

TOWARDS AN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN: SHIFTING FROM HISTORICAL RESEARCH TO PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN NEW TOWN HERITAGE

I INTRODUCTION

The verb “heuristic” can be defined as “enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves” and is thus a broad term used to describe distinct research methodologies.¹ Similarly it involves an investigative process of “experimentation and trial-by-error” techniques.² Generically it could be said that any attempt, consciously or simply by existing and being able to absorb information and generate knowledge is by definition heuristic and therefore research, the “diligent and system of inquiry”, is a heuristic process. In the profession of architecture, research and design are colloquially interchanged and the design process can be divided into different phases, but as long as a question is asked and demands an inquiry to achieve an answer, it is regarded as research. The research question is inescapably based on the asker’s a priori knowledge and their subjective experiences, a posteriori knowledge.³ In regards to architecture, an architect’s interests and personal experiences dictate their research and thus design focus. Whether one is working from a praxeological, historical, or technical perspective, an architect will be faced with complex problems with a multitude of intertwining factors. It is therefore strategic to understand and select appropriate research methodologies to approach their research question.

Research Methods presents a number of comprehensive perspectives and methodologies with which to approach research. It introduces Historical Research, praxeology, and phenomenology and provides an opportunity to reflect on one’s architectural practice. These research tools allow for structured and systematic investigation and in-depth critical analysis in architecture, depth that is missing in the 5-week studios and bachelor. This course is built on Philosophy and forces the student to justify choices as clear as they can. Within the frame of the “initial research phase” of the design process hence the first few weeks of the semester, this leads to explicit starting points for the design. Within my Heritage studio, analysing the historical development of the area of the project is a necessity. For Lelycentre, the first shopping area of Lelystad, a New Town built upon the recently constructed polders of Flevoland, simply establishing the context of the area became a ten week historical *and* phenomenological research project. Generic as it may be to begin so, Lelycentre is a prime example of a graduation project site riddled with “wicked problems”; open-ended and complex societal problems lacking empirical research and in architecture and construction, with ill-distinguishable boundaries between problem and solution.⁴ Similarly the last ten weeks have proved exemplary in revealing the need to maintain an awareness and understanding of choice in research methodologies. The Research Methods course introduces a number of tools that can be used to identify the intricacies of Lelycentre’s socio-cultural context and opportunities for an architectural intervention. It provides tools to use once the limits of a historical approach to a New Town become evident. Thus the research question is: what is the role of historical research in connection to phenomenological research when researching a complex area?

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

My work over the past few months reveals two research methodologies which are used in order to handle the research questions presented. The first is historical research, which is a necessity in Heritage as the P1 demands an understanding of the historical development of the project and site. The studio visit to Almere and Lelystad was what initially piqued my interest in Lelycentre. Despite being from the same time period and part of the same Polder development scheme, something in the planning had gone amiss and Lelystad was far less affluent than its sibling Almere. It would be simple to say this is due to Lelystad's isolated position in the centre of Flevoland whilst Almere reaps the benefits of being Amsterdam's close neighbour, but we intuited on our visit that the city is somehow working against itself. Although my design interest for the site is fundamentally how to improve the quality of life, I saw that the existing infrastructure of the city has a strict and defined logic and parts are misused, disused, or in fact highly used. Investigating this logic and understanding how the city developed was therefore imperative I wished to answer the question of "Why is Lelycentre as it is?", with respect to its neglect and strict functional zoning. To gain an in-depth understanding, the provincial, city, and neighbourhood scale are examined. Similarly, the first research question demands that the current state be defined, and although this was briefly answered, it did not extend to creating an in-depth analysis highlighting aspects that can act as starting points for the design. This, I decided, must be based on the needs of Lelycentre and its inhabitants. To identify the needs of the area, the next step was to use phenomenological research methodology. The question now addressed is "What are the qualities of and opportunities within Lelycentre?".

Historical research, as Groat & Wang highlight, is dependent on existing schools of thought and the researcher's own interpretation of facts, despite its need to be objective.⁵ Lucas describes and dissects the positions of art or architectural historians such as Tafuri and Pevsner basing his discussion on this same point.⁶ Evidence must be handled in that it is identified, organised, then evaluated. Most comparable to my applied methods are Protzen's 8 case study tactics in his historical research, although tactic 7 is not relevant as it refers to Protzen's reconstruction of Incan construction techniques.⁷

- 1: on-site familiarity
- 2: use of documents
- 3: visual comparisons
- 4: material evidence
- 5: comparison with conditions elsewhere
- 6: local information and lore
- 7: Re-enactment
- 8: Identification of remaining questions

Phenomenological research relies on similar information sources, if not the same, but the position of the researcher is very different. Not only is historical research fundamentally grounded in establishing the past and an interpreted narrative, phenomenology attempts to "understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those lived it".⁸ I applied both first-person and existential phenomenology, where first-person is my own experience of the site and existential is based on local users' experience.⁹ Similar to historical research, photography, documents and historiography, material evidence, and interviews are vital to gaining an understanding of the area. Most important, it could be argued, is the on-site experience and interviews. Existential phenomenology is an inductive process by which I, the researcher, am "guided" by users and inhabitants to uncover their view of attractiveness of the place.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Historical research methodology is founded in archaeology and anthropology; architecture is an object that is studied as a material culture. Groat & Wang submit five traits of historical research: it shows a thing from the past, it is an interpretation, it produces a narrative, it experienced “the cultural turn” which raised questioned historians’ so-called objectivism, and the spatial turn wherein the space the “artefact” is in and the politics of this space must be considered.¹⁰ Hicks traces the cultural turn or material turn to the 80’s and 90’s for archaeology, where disciplines began to pay attention to social and cultural themes such as consumption, identity, experience, and where archaeology and anthropology shifted from a definitive “objective” view to recognising subjectivity of their sources, methods, and findings.¹¹ For Eley, the cultural turn is characterised by awareness of gender issues, Foucault’s influence, new schools of thought, cultural studies, and an active relationship between anthropology and history.¹² New schools of thought include positivism, Hegel’s ideas of zeitgeist and spirit of the time, functionalist approaches, structuralist approaches, and poststructuralist approaches to history. An example of a historical analysis is Colin Rowe’s Collage City, containing simple black and white diagrams contrasting the built and unbuilt to support his analysis of the ideologies of Modernism.

Phenomenology also played a role in the cultural turn for archaeology, as it is linked closely with materiality, another term coined in the same period.¹³ One could say that this falls under Groat & Wang’s “spatial turn” for historical research as it is a research methodology for defining experience of specific peoples in a specific place. However hermeneutical phenomenology is referred to by Hicks whereas first-person and existential are examined here. The latter two depend on qualitative research strategies such as interviews, observations, artefacts and site, and archival documents.¹⁴ Hicks states that hermeneutical phenomenology carries the risk of romanticism as it is interpretive analysis. Lucas presents a case for phenomenological research as a strategy for Lucas’s sensory urbanism and sensory notation, based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s definition of phenomenology as the “study of essences”, such as “the essence of perception” and “of consciousness”, where the researcher describes but does not explain.¹⁵ Heidegger meanwhile asks “What is it to dwell? How does building belong to dwelling?” which plants him in a philosophical discourse divergent from Merleau-Ponty. Ingrid Stefanovic’s first-person “phenomenological reading” of the town Cavtat in Croatia and Missauga in Canada seeks to uncover the “appeal of genuine sense of place” by analysing two entirely temporally and spatially dissimilar towns.¹⁶ Maire O’Neill’s study of Montana ranch families is an example of existential phenomenological research. O’Neill focuses primarily on interviews designed to allow the interviewees to monologue. Upon analysis of the interviews, she identified visual, haptic, familial, and cultural as taxonomies of types of knowledge used by the interviewees. She argues that “cultivating awareness” of “haptic sensibilities” can allow designers to better understand how a place is experienced.¹⁷

Although my research does not focus on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, O’Neill’s view is reflected in my work and research. The area is less than 600m by 300m, yet I have visited the site twice now and spent 7 hours onsite per visit, making notes and photographs of numerous aspects. The interviews we conducted were few in number but revealed perspectives we had not previously considered. These two tools are applied in historical research and phenomenological, but they are processed differently. For the historical analysis, I took photographs of the area, the building sites I am interested in, building damage and decay, and also took photos from the same position as archival photographs so as to compare them to the original situation. For the historical analysis, photography is considered determinative evidence and lends itself to Protzen’s third tactic: visual comparisons. Once the phenomenological research began, I marked unappealing areas and problems within the area in the same photographs, and marked what spaces are the qualities of and characterise Lelycentre. For example, I noted that the plaza is positioned along a central axis between the shopping centre and the bridges between neighbourhoods but sits disused and empty with nowhere to sit. This is a personal observation where I experience this space as a transit zone. But an interviewee pointed to a dirty fountain in the plaza and said that for the last thirty years, children have played on that, revealing user

insight and experience: existential phenomenology. Here the distinction between the two types of research becomes clear, and they provide me, the researcher, with a wider more informed view of situation.

IV POSITIONING

Based on the findings above, my research can be considered a praxeological study of the area of Lelycentre where it analyses the history and development of the area and its existing users. It is an integrative approach to examining a complex area and through an inductive process that is also fed by feedback with locals, I have identified qualities of Lelycentre. In Spatial Agency, Awan describes “the beyond” as the social, political, and economic context of the project and the consequences that “a particular development might have”.¹⁸ The “beyond” is the critical information needed to expand a brief and gives the project justification and validity. As I get to make my own brief, I focussed my research on this “beyond”. This is comparable to Marieke Berker’s conclusion of the Lecture Praxeology, that the “praxis” of architecture can reveal the needs of the real potential users rather than imagined users.

Walter Benjamin points out that historical context is a defining feature of human sense perception. For this reason, I chose to use historical and phenomenological research. However, Tafuri describes a “constant opposition” between the historian and the architect: the historian is concerned with the past and writes for the present whilst the architect is concerned with a utopian vision.¹⁹ Although Tafuri’s view is tied to postmodernism, I disagree and refer back to the above ideas, that the architect must handle the history of an area.²⁰ It was through the city’s history that I came to understand that small scale developments are necessary for Lelystad to maintain itself, as its planning history reveals that dependency on failed large scale developments played a role in its lack of autonomy.

It is my goal to improve Lelycentre into a livelier area whose residents are engaged in its development and the living experience of this area. To reach this stage, I must identify the qualities of the area, asking myself the same questions for an area with various vacant office buildings, an underused shopping centre, scattered apartment complexes for the elderly, and a unique and defining infrastructure. What is the existing space, how can it become liveable, and what is liveable? One could say that Heidegger’s aforementioned questions about dwelling are therefore central to my research.

Another issue to address is Berker’s claim: the ethnographer is not a neutral observer. This is an unavoidable fact and an issue ever-present with any form of representation and interpretation. Not only is the researcher responsible for attempting to remain neutral, the sources must also be checked. I actively chose to work on Lelycentre instead of the studio project Zuiderzeewijk, but I suspect part of my inclination to work there was not solely in its architectural potential, but because our guides on the studio visit described Lelycentre poorly. After completing the analysis, we found that the negativity was greatly exaggerated. This is why multiple sources and multiple visits and comparisons are necessary in order to establish a broader view. The risk here is that multiple conflicting views can obscure the “truth”. However, this again broaches the discussion of “subjectivity” and “objectivity”, and is an avoidable reality of qualitative open ended research. It poses a difficulty for the architect and the Heritage student who engages in both the research process and the design process. For Heritage, there comes a moment where one steps away from collecting and presenting information as a researcher and has to judge and value identified qualities, and as an architect this can be argued to be subjective just as these decisions can be argued to be objective.

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- ³ The 6 Types Of Knowledge: From A Priori To Procedural. (n.d.). Retrieved October 20, 2018, from <https://blog.udemy.com/types-of-knowledge/>
- ⁴ Jacobsen, P. H., Harty, C., & Tryggestad, K. (2016). *(Re) constructing the wicked problem through the visual and the verbal: the case of a dialogue based architectural competition*.P1.
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- ⁶ Lucas, R. (2016). *Research methods for architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing. 126
- ⁷ Groat, et.al. (2013). 202
- ⁸ Ibid. 228
- ⁹ Ibid. 228
- ¹⁰ Ibid. 175
- ¹¹ Hicks, D. (2010). The material-cultural turn. *The Oxford handbook of material culture studies*, 25-98. 28.
- ¹² Groat, et.al. (2013). 176
- ¹³ Hicks, D. (2010). 29.
- ¹⁴ Groat, et.al. (2013). 244
- ¹⁵ Lucas, R. (2016). 158
- ¹⁶ Groat, et.al. (2013). 228
- ¹⁷ Ibid. 234
- ¹⁸ Awan, N., Schneider, T., & Till, J. (2013). *Spatial agency: other ways of doing architecture*. Routledge. 70
- ¹⁹ Leach, A. (2005). Choosing history: Tafuri, criticality and the limits of architecture. *The Journal of Architecture*, 10(3), 235-244.
- ²⁰ Lucas, R. (2016). 127