

# FINDING EMPATHY FOR (AN)OTHER

## A critical discourse on anthropocentric design

### I INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by what it must feel like to experience the world as someone else. We are highly complex individuals and once you consider the sum of our interrelations, how we function societally, this adds yet another dimension.

To design is to create something new, often for use by those other than yourself. Putting yourself in another's shoes can be seen as one of the greatest challenges and privileges of architectural research and design.

The built environments we occupy have been shaped by a history of dominant power structures, with just three women making Archute's '40 Most Famous Architects of the 21st Century' for example<sup>1</sup>. Particularly given that design is carried out by such a disproportionate representation of the population, research-methodological awareness becomes crucial for the architectural profession to gain an insight into the needs of a multitude of different users. It provides an opportunity to counter, as far as possible, a lack of awareness that can arise from societal privilege.

Even today, with inclusion given increasing importance, a perception of the designer as a one off, 'famous starchitect' permeates. Foregrounding research methodologies can begin to unpick this concept, centring the user and situating the architect within society. Seeing design *practice* as part of the research process, the balance between learning and creating, between user and architect is integrated throughout the design process. In recognising one's own background, heuristic processes are contextualised, allowing individual biases to be acknowledged and limited and therefore enabling the employment of heuristics as a valuable tool.

Through following this course, I have been able to recognise research methodologies as a much more holistic component of design, with a far greater agency than I had previously been aware of. Questioning beyond *what* I need to research, to understand *how*; this has forced me to review my position in both research and design practice. Does my approach to research align with my wider values and philosophical framing? Will this methodology lead to a thorough testing of my research question?

Marieke Berkers' lecture on praxeology, which looked at the feminist use and production of space was particularly useful for me. It has become a lens that I am using and adapting, applying it also to the inclusion of other species. J. Mejia Hernandez' lecture on heuristics and the research-design relationship has also changed my conception of the overall process, now viewing the entire graduation studio as a research opportunity. I have found this freeing in many ways, to realise and embrace design as a powerful research tool, which is part of the epistemological process and not a finite end goal.

My thesis topic views the Anthropocene as a colonization of nature. It is concerned in particular with the domination by humans over other animals. Following the chair of Transitional Territories' research framework, which explores new forms of occupation at sea, I am focusing on the impacts of power relations within the fishing industry. The domination of humans over sea animals results in commodification at a huge scale, treating them not as individuals but as resources. My thesis will focus on the research question: by introducing islands of heterotopic space through the creation of new, plant-based protein production; can the agency of design be utilised to foster a new culture of food production, encouraging a shift in our perception and relations with other animals?

## II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

My system of inquiry follows an 'emancipatory' approach, with the ultimate aim of not only recording and analysing current power relations but enabling their transformation<sup>2</sup>. It will be underpinned by a critical discourse analysis<sup>3</sup>, understanding the shaping of space in the context of wider societal influences, especially the impacts of anthropocentrism and speciesism. This framing is crucial to effectively challenge current views and practices, allowing the research and design of new forms of occupation and societal relationships. My research is therefore theory-led at its source, inspired by both architectural and cross-disciplinary philosophy.

The initial stages have focused on understanding and highlighting the scale of the industry in order to uncover the causes and impacts of such mass commodification and objectification. Due to the quantitative nature of this issue, my methodology has followed a predominantly etic approach, using mapping and scenario building to gain an overview of the industry and its impacts at the territorial scale.

However, critical of the complicity of mapping as a tool of commodification<sup>1</sup>, I am now focusing at the scale of the individual to counter the abstract quality of the territorial scale through qualitative research. Acknowledging my background and role outside of the cultures in question, qualitative research methodologies become a tool to uncover the point of view of the participants, whilst still emphasising the heuristic contribution of the designer as interpreter, combining these to draw an overall coherence and meaning<sup>4</sup>.

Considering the needs of both human and nonhuman users, I will be using a narrative-based approach, combining linguistic interview for current residents and employees with a praxeological, observational approach for nonhuman animals. Bringing together these two scales and approaches of research, I will continue to test and develop this understanding through an iterative process of research by design.

There has been a growing interest in qualitative research methodologies over the past few decades as naturalistic and emancipatory systems of inquiry become more established<sup>5</sup>. This pattern has, in part, been in response to the call for more feminist ways of conducting research. Valuing qualitative research methods for their ability to 'allow subjective knowledge'<sup>6</sup>, they challenge the dominant assumption that complete objectivity is firstly achievable and secondly even desirable. Feminist discourse instead argues that representations and statistics are also interpretations, yet are misleadingly presented as facts<sup>7</sup>.

A recent shift, legitimising individual stories as 'important sources of empirical knowledge'<sup>8</sup>, is recognised in social and literary studies as the 'narrative turn'<sup>9</sup>. New methods of information gathering and representation are being explored and valued, with increasing use of techniques such as audio and visual recording, notably in cases where verbal or written communication is more challenging, such as with young children or people with disabilities<sup>10</sup>. This is particularly relevant to me for its potential application in the study of nonhuman animals.

Praxeological methods are also being introduced for the study of ecological patterns. New technologies such as electronic tagging are used to track species numbers, movements and behaviours. However, issues with this methodology are still manifold, with most devices currently in use causing harm to the animals, which also inevitably impacts the reliability of results<sup>11</sup>.

## III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Following a wave of independence and decolonisation during the 1950s and 1960s, many Western architects turned to praxeological research in an attempt to build more climatically, contextually and

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a growing criticism of mapping as an instrumental tool in various acts of domination, for example colonisation. Eg. Bélanger, Pierre, and Alexander Arroyo. *Ecologies of Power*. Chicago: MIT Press, 2016.

culturally appropriate settlements. For example, in their design for the resettlement village Tema Manhean in Ghana, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew developed their compound housing according to traditional family structures. They approached their research 'as anthropologists, [to] stress its semi-tribal or "extended family" occupation [...] as the expression of a way of life that must be respected'<sup>12</sup>.

The call to listen and learn from the users themselves became a tool common to designers in the global South and post-independence countries, from GAMMA's depictions of the Bidonville to John Turner's celebration of home-building in the *barriadas* of Lima, rapidly building a body of theory which advocated a facilitation of 'self-help, an initiative from the people themselves'<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly, praxeological research has been used as a tool to emancipate women, particularly in the domestic setting. Questioning the practicality of the traditional home setting, designers including Bruno Taut and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky centred the female experience within the home for the first time. Studying movement paths around the kitchen and dining spaces, Taut focused upon women as the primary users, seeking to understand the reality of their needs within this space<sup>14</sup>. By centring women, a previously underrepresented and unconsidered user group, this enabled the design of the domestic environment to change, creating a much more efficient and user-oriented layout.

Building upon these foundations, the importance of understanding the user experience has continued to grow, the research focus shifting towards representation of the individual narrative. Feminist discourse has explored the role of 'story-telling', highlighting the impact of repeatedly telling particular stories in particular contexts, instead using narrative as a tool for elevating alternative voices<sup>15</sup>. Focussing on 'everyday urbanism, or the choreography of lifescapes'<sup>16</sup>, the UAE pavilion, Venice Biennale 2018 represented the urban fabric powerfully, curating photography and stories from a diverse variety of inhabitants themselves.

Understanding anthropocentrism and speciesism as systems of power, feminist discourse and postcolonial studies become critical precedents, examples of research methodologies which react to the production of space under power structures. I therefore hope to build upon recent developments in praxeological research, combining contextual understanding with narrative-based research of spatial appropriation, including its use by other animals.

In this context, I face an added complexity of communication. With linguistic and interview-based narrative limited, I will therefore lean instead towards observational study. To develop and represent alternative narratives, I approach the linguistic barrier between us and other animals not as an absolute, giving a voice to 'those who cannot speak', but as a challenge to learn to hear the voice of others<sup>17</sup>. Recognising behaviours such as struggling and escaping, or increasing inhabitation and playfulness as communication, I can inform a narrative which communicates the undervalued needs of members of other species within our living environments<sup>18</sup>.

In line with the wider critical discourse, this enables me to counter the erasure of other animals from our lives and landscapes, recognising and starting to empathise with their needs. It provides the foundation for research by design, informing the needs of new heterotopic spaces and systems of food production. In combining more traditional aspects of praxeological research with contemporary, cross-disciplinary narrative-based research, I can combine grounded spatial approaches with explorative social approaches, developing tested architectural research techniques in line with contemporary societal culture. In the context of our generational challenge, facing anthropogenic spatial and climatic change, I can explore the potential of design as a mechanism to shift damaging cultures and perceptions.

#### IV POSITIONING

The historical and contemporary grounding of the praxeological approach, seeking an understanding of unfamiliar patterns of occupation, aligns closely with both my interests in others' experience and the cultural aspect of my research question. I am, however, wary of the danger of appropriating or romanticising other cultures, which I feel is a problem in some early examples, such as John Turner's

interpretation and representation of *barriada* culture in Lima<sup>19</sup>. I therefore agree with the emphasis on the importance of a historical contextual perspective, as presented by Marieke Berkers, in order to ground the research within wider influences.

I have also drawn from the lecture given by Klaske Havik. Particularly stimulated by social and personal narratives of spatial experience, I develop this position based on literature stemming from the fields of anthropology and psychology. This reading has increased my awareness of the importance of questioning and challenging common assumptions of statistical or quantitative data as definitive<sup>20</sup>. It opens opportunities for new ways to value other voices and inherently represents each voice as an individual as opposed to research based on wider patterns, which tend to further highlight the majority.

I believe this qualitative, personal emphasis in research is highly important, yet often overlooked. In focusing disproportionately on the outcomes of quantitative research, the built environment caters for the needs of the majority as a standard. Traditionally, there tends to be a diminishing focus on research as the design progresses, particularly in terms of the social impacts. For instance, at the scale of the body a 'representative' average dimension is assumed across the majority of the built environment. Since the writings of Vitruvius, 'male anthropocentrism has underlain the system of architecture, read and rewritten in the Renaissance and through the modern movement'<sup>21</sup>. In order to produce a diversity of spaces that accurately reflect the diversity of inhabitants, we must therefore recognise the importance of research throughout the design process, down to the impact on each individual body.

This focus on the individual narrative is of particular importance to the current discourse in ecological urbanism and landscape architecture. Whilst there is a continuing trend towards soft engineering solutions and ecology-based design<sup>2</sup>, this still deals with the quantitative, large scale aspects of the problem, the conversation centring around increasing biodiversity and reducing species loss. The architectural outcome therefore reflects this, treating and representing members of other species as one mass. This spatial treatment inevitably feeds into our perception of other animals as one commodity rather than complex, varied and sentient individuals, ultimately further alienating them from our awareness.

The Transitional Territories chair has a clear ecological stance and strong theoretical background, along with a clear 'research by design' methodology. I see this as a great opportunity to break down the idea of research as a process to 'inform' design instead seeing both as continuous and complementary, stressing the need for constant reflection and awareness at all scales. This creates an incentive to introduce and value qualitative research on the needs of the individual alongside those of the wider populations'.

By framing the system of enquiry through a critical discourse, the societal context informs the theoretical basis of my research. Moving from mapping and scenario building as quantitative methods of research, to praxeological and narrative-based research at the qualitative level, I hope to achieve a balanced understanding of the socio-spatial patterns and issues at play. From here, I can then move forward to test various spatial and architectural responses, seeking new ways to instigate cultural change.

Given the complexity of the architectural discipline and the multi-scalar influences it accords, I believe it is imperative to recognise the role of the individual architect as part of a team and of wider society. The built outcome is never a final product, but part of the research process. It is therefore important to combine a variety of research tools, responding to the variety of scales and outcomes the building(s) hope to challenge. Research methods become tools through which to gain as much understanding as possible of the context and influences of the design environment; contextualising heuristic approaches to complement this. The role of the designer as interpreter and narrative builder

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Alberti, Marina. *Advances in Urban Ecology: Integrating Humans and Ecological Processes in Urban Ecosystems*. New York: Springer, 2009;

Forman, Richard. *Urban Regions: Ecology and Planning Beyond the City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

is acknowledged and embraced, their heuristic approach harnessed in order to create a new way forward.

I believe that architecture, the shaping of space and elements by humankind, is one of the most powerful cultural tools we have. We are able to manipulate form and space to suit our needs, enabling unprecedented alterations to the environments and systems we occupy. The human environment today undoubtedly has an enormous impact on space, but I see this not as proof that we must regress towards historical patterns of living, but that architectural design should be embraced and the 'human' environment extended to include all inhabitants. Starting with increasingly empathetic research parameters, iterative design can develop more inclusive ways of building and inhabiting, exploring how a more representative living environment reflects and shapes our perception of others.

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