COMPARATIVE METHODS AS PRIMARY APPROACH
The approach and use of comparative research methods in architectural location studies

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I DESIGN AS RESEARCH RESULT

Architecture is a profession that essentially requires you to know a little bit about everything, which in turn makes it extremely complex. There are no exact definable truths, instead there are many solutions for the same problem. The outcome of the solution is defined by the (potentially extremely focused or extremely wide) research that powers it. Research can be done objectively and approach a variety of topics that may or may not always be directly related, while still shaping a workable background for the future process. But research can also be done on a more subjective basis, and only touch the subjects that you as a designer are interested in; it likely becomes more in-depth, but can also be considered as selective and not thorough. It proves that there is not a singular approach towards architectural research; however, they emphasize the importance of the methodology in the process development.

The lecture series emphasized on this importance of a targeted methodology in architectural research, and demonstrated a broad perspective of approaches. This provided me with an awareness that the methodology influences the value of the research outcome, and thereby the future design process. Understanding this now, enabled me to focus more on the design project itself as a catalyst in an environment and not so much on my personal choices and intentions. It resulted into a more thorough look at the site, design brief and the (spatial) needs that come with it; transforming the (yet to be designed) project from a multifunctional building into a social hub for a fragmented region.

The graduation studio that I am participating in is called Public Condenser and is part of the chair Public Building. It takes place in either of two locations, The Hague (The Netherlands) or Copenhagen (Denmark), and is about the role of public buildings as framework for meeting and interacting by providing a wide arrangement of functionality under one roof; hereby enhancing the quality of life of both individuals and communities by encouraging a dynamic experience. The studio provided us with a rough design brief that is open for changes (given that changes are argued), and the restriction of either of the site locations in The Hague or Copenhagen. Given was that the first two months were purposed for researching the main features of both locations, so a motivated choice for using one of the sites can be made. Since all 24 participants in the studio are using the same sites, in an effort to prevent researching things twice, this research will be done as a group where the participants are divided into four topics: city, connection, people and power. Working in groups of three, I was part of the connection group. The goal of the research was therefore targeted around the connectivity of the site with its surrounding throughout different perspectives and scales.

II METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

A first step into understanding what methodological approach best suites the research, is to analyze the given of ‘connection’ and what this means. We (as a group of three) looked into the definitions of words such as connectivity, mobility, network and infrastructure to be able to formulate a stance on the topic. Doing this resulted into a series of research questions, such as: why and how does one access the location? What is the current infrastructure that allows to enable this movement? Is this infrastructure efficient? Are there future developments aimed towards optimizing these connections? The answers on these questions proved to be interlinked through different scales, where small connections would often relate to a broader context. This directly resulted into analyzing the sites and their surroundings through five different scales: European (XXL), national (XL), city (L), neighborhood (M) and the site itself (S). Etic and emic research both proved useful, as different scales required different perspectives. For example, on a European scale a location might be a trading hub and where analyzing physical connectivity with a top-down perspective comes to mind, whereas on a site scale it is more about the users of the site, their origin and how they navigate across the area; requiring a bottom-up approach. This combination of research enabled us to connect the site with its context, where it would otherwise remain independent.

Inspired by the idea of visualizing data in the same representational way throughout the different scales, we came across the idea of comparing the scales in The Hague and Copenhagen face to face in the same similar graphical view. This idea was inspired by Paris vs New York[1], a book by Vahram Muratyan with visual representations of things (often stereotypical) in Paris and New York, where they are directly compared on facing pages. By identifying, defining and visualizing typologies for the researched data in both The Hague and Copenhagen, a direct comparison can be made, allowing the reader to directly see and understand the differences which leads to the possibility of shaping an idea of the social and physical situation of said place. This methodological led research became the critical and leading element in order to illustrate the comparative nature of our research. By comparing data throughout the five scales in the same visual manner, such as done for the stereotypes in Paris vs New York, the typologies stood out and were recognizable throughout the final research book.

FIG 1: A COMPARISON FROM PARIS VS NEW YORK (2012)

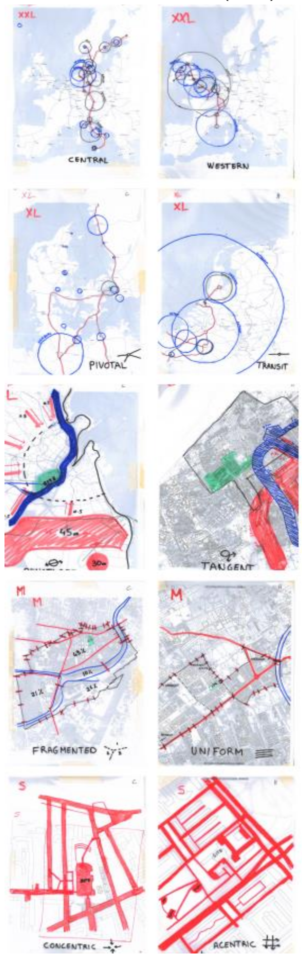

FIG 2: EARLY SKETCHES OF COMPARISONS THROUGH THE SCALES IN OUR RESEARCH

All things considered, the described research process of comparison between The Hague and Copenhagen is thereby applied in typological studies. The use of comparative research methods in typological studies is at an all-time high and becoming more used and accepted by academics, as suggested by Esser & Vliegenthart (2017, 1-3). They argue that increased digitalization of data and media brings forth increased accessibility and provides frameworks for comparing data with existing cases. In turn, these digital frameworks don't always provide space for new typologies, where potentially valuable data is discarded from analysis.

III COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AS PRIMARY APPROACH

Comparative research analysis can be considered as a way of simplifying data. By placing research data in a certain context, it helps to understand what is going on by referencing it to something that is already known. This corresponds with findings by Landau (1981, 112), where he mentions that it is human nature to simplify, but it brings a risk: the act of doing so adds subjectivity due to a certain way of understanding. To prevent this, one could have a system of statements that function as a framework; essentially a set of criteria on which the researched data should be questioned. Esser (2014, 15-17) emphasizes how these sets of criteria ought to be applied through different theoretical frameworks, but should be adapted per case to prevent the potential limitations by the selected framework.

These theoretical frameworks have always existed through the history of comparative research. As Lijphart (1971, 682-684) wrote, it is important that by approaching findings through comparative research it is clear how the research will proceed, the question however remains what exactly will be compared. Lijphart (1971, 682-684) argues that the comparative approach is originating from the idea that we as humans will always compare things to what we already know. Defining ways to do research by applying a comparative method essentially comes down to deciding what will be compared, and what it is compared to.

The main concerns that Lijphart (1971, 685-691) has for the comparative concern is the availability of cases and the many variables that come along with those that are available. These concerns are directly related to each other, it makes the available cases difficult to compare due to differences in variables. He therefore suggests the use of comparative studies as a secondary approach, as ways of verifying traditional, statistical research.

However as time changed, Blumler, Mcleod, Rosengren (1992, 3-7) argue that based on developments in the digital era (in the early 1990s, the rise of the personal computer) that the comparative method certainly has increased potential as primary approach due to its wide-spread availability, effectiveness and productiveness, yet consider it not quite reliable. Digitalization of data has most certainly increased the number of available cases and the ability to locate them based on entered variables; hereby solving one of the two issues that Lijphart (1971, 685-691) outlined.

Esser & Vliegenthart (2017, 5-7) redefine the concerns made by Lijphart (1971, 685-691) with the new digital era in mind, however still emphasize on the still existing subjectivity that case variables bring with them. Essentially, digitalization increased the accessibility of comparative research except does not solve the issue of having comparable case variables. This issue is especially recognizable in the field of archeology, as it is the direct reason for Lewis R. Binford to write his paper *Archeology as Anthropology* (1962) in which Binford (1962, 217-220) argues that archeologists tend to treat found artifacts in a similar manner and compare them within the same existing social framework. He therefore proposes a new framework for comparison in which different categories of variables should be considered, attempting to eradicate subjectivity by researchers, that might discard valuable information.

The same issue is recognizable in the thematic research on the topic connection that was conducted by our research group. In attempts of staying true to the developed methodological approach, an issue arose during data gathering where we found useful data for one site while not being able to find it for the other site. Since it did not fit the framework that we set out for ourselves, we ended up discarding potentially useful information. The framework required us to have data for both sites, so both sites could be framed in the same perspective, in order for the comparative study to be as effective as possible. However, by separating variables, as suggested by Binford (1962, 217-220), throughout different scales in our research (to later connect them together) it opens up the ability for the reader to interpret the research as it is; without having our subjectivity intervene. The concluding suggestions that are made therefore emphasize on the data that is there now and suggest how new (or changing) variables could influence the outcome of the research. Essentially, the research has an open ending that is open for future research and subjective interpretation.

IV COMPARATIVE RESEARCH METHODS IN LOCATION ANALYSIS

The studies regarding comparative methods and its process through recent decennia, with it being at a never before height due to technological innovations, relate to the lecture by Dr. Fransje Hooijmeijer[2]. Hooijmeijer argues about the use of technology in architectural research or design studies, and claims that researchers potentially might lose the connection to the things they are researching; it has never been this easy to find data online through a search engine, compared to previously spending months of outdoor time researching on site. However, she also emphasizes on the potentials that technology offers in analyzing data, which is demonstrated by the increased potential of comparative methods as primary approach. As earlier demonstrated, by Esser & Vliegenthart (2017, 5-7), technological improvements might solve some of the issues that certain methodologies bring with them, but it certainly does not resolve them all.

COMPARATIVE METHODS AS PRIMARY APPROACH

As the typological comparative methodology was a new approach for our research group, it was an experiment whether comparing two sites would have the results we intended. It proved to be a success as it resulted in remarkable results that we would have otherwise missed; yet also proved to have a downside where we had to discard potentially useful information. I tend to agree with the structuralist approach by Saussure[3], where things should be described in terms of their own categories and commitments: when things are placed in a different framework other than its own, information will be lost.

Therefore, I would argue that the methodology that was used for conducting the site research on both site location resulted in valuable information, yet still does not stand up to par as being a thorough research since information was purposely discarded for not fitting in the methodological framework. For this reason, I agree with Lijphart (1971, 685-691) that in site (or location) research comparative methods should be used as a secondary approach instead of a primary. The primary research method should incorporate all relevant research results, after which a secondary comparative approach can move into further detail and potentially validate or oppose the primary research results. In other research topics the comparative method has more potential as primary approach, such as architectural case studies or reference projects. The key point of analyzing these is to find a similar problem and learn from the applied solution: comparing and identifying typologies now features as the primary research approach.

The methodologically led approach in our research ended up being very practical, as it had simple and clear steps to it: find data on a site, find the same data for the other site, and compare it. Together with the defined terminology at the start of the research, this resulted in the data that was found being 'physical' data. It mainly looked at physical connections that could be verified and explained with found data. Non-physical connections were barely discussed, such as the role of a city in the world and how that connects to other parts of the world (i.e. The Hague being home to the International Crime Court and International Court of Justice), or on a smaller scale how people are connected with their neighbors near a site. I must agree with Robert Gorny[4] who emphasized that the relation and connection behind the aesthetic- and visible properties is mostly important for typological research, as it helps to explain why something is the way it is.

This brings me to the general approach of the studio. By splitting research into four topics (as earlier mentioned: city, connection, people and power) the relation between these topics becomes disconnected. The initial research question for our topic was answered in the research, yet a lot of information is missing that is also related to the topic and could possibly provide new perspectives on understanding the two sites.

Realizing this has invoked my interest in researching what is behind the physical connection of the sites, how the local inhabitants interact with each other and how the local infrastructure and urban space does or does not contribute to it. The design project of the graduation project is about providing a multifunctional building that offers a wide variety of functionality, the program itself therefore draws people to it. However, if the physical and non-physical connection isn't there, it won't. Therefore, my architectural position is about invoking social interaction through providing connections and providing an urban structure that allows for this interaction to happen.

END NOTES

1 Muratyan, V. (2012). *Paris Versus New York: A Tally of Two Cities*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.
2 Lecture Series Research Methods TALK 4 at BK TU Delft (NL) by Fransje Hooijmeijer, on Thursday, Sep 26, 2019.
3 Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a Swiss linguist who is considered as one of the founding fathers of semiotics.
4 Lecture Series Research Methods TALK 5 at BK TU Delft (NL) by Robert A. Gorny, on Thursday, Oct 3, 2019.

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