THE WORK-LIVE TYPOLOGY
Exploration of Mixed-use Workplace in Industrial Waterfront of Midtown New York

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INTRODUCTION & THE MODERN WORK CULTURE

The discipline of architecture and research are two intertwined entities. In both, the academia and in the practice of architecture as a profession. Research is an on-going constant that leads the practitioners to rational decisions, but it is also multifaceted, ‘utilized to gather technical / technological knowledge while also examines architectural humanities such as social role of spaces’\(^1\). The course, ‘Lecture Series Research Methods’ was beneficial to the construction of my thesis, since it does not only introduce different research possibilities but also clarify terminologies often used in academia through various guess lecturers and their applications of different research methodologies applied in exemplary projects.

One of the most eye-opening realization comes from the mentioning of ethnology in the first lecture; that ‘no one is a neutral observer’, thus, it raises my awareness of the influences of my presence. As a result, I’m constantly reminded of the ‘constructed image’ that I might be applying onto my interpretation of the hard data research subconsciously.

Moreover, I was also particularly interested in Robert’s lecture on Types and Typology due to its relevance to diagramming as a representation method. In his lecture, Robert also mentioned the ‘reclaiming of a generative notion of type’, which emphasizes on the analysis of the forces that influences the spatial organization rather than the physical characters. Therefore, this opened my mind to the possibility of understanding beyond the built-form and viewing the building as an assemblage through the typological research method. With this realization, I am able to identify the non-visible facets in case studies and still make judgements based on their systems / operations without being strongly dictated by their phenotypes.

My research question investigates the nature of the work culture of New York, in particularly, the changing landscape of work due to the rapid technological advancement of the past decade. The thesis examines the morphology of workspaces, from the physicality of office interiors to the modern notion of ‘work’ in the context of the current ‘information age’. The thesis then explores the obsolesces of office spaces and ultimately question the possibility of a reinterpretation of a workplace, within the area of study in midtown New York. Furthermore, the research also investigates the utilization of industrial heritage structure, exploring the theme of urban densification along the industrial waterfront of the Hudson River and touted the possibility for an adaptive re-use of industrial structure as a mixed-use public workplace. Hence, the research question of “how to create a workplace typology that respond to the changing landscape of work in the context of midtown” is proposed.

In accordance to the practice of research-by-design of the Chair of Complex Projects, the thesis observes midtown New York from the large scale prior to zooming into the smaller district and the area of study. The studio is divided into different phases, alternating between group and individual research work. Emphasis on the early stages have been on the gathering of hard data through an etic approach. While the individual research phases consist of a mixture between the etic and emic, which aids the refining of the personal research question(s) and the formulation of each project’s narrative.

II

RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION:
COMPLEX STUDIO’S AMBITION & THE EXTENT OF ETIC APPROACH

In relation to the Complex Project studio which emphasizes research-by-design in its principle, the research is context-led, and the first objective is to examine the area of study with a realist ontology, which eventually developed into the etic approach. The research in the pre-excursion phase emphasized on collecting hard data of the city through the diagramming of amenities, mobility and services to equip the studio members with as much awareness of the context as possible. Furthermore, information from quantitative research such as the demographic of the residents is also gathered, which subsequently, formed the initial hypothesis of the site prior to the actual excursion. Analytical drawings such as street and avenue axonometries with existing programs (fig.1) were produced to illustrate the current condition of the study area prior to the actual site visit which follows in the coming phase.

One of the most prominent of the heuristic techniques implied in this phase was the 1:1000 model-making of midtown Manhattan (fig.2). Students were divided into groups, that is responsible for
a specific portion of midtown, which would later become the group’s area of study. The model-making process is vital to the understanding of the site during the pre-exursion phase as it demands intensive quantitative data research as well as the overall comprehension of the three-dimensional physicality of the site.

During the excursion, the research approach has shifted to include some aspects that entered the realm of the emic episteme. This is especially apparent in the fieldwork conducted, where interviews and videography were completed. In fact, the emic approach in this phase is almost unavoidable as the city is experienced first hand during the excursion. I temporarily took on the dual role of both the researcher and the observer. The city was experienced through all of my senses.

As a result, the research conducted during the excursion helps in the formulation of the personal narrative which lead to formulation of my research question of how to create a new workplace typology that answer to the changing landscape of work in the context of midtown Manhattan. While the etic approach of the quantitative research enables the gathering of statistical data regarding employment and the demographic of the residents in the area. Model-making heuristic in combination with on-site interview also facilitate the discovery of potentials of specific locations, such as the industrial waterfront of the Hudson River.

With my research question re-defined after the excursion, I have chosen to include typological research methods to inspect the pre-existing workspaces of New York. Since the research question investigates the changing landscape of work, it is crucial to recognize the morphology of workspaces in relation to societal, technological and architectural interventions as the influential factors that might have triggered architectural / spatial changes in workplaces.

The reason for using typological research method to guide my thesis is because of its application and the aspect of rationalism it is able to portray through categorization. Based on the literature; ‘Typological Instruments’ by Caroline Bos, one of the benefits of the typological research is its ‘legacy of rationality’ which replicates a ‘scientific approach’ due to its systemic reasoning. Types also implies that there is an existence of a strict logic underneath the seemingly incoherent and out of control appearance, hence, types are also ‘eminently communicable’. This relates to my research question of exploring a new workplace typology because there is a possibility of investigating a mixed-use structure, which despite, its eclectic blend of programs, requires an establishment of a system to create a sense of order.

Figure 1: Axonometric diagram illustrating the street activities as observed through an etic approach. (2019), (Source: Own)
III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION: THE APPLICATION OF TYPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

While the modern study of Types and Typology have fallen into ‘The misunderstanding that typology is a matter of classifying forms and functions’ as mentioned in Oechslin’s ‘Premises for the Resumption of the Discussion of Typology’, historically, other notions of typological study can be traced back to a theory proposed by a French archaeologist, Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1849). Oechslin discussed the misinterpretation of typology by expressing de Quincy’s typological ‘link between the systematic and the historical or conventional (and therefore always societally oriented) limitations of architecture in their reciprocal dependence’. Hence, this suggests the potential of typological research to investigate beyond the built form, the possibility to highlight the invisible, which is particularly applicable to the study of the organizational aspect of the modern workplace in my research question.

Caroline Bos and Ben van Berkel of UNStudio, also demonstrated how typological research can be applied in projects to gain control of the design process in complex urban project. In the project Raffle City development in Hangzhou, China, type in architecture ‘exist to direct, to connect or to be instrumental rather than to prescribe’. The architects developed a large-scale, mixed-use projects with offices, residential and leisure space. The implication of a mixed program building with large scale (approx. 400,000 square meters) requires typological research to explore the operations of different functions and how to combine them into a single built structure.

This case-study project is comparable to my thesis because of its urban qualities, which is also relevant to the emphasis of Complex Projects Studio, where the urban condition is researched and analyzed quantitatively, through an etic approach. The Raffle City development serves as an example of ‘how typology may be helpful in designing architecture in dense, complex, urban mixed-use projects’. With its rational quality, typological research, in this case, emphasizes the underlying logic that controls the incoherence and complexity of the project. Therefore, making it necessary in helping to articulate and proliferate urban qualities within the research question regarding the mixed-use workplace typology.

From the reference to the past viewpoint on typology as mentioned in Quatremère de Quincy’s point of view. It is possible that part of the confusion that shaped our modern misrepresentation of typological research, which emphasizes on the classification of forms is also related to the misused representation in diagramming. According to Jacoby’s literature, Typal and Typological Reasoning: A Diagrammatic Practice of Architecture, there should be an agreement, ‘a common ground that a new diagrammatic practice had to explain, analyze, organize and generate beyond the limits of classical representation’, hence, directing typological research further from the trivial categorization of forms.
As seen in The Raffle City Project by UNStudio, the use of typological research method contributed greatly in the realization of a complex, mixed-use project. Therefore, as opposed to the common analysis of the finished forms, typological research can influence the assemblage of architecture through the diagramming of the invisibles such as the changes occurred or in my case, the organizational systems within workplaces.

An example of how diagramming can reveal the invisibles can be seen in my timeline diagram, which compares New York office floorplans with the technological developments of the past century (fig.3). It became evident that despite the numerous technological interventions of the latter half of the 20th century, the phenotype of workplaces rarely changes. Most of our current office stock is still more or less, different variations of the open-planned type of the mid-century era. My point here is not to emphasize that a new workplace typology is clearly needed, but this comparison through the typological research and analysis of office floorplans, reveal that modern offices still depends largely on the idea of flexibility of the interior arrangement, which is partly due to the architectural constraint of New York city, where architecture are designed not by their uses as a primary but are designed to maximized economical value. Here a dilemma is also presented, as the divisible interior floorplan also uncovers the possibility that it could have been mostly designed for the intention of economical benefits, rather than functionality, hence the main theme of Carol Willis’s literature ‘Form Follows Finance’. All these possibilities are the result of the application of a typological study that persist on its capacity to evaluate beyond the surface of forms.

Thus, through my initial research of office typology, I discovered hidden relationships and the concealed factors that influenced the seemingly mundane workplace typology. Since, Complex Projects Studio focuses on the ‘applied research methodology’, the application of findings to specific situations, in this case, midtown New York, is prominent. These factors, although seems beyond the responsibility of the architect, must be taken into consideration, in order to achieve a holistic proposal.

Figure 3: A portion of the floorplan comparison of New York offices, a part of the initial typological research of the current workplace typology. (2019) (Source: Own)

IV POSITIONING: IN RELATION TO RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

While the research is focused more specifically on the typological research regarding the initial research question in the investigation of the future of a mixed-use workplace along the industrial waterfront of midtown, the on-going misrepresentation of typology and types is still a common practice. Modern typological analysis is, for the most part oriented toward the outer appearance, the superficial image of architecture. Personally, I have found the points presented in Oechslin’s literature, Premises for the Resumption of the Discussion of Typology to be relevant to my research question of investigating the future workplace typology because of their emphasis on the understanding beyond the built form. Since the notion of workplace is being questioned in my research question and the line that separates work from living became blurred due to the technological advancement, the adoption of this
methodology allows my research to move beyond the superficiality of form and the connotation to offices. Thus, there is a deviation towards a mixed-use typology that I have taken instead of a monofunctional building.

Throughout the research process, I’ve understood that my position in accordance to Landau’s ‘Notes on the concept of an architectural position’ consisted of a mixture of rationalism and empiricism, with the initially phases being highly governed by rationalism, which is reflected in the research-by-design approach of the Complex Projects Studio. The boundary of the site was given, and the studio worked within established set of rules that sculpted the formulation of my thesis such as the zoning regulation, buildable floor area ratio and the city’s demographic.

While the position of rationalism is adopted into the core of my thesis research, especially with statistical data and the precise framework of study area provided by the studio, the presence of empiricism is added, especially during the New York excursion. Several qualitative research methods such as interviews and emic observations were conducted and the findings ‘eliminate the possibility of giving absolute authority to a set of predetermined rules’. As a result, my research question about workplace typology also expanded to the research of mixed-use intervention. While the core position of my research is still based on the realm of rationalism, the alteration of the position through the added layer of empiricism is beneficial to the exploration of the modern notion of a workplace, due to the current ambiguity in the modern-day definition of work.

In fact, this coalition of the two opposites is not uncommon as suggested in Chris Argyris and Donald Schon’s remark, that “it is common for individuals to hold different sets of theories according to specific situations”. However, “there are inviolables, whether held explicitly or not” which in my case, is the rationalist core that provides the guiding rules, such as the plausibility of the thesis regarding the actuality of midtown New York and the research-by-design approach of Complex Projects Studio itself. Since my thesis investigates a possibility of a new workplace typology along the industrial waterfront of midtown New York, the rationalist position ensures the applicability of the project in the context of the city, while the additional empiricist position allows for new interpretations of the modern workplace, ultimately exploring the current notion of work and the architectural discourse regarding the obsolescence of offices.

Furthermore, I opposed the view that empiricist position cannot be integrated into the research with an imposed rationalist start, on the contrary, I have found the added layer of empiricism in certain phases of the research quite beneficial as it raises questions and form an antithesis. While the emergence of possible antithesis might seem counter-productive, it is a crucial step that would eventually lead to the realization of a synthesis.

The rationalism positioning was helpful in guiding me to the arrival at the initial research question of the changing landscape of work and the workplace typology. The quantitative approach such as large-scale mapping and demographic study were crucial in confirming the plausibility of a project concerning the topic of workplace since the hard data reveals large percentage (80%) of office workers as the residents of the study area and the current governmental initiative, ‘New York Works’. However, it was through the empirical lenses that I was able to identify the complexity of the modern notion of a workplace.

The presence of empiricism in a rationalist-oriented position of my thesis is relevant to my research question, which requires an acknowledgement of the uncertainty, such as the changing landscape for work. In today’s context, work has become more varied and flexible owing to the constant technological developments, enabling new mode of working. While a rational core is necessary for the feasibility of my thesis in the context of Complex Projects and New York city, a layer of empiricism is needed in order to allow for new possibilities and interpretations which will influence the outcome of my initial research question that investigates the development of a mixed-use workplace typology along the industrial waterfront of the Hudson River.
Endnotes

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid. 51-52
7 Ibid.68
10 Ibid.112
Bibliography


