

# LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT

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## Creating methodological awareness by exploring a different research method.

### I INTRODUCTION

When I look at my own experience of doing research I was never fully aware of what I was doing. In my opinion there was not a lot of attention for research-methodology in my education. During the research stage in different projects and studios I just applied the methods that I was familiar with or the ones I was told to do. This was often a method advised by the teacher or a method I learned from a teacher in previous studios and never questioned it. I never researched different methodology I just did what was known, by me, my fellow students or the teacher of that particular studio.

However, I do understand the relevance and importance of doing research in the architectural profession. For example: to give a certain perspective on the matter or to raise inspiration for the design assignment. But I was never aware of the research method that was used or that there are so many different research methods to enlighten different perspectives on the same matter.

Besides that, I also think that this course was more important at the beginning of my education. Therefore it is a shame that this course is given at the end when I'm almost graduated. Maybe this is because I did my bachelor in Groningen instead of Delft or maybe it has to do with another factor, but I'm relieved and excited that I now learn more about this subject of how to do research and what the different approaches are.

This course really opened my eyes for research-methodology. I learned different research methods during this course that, as mentioned before, I wish I learned earlier on in my education. The research methods that caught my attention during this course were the literary research method in the lecture given by Klaske Havik as well as the Lynch mental maps that were shown during the same lecture.<sup>1</sup> What I also found interesting in the text of 'Research methods for Architecture' written by Ray Lucas was that the most successful research will move between the etic and emic positions, but that a singular focus can appear to be more thorough and that it is a greater opportunity for depth.<sup>2</sup>

I write this paper before I start with my graduation studio heritage in February. That gives me the opportunity to test a research method that was presented during the lectures of this course. This way I can see for myself if this method will work for me and if I can adapt this in my own research process.

My plan is to research the area of Hembrug in Zaandam, the site where my graduation studio is focused on, with the literary research method that was shown during this course. This way my research of the site will be a methodology-led research. The reflection in this thesis will be written after my experiment with the methodology-led research and I will enclose this research in the appendix at the end of this thesis, for those that might find it interesting to read.

### II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Due to the importance of historical and cultural value within the heritage studio, I expect the research assignment to be based on history. Furthermore it is expected to analyse and research the site of the project on topics like urban context, functionality and current use.

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1 Klaske Havik, Lecture on *investigating spatial narratives* (Delft: TU Delft – Research methods 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2018)

2 Ray Lucas, *Research methods for Architecture*. (2016)

Here comes my fascination for the literary approach given by Klaske Havik into account. I thought about how I could do a historical and urban analysis with the literary research method. I want to experiment with the first part of the triple bridge method that she describes in her book: description, transcription and prescription and apply the description method on the Hembrug area in Zaandam.

I choose this methodology because I love reading literature. I was never aware that literature could be used as a method within the field of architecture. I don't know if I am as good at literary writing as I am in reading, but I would like to give it try. I hope this gives me new insights regarding research methods and gives me a different perception about the Hembrug area. Next to that I hope that I get more skilled in writing. What spoke to me when I was reading about description in Klaske Havik's book *Urban Literacy* was that a description of a place is a copy of that place in words, it evokes the images of that place in the mind or the reader.<sup>3</sup> I recognized that my favorite writers, Stephen King, J. R. R. Tolkien, and J. K. Rowling, are very good in descriptive writing. In addition to that I also think of myself as a good observer. I would like to test if this could be a research method that I can use and adapt in my own research methodology.

I hope this research approach will shape my project to get a better understanding of the atmosphere within the Hembrug area and that this will help me to get a good feeling about the cultural and historic value of this area. I think this will help me to make certain design choices such as materialization and that I become more aware of the potential of this existing space, and shape it to my advantage, when coming up with a renovation plan.

The triple bridge that Klaske Havik explains in her book *Urban Literacy* is very clear to me. The goal is to catch the atmosphere and to describe how people experience and use space. To allow the researcher and reader to have an experience and feeling of a place rather than just a photograph with a description about how it should be used. The challenge however with this research method is to get more skilled in literary writing. To describe in such a way that what I write will evoke an image to the reader that is close to or exactly as the subject I describe. I also think it is not a method that is suitable for everyone. Some people dislike writing or reading and prefer a more illustrative approach.

### III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

In my research I focus on the description part of the triple bridge method by Klaske Havik. The literary approach for the description of a place is an interaction between subject and object. It uses literature as a way of researching and experiencing a place. As Klaske Havik stated in her book that space begins with words and it is through evocative description that we can understand how architecture is used, experienced and imagined. Literary writers are good observers and describe the spaces in which they move on several levels. Their descriptions sketch a very detailed image of the place and evoke a certain atmosphere.<sup>4</sup>

*'Only seldom can literary writers be said to offer a 'neutral' account of the places they describe. They bring to light aspects of atmosphere, activities, memories, rituals and emotion. Mere description, in a scientific, objectified way, does not allow for such 'lived' accounts of how people experience space. It is the quality of literary descriptions that they evoke.'* – Klaske Havik<sup>5</sup>

As Klaske Havik also mentions in her book, architect Steven Holl is an example who use a descriptive approach for his designs.

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3 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (2014) p. 38

4 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (2014) p. 37, 38

5 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (2014) cit. p. 39

Steven Holl states that space is only perceived when a subject describes it.<sup>6</sup> His architectural approach consists out of 2 pillars: anchoring (place) and intertwining (perception).

Anchoring is about trying to understand what makes a place meaningful to its users and inhabitants. It is more than just anchoring a building to a site; it is to catch the spirit and atmosphere of a place: *Genius Loci*. Holl tries to do this by tracing layers of history, to find stories and studies of the past to experience the site-specific atmosphere. He tries to look at a place from various perspectives using various senses.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of intertwining can be seen as criticism on the dualistic approach of object and subject. With intertwining subject and object are seen as a collaboration. They are connected, both being present, merging into one another, like different lines of the same story. The phenomenological approach to architecture, as used by Steven Holl, reveals its literary dimension: the aim in architecture is for the subjective and objective to intertwine. It is a matter of perception, in everyday life we become participants of architecture, rather than observing buildings as objects of art, we use them and are used to them in our daily practice. The perception of our surroundings is therefore not always a very focused one. The unfocused vision makes us participants of space, the focused vision turns us into outside observers.<sup>7</sup>

Steven Holl's design approach is a hybrid between a conceptual framework and a phenomenological approach.<sup>8</sup> He uses metaphors as a design tool to make design decisions and uses it as a recognizable element to generate associations for the future visitor of the building. This way, Holl investigates the possibility for architecture to generate associations by addressing different phenomena, to 'elevate the experience of daily life.'<sup>7</sup> He expresses this design approach in concept diagrams which he draws in watercolor sketches.

*'I depend entirely on concept diagrams, I consider them my secret weapon. They allow me to move afresh from one project to the next, from one site to the next. If I approached projects with a fixed vocabulary, I would be exhausted by now; I would have lost my interest in architecture long ago.'* – Steven Holl<sup>9</sup>

Steven Holl and Klaske Havik's methods are very similar yet also different. Where they both stress the importance of the intertwining of subject and object perspectives. Havik addresses a relatively new method of doing descriptive research within architecture and uses literary writing and poetry while Holl's method is based on sketching concept diagrams. His poetry is seen in his sketches and models and not in a writing form.

I think most architects try to sketch and conceptualize their ideas but the point where Steven Holl and Klaske Havik methods meet is that they have a certain perspective. They both try to reach the same goal, to get a better understanding and to capture the atmosphere of a place. How the space is used and experienced by the user rather than analyzing the space through architectural facts and statements.

#### IV POSITIONING

*'I propose in 'Description', that the capacity of the literary writer to evocatively describe is a skill that can help architects to develop a sensitivity to perceptual and poetic aspects of places. Here, the ambiguous relation between subject and object is at stake.'* – Klaske Havik<sup>10</sup>

For me this literary approach could be a new dimension for researching and exploring architecture and space. When researching the built environment the notion of the feeling of the place often gets lost in the process. The research is most of the time very factual and the subjectivity comes only from the person researching it and includes only his/her own opinion. But I personally find myself more in line with Klaske Havik and Steven Holl that the experience of architecture is important too and this I try to capture with the literary method of description.

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6 Steven Holl, *Parallax* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 13

7 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (2014) p. 73-80

8 Alejandro de Zaera-Polo, 'A conversation with Steven Holl' in: *Steven Holl, 1986-1996* (Madrid: El Croquis, 1996), 11.

9 Yehuda E. Safran, *Steven Holl: Idea and phenomena* (2002) cit p. 73

10 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (2014) cit. p. 27

I tried to apply this method on the Hembrug area in Zaandam. When looking back I think it was very difficult to accomplish. I had some trouble finding the right words and sentences to express the feeling and experience I had on the site. Also to observe and descriptively write down the things I saw was challenging. My biggest struggle was not to be too objective and factual about what the place looked like, I needed to search for my subjective mind and add that in my writing. It also took a lot of time, re-reading and adding more details as I tried to read my piece through eyes that had never seen the site before. When I look at my literary description now (see V Appendix) I also think that it isn't finished yet, but then it raises the following questions: when will it be finished? How much do I have to tell? And how many details do you have to include?

On the other hand, this approach taught me a lot. How to observe and describe in detail, how to bring the atmosphere and the feeling I had while visiting this place into words. What I think I could have done better is reading more into the history of the site so I could incorporate the narratives of the site and its history. Next to that I think that I could have interviewed people on the site to capture the perception of its users and visitors. To get a deeper understanding and meaning towards the Hembrug Area. This I wish to do when I start with my graduation studio in February.

When I look further into the triple bridge method, this is a method to introduce the literary writer in the domain of architecture and urbanism. Each of the three branches of the bridge; description, transcription, and prescription, offers a different perspective.<sup>11</sup> For this assignment I only explored one perspective, the one of the lived experience: description. This is because although I am a student within the domain of architecture and urbanism, I am not a literary writer and I never tried literary writing before. That is why I only focused on description, but I would like to explore the other two perspectives of the triple bridge method in the future.

I would like to adopt and develop this literary approach, because it gives me more insight on the atmosphere of the place and it forces me to put this feeling into words, to stand still and observe. What I wish to develop and explore more is transcription (use, activity) and prescription (time, indeterminacy).

I also wish to add drawings or photographs when I do this kind of research. Maybe sketch little fragments of the area or photograph details that I find important. I also would like to try the concept diagram method of Steven Holl. I think that writing and imagery can be intertwined too. For me personally to only use the medium writing to catch the atmosphere of a place is very limited. This is maybe because to me, words have a certain limitation. The same counts for sketches or photographs, these mediums alone have its limitations. That is the reason why I would like to make a hybrid combination between the two research methods, literary writing and imagery within the field of description.

## V APPENDIX

### **Literary description Hembrug area Zaandam**

It was an Indian summer's day in October when I visited the Hembrug area in Zaandam. I drove by car towards the site and what I noticed upon arrival that it is a remote area. I entered the Hembrug area from a road that lies in the west and had to go through a small forest to get to the area. This forest stretches out to the north side all the way towards the channel that lies in the east surrounding the Hembrug area and closing it off from the city of Zaandam. The channel, on the other hand, bends around the area towards the south where it continues along. When I got through the forest I saw these old factory buildings on the periphery of the area that stood there proud and tall, carrying the memories of the past. I drove past it on the east side where there was a parking lot. When I stepped out of my car, near the expedition building, the warm air of the Indian summer's day welcomed me in the Hembrug area. The ambiance was so peaceful and quiet, between all the green of the forest and the periphery with the old factory buildings. You could hear the birds sing; the rippling water of the channel and in the distance you could hear people talking. There was no indicator that could possibly tell me that this area once was one of the biggest weapon factory sites in the Netherlands. It is hard to imagine that the destruction and despair that weapons bring came from such a peaceful place like this. First I walked around the expedition building, the old train track and train wagon that stands in front of this building reminds the people of today how this particular building was used back in the day.

I moved on to the next building, here used to be the incinerator factory. This brown brick building looked like it consisted out of two buildings that were placed against each other. One wide and low the other narrow and high. What immediately draws my attention is that the building had no roof; this has been replaced by corrugated sheets which lies on the existing steel roof construction where the original roof once was. Time was doing its job on the old factory the heavy steel doors which used to be painted green but over the years the paint started to scale off. There were a lot narrow tall steel windows with glass-bars all around the building but especially on the part of the facades where could have been a first floor I wonder if there maybe was. The small narrow windows catch my eye, they seem to be paired but there is a variation of tall and small windows but they are all equally narrow. Is there be a system or pattern or is it this way because of practical reasons, it makes me curious. When I went inside, the inside was completely stripped. There were traces of a first floor or balcony that used to be there but this was gone now. The space was defined by the concrete walls with old steel beams in the openings and a plinth of yellow brown tiles on the walls. The only thing that still stands in this wide open space is a small office box made out of steel framed windows painted in a dark green color. Was this where the boss would sit? This office box stands on the edge of the ground floor of this building, missing some glazing here and there. There was nothing left of the incinerator factory that once was up and running here. Because of the roof that was missing, the sun shined bright inwards from the top of the building through the steel construction and gave an art like light work on the brick walls. The floor was made out of concrete and through the cracks there were growing plants. This whole scene gave a very apocalyptic feeling, as if nature was taking over and the building was given over to decay.

## VI REFERENCE LIST

Alejandro de Zaera-Polo, 'A conversation with Steven Holl' in: *Steven Holl, 1986-1996* (Madrid: El Croquis, 1996)

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