THE OTHER WAYS OF DOING
Learning and Unlearning Research Methods

Student
Han Li (4932803)
Chair of Methods & Analysis, “Positions in Practice”
Thesis “In Transit”
I BEYOND THE IMAGE

Gordon Matta-Clark used a chainsaw to physically examine the grains and pains embodied in a suburban domestic house.¹ Gerrit Rietveld abstracted a chair repeatedly to find out its essential structural elements.² John Hejduk created imagined worlds and characters to explore architecture as a product of time.³ The subject of research is important, and so is the language of exploration. The way of doing often reveals more than the actual products.

This course raised my awareness in choosing a methodology that is consistent with my research question. Professor Robert Alexander Gorny’s lecture on “Investigating Typologies” presents the bias that we may embed in our research method if not reflected on critically. He drew an alarming revelation between types in architecture and stereotypes in everyday life. The lecturer revealed the architect’s habit of taking an existing type that performs well for granted and applying it in a new context uncritically. Gorny suggests to examine the genesis of a typology and the relations that enabled such typological change. This points out that architecture encompasses the complex relations and cannot be examined through a single lens of form or function. My research is carried out on such basis, understanding architecture not merely as physical existence, but an assemblage of relations.⁴ Through my research, I aim to understand the aura of the place and further investigates what relations and conditions produce such sense of place.

My thesis is carried out in the chair of Methods and Analysis, based in the city of Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia. The city has suffered through its political instability over the years and experienced a destructive earthquake in 1963.⁵ It is physically layered with architecture carrying different and often conflicting ideologies. Much like “the pea” under “the princess’s mattress”, in many aspects of the society including its architecture, problems keep bulging up in the new layers that attempt to cover up, but repetitively failed to do so due to the unresolved “pea” underneath all the layers of masking. The research is carried out at a “interesting” time where the facelifting project “Skopje 2014” arises as a reaction to the outdated socialist ideology carried by the brutalist architecture built after the earthquake. Being out of the EU, “Skopje 2014” expresses the yearning of the right-wing government at the time to be part of the remaining glory of western European history. The resulting neoclassicism-alike architecture are merely symptoms of the conflicting society.

Researching into such architectural environment whose image is distinctively clear and unquestionable, we intended to look beyond the images and investigate the genesis and relations that produce such symptoms in order to not stay on the level of applying types as mentioned in Gorny’s lecture.⁶ From the initial research, we have problematised the idea of liminality as a point of exploration.⁷ In the seemingly absurd built environment of Skopje, I would like to push the absurdity even further that the tragedies of everyday life becomes pleasurable and comical. This brings me to my research question, what does this position of liminality and latency do, wanting to leave but cannot leave? How is it embedded in architecture and how does it reveal itself?

II FROM PHENOMENOLOGY TO ETHOLOGY

Our research methodology starts with phenomenology and then follows ehtology. We have used tools of narratives, critical discourse analysis and interdisciplinary research to study the phenomenon and its conditions. According to professor Klaske Havik, phenomenology is the study of things as they appear to us

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² Michael White, De Stijl and Dutch Modernism, (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2003), 64.
⁷ Liminality in our definition means an in-between state of transition. Our hypothesis is that liminality emphasises by transition the sense of place
and it focuses on the role of the body in experiencing space. A place is not a site. A place has an aura that is beyond visual perception, it might have to do with the sharpness of the air, the moisture in the sound and the dullness in the smell that coordinate this place among all others. For me, John Hejduk describes most clearly what the aura of a space is, he said “In Oslo, when the fog rises at night, you can practically cut a bucket of air with a knife.” Following the understanding of the sense of place, we furthered the investigation with ethology studies. Ethology defined by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze “studies the composition of relations or capacities between different things.” The process involves the problematisation of a phenomenon and the examination of its capacity to affect and be affected. This methodology asks the question of what a thing does instead of what a thing is, which is especially relevant in our research for the context has loud visual language. In the following paragraphs, I will reflect on how the combination of these two epistemic frameworks are applied with the specified analytic tools in our research.

A narrative is a story, an individual perception of a reality. As an outsider of the context of Skopje, it is important to understand the multitude of subjectivities at play in order to piece together a intersubjective picture of the place. We were specifically focusing on how realities are portrayed through media of different kinds, including news channels with western and balkan perspectives, biennales with an international outlook and local perceptions. The medium of communication all have inherent or internalised subjectivities. Through different lenses of narrative, a diversity of realities were cast. We then compared and contrasted different realities in front of us in order to examine the conditions that produced it and the context that allowed it. Through this process, the self-contradictory representations revealed to us the insecure and liminal position of Skopje.

Ray Lucas explains that critical discourse analysis is used to “analyse the hidden aspects of cultural phenomenon”. We were interested in how a territory establishes itself, and what happens at places where these territories meet. Critical discourse analysis is therefore adopted by conducting investigation of tectonics. By drawing in detail places where different territories confront each other, we were able to see the physical manifestation of limit and how limit is negotiated in the built environment.

Interdisciplinary research is the study of architecture integrating knowledge and method from different disciplines. The temporal aspect is an important investigation in our research about liminality. To research the ephemeral quality of liminality, we integrated the medium of film to study certain architectural quality, using an abductive way to speculate. Extracting a singularity in the detected phenomenon, then rearranged things and speculate what will happen through the making of a short film. (Figure 1)

[Figure 1. Film screenshots illustrating how liminality appears and disappears at different times in the same space. Author: Han Li]

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III WAYS OF NARRATING

The use of narrative has played a significant role in my research in understanding subjectives from diverse perspectives, through which we were able to untangle the complicated relations, understanding the intersubjective reality and investigate its condition. In this chapter, I will explore the different ways narratives have been used as a tool in various contexts and how each way of doing has informed my research problematique. This includes narratives expressed in the specifics to communicate the general, imagined narratives that construct characters that inhabit and fulfil the role of architecture and allegorical narratives that combines design and theory.

Narratives in the hands of artist Louise Bourgeois often depict the atmosphere of the political environment through telling the stories of intimate domestic space. Her work “He Disappeared into Complete Silence” documents the absurd tragedies of everyday life and loneliness of individual although engaged in social life. This work was first created in 1947 and recreated in 2005. Using domestic space as a site of resistance, Bourgeois was able to reflect on the atmosphere of alienation resulting from the political situation. In facing projects like Skopje 2014 with its loud manifestations, we had the tendency to look at public space for political narratives. However, Bourgeois’s work shows how the everyday can be so potent that it effectively conveys the unescapable loneliness that was in the midst of postwar air. Such an approach informed our way of looking for everyday life struggles to evaluate the effect the architectural layers imposed on the people of Skopje. (Figure 3) The combination of literacy and etching print depicts the weight, colour and smell of the atmosphere during that era. In 2005 this work was reprinted, this time, with simple colours of blue or red added. The pain was revisited, however with new interpretation and meaning. The heaviness from etching printing is elevated slightly by the use of colour, depicting a slight different atmosphere in 2005, a similar sense of pain, but perhaps of a different reason and source. This revisiting of the same narrative at different times effectively explores the measure of time, which we have incorporated as a strategy in our research in the temporal quality of liminality.

Figure 2. ‘He Disappeared into Complete Silence’, the left is produced in 1947, right in 2005. Author: Louise Bourgeois

Figure 3. Imagined narratives of Skopje, on the left is construction worker in 2013, on the right is blacksmiths 1655. Author: Han Li, Isabel Lee

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Narratives in John Hejduk’s practice reflect a universal situation by creating imaginative worlds with characters relating to one another. Practicing just after the modern movement, Hejduk’s work built on the fruits of the modern movement and its strong emphasis on formal exercises. It also developed on what had been left out in the modern era, the failed agenda of social transformation. Hejduk regards architecture as a cultural practice that is in dialogue between human (abstract mind) and form (system of knowledge). The use of narrative in his case is an interplay of complex relations which enabled him to overcome the functionalist agenda of modern movement with a non-reductive attitude. Hejduk considers architecture almost like a work of translation that “starts with the abstract world, and works toward the real world.” He therefore, depicts one reality repetitively from different perspectives and in different scenarios, destabilising what seems to be constant. The method of telling the same narrative a thousand times over endeavours for the real world to be as close as the abstraction he started with. His use of narrative informed my research to study the affordances and relations of architecture, and explore all possibilities in different scenarios.

Figure 4. Drawings of ‘Cemetery of a still life painter’ 1995. Author: John Hejduk

In the current architectural environment, there seems to be a separation between architectural theory and architectural design. UCL professor Penelope Haralambidou formulates allegorical projects as a way to combine design and theory. Allegory is a type of narrative that says one thing and means another, whose origin is closely associated with mythical narratives. Haralambidou argues that allegorical architectural project can be used productively in understanding and exploring spatial ideas. It is a process of translating a reality and speculating the outcome. An allegorical architectural project combines both writing and drawing that destabilise the established mode of architectural production. By doing so, destructing habitual way of thinking. In our research, We abstracted our findings in the allegorical narratives to communicate relations. However, I think there is still a fine line between abstraction and reduction, which I am still struggling to identify.

Figure 5. Allegorical narratives depicting our understanding of relations in Skopje, with suggestive use, time and strategy. Author: Han Li, Isabel Lee

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18 Deamer, “the legacy of the whites”, 93.
IV THE OTHER AS AN OPERATING POSITION

I have framed our research within phenomenology as a starting point and then moving on to follow ethology as I feel phenomenological observations have to be pushed further to be valuable. Havik advocates looking for accurate description of atmosphere in non-architectural literature, which is a useful tool as a starting point to develop sensibility towards the place. The research must go on to investigate the conditions that produce such an atmosphere. The study of tectonics, how parts are bonded in a single whole, often reveals the hidden relations. However, to study tectonics does not only focus on investigating material culture. While I agree on the opposition of hylomorphic way of thinking and acknowledge the importance of understanding material manufacturing processes, I oppose the nostalgic attitude Eireen Schreurs presented in her lecture towards craftsmanship and the reductive way of placing material culture as the driving force of architecture. Her single lens perspective regards architecture as an object, different from my belief that architecture is relational. It is worth to quote American author bell hooks to understand how approaching research from singular aspect of material culture can be dangerously reductive. “Imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is a phrase bell hooks often uses to describe the interlocking forms of domination functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives. It is to remind us that things cannot be viewed through one single lens of race or gender. More than how materials are produced and put together, I am more interested in what conditions and fields does such an ensemble creates. I share British Anthropologist Tim Ingold’s position that architects should develop the sensibility in finding “the grain of the world’s becoming and follow its course”.

The work of John Hejduk is the main point of study for the development of my research methodology. However, he was widely criticised for his nomadic project that does not rise from the context. I believe that what Hejduk was occupied with exploring is the composition of relations between objects, human actions, programs and forms and their capacities to affect and be affected. His proposal for the city of Berlin was considered ‘too radical to implement and too relevant to ignore’. The study of relations are abstracted information from reality, it can therefore be applicable in many situations just with contextualised characters. However, this contradicts with my belief in the study of tectonics as Architect Kenneth Frampton argues that architecture always arises from the context. In this era of globalisation, critical regionalism is often revisited for its contextual specificity and place making effect. Perhaps it is important to constantly make efforts in contextualising design to fight against the universal placeless-ness. This self-contradictory position of mine was also realised in my research. Through analysis of the sense of place in Skopje, we arrived at the study of liminality. However, once we have extracted this abstract idea, the research seems decontextualised to be not about Skopje anymore, but simply the study of liminality itself. This remains my question, maybe many projects face a similar problem? Or maybe abstraction and tectonics studies are just two parts of one process where a subject is first abstracted and then concretised and contextualised?

In all the analytical tools, the visual tools including reading, writing, modelling, drawing and filming are involved. However, the human body as a vital factor in architecture does not yet have a systemic methodology to explore the field of architecture. The proposition “Cogito ergo sum” separated the body from the mind. How will the way we design change if we perceive the human body not just as a 170cm tall volume, instead as an embodiment of knowledge? Havik mentioned in her lecture that phenomenology has a strong focus on the body in experiencing space. However, this assigns a passive role to the body as perceiving of atmosphere and of architecture. My question and quest is to look for methods that acknowledge the role of the body as actively shaping space and architecture.

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26 Kenneth Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture, 5.
What I take away from this course, or perhaps from this master degree is never be too comfortable with one methodology, one way of thinking and one position. I consider employing ‘the other’ as an operating position necessary to challenge the habitual issues, methodologies and solutions we as architects often arrive at, to work with and against whatever I have been taught and have learnt. This asks for a persistently critical self-assessment over methodologies we employ. I guess the best ending for ‘the other’ is to stay ‘the other’.

28 Our degree is called master of science in architecture. I propose to change the name to mistress of science in architecture. The definition of mistress is a woman who has control over or responsibility for someone or something, the feminine counterpart to ‘master’. In the contemporary world, a ‘mistress’ has a negative connotation as a woman who has a sexual relationship with a married man, as the other woman. The proposal to change the name of the degree is not a feminist statement. Gender is not the important topic here, but the position of ‘the other’.


