Phenomenology of our values
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Introduction
With the field of architecture becoming more and more complex through the years a clear scientific approach to the way of doing research is important for the architect and consequently the outcome of the design process. Technological advancements in engineering as well as the enormous amount of available information have broadened the possibilities within architecture but have also created the need for a much more accurate and careful approach in what concerns our built environment.

This course was very enlightening, for the research process during the graduation, because it underpinned the importance of a conscious approach to research. The lectures trigger the participants to not only make a thorough research by highlighting different approaches and perspectives in the field that can be utilized by the students, but also inform them on how different methodological approaches can have different implications in this process.

While many times, clarifying the methods used can be an easy task, understanding the methodologies behind them and their effect in the research can become difficult. Although the importance of this understanding became very clear to me during the lectures, realising that even a “successful” research with clear results and conclusions can lead to false science if the preparatory actions and decisions are not completely conscious.

During the graduation project for Heritage and Architecture in the Harbor Heritage Studio, a former industrial building in the former city harbors of Rotterdam is studied with the goal of reusing it with a new cultural function. In the many steps of this research, I tried to apply the knowledge acquired in this course where possible. When this was not possible I tried to remain conscious about the ways used to gather, analyse, interpret and finally communicate the results to my colleagues and to the tutors of the studio. This position would result, for me, in a much more clear understanding of the shortcomings during this research process as well as their implication to the value ascribing and assessing processes during the research.

The department of H&A provides the students with a toolbox of methods that can be applied during the research phase of the graduation, that aim not only in an analytical approach to the building, but to a concrete value assessment that generates the following steps in the research. Outside the educational environment, research on Heritage buildings is in many cases the work of architectural historians or historic building surveyors, while the contribution of an architect derives mainly from his deeper engagement in the field and his experience with buildings. The research method of value assessment has a strong dialectic and discursive character and when consensus has been reached between the specialists involved, it results in a clear (in most cases visual) historic atlas, that can be used for the development of a design. The inherited tendency of architects to intervene, can have a tremendous effect in the accuracy

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1 As provided in the Studio.
of this research process, as stressed by Wessel de Jong in “Designing from Heritage”. In order to tackle this, in our research about the redevelopment of Fenix II in the Rotterdam harbor, we introduced a second assessment layer, resulting in a deeper understanding of the problematique around the building.

Research methodological discussion
The method developed in H&A, based on the book of Marieke Kuipers and Wessel de Jong, is focused on discovering and assessing the qualities of the building in order to create a set of maxims that leads to a design proposal.

The first step in this process is “Chrono-mapping” where a combination of methods is utilized to develop an understanding of the heritage site in regards to its age, to the materials present, the evolution it underwent through time and the current condition of the building. In this process, physical visits to the site are performed with the intention to document the building in a range of levels (shearing layers), a concept developed firstly by Frank Duffy and later elaborated by Stewart Brand in his book “How buildings learn: What happens after they are built.”. The results of this research are both textual and visual and describe the building in many aspects (architectural, historical, socio-cultural, structural a.o.)

Even though the logical argumentation strategy is organizing this step, it can be better described as a combined type of research, since the deeper approach to the principles of Brand is done by utilizing a broader apparatus. An example is the quantitative research on the building’s square meters throughout the evolution in time by using archive material done as abductively as the qualitative research on the organization of the function in that space in regards to the architectural theories and practices of that time. Both researches are concerned with the same layer of the building but with very different strategies of information inquiry or analysis, amongst many utilized during this step.

The next step consists of “Value-mapping” where the “value-bearing” qualities are identified and classified in a methodical manner. In order to make that explicit and easily communicable to others, an experimental value matrix was developed in the department, to be utilized by the students in this process. It combines an enriched version of the shearing layers (surroundings, surfaces, spirit of place) with the Rieglian values but applied in the context of the heritage project. Even though this tool can create a strong association between the present state of these qualities in the building with their historical evolution, it does not claim to be an all-encompassing tool. This analytical method should remain objective, based on reliable

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sources of information and sincere observations, without anticipation of future changes. While in this step a more clear “mapping” strategy is applied in the organization and analysis of the information, data reduction generates correlations that have to be sorted in the matrix. The objectivity of the approach becomes even more critical in the next step of the research.

For the “Mapping Levels of Significance” step in this process, a colour coding system is used to visualize the hierarchy among the studied values in plans, sections and elevations, accompanied by text, clarifying and explaining the differences in the evaluation. In the case of Fenix II, we introduced a secondary “set of maps” that aimed to contextualize these values in the historical narratives of the building. This was done not only to create a secondary framework whereupon the following steps could be based on in the course of the research process, but to also generate “levels of historical significance”. For this, the qualities were colour coded not according to an ascribed significance but according to their importance for one of the building’s architectural / historical narratives. In the “Guidelines for Building - Archeological Research” the importance of clear distinction between facts, interpretations and value assessments is stressed for this part of the research.

Forming dilemmas, possibilities, opportunities and obligations, is the final step in this process and requires the active engagement of the “intervening” architect in the transformation of heritage discourse. This is also done through mapping these elements and by formulating a position statement, where the obligations that derive from the reuse of a heritage site are argued.

Research methodological reflection
A methodological “map” would be required in order to clearly describe the scientific course of such a research but even that becomes irrelevant if one considers that in this process, the range of methods used, spreads through the fields of typology, phenomenology and praxeology, depending on the specific aspect of the research. Although, it becomes clear that the early steps have an objective character, that becomes more and more subjective during the process, with the discursive and dialectic character of the later steps playing an important role in the credibility of the outcome.

As means of increasing the credibility of qualitative research, triangulation and member check are suggested by Groat & Wang in “Architectural research methods”. This was translated in our research, in a second “set of maps” where the values of the building were coded according to their relevance in one of the building’s historical narratives. Next to the original value assessment matrix where values are sorted and subsequently assessed according to Rieglian values, we generated a second scheme where the described values are

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sorted in respect to their implication in a distinct chronological time frame. Translating that into maps would result in the unveiling of deeper phenomenological questions, both in this step of the research as well as in the following ones.

In the discourse around heritage objects, the "material" and the "meaning" are initiating an unavoidable discussion about terms as originality, authenticity, preservation, restoration with this discourse respecting the Zeitgeist of architecture, sciences history, art, technology a.o. by introducing terms as reuse or reversibility. Before assigning the values to a time frame, the building archeological research that provided quantitative information about the materials and their age was combined with the qualitative research during the second step that aimed to define the meaning of that material for the given layer of the building.

This method meant to serve as an extra foci in the process of mapping\textsuperscript{13} the values of the heritage object. It is in no way to replace the original value assessment mapping process, since due to its simplifying nature it can not be compared to the holistic approach of the H&A value assessment matrix or other value assessment methodologies\textsuperscript{14}, where history is usually just one of the components. Where the first ones try to assess the meaning and the material, our research focused more on correlating the two with the historical narratives. Design choices in the course of the research can be accessed in regards to their effects in the building's historical narratives, using these maps. Comparable matrixes are utilized by building historians when they are researching heritage buildings.

Position

My descriptive discussion and affirmative reflection on the methods utilized in the research was not done to assert credibility or innovation in the use of this methodology but to clarify my view of it in the culture of dealing with heritage. The value assessment forms a basis in the decision making process of the architect dealing with heritage, and the multidisciplinary approach that is strived for in practice, becomes hard to achieve in current education\textsuperscript{15}. Introducing assessment processes that laid focus on specific values or that derived from relevant disciplines, was productive when applied to our research. The accuracy and general application of such a tool in the educational environment or across the heritage is surely debatable. It managed to provide though, a clearer insight for us about the details of the relationship of historical values with the architectural elements of the building.

The initial research on the building did not only unveil the very episodic character of its construction history but also the plethora of historical associations, across its many layers. Inherited values of heritage objects are so varied and relative to our own understanding of these terms inside our culture, that a holistic approach to organize them is only relevant subjectively within the object and its context. The value assessment remains though by

\textsuperscript{13} Mapping is used to indicate the correlative strategy that is employed in the process.

\textsuperscript{14} Zijlstra, Hielkje. \textit{Analysing Buildings from Context to Detail in Time: ABCD Research Method}. IOS Press, 2009., 74

definition a relative statement, which lends its credibility in the quality of the preparatory research.

The phenomenological dilemmas that heritage objects offer to their researcher are engraved in the nature of the field. In the attempt to ascribe immaterial value to our built environment, a very clear formulation is required. In this formulation the researcher arrives at phenomena where “material” and “meaning” are not so easily distinguishable. One could try to redefine the vocabulary around these matters, but would only end up reinventing the wheel. Retrieval to normative theories regarding heritage, in the form of internationally established guidelines could only be educative, but it also does not offer concrete examples and remains general. Emerging in the phenomenological discourse built around these terms in the heritage literature is unavoidable. This does not necessarily imply that the researcher becomes familiar with the actual differences between the approaches of Viollet Le Duc and Quatremère de Quincy around the controversies in the practice of restoration in the 19th c, but he is urged to define his “material” and his “meaning” in the given context under the same considerations about immaterial culture in architecture. Arriving at different statements in the educational environment, requires further examination and deeper understanding in the matter, with the dialectic consensus of the students playing an important role as well.

Employing assessment tools in architectural research is not exclusively relevant to heritage objects but becomes more and more necessary in our constantly expanding and evolving built environment. Many times existing architectural elements are registered as “contextual information” in our modern building practices with the focus of the research on the potential(s) of the otherwise “vacant” space in the future. Initiating our practice from the existing could be counterproductive in our episteme or our scientific Zeitgeist that both strive for efficient development and where the experiment becomes part of our explicit reality. Approaching a heritage object should be done with clear statements concerning the strategies to deal with the existing, when in non-heritage oriented disciplines this is usually neglected or considered as “contextual restrictions”. Even though there are guidelines and restrictions formulated and in many countries legislated around our building activities, their approach or relevance to the cultural value or architectural knowledge embedded in our built environment can only be conceived as episodic.

The complexity of these evaluations is only a reflection of our modern architectural achievements. In this sense culture and value, constitute the connection between the “material” and the “meaning” but not in a static way that requires definition. Instead, as an actively interacting system, where through observation and experimentation, theory and practice, understanding and knowledge, a.o. the architect is only able to observe and document these phenomena. Buildings become books for architects in this sense, teaching and learning as a natural system of knowledge.

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Bibliography


