P4 position paper: Study center Rotterdam
Reflection upon the stances taken within the research and design studio Interiors, Buildings & Cities

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AR3Ai133 Design Studio Interiors, Buildings & Cities

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Preface
This position paper will reflect the stances that I take with the research that I’ve performed within the framework of the fall 2011 msc3 graduation studio Interiors, Buildings and Cities. Within the design studio¹ research consisted of referential analysis, research by design and discussions with colleague students and tutors. A theoretical background was parallel developed in the Research Seminar²: the research topics were linked to issues of the design project.

The Research Seminar led by cultural anthropologist Irene Cieraad, consisted of three reports: a field research on the location/context of the project, a literature research on the theme of the project and a final social research legitimizing the design proposal for the P2 examination. The final report of the social research is the basis for this reflection, while the first two reports can be seen as the departure for the social research.

Departure of a social research
The main theme is based on the initiative of the Interior, Buildings and Cities Design Studio, to research the meaning and possibilities of a university library for Erasmus students on the Coolsingel in Rotterdam:

...’Who owns the city centre?’ seems to become ever more crucial...one sees large public institutions, small cultural and social spaces and social housing gradually making place for nondefined shopping and leisure areas, mixed with luxury apartments. In our view the city government should resist this tendency by supporting alternative initiatives, which stimulate a more mixed use of this important area. Further, we think the university is very important for the public life in the inner city. For Rotterdam, the decision to give its invisible university some presence in the inner city might create an essential opportunity for both the city centre and the university...the university library as an architectural assignment in the inner city gives students an opportunity to create a truly public building where various users might meet.³

The main conclusion of the first two reports was that the university library on the location of the Coolsingel has the potential – supported by various interest groups (EUR, Rotterdam, students, Stadswonen) – to attract and to keep students and make them visible in the city center.⁴ The success of the building though, will be determined by the actual visiting of the intended users and the social/civic functionality that it fulfills within the existing urban context.⁵ The question arises if students will travel to the location of the Coolsingel to study there, outside the campuses Hoboken and Woudestein. Within the framework of the design studio the goal is to determine the motivation of students to study at this location with its specific (building) features and expected experiences:

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¹ Design Studio tutors: Eireen Schreurs, Mechthild Stuhlmacher
² Research Seminar tutor: Irene Cieraad
³ MSc 3/4 design studio AR3A133: fall 2011
⁴ Luijk 2011b: 8.
⁵ Luijk 2011c: 2.
What constitutes a for EUR students attractive university library situated on the Coolsingel?

Positioning of the related research methods

Data has been collected from the primary source by interviewing students of the Erasmus University. The method of interviewing works two ways: on the one hand gaining information for the research and on the other hand involving future users within new initiatives. (With the hypothetical consequence it catalyzes discussions among interviewees and others about the subject) Another reason why this method has been used is the quality of information: good questions, generate good answers that may generate more in depth questions and answers, as opposed to questionnaires that operate one-way.

Based on the first two reports of the Research Seminar, nine questions divided by four themes were asked: Traveling, Location of study, Program and Facilities, and Recognizability and Identity. The interview was build up with practical questions to gain insight in the programmatic expectations. To prevent this method might be the mere translation of preferences into mere program and function a phenomenological attitude was maintained:

Whereas in positivist research, the student typically begins her inquiry knowing what she does not know, the phenomenologist does not know what she doesn't know. The phenomenon is an uncharted territory that the student attempts to explore.6

The results of this exploration are valuable for architectural design as Pallasmaa meant it:

Architecture cannot ... become an instrument or mere functionality, bodily comfort and sensory pleasure without losing its existentially mediating task. A distinct sense of distance, resistance and tension has to be maintained in relation to program, function and comfort. A piece of architecture should not become transparent in its utilitarian and rational motives; it has to maintain its impenetrable secret and mystery in order to ignite our imagination and emotions.7

This argument relates to the question what a university library at the Coolsingel actually means and searches for the ‘soft values’. Because the university library is located outside both campuses, a part of the ‘genius loci’8 or identity as experienced by the students needs to be transmitted to the new situation to feel ‘at home’ outside the campus:

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‘The human identity has as a condition the identity of place’

‘All experience implies the acts of recollecting, remembering and comparing. An embodied memory has an essential role as the basis of remembering a space or a place. We transfer all the cities and towns that we have visited, all the places that we have recognized, into the incarnate memory of our body. Our domicile becomes integrated with our self-identity; it becomes part of our own body and being.’

Students were asked how they view current situations and what their expectations would be in the case of a new university library at the Coolsingel. They were asked if the identity of the EUR/Erasmus MC related to the respective campus and what characterizes it the most. It was a phenomenological approach with the potential to bring to daylight the perceptual experience of the participants. As Lester puts it in ‘An introduction to phenomenological research’:

The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. In the human sphere this normally translates into gathering ‘deep’ information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participant(s). Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, ‘bracketing’ taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people’s motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom.

In his book ‘The Image of the City’, Kevin Lynch formulates the criterion of imageability as the guide for the building and rebuilding of cities: ‘…that quality in a physical object, which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer’. One of Lynch objectives of study was the development of an adequate method in applying this phenomenological concept on interviews. On this phenomenological method he launches, two criticisms:

First, the samples were inordinately small... It would be impossible to generalize from these, and to say that a “true” public image of the particular city has been uncovered. The small size was made necessary by the broad type of inquiry that was made, and by the lengthy time required for the elephantine and experimental technique of analysis. Clearly, a retest with a larger sample is needed, and this requires more rapid and precise methods. A second criticism is the unbalanced nature of the samples chosen... retests should be made with a sample that is not only larger but also more representative of the general population.

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9 Original text: ‘De menselijke identiteit heeft als voorwaarde de identiteit van plaats’. Published in Heynen et al. 2004: 533.
10 Pallasmaa 2005: The Eyes Of The Skin: 72.
11 Lester 1999: 1.
Though the objective for my own research was different, the same methods for gaining data might apply: instead of a “true” public image of a city among citizens, the “true” image of the Erasmus University library needed to be uncovered. A limited number of students have been interviewed considered the limited time and capacity. The question remains if a larger sample would improve the quality of the public image, since phenomenological research is about personal experience:

The main issue I have come across in taking a phenomenological (or any qualitative) approach in a commercial or organizational setting is people not understanding what it is, and expecting similar parameters to apply as for quantitative research. A fairly common comment concerns sample size - it can be hard to get over to people that a single-figure sample is valid - and there can be confusion between methods such as theoretical sampling ... used to ensure that participants are drawn from a spread of contexts, and statistical sampling, which is concerned with quantitative reliability and often with differences between contexts. If the sample size is increased a common misunderstanding is that the results should be statistically reliable.14

In this thought the argument that a sample is necessary that represents the general population might only be valuable for a phenomenological approach if the cause of the distinction is directly related to differences in perceptual experience of the object. This implies that the subdivision of students in bachelor/master has no qualitative value for phenomenological research, as long as both groups identify themselves with the same ‘genius loci’ of place. This is the same reason why a distinction should be made between the students of the campuses Woudenstein and Hoboken: while both groups might consciously identify themselves with the Erasmus-logo, it does not have the quality or character of place that can fulfill the mind. The question remains how a symbiosis of the campuses’ ‘genii loci’ could be conceived.

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14 Lester 1999: 3.
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2011b  “Een universiteitsbibliotheek op maat – Onderzoek naar de potentie van een universitaire bibliotheek aan de Coolsingel als middel voor het aantrekken en zichtbaar maken van studenten in de binnenstad van Rotterdam”

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