RESEARCHING THE CHARACTER OF A NEIGHBORHOOD
Reflective Paper – Lecture Series Research Methods

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Thesis "Affordable housing in the Sutton-Place neighborhood"
AR3A160 Lecture Series Research Methods

I   INTRODUCTION

The field or architectural design or research is very complex. Unlike other fields of science, architecture has no universal method or workflow that all research should follow. Architecture can be approached from many different perspectives and at various scales, each will give the architect different impressions and conclusions. Therefore, the scale and perspective an architect chooses to research from can have big influence on the final research and the design that will follow. Because of this it is very important that an architect is aware of the research methods he chooses, and to pick them consciously. The architect needs to be aware of the consequences their chosen method has, and the architect needs to be aware of the bias their research results will have.

This paper is a critical reflection on the research methods applied in the studio 'Complex Projects' when researching the urban and architectural context of Midtown New York. Midtown New York is a very large research site, this makes it difficult to research all aspects of it in the time available in a semester. Therefore, group work and a very structured approach is necessary. The research into the urban context of Midtown New York during this course has been structured in group and personal work. For the group work certain research methods are made mandatory, both to improve collaboration and coherence. However, the individual research focused on the personal interests found during the group work is a lot less structured and more open to individual choice in methodologies.

Because of the mandatory research method in the group work, the students are not fully aware of the perspective from which they are looking at the urban environment, as this was decided for them by the tutors. This will give the research results, in this case a research book that attempts to summarize the research site, an unclear bias. The students that are not aware of this bias might run into issues because of it during their personal research or when working on their design. Therefore, extra care needs to be taken when designing the personal research method, because a well-designed personal research can combat this bias.

The focus of the personal research for this studio laid in the small residential neighborhood along the east outskirts of the city. This neighborhood has recently undergone some changes which were very controversial. According to interviews in news articles the residents said the new development went against the character and atmosphere of the neighborhood. To research this and expected future development, it is important to learn more about this character of the neighborhood. Thus, the research question is the following; What is the character of the Sutton-Place neighborhood? This paper does not give an answer to this research question but tries explores how this question could be researched within the strict structure of the Complex Projects course. It describes the efforts of the collaborative group research to explore the character and it describes the personal research efforts to explore this character.

II   THE COMPLEX PROJECTS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As previously introduced, the research for Midtown New York studio from 'Complex Projects' is structured in group research and personal research. The group research was structured by the tutors with mandatory deliveries, which imposed certain research methods on the students. The group research for this studio was structured in three different phases, each with their own focus.

The first phase was focused on getting familiar with the city layout and scale. This was done by making a large-scale model of the selected research site. With a total of 36 students a model of about 5 by 6 meters was made in the scale of 1 to 1000. The purpose of this physical model was to allow the students to get a grasp on the scale of the city, the types of buildings, their height, and their mass. Besides this initial exploration of the research site, the model also functions as an early investigation of the scale of the streets and avenues, it explores where possible neighborhoods might be, as well as allows the students to get familiar with the city layout.

The second phase of the group research set out to gather as much 'hard data' as possible. This data was to be collected in a research book made by the group. The purpose of this book was to

help understand the cities development, its history and the changes that are happening at the moment or are expected to happen in the near future. The research into the hard data was separated in smaller student groups that all researched their own aspect of the city. One group focused on the history and development of the city and the site-specific history, whilst other groups focused on the demographics, the real estate, the transport systems, the public areas and the climate of the city. The information from this research followed from sources like the public GIS library the New York City government provides, as well as other government pages and other research with a lot of spatial data.

The third phase of the group research consisted out of a field trip to the research location. As a group the students visited the city to confirm their suspicions, they explored and filmed the site. This phase of the research ended with the students developing a group vision and a video to present this. The goal is to take all that was learned during the first two phases, as well as the personal research, and extrapolate that towards a future vision for the research site. Making such a video forces the students to investigate the changes that are happening in the research site, as well as the threats and opportunities. The field trip was focused on exploring the site with the group, and together confirming the research and collecting footage needed for the group vision video.

III   PERSONAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The personal research is done alongside the second and third phase of the group research. It is focused on the issues, threats and opportunities the students have run into during the second phase of the group research. The students all have found some aspect of the research that really sparked their personal interest, and they are free to explore this with their own research methods. The personal research should be able to fit in or follow from the group vision, and it should lead into a design question and proposal for the P2 presentation.

The hard data gives a good impression of the neighborhood and its history and changes from a very technical perspective; however, it does not explain the student the atmosphere and character of the site very well. Therefore, the personal research was focused on different perspectives besides the factual hard data. Since this 'soft data' is much more susceptible to interpretation the student needs to be decisive in their efforts to broaden his knowledge, to not look at it from only one perspective. A lot of the research into the character of the site is done on location, as only here the atmosphere can be experienced. Thus, for the personal research a large portion was done using a phenomenological approach.

During the trip the students got a lot of time to focus their efforts on their personally picked design location and to explore the neighborhood and surroundings. During these exploration attempts were made to document the personal experience on location. Multiple times attempts were made to capture the atmosphere of the neighborhood. This was done on different days and on different times, to get a feeling of the neighborhood on different type of days. On this location it made a big difference if it was weekend or not, as the neighborhood was much livelier because a lot more people are using the streets.

The method used to capture the atmosphere when on location evolved each new attempt. The attempts started with taking photos and videos of the site, but over time this evolved into writing down the experiences. This adaptation was needed because the photos and videos alone did not capture the complete atmosphere that was experienced on location. The texts started as short descriptions of things you did not see on the picture, like temperature or weather, but this grew more into complete descriptions of every tangible and intangible aspect of a street. The writings started very factual as well, with short bullet point descriptions that could be held next to the pictures to explain more, but these transformed into more complete, almost poetic, descriptions where the pictures were secondary to.

The reason why there is a need to turn to such descriptions was described by Havik in Writing atmospheres; She explains that; such experiential analysis asks for poetic language rather than the factual language of science to bring across atmospheric qualities. (Havik, 2019). But she also stresses the importance of looking and writing through the eyes of another. As Jeff Malpas describes, people

perceive atmospheres individually (Malpas, 1999). Different people will have different responses. These responses can depend on their relation to the place, their own background, their memories, their moods. For this very reason it is also needed to look through the eyes of the residents and passerby's, but also involve the residents in your research. Through interviews the residents and passerby's can be asked for their personal impressions. A phenomenological approach like this focusses on the relationship the residents have with the neighborhood (Bognar, 1985).

On location, the discussions with residents and passersby really helped to form a complete picture of the neighborhood. The resident's experiences with the neighborhood gave a good impression on how they use the place and what they would change in their neighborhood. These discussions were done on the street in a very casual way, as to not make it feel like an interview. This approach was chosen on purpose to try to get the most genuine answers and reactions from the residents on the posed questions and proposed changes. Their answers were documented in a similar fashion to the personal experience, by writing them down in almost bullet point fashion, and in a later stage they were rewritten into a more complete story. Some residents were more talkative and easily spoke for an hour about how they felt about the site, and all these interviews combined gave a good overview of the issues that bother the residents and the needed changes, as well as their reaction to ongoing changes in their surroundings.

IV   POSITIONING

By having both the mandatory approach for the group research and the self-designed approach for the personal research, it becomes possible to compare the two approaches when it comes to researching, understanding and capturing the city, its scale, and its character. Both of the approaches set out to research the same object; the Sutton-Place neighborhood in Midtown New York, but they both gave completely different impressions of the neighborhood. This section of the paper discusses these differences in impressions and how this makes some methods more useful than others.

This starts with the model made for the group research, this was very first thing that was made, and therefore also the first impressions of the location. However, it gave the wrong first impression of the size and scale of the buildings. This is because the abstractions needed to be able to build a model of the city at such a large scale, distort the impression of scale. Therefore, the creation of this model creates a wrong expectation of scale. This became apparent only when the students visited New York, when the city felt much higher than expected, especially in the low-rise neighborhoods of the city. Where in the model these low-rise buildings feel like they are 2 to 3 stories high, in real life they reach from 6 to 9 stories high. At the same time the model gave the expectation that the site was very large, and things would be a long walk away from each other, however, in real life this was again very different. It was actually a lot smaller and easier to walk from the East to the West or from the North to the South. In conclusion, the model distorted the horizontal plane to create an expectation that was larger than real life, whilst at the same time it skewed the verticality of the city to seem smaller than real life. Because of this effect, the model has no useful purpose in the research. In contrary, it had an adverse effect on the impression of scale and size of the city and the researched neighborhood.

Like described previously, the 'hard data' research was very useful to understand the city from a technical perspective, but it gave little to no idea of the character, scale and height of the city. With only research into the numbers of the site, it is very hard or impossible to get a good grasp on the complete story of the development. At the same time, an actual visit to the site and the personal approach to research the character of the site did become a good way to research the character, but this is lacking in the necessary historical information to tell the story of the development. Both research methods are unable to tell the complete story of the development and character of the neighborhood without each other. Together the two approaches, the phenomenological approach and the typological approach, give the most accurate and complete interpretation of the story of a neighborhood or city.

Since the approach of the studio is fully focused on the factual part of the research, a personal approach focused on a more anecdotal aspect of history is very complementary. Together they form a complete story, but neither is super useful without the other.

The personal research approach applied here is very similar to the approach discussed by Klaske Havik in Writing atmospheres (Havik, 2019), as well as in her lecture for the course Lecture Series Research Methods. However, only using the phenomenological approach she described in Writing atmospheres also gives a very limited understanding of the site. A combination of hard data and this phenomenological approach is needed for a thorough understanding and to be able to research the character of the Sutton-Place Neighborhood.

V   BIBLIOGRAPHY

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