

POSITIONING THE ARCHITECT AND THE USER

Beyond architectural status and determinism

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INTRODUCTION

Architecture is a very broad and complex profession.¹ Design and research are interrelated and an architect is constantly confronted with a lot of questions without one right answer to these questions. Reflecting on your design process might give you more insight in the way choices were made but this course showed me that a big part of this awareness could be/should be shifted to the beginning of the process. Research can be conducted in several ways and this course showed me that self-awareness in choosing a specific approach in research can help to navigate through the complex discipline of architecture and even attribute to decision making with better outcomes as a result. In addition, by being transparent about the ways in which you conduct your research, your propositions can even be strengthened.²

With these realizations I started to think about the role of the architect and as a challenge I started to think of an architectural process as a performance by an orchestra. Who can be defined as the architect? Is he the composer of the piece, the conductor in front of the musicians, one of the musicians, the judging audience? And in case of a heritage project, what is the heritage aspect in that regard? This metaphor opened my eyes and made me see the different roles/positions an architect can choose from.

This realization that we always have a choice during the entire architectural process interested me most during this course. It became apparent that we are so used to the way in which we work and make decisions that we make a lot of decisions without even realizing. By becoming aware of this, tunnel vision and working on automatic pilot is avoided and I now have a choice how to approach a specific research question in order to enrich the research and reveal new pathways towards a design.

This is exactly what I intend to do within my Heritage and Architecture graduation project which deals with the Hembrug terrain in Zaandam. This former military site has been the stage of ammunition and weapon production for over 100 years until all activities seized at the end of the last century. Since then the site has been almost completely abandoned and closed off for the public. Now we have the opportunity to open it up and reconnect the site to the public, giving it a proper use again. In my opinion the architect plays an important role in reconnecting the site to the society and therefor the following question came to the fore: 'how should an architect position himself towards the public and the users in order to create a new connection between the Hembrug terrain and the society?' This question is relevant in terms of creating a better understanding of the ways in which an architect can approach and implement use in the design (process) in order to safeguard the historical values of the Hembrug site.

During this course I became fully aware of the fact that I have a choice through which lens this question will be approached. Hence the aim of this paper is to find an appropriate but specific methodological angle of approach. This will enhance a "greater opportunity for depth of engagement within the scope of a research project".³

USE, MORE THAN FUNCTIONALITY

In my previous design projects users mostly where abstracted and use was only talked about in terms of functionality. The specific role of the architect was not consciously accounted for. However, if you consider architecture to be a humanities discipline, as Ray Lucas states⁴, and if you consider architecture to be a creation of both design and use like Jonathan Hill discusses⁵, the positioning of an architect towards users is quite important.

Specifically with regard to my research question, putting emphasis on the 'use' aspect instead of the 'design' aspect of architecture is crucial in order for an architect to position himself. Therefor I decided to approach my research question through the lens of praxeology: the study of human action and conduct. Not only does this approach enable an architect to position himself consciously, this approach might give you new insights as well: for example Jasper states "Anthropology is particularly well equipped to study everyday transactions, as well as the rituals and ceremonies with which we

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mark life transitions—from the private to the public, from domestic life to death.”⁶

Approaching the research question through the praxeological angle is also relevant if you consider the Hembrug site to have become part of ‘the commons’ again. According to professor Tom Avermaete a ‘commons’ is a resource or land that affects or belongs to a whole community.⁷ In a way the former closed off military site has become part of the public domain again and therefor it can become the stage for everyday practice. The architect has an important role to play in this transition. He has to make sure the historical values of the site are not lost (we could even discuss the theorem that heritage is a public good) and at the same time create this new connection to the society in order for the site to get a proper use again.

But how do we conceive the society/the public and future use? This is quite important while the way in which an architect conceives the user affects the relation between the user and the architect and what they design.⁸ Next to for example interviews and user participation, literary writing might also be interesting to address this question. Klaske Havik stresses the fact that by merging architectural analysis with literary writing, fundamental ambiguities of architecture (ambiguities like, author-read and subject-object) could be addressed.⁹ Using spatial narratives might therefor give a better understanding of the relationship between the user and the architect and at the same time make it more clear how the relations between the Hembrug site and current users of the Hembrug site are.

Conceiving the users however is just the first step, positioning yourself as an architect towards the user is even as important. There are a lot of positions an architect can take with at the base the distinction between the etic viewpoint (viewpoint from an outsider) and the emic viewpoint (viewpoint of the insider).¹⁰ Although the position of the architect cannot be isolated from its context¹¹, by being aware of the several possible roles the architect can have, a conscious choice can be made. This is of special importance nowadays while we see that the character of the architectural project is challenged¹² and the architects have+ to define their new roles.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT AND THE USER

In history, architecture has been the embodiment of religious, economic and imperial power but after World war II the awareness of the societal and social implications arose, meaning that architecture became more and more a public matter.¹³ Due to this shift, several architectural approaches and positions came into being. While Landau states that a big part of the evolution of the architectural culture has to do with the architects commitments, their beliefs and point of views,¹⁴ we can presume that the approaches and positions of architects largely influence the architectural discipline.

In his article ‘The Architect and the Public’, Tom Avermaete distinguishes several positions of the architect like the 1950’s viewpoint of the architect as a syndicalist.¹⁵ Within this approach research was conducted into the building practices, collective practices and dwelling practices as the believe was that the ordinary and transient workers’ environment could become the base for a new architecture of dwelling: the relationship between everyday culture and the expert (the architect) formed the main concern in this approach. In the article ‘The Squatter Settlement: An architecture that works’ an example is given of such a workers culture environment: the Barriada in Lima.¹⁶ The article from 1967 stresses the lessons that could be learned from such environments like the fact that the Barriada-builders are able to manipulate their own living environment according to their ever changing circumstances (family composition, family lifestyle ect.).¹⁷

In the 50’s and 60’s the viewpoint of the architect as a populist originated.¹⁸ Rather than to consider architecture as an art, architecture should primarily focus on establishing a better relationship between men and their environment. So the convention that architecture as an art should not be “contaminated with the concrete aspects of everyday life”¹⁹ was disputed from this viewpoint.

Another viewpoint, which came into existence in the late 60’s, gave the architect the role as an activist.²⁰ This viewpoint did not comply anymore with the former role of the architect as a craftsman; the reality of the community became their engagement. This approach considered the public to be a

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disempowered community which should be represented by an architect who could, through his knowledge, stand in for them.

In general architects were still positioning themselves outside of society.²¹ Carlo explains that although the Modern Movement was indeed intensely concerned with use, the user was simplified to an "individual subject within a strictly functional viewpoint".²² This disconnection of the aspirations and life of common men to architecture formed the base for the participation movement in architecture: the architect became a facilitator.²³

The above mentioned approaches are highly dependent on the definition and meaning of the users of architecture.²⁴ The categorization of (building) users by Hill helps to elaborate on this: he distinguishes the passive, reactive and creative user.²⁵

The passive user is thought to be obedient and predictable which can be related back to one of the main principles of functionalism: determinism.²⁶ The designed space does not account for the possibility of irrational actions, the design is like a machine which can only be operated in one correct way by the user. An example of such a design is the Frankfurter Kitchen by Schütte-Lihotzky. Although its use is key, the use is scientifically managed to enable mass-production and standardisation.²⁷ According to Carlo the design was considered to be successful in the way of resisting mutations by use,²⁸ the architect remained to have an etic approach.

Different from the passive user, the reactive user is able to modify a space whether or not within a predictable and narrow range of options.²⁹ Although this implementation of flexibility in a design acknowledges the inability to foresee all possible uses, it can also be seen as "the illusion of projecting their (the architects) control over the building into the future, beyond the period of their actual responsibility for it"³⁰.

Where passive and reactive users still largely depend on existing conditions, creative users can create new spaces or establish new meanings to spaces.³¹ Architects who acknowledge the creative user accept their loss of control and the position and status as the master of a project.³² Acknowledging the creative user might lead to an architecture of participation although architects have shown to be able to respond to creative use within their designs. Hertzberger for example made use of polyvalence forms in his designs: architectural elements to which users can give new uses and meanings too without that element to change. Herzberger stated that "a form which has polyvalence is capable of varied uses because it resists fixed meanings".³³ Examples of such elements by Hertzberger are the square hollow and the brick podium-block in the Montessori School in Delft.

TOWARDS SAFEGUARDING HERITAGE

All these approaches above have in common the changing role of the architect from an 'exclusive artistic genius serving a private client' to an 'inclusive engaged architect playing a public role'.³⁴ But next to the position of the architect, the question how to position the user therefor becomes as important.

I adapt the statement from Marieke Berkers' lecture that an architect should get a grip on the actual users instead of the imagined once. However, the literature research made me realise that it's not always possible to foresee the use of your architecture over time. How do you take account for future uses and future users? Implementing flexibility in the design might be a solution but does it leave any room for users to give meaning to the spaces?

In the lecture of Eireen Schreurs she made the remark that heritage is largely dependent upon the society. However Coeterier states that there are big differences between the valuation of cultural historical objects by experts and by laymen.³⁵ In my view an architect can close this gap by facilitating new use in historical buildings. This use has a large influence on the possibility to safeguard the heritage. Use not only guarantees maintenance (and therefor safeguarding of heritage), Coeterier goes as far to consider 'use' to form the right to exist for heritage buildings as an integral part of a dynamic environment.³⁶ Marieke Kuipers even says: "Interventions in the existing should be an answer to societal needs and aim at making both the buildings and their surroundings accessible and

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usable for the people: the bond which will result will guarantee their sustainable use and will support maintenance policies.”³⁷

To establish this, changes to buildings might be necessary but next to facilitating new use, new values can be added as well.³⁸ Especially for heritage that does not have an immediate appreciation by the public, use and the possibility to let the user give meaning to the buildings becomes then crucial in my view. Therefor I find the examples of polyvalent forms in the architecture of Hertzberger very interesting. This kind of architecture allows a variety of use and can be given new meaning too. This goes beyond the implementation of flexibility while in my view polyvalence really facilitates the creative user and enables new use, meaning and appreciation to be established by the all types of users over time.

Looking back at the positions of the architect discussed by Avermaete³⁹, I think the right way to position yourself as an heritage architect is to be a facilitator. I do comply with his notion that the new architectural project (especially in the case of the Hembrug site) could be seen as the cultivation of common resources by transforming, accommodating and activating these resources⁴⁰. Although I think a balanced and flexible approach towards the users and the public is necessary (Lucas also states that successful research will most likely move between the emic and etic position.⁴¹), the architect could be the initiator and facilitator of this process.

To conclude I like to end with the metaphor mentioned in the introduction. After writing this paper I consider the architect to be the composer of a piece of music. He shapes the structure but the composed piece can be played in different ways, there is room for creativity. The Hembrug site can be considered to be an already composed piece of music with some gaps. The architect can be the one to compose the remastered version to bring the piece back into the 21st century while making sure the essence of the original piece is safeguarded. Although musicians and the audience give real meaning to this piece, the composer enables them to do this.

END NOTES:

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- 3 Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, 11.
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- 5 Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users* (London: Routledge, 2003), I.
- 6 Adam Jasper, “Anthropology and Architecture: A Misplaced Conversation,” *Architectural Theory Review* 21, no. 1 (2017): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2017.1289709>
- 7 Tom Avermaete, “The Architecture of the ‘Commons’: Towards a New Definition of the Architectural Project,” *Architecture in the Netherlands*, (2015/2016): 36-43.
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- 9 Klase Havik, “Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto,” *Montreal Architectural Review* 4 (2017): 43-44.
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- 11 Royston Landau, “Notes on the concept of an architectural position,” *AA Files*, no. 1 (WINTER 1981- 82): 114.
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- 24 Tom Avermaete, “The Architect and the Public: Empowering People in Postwar Architecture Culture,” 48.
- 25 Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users*, 1-90.
- 26 Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users*, 9-28.
- 27 Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users*, 15.
- 28 Carlo, “An Architecture of Participation,” 78.
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33 Hill, "The Use of Architects," 360-361.

34 Tom Avermaete, "The Architect and the Public: Empowering People in Postwar Architecture Culture," 61.

35 J.F. Coeterier, *De beleving van cultuurhistorische objecten: een verkennend onderzoek in de Meierij van Den Bosch* (Wageningen: DLO-Staring Centrum, 1995), 63.

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