

# **ACCESSING THE PAST THROUGH HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

**Bewar Ahmed**  
Research methods



## INTRODUCTION

**Research;** *a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover (new) information or reach a (new) understanding.*<sup>1</sup>

**Design;** *to make or draw plans for something, for example clothes or buildings.*<sup>2</sup>

Those are the two definitions of research and design found in the dictionary of Cambridge. Herbert Simon and Donald Schon, however, have a wider array of definitions when it comes to describing the essence of design activity. For Simon, designers create courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.<sup>3</sup> Schon, on the other hand, argues that a designer is one who converts indeterminate situations to determinate one.<sup>4</sup> Like with the definition of research, also the term design has been given a wider definition, by scholars. James Snyder explains that research is “a systematic inquiry directed towards the creation of knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> In the more architectural context, Salomon emphasizes that research can be understood as any systematic inquiry or as the close study of something. Comparable to design that “can alternatively be understood as both a rational problem-solving technique or intuitive aesthetic act,” research can be expressed in “multiple modes of inquiry.”<sup>6</sup>

However, in this paper, it is not about the definition of the two terms separately, in fact, it is about the relationship between the two and above all the method(s) used to do the research. As research can inform design in many ways and at many times in the design process.<sup>7</sup> In the past there have been many who have related design with research in several points of view. For example, Kieran explains that “Research brings science to our art”, meaning, “that to move the art of architecture forward, we need to supplement intuition with science.”<sup>7</sup>

David Salomon similarly, considers that research and design are “well-fabricated hybrids” consisting of “objective truths” and “personal fictions”.<sup>9</sup>

In the graduation design studio at the faculty of architecture of the technical university of Delft – which continues for one year – half

year is spent on research. The research done in the first half year, must be linked to the design that will be made in the second half year, therefore the link between research and design is obviously present. For me, research and design, are inextricably connected. Research forms the scientific foundation of the actual design. Without (scientific) research, the design has no solid ground to stand on. This again emphasizes the importance of research for the design.

Until the present day, the importance of choosing a method to do the research – and also that it even was an option to do so – never occurred to me. The research that I have been doing throughout my study was more or less based on gathering all the information that is available, and draw a conclusion from the information obtained. There was no “technique” used to do so. However, this “way of doing research” has been changed throughout the lectures on research methods. For example, I now know that there are possibilities to frame (use a technique) my research. For example to use praxeology as a method to do the research, or by using historical research strategies.

The aim of this paper, is to emphasize the method(s) used to do the research that is inseparable from the design. In order to clarify this, I will use the research done in my own graduation project; “*Adapting 20th century Heritage*”. Participating in the heritage studio, it is needless to say, that the research that has been done – to the utmost extent – consist of historical research. Through the research question; How to access the past using historical research tactics, in order to envision a future intervention?, I will explain (how) the research methods used during my graduation studio. For this, I will discuss and reflect on how we made use of the Historical research strategy to analyze the area and the link that eventually was made to the design.

## THE PROJECT+GOAL

Lelycentre was the first shopping center in Lelystad. It was designed by W.W. Buitenweg, constructed in the year of 1967 and officially opened in 1970 by Landroost Otto. The purpose for the construction of Lelycentre was to give the first inhabitants of the Neighborhoods Zuiderzeewijk and Atolwijk a shopping center which would provide them with the daily basic needs, like groceries. Adjoining being a shopping center, Lelycentre also became a place for the inhabitants to meet and to spend free time.<sup>10</sup> In the year of 1990 Lelycentre underwent a transformation, led by Bureau De Gruyter Architecten/Ingenieurs.<sup>11</sup> This transformation altered the image of the shopping center drastically. Although it is still functioning as a shopping center, Lelycentre has lost the vigor it once had in the starting days. Within our graduation studio – *“Adapting 20th century Heritage”* – we set as goal, to analyze the plot which in Lelycentre is located and to give the center what it needs, in order that the center can reclaim the status it once had in the area.

## THE RESEARCH+METHOD

The (historical) research done in the graduation studio, was done in order to assemble the evidence from the past in order to know the place better and value it in terms of historical-, architectural-, and technological values. For the historical, the research sought an understanding of the developments that occurred in Lelycentre as well as in Lelystad (the city where Lelycentre is located). As stated in *“The architectural research methods”* by Groat and Wang, history research entails fact finding, fact evaluation, fact organization, and fact analysis. Also “it requires an interpretive imagination that nevertheless does not spill over into fiction. Above all [...] history research requires the framing of a narrative that is at once holistic, in the sense that a story is holistic.”<sup>12</sup>

In the study *“The Home,”* done by Adrian Forty, Forty cites a character in an 1888 fictional work, entitled Mark Rutherford’s *Deliverance*. Within his study Forty presents a case that – from 1850 to 1950 – the concept of the home underwent significant changes, bringing about

transformations in how the home as a material object came to be designed.<sup>13</sup> In the research done, Forty firstly viewed something from the past, in order to give it his own interpretation to eventually end up with a narrative. And this – giving the history research a narrative – was the main goal of my research. This narrative I needed in order to use it as the foundation of my eventually design for an intervention in Lelycentre. However, the research I have done, is more comparable to the research tactics used by Jean-Pierre Protzen, when he did research on the Incan construction technique. In his *“Inca quarrying and stonecutting”*, Protzen uses 8 different historical tactics in order to analyze the Incan construction technique:<sup>14</sup>

Tactic 1: On-site familiarity.

Tactic 2: Use of documents.

Tactic 3: Visual comparisons.

Tactic 4: Material evidence.

Tactic 5: Comparison with conditions elsewhere

Tactic 6: Local informants and lore.

Tactic 7: Reenactment/testimonial.

Tactic 8: Identification of remaining questions

From the beginning until the end I have dealt with several methods that I have – consciously and unconsciously – used. The first method was research through literature, followed by research through observation and research through dialogue. Whereas Protzen refers to other studies (literature) – either to corroborate his own findings or as a foil to what he observed (tactic #2) – for the plain and clear facts about the site I also did my research through literature. For this I have used different books, drawings and documents found on the internet, library as well as in the archive of Lelystad. Adjoining to the literature, I also wanted to experience the site our self to see, feel, smell, hear and even taste the place. In order to do this I have visited the site several times. This comes close to tactic number 1 (On-site familiarity) of Protzen, where he acquired knowledge of the topic by visiting the plot. However, alongside the straight facts and our own experience, there was another – maybe the most important – research method I used; i.e. research through dialogue. Here, I wanted to stress out the social aspects of the

place. I wanted to hear the experience and opinion of the users and inhabitants of Lelycentre. This – gaining information through traditional knowledge from the people – is comparable to the sixth tactic of Protzen used in his study on the Incan construction technique, where he made use of local informants and lore. To conclude, the research done in the studio of – *“Adapting 20th century Heritage”* – was mainly done to observe the survived evidence of the past, in order to end up with a narration for the design.

### THE OUTCOME+SEQUEL

To position myself in the debate of research methodology, firstly, I am going to explain the goal of my research. As already mentioned, the research done, was to end up with a historical narration of Lelycentre. However, why did I need to narrate the history of Lelycentre? What I basically did (or maybe even better said, *still* trying to do) is something Rem Koolhaas is laughing at. About that – predicting the future – Rem Koolhaas stated in his writing “Junk spaces” that *“The idea that a profession once dictated, or at least presumed to predict, people’s movements now seems laughable, or worse: unthinkable. Instead of design, there is calculation...”*.<sup>16</sup>

I was – in short – attempting to predict the future of a giving plot, in order to intervene somewhere in that plot, to eventually give the plot what it needs. For this “prediction” I needed to know the history. Unconsciously – I came to know after writing this paper – I have used the historical strategies that are comparable to the ones Jean-Pierre Protzen had used in his research about the Incan construction technique explained by Groat and Wang in “Architectural research methods”. However, the research is still far from done, which implies that the research needed cannot be covered within the frame of one research method. For an all-encompassing research, a combination of methods is ideal.

If the research done has to be framed, it would be framed in Qualitative research method. According to Denzin, in a Qualitative research the focus is multimethod. It involves an analytical and natural approach to the subject

matter. I.e. the research done entails the study of things in their natural setting, in order to make the meaning people bring to them clear.<sup>16</sup> Or – a more plain explanation – it is a research method of observation to gather non-numerical data.<sup>17</sup> For one part of the research – trying to access the history and end up with a narration for it – this Qualitative research was sufficient. However, to achieve the goal of the research – partly agreeing with Rem Koolhaas – some calculation is needed. This part of the research fits perfectly in the Quantitative method, which is the factual research of visible aspects/facts through statistics, math and/or (computational) techniques.<sup>18</sup> This – again – implies that a combination of different methods is idealistic.

To – again – make use of the tactics of Protzen research, I want to explain this “ideal” way of doing research according to different research methods. Tactic number eight in Protzen’s tactics, consist of the identification of the remaining (unanswered questions). After the historical research done for the graduation studio, there were a lot of (new arose) questions that needed to be answered to make the research thorough. For these questions, a different approach, i.e. a different research method is necessary. To summarize it: After the historical research the history was known, in terms of the goals of the research – attempting to predict the future of a giving plot, in order to intervene somewhere in that plot, to eventually give the plot what it needs – the next step would be to analyze the current situation. And after that, it is the aim to predict what is the right intervention in terms of the future. And since there is no technology to predict the future, it is critical to choose the right methods to try to do so.

Looking back at the lectures – this notion about that there is not a right or wrong method – got only more well-grounded. In the debates after the lectures, the debates about research (methodology) could never-ending go on about what a method is, how it could be used, when it could be used etc. From this I can conclude, that the possibilities in choosing (a combination) from the different methods that are applicable, are infinite.

- 01** *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "Research," accessed, October 22, 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/research>.
- 02** *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "Design," accessed, October 22, 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/design>
- 03** Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
- 04** Donald A. Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 41–42.
- 05** James Snyder, *Architectural Research* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1984).
- 06** Salomon, 34.
- 07** Wang, David and Linda N. Groat. "Does Design Equal Research?". Chap. 2, In the *Architectural Research Methods*. 2nd ed. Hoboken: Wiley, 2013.
- 08** Stephen Kieran, "Research in Design: Planning Doing Monitoring Learning," *Journal of Architectural Education* 61(1) (September 2007): 31.
- 09** David Salomon, "Experimental Cultures: On the 'End' of the Design Thesis and the Rise of the Research Studio," *Journal of Architectural Education* 65(1) (October 2011): 33–44.
- 10** Flevopost. "Jubileumparaplu's sieren nu ook eerste winkelcentrum Lelystad." Flevopost.nl. <https://www.flevopost.nl/nieuws/lelystad/499690/jubileumparaplu-s-sieren-nu-ook-eerste-winkelcentrum-lelystad.html> (accessed September 27, 2018).
- 11** Welstandsnota 2015. 2015. Ebook. Lelystad: Repro gemeente Lelystad. <https://www.lelystad.nl/Docs/Welstandsnota%202015.pdf>.
- 12** Wang, David and Linda N. Groat. "Historical Research?". Chap. 6, In the *Architectural Research Methods*. 2nd ed. Hoboken: Wiley, 2013.
- 13** Adrian Forty, "The Home," in *Objects of Desire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 100.
- 14** Wang, David and Linda N. Groat. "Historical Research?". Chap. 6, In the *Architectural Research Methods*. 2nd ed. Hoboken: Wiley, 2013.
- 15** Giesecking, Jen Jack, William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low and Susan Saegert. "Junk Spaces" Section 1 in *The People, Place, and Space Reader*. London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2014
- 16** Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, *Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998), 3.
- 17** Babbie, Earl (2014). *The Basics of Social Research* (6th ed.). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Cengage.
- 18** Given, Lisa M. (2008). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.