitful experimentation of several spontaneous performances on the ferry

⁸ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Schmitt, *Land and Sea*.

⁹ Ross Exo Adams, *Mare Magnum: Urbanization of Land and Sea* (Chicago, 2015).

¹⁰ Alessandra Ponte, “Maps and Territories”, *Log*, n.30, 2014, 61-65.

¹¹ Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹² Corner, “The Agency of Mapping”, 222

¹³ Schmitt, *Land and Sea*.

deck – as well as documentation in photos and videos – is not enough alone to support a serious wide-scale research on the meaning of territory itself: it is perhaps the moment to renovate the former with an hybridation from the latter.

Below: one of the maps produced by the Oceanic Project group on the power-scape (left) and a photo taken in the middle of the English Channel while performing on the deck of the ferry (right).



III RATIONAL MAPPING AND IRRATIONAL NAVIGATION: SCIENCE OR ART?

The most common meaning for a territorial map is to measure a geographical area, or generally to give order – physical and mental – to a place; however, being an artefact – thus produced by someone – a map is intrinsically subjective, proposing a *man-iplulated* representation of reality. “Mapping is a fantastic cultural project, creating and building the world as much as measuring and describing it”¹⁴: in the oxymoron *creation-description* lays precisely the very definition of context-based territorial mapping, meant as a rationalizing tool but necessarily subject to individual irrational perception – or to state imposed narratives. Indeed, maps have historically evolved from mythicist tools to trace the exploration of known and unknown worlds to standardized medias to “measure and control”¹⁵ a territory: an “intellectual weapon of the state system”¹⁶, thus a very useful element to tell a univocal biased story of any context – an imposed autocratic narrative to strengthen political or economic power on an area, or to advance claims on others. Thus, in our plural societies, a question arises: if today, mapping can be still an appropriate tool to measure and narrate our context(s), or

¹⁴ Corner, “The Agency of Mapping”, 213.

¹⁵ Stuart Elden, *Terror and Territory* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

¹⁶ John Brian Harley, “Silence and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe”, *Imago Mundi* 40 (1988), 59.

even if it is possible to analyze our context(s) at all. Two examples will be given: the introduction of open-source platforms such as GIS (Geographic Information System) – allowing to quickly match geographic geometry to almost any kind of data – questions the whole traditional conception of mapping as context-based biased narrative; on the other hand, relatively new theories such as space syntax – which re-interprets spatial features in an attempt to maximize efficiency in people’s behaviors and paths – uses the very same data in the opposite way, moving towards a hyper-univocal *autocratic* interpretation of the context which will eventually shape the same context in return.

In both cases, the mapping approach and thus the narrative that comes out of it becomes the very relevant subject, while the physical context as an entity disappears behind its own representation. Therefore, it is clear how the choice of an appropriate method for the study of the territorial scale becomes topical. To unmask this wicked circle of representation, the understanding a territory/context beyond maps needs to be overcome. It could be even argued that mapping is not the most appropriate tool to measure and claim a territory: “before erecting menhirs [...] men possessed a symbolic form with which to transform the landscape. This form was walking”¹⁷. On this line of thinking, many groups – often labeled as artistic avant-garde and not as architects – tried to rediscover the meaning of direct personal experience as a subjective practice to deconstruct the rational/productivist structure of the territory. More precisely, the last century has been very breed to this sort of experimentations. Many “anti-walks”¹⁸ have been proposed and completed: beginning with the Dadaist and Surrealist de-ambulating visits to the “banal city”, then moving to the unconscious city of the Lettrists, later Situationists – the drifting practice of “*la Dérive*” – and all the nomadic readings of the territory which came out of it, and finally the more recent explorative approaches of Minimal Art and Land Art, from Gordon Matta-Clark holes to Richard Long lines, until the floating piers of Christo. Performance Art can be also be included, for instance with Abramović and Ulay’s *The Lovers/The Great Wall Walk*: anyway, artistic performances, not architectural research.

However, the map as a tool to “objectively” narrate the context of a territory could be strengthened or replaced by the very subjective personal experiences of groups or individuals, who propose methods or paths which can be potentially followed by everyone, opening to very innovative approaches to the understanding and then study of contexts. Wandering in the landscape could become a research practice. On the other hand, most of these experiences have become – or are perceived as – only an artistic *capriccio*, denying their scientific meaning, relegating them as mere performances.

IV BEYOND THE DICHOTOMY

The current condition of territorial/context research appears therefore clear: either a rational context-led approach is followed, resulting often in a series of maps, which express a presumed objectiveness but still univocally manipulate the image of reality; or an irrational navigation of space is proposed, thus involving performances which more often are labelled to belong to the field of experimental arts or avant-garde, therefore expressing a consciously subjective but perhaps wicked perspective on the same context. Even though the latter is often seen more as an artistic practice than a scientific approach, both (should) own the status of research methods; moreover, in both cases, their consequent analytical tools – maps and performances – show limitations: hence, the need to “break down dichotomy”¹⁹ of objective and subjective, rational and irrational.

What is being here proposed is a re-framing of the territorial/context problematic, and thus of the understanding of the territory, hybridizing traditional context-led research with direct explorative practices. Therefore, it is not the context-led research to be contested in its ideals, but the modalities to be followed and analytic tools to be used. For instance, walking as an ideal means to explore

¹⁷ Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: walking as an aesthetic practice* (Ames: Culicidae Architectural Press, 2017; first ed. *Walkscapes: camminare come pratica estetica*, Torino: Einaudi, 2006), 25.

¹⁸ Careri, *Walkscapes: walking as an aesthetic practice*, 67.

¹⁹ Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, 10.

relationships between time, distance, geography and measurement²⁰: nothing more proper to study a context. Getting oriented or/and lost could be considered as an appropriate technique to study someone's surroundings.

However, a question of scales arises. Personal experience appears to be limited in the potentialities of its application by the simple factor of the extension of space. On the other hand, technological progress helps both in the tangible tools to enhance physical experience and in the digital resonance to spread performances. For instance, most of the recent work by Dutch Artist collective Satellietgroep²¹, active since 2006, involves research and performances on very wide scales – mainly sea and coastal transitions – which are always studied through the winning mix of very personal and subjective explorations of specific sites and technological support by scientists and local institutions. Among other performances, standing 13 hours in sea water for a full tidal shift resulted possible for the American artist Sarah Cameron Sunde only after months of analysis of local data and maps; being invited by Satellietgroep within their research project on Dutch coastal dynamics – the understanding of the Netherlands as the archetype territory for the relation between man and water – Sunde's contribution could be described as actual territorial context-led research.

Therefore, the "solution" here proposed is to reconsider context-based mapping and the territories it represents, defining them as "maps AND territories: [...] the logic of *and* introduces the possibility of moving between things"²². A map could not necessarily be the most appropriate nor the most effective tool to always represent a territory, which is indeed something existing beyond the map itself. If those which are today considered as artistic works and performances could be raised (again?) to the status of actual scientific research tools, perhaps we could reinvigorate context-led research with new opportunities and different perspectives. Suddenly, mapping itself would not be necessarily associated to dry zoning plans anymore, but it would become a multi-scalar transversal tool to also express new untraditional categories.

²⁰ Clarrie Wallis, *Stones Clouds Miles: A Richard Long Reader* (London: Riding House, 2016).

²¹ "About Satellietgroep", Satellietgroep, last modified July 31, 2018, http://www.satellietgroep.nl/about_satellietgroep/1

²² Ponte, "Maps and Territories", 65.

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