

06. December 2018

THE PUBLIC INTERIOR IN THE INTIMATE CITY Relating anthropological comprehension to architectural research

I - Introduction

A design exercise, especially in the realm of architecture, requires previous acquisition of knowledge that acts as a preparation for the execution of said design exercise. In that sense, research precedes design, thus in analogy research methods act as forerunners of design methods. Particularly in architectural education, quite some effort is put into fostering awareness of said design methods. Unfortunately, the tendency is that methodological awareness goes just as far back as the design and planning go but doesn't extend to its preparation. At the Architectural Research Unit (ARU),¹ for instance, that is not the case. During the research phase (a.k.a. design preparation), one already is deciding what is important and what not, what to include and what to leave out – they consider it part of 'design'. Thus, they strongly foster a methodological awareness that spans over both phases of the project. In practice, 'research' is often used as token for engagement and trustworthiness by offices in their website manifesto.² However, it is questionable whether acquired knowledge can be called research if it isn't communicated.³

My personal revelation in this scope has been how my notion of data-informed architecture has changed. The course has made me more self-aware of the information I'm processing and where to embed it. During my Why-Factory semester, we spent most of the time trying to identify the specifics of a problem. The project turned out to be very successful, but I didn't know exactly why. Very often, we arrived at a conclusion that was true, but we didn't know exactly how (it involved computational mathematics, public policy and lots of excel sheets). The course helped me to distil thoughts of process into something I could repeat. This way, I am being able to anticipate the type and amount of information that I am going to collect through study trips, books, and photography. My interpretation of that information and the resulting conclusions – the guiding principles for the project – are more compelling and processed.

In one sentence, my thesis encompasses the 'city rooms' that make an 'intimate city'. However, there isn't a consensus in the chair about what that may mean. The beauty of the project is to find a definition or identification of what they are. City rooms, in their broadest context, are public interiors where one may feel at ease and has intimate knowledge of. A library, or a well-lit station hall, a market hall or simply a passage through a building have the capacity to become city rooms. These city rooms stand in relation to *The Intimate City*, this semester's overarching theme of the Interiors Chair.

¹ Formerly tutored by Florian Beigel and Philip Christou at the London Metropolitan University.

² Thomas Weaver, *Against re(search)* (Lecture at the TU Delft 26.10.2018)

³ Feilden Clegg Bradley studios are a rare example of a researching and publishing practice. They are especially interested in environmental and sustainable detailing.

What that means remains open. The project is located in Antwerp. My goal is, thus, to find out what the role of a city room in *The Intimate City* is. I am aware of the scientific weakness of this topic. However, it is the dictated studio approach, and, after all, there is a certain charm about working with so undefined but humanly embedded issues.

II - Research-Methodological Discussion

The topic – *City Rooms* - suggests an urban scale that needs to be dealt with. However, such a big scale implied a difficulty in focussing the research on a specific issue. The first requirement of *The Intimate City* is intimacy, a depth of knowledge only to be acquired by visiting the place. Christopher Alexander argued that in order to find out what a good entrance is, one must have seen, studied and, well, entered through several entrances. It is only then when we start recognising the patterns that make a good entrance 'good'.⁴ We followed the same principle with our field work.

In order to build a toolset that would help unpack the city of Antwerp, we did two prior study trips to Paris and Milan. In Paris, through a series of walks, we (a 8-person group) photographically documented the qualities of the spaces that qualified as 'city rooms'. Back in the Netherlands, we spent four weeks refining our approach in order to apply it on Milan. First, we defined what we wanted to get out of it: "What is Milan about?". As unscientific as that question is, its answer would distil Milan's qualities to the essentials relevant to the research. As a second step, we tried to anticipate the information that would come at us and create a strategy to work with it. Then, as a group, we spent an extended weekend in Milan, documenting the fragments of the city we saw and compiling a 120-page book on its features with eight essays about Milan's patterns. These isolated patterns, events, and/or chapters, (e.g. theatricality and infiltration) patched together a narrative of Milan. They established principles that shed light on how the Milanese shape Milan, and how Milan shapes them. Through the reading of small episodes, we unpacked some qualities inherent to the city that would have remained invisible. When we finally visited Antwerp, I had acquired the required toolset to grasp the city and make informed decisions about choosing a site, a program, and a position. The goal thus is not to learn how to engineer intimacy, but rather to understand what *The Intimate City* is. It is that understanding that will become an anchor point throughout the design process, informing decisions and ultimately rendering a successful city room. In a sense, it is about establishing the right guiding principles on which you can rationalise decisions on. It is neither form-generating nor very scientific, but it makes the whole notion of *the Intimate City* much more approachable in architectural terms. So far, the rather heuristic approach of exposing my intuition to selected situations has proven to be valuable to grasp *The Intimate City*, but only if followed by a written reflection supported with context-building literature (such as historical data).

On an urban scale, Christopher Alexander's 'The Timeless Way of Building' and 'A Pattern Language' shed light into the mechanics of the city and how they influence the way we make use of it.⁵ ⁶ Valerio Olgiati's newly published 'Non-referential architecture' argues for the necessity of newness and the Zeitgeist-aware architect.⁷ He also outlines the principles of the non-referential architecture in what he calls the non-referential world, which, on the lines might often sound like a justification of his own work, but

⁴ Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 548-552

⁵ Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979)

⁶ Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977)

⁷ Valerio Olgiati, Markus Breitschmid, *Nicht-referentielle Architektur* (Basel: Simonett & Baer, 2018), 78.

between the lines contain helpful and progressive statements. Rittel and Weber's paper 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning' make a case for using heuristic techniques to solve design (wicked) problems, using the general theory of planning as an example.⁸ On a smaller scale, Foucault's 'Utopias and Heterotopias' tries to define types of spaces by going beyond their formal intention, offering a glimpse at their meaning.⁹ Charles Jenks' essay 'Semiology and Architecture' underlines the nature of symbols in architecture.¹⁰ George Perec's 'Species of Spaces' investigates how spaces are intrinsic in our memory¹¹ and Hermann Czech's 'Cafés' how architectural intentions have to be as specific as their detailing.¹²

I believe these readings to be a good start, and so far, they have supported the creation of an attitude towards *The Intimate City*.

III - Research-Methodological Reflection

This mindful *expose-observe-reflect* approach seemed to peak in the 20th Century in terms of its methodical awareness. Christopher Alexander is a prime example of a thorough yet 'feeling' researcher. He makes a case for his main theory in 'A Timeless Way of Building' (1979), using the second volume of the series, 'A Pattern Language' (1977) field research catalogue that is finished off with informed conclusions in each of the chapters (or patterns). The University of Oregon campus was the experimental testing ground of these theories, an experiment which is conveyed in the third and last volume of the book series, 'The Oregon Experiment' (1975). Another example is William H. Whyte's documentary 'The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces' (1980). As an organizational analyst, Whyte was often hired by firms to identify flaws and boost qualities in their organization. His success prompted the City of New York to hire him to use his methods on urban spaces, basically asking the question: why do some spaces work, and why some don't? The film concludes with an outline of guiding principles that aim at making small urban spaces successful and friendly. Alexander's and Whyte's approaches are perceived as valid and true because they describe phenomena that we all can intuitively identify with. Today however, it seems as if research is only valid if there is a clear metric behind it; the validity of a conclusion feels completely tied to its measurability, as if the only valid arguments are the quantitative ones, since otherwise we might enter the realm of unscientific aesthetic debate. The London-based School of Life makes a good case against this aversion to debating non-measurable merits by having a go at the phrase 'beauty lies in the eye of the beholder'¹³.

It is for that reason that I have applied their methods into studying one specific community in Antwerp. It is too early in the project to know the exact proposal, but *The Intimate City* requires an intimate knowledge of your target group. The community around the Sint-Jansplein in Antwerp can boast a vast square that is host to numerous markets and events, but the square is lacking a proper spatial definition in relation to the market – a lack that I want to address with my project. Whyte's sober observation of the place's mechanics proved referential when observing how the market went along the day. Alas, I didn't have a group of keen interns at my disposal, so the documentation

⁸ Horst W.J. Rittel, Melvin M. Weber, *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning in Working Papers from Urban & Regional Development* (Berkeley: Elsevier Scientific, 1973), pp. 155-169

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (Paris: Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité, 1984), 46-49.

¹⁰ Charles Jenks, *Semiology in Architecture in Meaning in Architecture* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1979), 10-25.

¹¹ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 1-96.

¹² Hermann Czech, *Cafés in Cafés and Bars. The Architecture of Public Display* (New York-London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 94-96.

¹³ The Book of Life. <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/why-you-should-never-say-beauty-lies-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/> (Accessed: 26.11.2018) – I am aware no internet articles were allowed but the article had a very good point, however it is not central to this paper.

through photographs and sketches could only get as good as a one-man-effort could. Nevertheless, the material was extensive enough to get under the skin of the place. I heard at least seven different tongues, shops around had billboards in Arabic, Russian, Dutch, French, English... Vendors were initially reluctant to talk, but if you bought something, they answered questions. In Cafés, I lied to the barista by saying that I was moving to Antwerp and was thinking of moving into the neighbourhood, seeing if he could tell me something about it. The answer was so complete and personal (he even brought a map), that it offered a very up-and-close look at the place; he lived just nearby. And, while all of this sounds valid and interesting, it is not really worth anything without proper communication. And that is only ensured through proper documentation.

Alexander's and Whyte's methods have been inspiring to me also in the way they *document* their research. Both methods couldn't be more different but are nonetheless in the same wavelength: they are preoccupied with intrinsic human behaviour and subsequent spatial responses to it. The research-methodological reflections that both undergo is something I have been maintaining throughout the project. This has been done in two ways, the first one being constant writing. Especially after Tom Weaver's lecture *Against (re)search*, I felt the impulse to let all my thoughts out in writing, as to create a pool of ideas and reflections. In one way, this has been done privately with manuscripts and small essays, but also with the Milan research book 'A Reading of Milan'¹⁴. The resulting repository, combined with sketches and other visual material, has proven of immense value in consolidating my ideas of what a city room in *The Intimate City* is. Those findings were the theoretical foundation of the P1, where we were tasked with designing a contextless city room, with the idea in mind that we would unpack its qualities in their most unadorned reality if the room didn't have a context (that is, location within a building and a city). One may consider my written reflections as, for the sake of the example, parallels to the first two volumes of Alexander's work, where I establish a need for the research (the what and the why) and formulate a set of principles (the how, the who the where). These were tested in the form of a series of iterative physical models in 1:20 and 1:50 scale that formed the basis of the P1. After the presentation, a comparative study of the built models and other (built) city rooms helped to evolve the previously identified city room principles. This is not much different to Alexander's aforementioned studies of entrance transitions (but hopefully it takes less time to write than 'A Pattern Language').

The second way is through the studio-imposed project journal, in which we document the progress through visual material and build a chronological set of events that allow to track back research and design evolution. The journal delivers a very suitable platform to organise significant findings in a chronological order and, what is of great significance, being able to communicate them. This is possible because the journal contains visual material of study trips and studio exercises (photography of places, models and situations). In summary, both Whyte's and Alexander's methods can be combined to explain my personal methodology: A visual and graphic journal of my findings, containing valuable praxeological information, is complemented with a collection of small essays that interpret that data and sets it in relationship with the research question and acts a repository of ideas and positions.

¹⁴ This was the result of a six-weeks long research, culminating in a book that, apart from being an interpretation of Milan, stood for the toolbox we had acquired in urban research.

IV - Positioning

As the reader might expect after making it this far into the paper, there is an apparent alignment with the 'On Heuristics' talk by J. Mejía. My personal methodology has been particularly characterised by extensive documentation in form of photography (both recent and historical) and subsequent comparative studies of spatial responses to issues (through models and sketches). The nature of the architectural works involves iterative processes that pursue a feeling approach rather than a bare solution of the mechanical problem. Those processes, especially in the *Chair of Interiors, Buildings, Cities*, predominantly involve insight through trial-and-error modelmaking. Models, after all, contain more (and more focused) information than its drawing representations by virtue of their tridimensionality and abstraction. However, this method only yielded results in the search for spatial and architectural qualities. Of course, these mean nothing without the people that inhabit them. Olgiati's 'Non-Referential Architecture' already introduces the notion of the universality of spatial experience (and how to analyse it) with very valid examples. The argument though falls short by arguing for monolithic executions, which ignores cultural and local constraints that make spatial experiences characteristic for a specific place (perhaps *The Intimate City?*).¹⁵

The comparison of my approach with Whyte's 'The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces' did perhaps give it away: the 'Praxeology' talk by M. Berkers offered some fertile ground to address the issue with a heuristic approach to spatial qualities: it doesn't include human behaviour due to its abstraction. Human behaviour, (un)fortunately, this is something that should be investigated on site: interviews and documented observations do not only broaden the database, but their mere performance inadvertently builds an intimate relationship to the place, paving the way to an understanding of *The Intimate City*. In the context of our studio, this is accomplished with the involvement of the chair's anthropologist, Leeke Reinders. With a set of exercises planned alongside studio progress, the aim is to create a documented understanding of the social processes and events that are place-making, and how they influence or are influenced by their built environment. In that sense G. Perec's 'Species of Spaces' offered an example in praxeological awareness¹⁶. He described places through their finer graining thus achieving a sense of atmosphere. However, his focus on the infra-ordinary seemed out of touch with the general mechanics of city rooms and intimacy.

The methodology outlined in this paper is quite different to, for instance, The Why Factory, which was my studio before graduation. In the Why Factory, the research is a more think-tank based top-down approach, where visions are laid beforehand and then subjected to real life test through experiments; algorithms in Python in our case. However, all topics consulted were so macroeconomic – the save the world kind of approach – that it lacked interhuman considerations. The Interiors chair's approach, on the other hand, with support of an anthropologist, could not be in a starker contrast. However, that focus on the individual and the community, as noble as it is, ignores the other forces that shape the city, such as economics and policy. Even *The Intimate City* is subjected to them. And these forces are usually guided by a vision, as naïve as it may be.

And it is these forces that can make a project a success in all senses. Studying the place and its users creates the knowledge that informs specific design decisions to make sure they live up to the ambitions of the users. It is imperative to address the finer

¹⁵ See: 7, pp. 51-62 and pp. 84-91

¹⁶ See: 11

graining of the architecture, the one that creates the emotional connection between the city room and the user. My target group study approach borrows methods from Whyte and adds some interviews as a first attempt at becoming a platonic resident of the Sint-Jansplein. The following documentation, however, has been the valuable measure: especially through writing, relationships between perceived human behaviour and spatial response to it have emerged (and, over time, often fallen again). I believe that by understanding both mechanics of a place and motives of its users and making sense of them in a consistent way – through writing, photography and sketching in this case – the Sint-Jansplein of *The Intimate City* we as a studio are looking for is going to emerge. And with it the fertile ground on which the project may be founded (no pun intended).

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