The co-application of grounded theory and praxeological methods
LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT
Self-Assessment on Research Methods

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This is a position paper written as a final assignment to the course AR3A160 Research Methods mend to reflect on my own graduation research approach. As an architecture student, the course Research Methods made me aware of correctly understanding not only the methods applied in my own research but particularly the methodology in which they are used. However, most importantly I became aware of how my interpretation of data and knowledge is determined by the paradigm to which I, until recently, unwittingly affiliate myself. Conclusively, I learned to accurately stipulate research methodologies prior to starting a research.
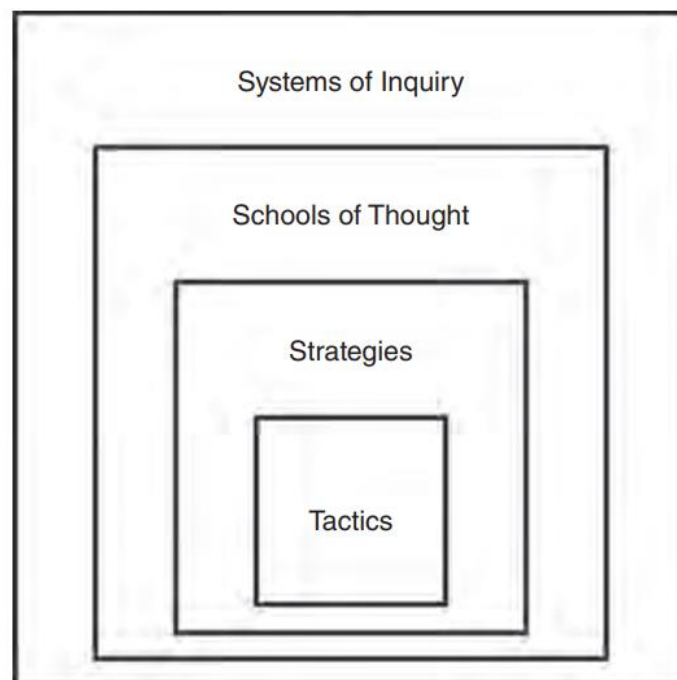

Figure 01. Conceptual framework of inquiry
Groat, L. N., & Wang, D. Architectural Research Methods. (Hoboken: John Wiley And Sons Ltd., 2013), 10.
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I INTRODUCTION

Commonly, the definition of research is regarded a "*systematic inquiry directed towards the creation of knowledge*".[1] Architectural research is related to the term. However, a distinct difference to other disciplinary and professional fields of research is that architectural research considers a much broader variety of methodological choices and centres of interests. Most import in this definition of research to architectural research as a subcategory is the phrase "*creation of knowledge*". The notion of knowledge creation seems suggest famous theories of various sciences. However, distinct in architectural research is that it can create a base of knowledge emerged through collecting several relatively smaller pieces of knowledge attained through a variety of methods. An example is material testing through of series of constructed projects. Most architectural research seems to focus on the physical outcome of a design. However, understanding the process through which this design came to the realisation, is also part of architectural research and according to authors Linda Groat and David Wang in their book *Architectural Research Methods* just as vital.[2]

The research discussed in this paper is part of the Project AMS-Mid City of the Complex graduation studio Msc3. The project studies the transition of the 'urban zones' along the metro corridor from Amsterdam Centre to Zuid-Oost, by analysing three sites in three separate publications. My personal research is part of the group publication one of the three districts, district Amsterdam Zuid-Oost. The previous Zuid-Oost Complex group, students of the academical year 2017-2018, laid the base of the research. Therefore, my inquiry strongly relies on artefacts produced as a conclusion to their study on the area. My research on the district Amsterdam Zuid-Oost was deducted as analysis of the area aimed to first get a general understanding of its demography, the topological characteristics, spatial and infrastructural defects and opportunities, then to intervene in the situation by developing a future master plan to the area. It is a cyclical process of analysing the area by observations, situational mapping and inquiring statistics, interpreting collected data and making temporary conclusions through visualisation in Collage images. The research is based on the research question: What are the demographic, the topological, spatial and infrastructural defects and opportunities of the district Amsterdam Zuid-Oost?

Architectural research is thus a process of systematic inquiry. The way in one commences this process, the strategy, is considered to be the methodology of the research. To get a better understanding of the term, Groat and Wang positioned it in a conceptual framework of inquiry. As can be seen in figure 01, the conceptual frame work consists out of four nested frames.[3] The outermost frame represents the "*paradigm*" or worldview, to which a researcher is affiliated. A certain paradigm entails the broad assumption about the nature of knowledge, reality and being. The next frame represents the "school of thought". The *school of thought* is regarded as a certain broad theoretical perspective influencing multiple disciplines, which can be adopted by a researcher. Within the *school of thought*-frame lies the frame "Research strategy" or *methodology*. The innermost frame is the "Tactics-frame". In here lies the "Tactics", or the *methods* applied to collect knowledge. To make a distinction between the innermost two frames, Groat and Wang refer to their somewhat military origins. To quote the book "*A strategy refers to an overall war plan, while a tactic refers to the disposition of armed forces in combat*".[4] Therefore, in the case of research, the "research strategy" or *methodology*, can be considered the structure or the plan, while the "tactics", are considered the specific research techniques, like, situation mapping. For an architect to reflect upon his own research, which may or may not lead to a design, it is therefore important to understand the applicable methodologies and to be aware of the *school of thought* to which a he or she as a researcher can be affiliated.

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[1] Snyder, J. *Architectural Research.* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1984), 2.

[2] Groat, L. N., & Wang, D. *Architectural Research Methods.* (Hoboken: John Wiley And Sons Ltd., 2013), 9.

[3] Groat, L. N., & Wang, D. *Architectural Research Methods.* (Hoboken: John Wiley And Sons Ltd., 2013), 9.

[4] Groat, L. N., & Wang, D. *Architectural Research Methods.* (Hoboken: John Wiley And Sons Ltd., 2013), 10.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

An assessment of my own research can be made based on the conceptual framework. I focus on its three innermost frames; *School of Thought*, *Strategy* and *tactics,* to elaborate on the chosen methodology of the research and how this shaped the AMS-Mid City research itself. First, the strategy. The AMS-Mid City research can be described as a cyclical process of data collection either by literature study or situational mapping, data reduction, data display in temporary collages and infographics and conclusion drawing by developing a master plan. To quote authors Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln on their definition of the term qualitative research: "*Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials*".[5] The district Zuid-Oost of Amsterdam, a natural setting, which has been the subject of the research, is analysed by the researcher. This analysation, or inquiry, is grounded in the empirical reality of the researchers own observations of the area. The researcher from a distance observes this natural setting, while subjectively making sense of the collected data. Therefore, based on the quotation, I categorise my research as *qualitative* research and consider this the methodology to which it is conducted.

Second, the tactics applied. Categorising the research as qualitative already tells something about the *method*s or "tactics" used in the process. Groat and Wang created another framework based on the ideas of Professor of Educational Psychology John W. Creswells' in his book on research *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches,* for tactics that can be applied to collect data in qualitative research, distinguished between *interactive* and *non-interactive* tactics.[6,7] Reflecting on my own research by aligning its process with this framework the methods employed are predominantly *non-interactive*. With exception to in situ observations of the urban context, the interactive methods I employed are what is described by Creswell as nonparticipant observations. Summed up, my research consisted out of three employed methods: situational mapping, while subjectively interpreting the situation, artefacts and sites; analyses of artefacts (booklet and model) made by students of previous years and archival documents: retrieving hard data, statistics, documented on the area.

Third, the school of thought. The methods applied in the research on district Amsterdam Zuid-Oost in the AMS-Mid City project are as described earlier as part of a broader strategy or *methodology.* The methodology is common to a particular *school of thought*. Groat and Wang argue that there are three *schools of thought* regarded to qualitative research methodology in architectural and environmental research.[8] This paragraph will briefly position the research as common to the *Grounded theory* or *constant comparative method* school of thought.

The definition *grounded theory* is refined and defined by sociologists Anselm Strauss and Juliette Corbin as an approach in which "*data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another. A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind (unless his or her purpose is to elaborate and extend existing theory). Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data…. Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action*".[9] I have chosen this approach because it puts the researcher in a position to investigate a setting holistically and deduct the research without a preconceived theory. The *theory* that would "*emerge from the data*" would conclusively shape the intervention: a master plan that shall be implemented in the area sufficing to the district Zuid-Oosts' demographic, topological, spatial and infrastructural defects and opportunities. While the research could also be conducted out of an ethnographical approach which might have led to better understanding of the people living in the area, this approach seeks to inquiry with a preconceived theory in mind that relies more on observation to uncover specific patterns. Therefore, it already starts with finding to confirm or debunk a theory.
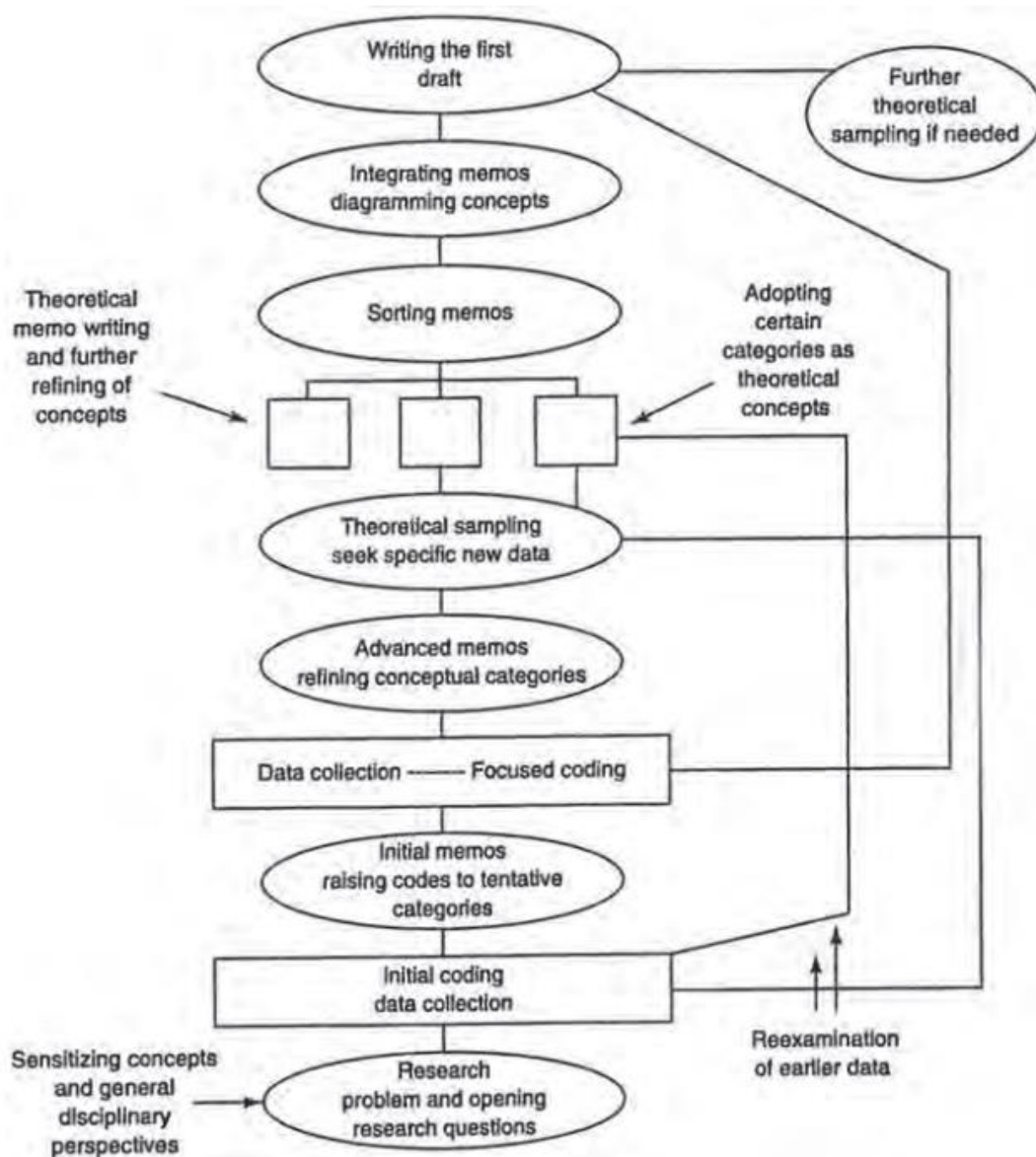
Figure 02. The Grounded Theory Process
Charmaz, K. Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative analysis.
(Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006), 11.

[5] Lincoln, Y., & Denzin, N. *Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry.* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1998), 2.

[6] Groat, L. N., & Wang, D. *Architectural Research Methods.* (Hoboken: John Wiley And Sons Ltd., 2013), 244.

[7] Creswell, J. W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches.* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2009), 213

[8] Groat, L. N., & Wang, D. *Architectural Research Methods.* (Hoboken: John Wiley And Sons Ltd., 2013), 224.

[9] Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. *Basics of Qualitative Research.* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1998), 12.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Historically the *grounded theory* approach was articulated by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their work in beginning of the '70s of the twentieth century. Barney Glaser had a background in quantitative empiricism, which can be described as a method of study of international law through a combination of quantitative research methods and canons of behaviourism (a systematic approach to understand the behaviour of humans and animals). Anselm Strauss' background laid in more interpretive sociology. Their different backgrounds are reflected in grounded theory: an approach both systematic and based on interpretation. Glaser and Strauss sought to distinct their approach from the common practice of qualitative research from a purely descriptive study toward an explanatory theoretical framework. Groat and Wang describe *grounded theory* as an "*intensive, open-ended, and iterative process that simultaneously involves data collection, coding (data analysis), and memo-ing (theory building)*".[10] Emerita Professor of Sociology Kathy Charmaz has attempted to structure this approach in a diagram from her book *The Grounded Theory Process.*[11] The diagram, figure 02, shows all combinations of iterative sequencing the three elements of the process: data collection, coding and memo-ing. Thought, the process shows similarities to most qualitative researchers, it is distinguishable by the constant action of doubling back-and-forth between the three elements. Thus, in grounded theory an object of study is repeatedly assessed, assuming that this object can never be fully understood in one take. Ultimately, it is regarded that a theory will emerge from this iterative process. Referring back to my AMS-Mid City research; first data is collected through either interactive or non-interactive *methods*, then the data is interpreted (analysed) and third, transformed in a temporary Collage image, which serves as theoretical memo; storage of ideas and research data of the site district Amsterdam Zuid-Oost. After judging and assessing the collage image, the cycle progressively repeats.

The grounded theory approach is not free of change. The role of memo-ing to build upon the ultimate theory is a defining and debated feature of *grounded theory.* Memos hold the researchers' theoretical ideas and will be made as step three of the repetitive cycle. However, as author Simeon Yates argues in his book *Doing Social Science Research*, memos can be reassessed at any phase of the research and therefore do not at all hold a fixed position in the cycle. They alone also lead to the creation of new ideas, thus new memos. He describes this reassessment of memos as the "sorting" procedure.[12] To quote Yates "*Both examination and sorting produce memos of greater scope and conceptual density.*"[13] An example to illustrate the *grounded theory* approach and in particular, the memo-ing process is a study by researchers S. Ahrentzen and L. Groat on a women architecture faculty published in the *Journal of Architectural Education*.[14] As part of their qualitative inquiry, the researchers took several in-depth interviews with these women playing their part within the field of architecture. Aim for them was to understand women's perception of their attraction to the profession, if they experienced discrimination in the business and how they visualize the future of architectural education. Based on their in-depth successive interview research method, the process entailed an ongoing *memo-ing* process. In the process, *memo-ing* played an essential role in both initiating the process of analysis and developing the next interview in the sequences of data collecting, because they produced newly arisen questions while deducting the interviews.

[10] Groat, L. N., & Wang, D. *Architectural Research Methods.* (Hoboken: John Wiley And Sons Ltd., 2013), 235.

[11] Charmaz, K. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative analysis.* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006), 11.

[12] Yates, S.J. *Doing Social Science Research.* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2003), 200

[13] Yates, S.J. *Doing Social Science Research.* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2003), 200

[14] Groat, L. N., & Ahrentzen, S. "Voices for Change in Architectural Education: Seven Facets of Transformation from the Perspectives of Faculty Women," *Journal of Architectural Education*, (1997): 273.

IV POSITIONING

One of the lectures that spoke to me, but sadly did not alter my already undergoing research process, was the lecture by architectural historian Marieke Berkers. It not only supported me in understanding the notion of "*praxeology*", it also led me to believe that my approach of inquiry regarding the district Amsterdam Zuid-Oost was insufficient. Insufficient, meaning not as much a problem of the methodology itself, rather more of the methods applied during the research. While deducting the research to find get an understanding of the district Zuid-Oost's demography, the topological characteristics, spatial and infrastructural defects and opportunities, the research methods applied were predominantly nonactive. Therefore the researcher did barely get in touch with the inhabitants of the area, which are both subject of the research and subject to the interventions the researcher will make. In this part of the paper I therefore want to make the argument, that when one researches an urban area planning to design an intervention, a researcher should always employ more ethnographical research methods.

Praxeology involves the study of human action and conduct.[15] It is based on the fundamental fact that an individual human being acts on conscious action towards a chosen goal. As part of her lecture, discussing the perceptions of space based on the idea of praxeology, Berkers explained that any human-being has its own perception of spaces. Therefore, everybody in a unique way conducts acts in a specific environment. In research sought to understand the inhabitants of an area, Berkers argues, one should predominantly employ interactive research methods: to conduct structured interview on inhabitants, to observe the situation un-structuralised and combine both with analyses of conditions that produced the historical landscape. Berkers emphasised in her presentation: "*By studying the praxis of the architecture, one can develop an eye for the actual users of the building and not the imagined ones*".[16] I believe that this approach is also applicable when creating an intervention (master plan) for the users of a neighbourhood, a district, by studying the praxis of the urban environment in the district. Though Berkers seems to refer to ethnography as a school of thought when talking about this kind of inquiry, I believe that these methods are also applicable to be used in a research conducted with the *Grounded Theory* school of thought.

By applying methods related to praxeology in the site you are studying, research can determine how human action changed the site itself. It is an approach to study everyday human life of for example inhabitants of a specific area. This conception is derived from the first applier of Praxeology and author of the book *Human Action, The Scholar's Edition,* Ludwig von Mises. Von Mises argues "*Human life is an unceasing sequence of single actions. But the single action is by no means isolated. It is a link of a chain of action which together form an action of higher level aiming at a more distant end.*"[17] Referring to analysing the district Zuid-Oost in my own research, I believe that by primarily employing the method to interactively observe the situation un-structuralised, focusing on the sequence of actions taken by the subjects, a researcher can understand how every individual subjec behaves in the area which is observed. By employing this method within the cyclical research process that characterises the *Grounded theory* school of thought, while translating knowledge retrieved by observing the sequence of taken human actions in temporary data collections (memo's), a theory can emerge that is directly based on these action taken by the inhabitants of the area. I believe that this emerged theory will hold more knowledge on the defects and opportunities of the studied area, then theory emerge based on the more un-interactive methods I applied in the AMS-Mid City research.

[15] "*Praxeolog*y," Merriam-Webster, Retrieved from www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/praxeology, (2018)

[16] Berkers, Marieke. "*Praxeology"* Lecture. Lecture series Research Methods TU Delft, Delft, September 20, 2018

[17] Mises, L. v. *Human Action, The Scholar's Edition.* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008)

Conclusively I want to argue that the same insufficiency that occurred to my own research also occurs throughout the whole field of architecture when deducting research on a specific area. I believe it is a result of a shortage of time, often a direct consequence of shortage in budget, or an allocation of time within a project. The un-interactive methods applied, often result in an intervention in a site which seems out of touch with the actual users of the area. Not understanding the actual user/inhabitants of the area or building, but like Berkers argues, design for the imaged ones.[18] Of course, it is not that architectural firms deliberately create these imagined users, but the way they, in that case, refrained from exploring interactive research methods, employed from a praxeological point of view, led them to not fully understanding their research subjects; the users.

[18] Berkers, Marieke. "*Praxeology*" Lecture. Lecture series Research Methods TU Delft, Delft, September 20, 2018

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11   Strauss, A. L., & Glaser, G. B. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* (New Brunswick: AldineTransaction, 1967)

12   Yates, S.J. *Doing Social Science Research.* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2003)