PROXEMICS
Understanding the social and spatial organization of a place

Mariona Maeso Deitg (4802934)
Chair of Urban Architecture, "Urban Architecture: Spolia"
Thesis "The role of preexistences in spatial and social organization"

I   INTRODUCTION

1.1 The relationship between architectural design and research

Research is a systematic, organized process that seeks to understand reality to be able to interact with it and to transform it in the long term, dealing with specific problems that require specific solutions. In practice, it is necessary to conduct preliminary research to understand what kind of problems the architectural project is aiming to solve or ameliorate, or to understand certain phenomena. There is a wide range of valid forms of architectural research, therefore researchers "should not restrict themselves to a single paradigm of research, and most will be informed by a number of approaches". [1] Often the creative process is analogue, non-linear, and requires a lot of trial and error methods. Sometimes the architect has to be experimental in the research methods, breaking out from traditional methods or using techniques from other fields. Research methods are ingrained in the design process; they shape and appraise the architectural design from the starting point to the finalization of the design process.

The variety of research methods presented in this course expanded my view on the possibilities that lie within the field of architectural research, and the richness that this multifaceted field offers. It also made me realize the importance of architectural research to reach a sensible, responsive and useful design that adequately deals with the context and the issues it presents. I was intrigued to learn that research methods in architecture are not restricted within the architectural field; they extend to a diverse range of disciplines, which enriches the way architects approach a design.

1.2 Introduction to the thesis topic

The theme of the Urban Architecture Graduation Studio is *spolia*, a term from archeology that defines the left-overs of a building that find themselves back in a new structure. Spolia can be differentiated into spolia in se, which refers to the use of actual elements; and spolia in re, which evokes the use of older images, motifs or memories. Spolia exceeds materials and it can also be understood as social networks, practices of inhabitants or cultural expressions. Two questions posed in the premise of the studio were 'what to keep' on the site, and 'what to build'. To answer these questions, it is relevant to gain a comprehensive understanding of what is there, material or immaterial. My thesis will explore the episteme of proxemics as a way to study the social and spatial organization of a place, and how inscriptive practices as an analytical tool can bring the research results closer to the design process, translating the observations on the site in a visual way.

Extensive fieldwork research was encouraged in the studio, which required several research trips to the site, an urban block located in Anderlecht (Brussels). Prior to the first trip to the site, we had gathered basic qualitative and quantitative information, hence we knew beforehand about the complexity of building typologies and different social groups that coexist there, as well as problems caused by the spatial and social fragmentation on the site. Drawing, interviewing and photographing were, amongst others that will be discussed more in depth later, the chosen methods to record relationships between spatial qualities, social interactions and behaviors. The understanding of this problematic is fundamental to be able to find a suitable architectural solution.

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

II   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

2.1 Chosen research methods

Since my personal interest comprises both architectural and social elements, different research methods have to be carried out to find the relationship between both. The research method used in the first part of the research was fieldwork, conducted from a proxemic approach. Fieldwork is a primary recourse of data that tries to understand a specific place and how people occupy it, which is strongly related to proxemics, defined "as the study of human's perception and use of space", [2] In fact, proxemic studies can only be carried out in the field. During the first visit to the site, different forms of engagement with the field were conducted: observation of behaviors and activities, sketches, hairy maps with notes, verbal and non-verbal interviews with locals, exploration, and the use of photography and film to document how people interact in and with the spaces in the site.

The second part of the research was post-situ, analyzing the materials from the fieldwork and translating them visually into inscriptive practices. Using a tool of architectural production as a means for describing, theorizing and explaining brings the results of research closer to the design process, which serves to answer the questions of 'what to keep' and 'what to build' simultaneously.

2.2 Epistemic frameworks, current relevance and challenges

Proxemics deal with the relationship between people and space, it is an epistemic framework that analyzes how humans use space. As Jones states in *Proxemics: The Language of Space*, it is possible to alter social interactions by, for example, "moving the furniture in a room in different arrangements".[3] An architectural intervention, or any modifications in spatial qualities, can change social behavior. The chosen approach felt adequate as a way of understanding the problematic of the site, which is both spatial and social fragmentation, to see where and how an architectural intervention could increase social interaction and reduce fragmentation. My aim is to intervene on the site from a sensitive understanding that adequately responds to the problematic.

Although it might be changing, we can still often find architecture practices that are detached from the realities of the site they are working on, and end up making assumption-based decisions that are not supported by any research. With the increasing complexity found in cities nowadays, it is of significant relevance as an architect to have an accurate, deep understanding of the place before intervening on it.

Prior to the site visit, qualitative data and a series of maps, site plans and drawings were provided to us, which served as a base for the findings on site to be added. One of the advantages of using inscriptive practices as an analytical tool is that it can express many layers of information at the same time, but it also presents challenges such as the extent of legibility of the graphic content and the degree of competence of the readers.[4] Lucas uses the term of *inscriptive practice*, which not only include drawings, but also notations, diagrams, maps, and any other type of graphic work. A drawing makes sense as a tool to translate proxemic studies, when it presents different layers of information, not only showing spatial qualities but also including notations, movement, or any type of observation

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[2] Hall, Edward T. et. al. *Proxemics [and Comments and Replies]. Current Anthropology* 9, no. 2-3 (1968): 83

[3] Jones, Lyndon. *Proxemics: The Language of Space.* (London, Emerald Publishing, 1984), 9.

[4] Lucas, Ray. *Research Methods for Architecture*, (London, Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 179.

made during fieldwork research. Therefore, a one-dimensional, purely spatial analysis fails to account for interpersonal and social relations, as well as the meaning spaces have for its users. [5]

III   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

3.1. Proxemics: history and theory

The term proxemics was initially introduced in 1963 by Edward T. Hall, a cultural anthropologist, in his book *The Hidden Dimension.* According to the author, the term proxemics "is used to define the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space" [6], and it can be uncovered through observations and analysis. In the book, Hall describes three types of spaces in proxemics manifestations: fixed-feature, semi-fixed feature, and informal space.[7] The first one refers to buildings or the urban context, which are the cast in which a significant part of behavior is formed; the second one refers to the furniture or interior arrangements, which can have a measurable effect of behavior; and the last refers to the spatial experience of an individual. The observation of behavior in these three different scales can reveal how different spatial configurations encourage certain behaviors, and inform the researcher on what kind of solutions can be applied to improve certain situations. Other than in the field of architecture and design, proxemic studies can be relevant in a diverse range of fields, such as technology, advertising, psychology, cinema and anthropology.

3.2. Inscriptive practices: history and theory

As architects, one of our main ways of communicating ideas is through drawings; we are used to represent spaces visually. According to Berger, a drawing is a "record of one's discovery of an event – seen, remembered, or imagined" [8], which makes it a useful, informative research method, particularly in fieldwork. It is a tool to represent the experience of space in a visual format. Since proxemics involve the study of space, inscriptive practices can adequately represent space and any forms of social behavior or interactions in it.

A relevant example of the use of graphic content to represent the experience of space are the works of Kevin Lynch in *Image of the City,* published in 1960. In the book, Lynch discusses the concept of environmental image, defined as the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual [9], and uses a series of mental maps to represent spatial settings and human action simultaneously. Lynch sees spaces as not merely a physical entity, but also as mental images, or a subjective experience. This idea of space relates to Henri Lefebvre's theory of social space, that space is a social product, or a complex social construction, and it embodies social relationships.[10] In *The Production of Space,* published in 1974, Lefebvre questions the use of maps to decode all meanings and contents of a space, and argues that there is no finite amount of maps that could represent all the meanings of a space.[11] However, a drawing with several layers of information can get close to decoding, or representing, all the information from the research. An example I find quite intriguing and successful are the series of drawings *Kotti 2008, 2010, 2014* by the artist Larissa

[5] Pellow, Deborah, *Setting Boundaries: The Anthropology of Spatial and Social Organization*, (Westport, Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 11.

[6] Hall, Edward T. *The Hidden Dimension.* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1969), 101.

[7] Ibidem.

[8] Berger, John, and Jim Savage. *Berger on Drawing.* (Cork, Occasional Press, 2007), 3.

[9] Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City.* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997), 5.

[10] Lefebvre, Henri, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Production of Space.* (Malden. MA; Oxford, Blackwell, 2009), 27.

[11] Ibidem, 86.

Fassler, in which she represents her observations on the Kottbusser Tor in Berlin, recording a diverse range of interactions, moments, and elements she has observed over time.

Fig. 1 / Fassler, Larissa. "Kotti, 2008". *Larissa Fassler,* http://www.larissafassler.com/kottidraw_1.html

In a similar way, the works of Atelier Bow-Wow study how people occupy space and the social relationships that are created through space. They use drawing as a form of research, to translate their observations at different scales. For them, "being able to distinguish each detail in an illustration is evidence that people have seen them". [12] They meticulously draw the spatial qualities as well as the way people use buildings and interact with the environment, using illustration as a form of architectural ethnography.

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[12] Tsukamoto, Yoshiharu & Kaijima, Momoyo. *Graphic Anatomy Atelier Bow-Wow.* (Tokyo, TOTO Shuppan, 2011), 3.
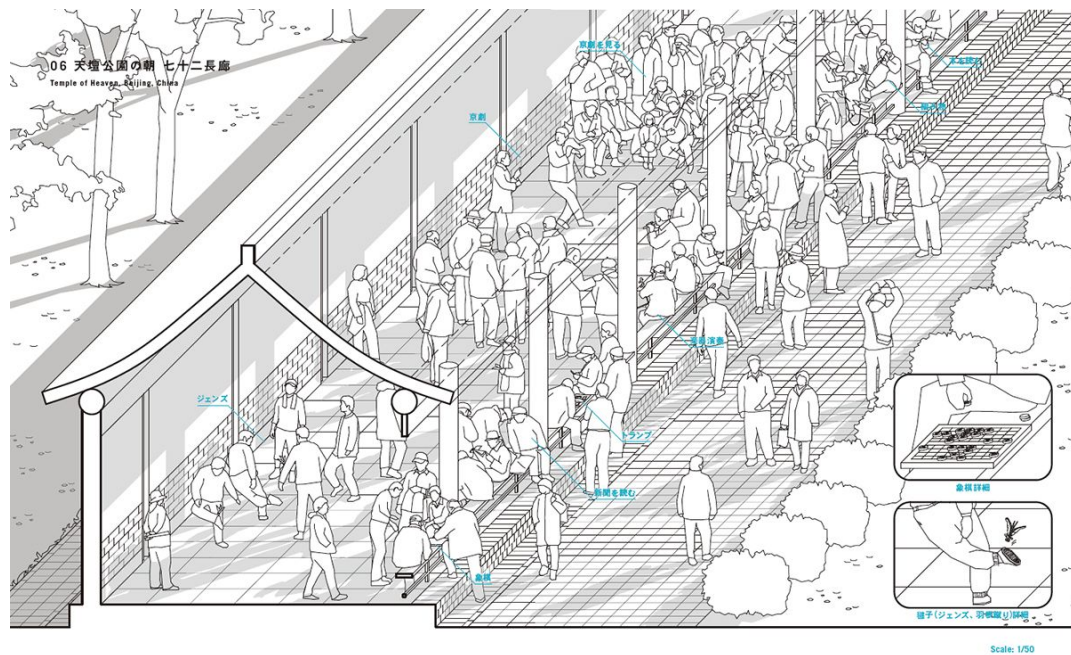
Fig. 2 / Atelier Bow-Wow. "Temple of Heaven*". Commonalities of Architecture*. Atorie Wan, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, Momoyo Kaijima. TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, 2016.

3.3. Critical reflection on the selected research methods

I use proxemics as an epistemic framework, as a method to understand the social and spatial organization of the selected context, and inscriptive practices to translate the findings, but the techniques used could be part of other epistemic frameworks such as phenomenology or praxeology. I use these approaches as a way to strengthen my arguments of my chosen research methods, but I try not to fully fall into one single approach. Combining methods that are based in several epistemic frameworks enriches my approach and allows me to obtain varied layers of information. We can argue that my chosen research methodology uses multiple tactics, fitting in the type of qualitative research defined as *bricolage*, which suggests that the researcher will employ a variety of tactics "that are particular to the context and appropriate to the research question".[13] The observation and recording of behaviors alone is subjective, but the interviews and engagement with the public made my research more objective, providing different perspectives and a sense of the broader image of the social context of the site and the way the public interacts with or perceive the built environment.

With all the layers of information obtained during the fieldwork, and the posterior analysis of the information, I am trying to achieve a holistic understanding of the site, objectively analyzing a subjective experience, from different perspectives. The translation of the layers of information from the site research into inscriptive practices starts to suggest possible design solutions, and allows at the same time the possibility to use drawing as a tool to create a participatory relationship between architect and public.

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[13] Wang, David, and Linda N Groat. *Architectural Research Methods*. Second edition. (Hoboken, Wiley, 2013), 219.

IV   POSITIONING

4.1. The relationship between the architect and the users

In Marieke Berkers' lecture on *Investigating Spatial and Social Practices*, the issue of the authority of architects over users was posed. In one of the recommended readings for that lecture, Jonathan Hill's *The Use of Architects,* the authoritarian, modernist tradition of the architect as a form-giver, creator and controller of human environments is highly questioned. The first position that I take is that architecture is a practice that is equally spatial and social, and that the use cannot be fully predicted or imposed by the architect. The architect should never have an invasive, deterministic attitude towards defining how a building will be used. To what extent is the architect the author of an architectural project, when users have appropriated the spaces and changed its uses and meanings? Some of the findings from my research show that even though the way spaces are designed affects the use, users still find ways of adapting them to their needs. Hill describes the creative user as "a user that creates a new space or gives an existing one new meanings and uses, contrary to the ones predicted by the architect".[14] Allowing users to be creative puts them in an equal position to the architect in the role of the formulation of architecture. The architect is no longer superior to the user.

4.2. The social meaning of architecture

The studio of Urban Architecture advocates for an architecture that anticipates uses and fosters experience, and sees the city as an assemblage of sites, materials, networks and places. Some questions about ownership, control and occupation rights are posed, which led me to question the relationship between architecture, social order and power. As Jones argues, "architectural production is a political practice that has deep-rooted connections with social order".[15] Was it a political decision to physically fragment the site in Anderlecht to separate certain social groups? From a personal point of view, architecture is part of a larger field that includes social, cultural, institutional and political issues. Architecture has a social function, be it positive or negative. The incorporation of proxemic studies, through observation and analysis of behaviors in certain spaces, into architectural research can help us determine how different spatial configurations encourage certain behaviors, and if these behaviors are positive or negative. It helps us research the effect of architecture in the social dynamics of a place.

The Italian architect Giancarlo De Carlo discussed that architects were positioned outside of society as a result of power relations, and that they should engage with the public in the design and building process, overcoming the dichotomy between building and users.[16] New forms of architectural production have emerged in the recent years, such as the concept of commons or common space, which is constantly redefined and shaped through collective action.[17] The architect as a facilitator engages the public to carry out a project, turning architecture into a participatory process. When establishing a participatory relationship between the architect and the public, the study of proxemics becomes relevant as a way of understanding the relationship between the public and space, and the use of drawings or other inscriptive practices can serve as a communicative tool between the architect

[14] Hill, Jonathan. "*The Use of Architects". Urban Studies 38, no. 2* (February 2001), 351–65.

[15] Jones, Paul. *The Sociology of Architecture : Constructing Identities.* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 170.

[16] Avermaete, Tom. "*The Architect and the Public: Empowering the people in Postwar Architecture Culture"* . Hunch: The Berlage Report on Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape, no.14 (2010), 83-95.

[17] Hiller, Christian & Anh-Linh Ngo. "*Ownership and Access". An Atlas of Commoning: Places of Collective Production. ARCH+ Magazine*, (Summer 2018), 48.

and the public.

Proxemics, together with the use of inscriptive practices, can have a significant value while conducting research on a specific site. The first serves as a way of understanding the public-space relationship, while the other serves as a way of translating the research in a way that is understandable for everyone, linking the architect and the public.

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