

INTERPRETATIONS ON THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Evaluating discrepancies between theory and methodology

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Thesis "The Urban Impact of Brusselization"

I INTRODUCTION

Architecture as a discipline does not stand on its own. The plurality of architecture and its ties to other disciplines of science imply that the act of research is paramount in architecture (Lucas, 2016). By offering lectures and providing reading material, the aim of this course was to make students aware of the important role of research in the field of architecture. Although I already considered myself an advocate of research in architecture before the start of the course, it had certainly helped to further explore the possibilities of the multitude of research methods. For me, this particularly led to the insight that in my studio research, I rely on the use of a combination of research methods to comprise a methodology that helps answering my research question. Furthermore, the course informed me on the contingent nature of architecture. Often, there is no single correct methodology to a research topic, contrary to many other fields of science. This means that a chosen methodology is more likely to be up for discussion. Judging from that, the positioning and argumentation of an architect (or student in my case) in terms of selecting a research methodology has to be coherent. This essay will provide insight in this process.

In my Urban Architecture Msc3 studio, I focus on the effects of Brusselization on the urban space of Brussels. The process of Brusselization is known as the radical top-down modernization fever in urban planning, which left its marks on the city of Brussels mainly during the 1960's and 1970's (Doucet, 2012). Not only did this process change the urban morphology, Doucet (2012) also concludes that Brusselization is responsible for an 'urban trauma', indicating that this process is not solely influencing space in a physical form. In *The Production of Space* (1991), Lefebvre endorses the ambiguity of the construct of space and introduces a 'spatial triad', a theoretical model in which multiple interpretations of space are being highlighted. In my studio research, I use Lefebvre's 'spatial triad' to study the impact of Brusselization on the urban space of the city. The combination of methods I use for studying space in accordance with the theories of Lefebvre need to address the multiple interpretations of space. The necessity of using more than one research method to document a given space is illustrated by Lefebvre (1991): "How many maps, in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meanings and contents? It is doubtful whether a finite number can ever be given to this sort of question. What we are most likely confronted with here is a sort of instant infinity, a situation reminiscent of a Mondrian painting" (p. 85-86). The sole use of one method is therefore not extensive enough to describe space, as also argued by Awan et al. (2013). This essay concerns the methodology of empirically researching socially produced space and studies the discrepancies between theoretical bases and methodological approaches.

2 RESEARCHING PLURALITIES

In the 'spatial triad', Lefebvre (1991) describes the multiple interpretations of space and the dynamic relationship between them:

- The first interpretation is the representational space, which is produced by historical processes and events. It is the passively experienced space, the reproduction of conceived symbols, ideals and processes that form an image of the city. This interpretation has to be understood through researching history and society in the particular context of a given space.
- The second interpretation is based on the physical elements of space, the representations of space. It is a more analytical perception, which can be understood through mapping or modelling space. This view of space allows for measurement and conceptualization by humans.
- The third representation of space is the spatial practices. It is the use and appropriation of space, which takes place within the products of the other spatial interpretations. The spatial practices come to existence through the relationship

between daily routines and urban reality. It can only be put into expression by displaying empirical material that shows the events and movements in and through space.

As argued in the introduction, these interpretations of space require different investigative tactics. Capturing the plurality of space in my research is done through theory led research. Following Groat and Wang (2013), Lefebvre's theory of space can be classified as design-polemical theory. This theory is used as the basis for choosing an appropriate methodology. The overall research framework therefore examines the way in which Brusselization embodies the theoretical (social) construct of space.

The first component of the spatial triad, representational space, requires historical research. Brusselization has to be placed in a historical and social context in order to understand the non-architectural implications of the process, even though Brusselization is essentially of architectural nature. Lucas (2016) discusses the role of historical research and describes historical processes as a source for producing architecture. Using literature to describe Brusselization in its historical context therefore provides information that is relevant to architecture. As a discipline, architecture responds to social, cultural, economic and political aspects of a given space (Lucas, 2016).

Representations of space are being examined through critically reviewing project-specific literature and visual material. To capture the physicality of spatial representations, remaining on a theoretical level is not sufficient, considering that representations of space correspond to conceived reality. Representations of space directly addresses architecture. It involves abstraction and conceptualization of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Brusselization manifests itself on a physical level and produces tangible subjects of study. A selection of such case studies and its notational media, actual products of Brusselization, will deal with the material aspects of Lefebvre's theory.

Spatial practices, contrary to the aforementioned interpretations of space, apply to the emic mould of research. Spatial practices addresses the social and sensorial component of the theory and thus requires closer observation of daily life (Lefebvre, 1991). Fieldwork is necessary for this type of research. After all, researching spatial practices is praxeological research and transcends the conceptual level of space.

3 NEGOTIATING BETWEEN THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Before the original version of *The Production of Space* was issued in 1974, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour (1977) published *Learning From Las Vegas*, which also explored the social and cultural dimensions of space. The authors sought to document space through a series of methods, by approaching the subject of study in a scientific manner. The research conducted is therefore methodology led. Las Vegas was the subject of study in the publication, but Venturi et al. (1977) implied that the research methodology should be applicable to other locations: "This has been a technical studio. We are evolving new tools: analytical tools for understanding new space and form, and graphical tools for representing them" (p. 73). This approach to documenting space was at the time considered innovative, so this approach of (scientific) methodology led research yielded worldwide recognition of the publication (Chapman et al., 2006).

However, Venturi et al. (1977) discussed the occurring difficulties of this approach in terms of capturing the full meaning and content of space. "It is extremely hard to suggest the atmospheric qualities of Las Vegas, because these are primarily dependent on watts, animation, and iconology: however, "message maps," tourist maps, and brochures suggest some of it" (p. 19). These difficulties are also perceived by critical reflections on *Learning From Las Vegas*. The methodology's consistency is undermined by Chapman et al. (2006): "When read as a scientific procedure, rather than a theoretical one, *Learning From Las Vegas* becomes itself ambiguous. The work as a result represents

not only a provocative polemic on architectural signification but the complex and often problematic relationship that exists between scientific procedure and architectural discourse” (p. 325).

Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) diverted from a scientific approach and chose for a theoretical approach to decode the plurality of space. Based on the assumption that space is 'produced', Lefebvre concluded that developing a theory is the correct approach, since "theory reproduces the generative process" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 37). In studying this process, referring to the production of space, the role of history becomes more prominent. Accordingly, history is understood as source of 'representational space'. The production of architecture is strongly linked to historical processes and representational space. As Lucas (2016) derives from Manfredo Tafuri's readings, architecture is most complexly entangled in social and cultural production, of which historical dynamics are the main driver. Architectural culture can therefore be considered as a convincing 'display' of representational space.

Still, representational space does not limit itself to architecture. It is not susceptible to rules, cohesion or consistency (Lefebvre, 1991). Seen from this interpretation, a pre-set methodological approach, as used by Venturi et al. (1977) would therefore be too stiff for the purpose of documenting imaginary and symbolic elements of space. A given method, or investigative tactic, may therefore serve as an approximation of representational space rather than a conclusive decryption.

Although applicable to architecture, the work of Lefebvre is not of architectural origin, but of sociological origin instead. Lukasz Stanek studied the concrete use of his theories in architectural practice. As Stanek (2011) perceives, the success of linking Lefebvre's theory with architecture and urban design is somewhat controversial. Applications of Lefebvre's theories in empirical research had not been done until the 1990's, since *The Production of Space* had merely been interpreted as a theory. Simultaneously, Lefebvre's theory of space as 'socially produced' contrasted with the concept of 'architecture as space', which had been mainstream in architectural discourse (Schmid & Stanek, 2016). This cohered to the functionalistic thinking that dominated architecture and urban planning during the time in which *The Production of Space* was published.

To solve the problematic nature of applying Lefebvre in architectural research, one has to transcend the imperviousness of the methodology led research conducted by Venturi et al (1977), while also carefully transcribing the generic theories of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) into a specific approach in empirical research. According to Schmid & Stanek (2016), the search for this middle ground is most successfully endeavoured by Edward Soja. Soja's postmodern thinking resulted in a new interpretation of Lefebvre's spatial triad. To conclude, as emphasized again and again by Lefebvre, successful interpretations of the spatial triad in empirical research rely on the acknowledgement and understanding of the dynamics between the three different interpretations of space (Schmid & Stanek, 2016).

4 POSITIONING

Studying the social construct of space is a popular subject of debate nowadays (Schmid & Stanek 2016). However, the question of public space had been off the table in architecture in the second half of the twentieth century (Avermaete, 2010). During this period, the symbolic content of public space had been ignored. Consequently, Lefebvre's theories were misunderstood and considered inaccessible. It was not seen as an applicable basis for conducting empirical research. From the 1990's onwards, scholars started experimenting with integrating Lefebvre's theory with empirical analysis. Schmid & Stanek (2016) found that most attempts of appropriating *The Production of Space* in research methodologies were accompanied with confusion and problems with interpretation.

This sudden increase in interest of the social components of space cohered with the turn in architectural discourse. Since this turn, architectural practice focused more on topics such as

urbanization, historical context and spatial practice (Schmid & Stanek, 2016). As mentioned in the lecture by Berkers on spatial and social practices, the magnitude of such topics in current architectural discourse and the need for thorough understanding these themes relies on praxeological research. The theoretical basis of such research was elaborately discussed in Lefebvre's writings. The work of Henri Lefebvre was therefore an appropriate starting point for many debates in the profession. Consequently, *The Production of Space* became the basis for many forms of research and practice architecture, but also in many other disciplines. The call for a bottom-up approach in the design process is particularly interesting when researching the impact of Brusselization on the city. Lefebvre is seen as an influential figure in the urban debate of Brussels. In describing the relation between architecture and the public, Avermaete (2010) found that Lefebvre's work was the inspiration of counter movements against the radical modernization of Brussels. The aspirations of these activist groups for social and spatial justice penetrated in architectural culture. The study of Avermaete (2010) thus indicates the strong influence of politics in public space in the instance of Brusselization. The ideals and symbols of this architectural activism may therefore be of great influence in the construct of Brussels' representational space.

In the chair of Urban Architecture, the interest in public space coincides with that of today's architectural mainstream. There is a persistent focus on praxeological research throughout the studio. The exploration of the context of the given site and all its socio-spatial characteristics that is done during the Msc3 phase can not be seen in isolation from Lefebvre's theories. Decoding space with a methodology derived from these theories is a logical research in line with the ambitions of the Urban Architecture studio. The importance and relevance of understanding the possibilities of Lefebvre's work in researching these socio-spatial characteristics is unequivocal. The exploration of research methods in this paper and the provided literature and lectures in this course helped in the process of positioning the theoretical component of my studio research. Concluding on the findings in this paper, there is no fixed methodology to be followed in conducting empirical research, as illustrated by the flaws of the methodology led approach by Venturi et al. (1977). Theory does in this case not immediately lead to a methodology. Lefebvre does not provide a research framework in his writings, neither do Schmid and Stanek (2016) in their reviews of Lefebvre's work in relation to architectural research. Instead, because of the specific relationship between theory and research in the case of Lefebvre's work, the process of establishing a research methodology is of an organic nature: "Working with Lefebvre's theory is not simply about applying an existing repertoire of concepts, but about the necessity of continuously advancing the theory as part of an engagement with current developments in society. This is largely due to the specific dialectical relationship between theory and empirical research in Lefebvre's understanding" (Schmid & Stanek, 2016, p.35). The provided research framework should be up for constant discussion and evaluation. My understanding of Brusselization and its urban impact and the functionality of my research framework therefore relies on a thorough understanding of the theoretical basis that I am working with, provided by both the works of Lefebvre (1991) as well as reflections on his work, such as the work of Stanek (2011) and Schmid & Stanek (2016).

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