

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

An assessment of the perks and limitations of different ethnographic approaches.

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I ADEQUACY IN METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH

My fascination in architecture is the ability to create 'invisible architecture' with which I mean, architecture that does not astonish or amaze, but architecture that serves the needs of the people interacting with it, without them noticing. Architecture should serve, should enable. Architecture should not limit, annoy or block. To understand this full meaning of freedom, I read multiple sources on the word Freedom, including 'Fear of Freedom' (Fromm, 2001). The social psychologist and philosopher describes how freedom can lead to aloneness and worthlessness. He describes how people act to escape these feelings and about the one way that does so while not harming others; Spontaneity. This means that people need to find the possibility to do something without any limitations or prescribed written or unwritten laws, out of pure intuition. The studio 'Position in Practice' is focused on the city of Skopje. The city has had an immense population growth over the last decades. During the site visit I got interested in the overload of traffic in the city, and the way the people in the city deal with the circumstances, as well as the fact that this city is very diverse. Different races, ethnicities, levels of income and schooling; different cultures, habits, schedules; different prospects and different mental baggage.

At the same time, I have always had an interest in writing. The narrative method introduced in this course showed me that writing can have a balance between writing subjectively, while still being able to extract worthwhile information out of it, that could be used as a research tool.

What I stumbled upon then, is the fact that narrative is always told or written down by one person, or a small group of people. What I choose (consciously or unconsciously) to write down, or what my neighbor chooses, and the words I or they will use to explain the same thing, will undeniably be different from each other. There is a power, and a weakness in that. The power is to get a first-person impression of the space or situation you're describing and that it offers a fresh look on the matter, from a person that might not be from similar backgrounds as the main 'actor' in this space or situation. It can also define a certain scope other than a general description as a result of averaging a survey. The weakness however is that spaces might be misinterpreted or misread by the narrator. But acknowledging that they cannot prescribe the affective treats and interactions of a design, it becomes more an enabling tool, to be precisely neutral enough to cater for a multitude of interactions. (Havik & De Wit, 2017) And that is why a research-methodological approach can be of great value in the design process, first figuring out what emotion the place unlocks for you, then critically reflect on what it does for others, and making sure all is accounted for. This also links back to the readings I did of 'Fear of Freedom'; by catering for spontaneity, unlocking the space.

Question remains, does narrative description do justice to the space and its interactors? Can narrative description be used for both analysis and design initiation? The courtyards in the City Wall of Skopje are used for skating in the afternoon, parking in the evening, and drinking a beer in the night, all these activities were informed by both spatial and societal limitations or opportunities. The parking garages under the courtyards were not used because of a sense of insecurity and fear of criminal activity, and lack of internal storage space in the surrounding apartments. Beers were more affordable in supermarkets, and outside activity was natural to the inhabitants. This was an observation that was spread out over two weeks, being an outsider and a stranger to these spaces, but also being invited to participate in the daily life of Skopje by students of the faculty of Architecture in Skopje. Pure narrative description would not have led to the same observations. Is it possible to rely purely on narrative description when designing spaces and if so, what do I need for a purely narrative-based approach? when does it suffice? How do you deal with short-period observations without having to do a participant observation of the place that could take months or longer?

II METHODOLOGICAL AIM AND EVALUATION

To understand what the narrative methodology entails, we need to take a look at qualitative descriptive research done on the ethnographic methodologies. By doing literature research related to fieldwork, I hope to find more information regarding the conditions in which these observations have to take place, such as the perspective of the narrator (subjective, objective, human-based, space-based),

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and what results could come from such perspectives. To understand this, first we would need a clear distinction between narrative descriptions and participant observations.

“... anthropology has come to mean ethnography, and ethnography has come to mean field work: participant observation, narrative description, and the like.” (Hymes, 1996)

I will focus on spatial narrative descriptions within a broad framework of architecture to find relations and differences in the character of narrative descriptions and participant observations and how they manifest themselves in architecture. I hope to find guidelines of what a narrative description should or should not, can or cannot do. I want to see if seasonal activities get mentioned, and if there is a correlation between that and the time-span of the observations. The time-span of the observations should not be seen as a timer per observation, concluding a total amount of time spent on observing, but as over what period of time, what number of different observations were done. Is narrative description done at a certain time of the year, or did the narrator return to this place to do multiple descriptions with different conditions. Is that necessary for a conclusive piece of text? When no surrounding situational conditions are mentioned, that could mean the importance is in the object(s) described, and the objects are seen as its own resilient identity. The same goes for the description of human interaction, when texts are devoid of any mention of human interaction in space, this space either does not allow for interaction, or the interaction is no important part of how the space performs. On top of that, it should become clear that when narrative descriptions are not sufficient, what tools could be used to translate a narrative description into a device that is capable of informing the architect to an extent that it can lead to design decisions. By being aware of these notions, each narrated text could in the end lead to decisions in the design process.

In the end I hope that with all this information I can reflect on my own texts so that the relevance of those texts and the way they can inform certain design choices will become clear. This should help me in my further research, utilizing the tools that have already been used, but so far have yet to be translated into an informing piece of research. Looking at the traits certain texts have, while also seeing how it informed the design process prevents drawing generalizing conclusions on narrow-minded observations, while these observations could be used to improve certain details in a design.

III LITERATURE REVIEW

Narrating space and its qualities is something widely used in modern literature, not as a research method, but to set a scene for storytelling purposes. Novel- and storywriters used spatial descriptions to relate the characters, space and time. Ericka Wickerson explains how, by looking at Joseph Frank's essay 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature':

“Joseph Frank's examples of spatialized description all depict movement through space, and this is what injects space with temporal momentum (...) almost every sentence begins with a description of setting (...) Interspersed among these observations are descriptions of the characters' movement” (...) “The construction of space, where setting is seen before character movement within it, reflects [Hans's and Joachim's] unfamiliarity with the location.”(Wickerson, 2017)

Wickerson goes on to make a point by showing the opposite, in Kafka's *The Trial* a scene where the main character sits right up in bed is discussed, it being devoid of any spatial notion. This has two reasons. The movement of the main character is minimal (from laying down to sitting up right), and the surroundings are well known by the character, therefore taking its spatial traits for granted. The last sentence of the first example, in relation to the latter, could be seen as a confirmation of the power of narrating architectural spaces when performed by someone unfamiliar with the location. In this way, subjective description of the space will always have a basis of spatial elements necessary to describe the scene set to the fullest extent. But, this notion is only true for architectural description, not as basis of a research-informed design:

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"[By conducting narrative inquiry,] the designer is forced to consider the environment he or she is creating or evaluating as an experience." (Smith, 2001)

The words 'an experience' in this sentence could, and arguably should be replaced by 'a participating experience' or 'interacting experience' as Hymes claims:

"One may need to be present, or privy to a description of the scene, in order to know the referents of pronouns in spoken narratives. One may equally well need to be privy to an implicit scene to know the true referents of norms in a written narrative or document."(Hymes, 1996)

An important difference between present and privy is made. Presence does not include involvement in the scene and can therefore be done by an outsider, which as beforementioned is suitable for architectural description, while being privy can create a better understanding of the experience. Spoken narrative is used in this case, as opposition to the written statement, and has to be seen as the difference between subjective and objective. Hymes wants to make sure that the one is not superior to the other, as this would cause an unreflective form of stereotyping. This stereotyping could be as banal as defining certain behavior as 'abnormal' as it deviates from the observer's notion of 'normal' behavior. Similar and sometimes resulting from the first notion is the categorization in 'good' and 'bad', and both categorizations prove defective in field research, according to Ruth Benedict (1934). But with participating observations arise other, in this case moral considerations. And it is that of covert participation opposed to disclosed intentions. By participating covertly, human interaction might not be influenced by the observer, and therefor will be more genuine. Edward Shills argues:

"[His] self-disclosure might occasionally hamper research he is conducting, but the degree of injury suffered does not justify the deviation from straightforwardness implied by withholding his true intentions."(Shills, 1982)

Shills continues to explain the difference between observations with the intention to observe, and 'observations of everyday life (...) which have arisen out of intentions other than observation.' People naturally observe the behavior of others and those who do not, Shills claims, are 'morally or intellectually defective'. But observing under false pretenses is morally reprehensible. This means that it comes down to the architect's morality and responsibility, to overcome the hampering of the observation and interpret observations with a sense of reasonable imagination.

To summarize, narrative description and participating observation seem to inform each other. Narrative description can be used to architecturally dissect a place, without prejudice. It offers an architectural base only if the narrator is unfamiliar with the space. However, in architecture the anthropological aspect of space needs to be informed by a sense of experience and those experiences can only be categorized when there is a clear understanding of norms, and therefor normalities, as seen through the eyes of the 'indigenous' users of said space. Ignoring either architectural dissection or experience will result in inadequacy. In the case of Skopje, architectural dissection would not include time-related perception of for instance the City wall courtyards, while ignoring the architectural dissection would totally untie the evaluated space from its surrounding, spatially informed limitations of the metabolist architecture of the seventies. Finally, participating observations never paint the full, complete picture. There will always be a difference in understanding due to difference in personality of the observer and the observed, and the observed being aware of the observation will always require imagination of the observer, to come to a definitive conclusion on the conducted ethnographic methodologies.

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IV REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Havik and De Wit argued, that acknowledging the fact that the mind of the designer and the user are not alike, and that designs should enable the user, to interact with the space, not as it was intended by the designer, but as was made possible by the designer, and intended by the user. (Havik & De Wit, 2017) I think this is a valuable notion. What has become clear through my research is that a full understanding of a space and its users is not (morally) possible. To reach such a level of knowledge, that could maybe lead to a more suitable and specific design, one has to cross the boundaries of the acceptable.

But I think there is an ambiguity in literature when talking about narrative, observation, description and even participation. Often 'narrative observation' is used. But a clear distinction between description and observation needs to be made. Although ethnographical narrative description by default implies being present in the space you describe, and therefore observing is unavoidably part of it, narrative description should, in my opinion, be architecture focussed. As discussed by Wickerson, the strength of looking at a space like a stranger is that an architectural base will always be present, as it is necessary to set a scene. Participant observation on the other hand does need a form of documentation, and writing might be the easiest way to do it. This means storytelling, and therefor narrative is used to elaborate on the participant observation, but does not mean these terms are interchangeable. In my opinion, participant observation should, other than narrative description focus on the human aspect of space. It should elaborate on nuances not noticeable from the side line.

But when does one use narrative description, and when is participant observation necessary? Smith's statement can be seen from multiple perspectives, of which two are obvious to me. At first glance, it basically means that when narrative methods are used, the unfamiliarity valuable for architectural description turns disadvantageous when the designer needs to be able to fathom the experience users of this space have over time. To get an understanding of this, observation as sole method does not suffice. Experience is a combination of space, interactors, movement and time. But, when dissecting Smith's texts, I would argue creating and evaluating should not be placed in the same sentence. While evaluating an existing environment, the participant approach, of trying to view surroundings through the eyes of the users is, from my perspective, necessary. However, when creating a new environment, prior experiences of different environments could be used to create the desired experience, making participating not necessary by definition. When creating a space one could do without participation, only when the aim of the design is to break with the existing. Only when prior experiences were gained in drastically different cultures, social layers or environments one should tread lightly, as assuming one design approach fits all environments is naively oblivious. (Hymes, 1996) One could still argue, that even when breaking with existing structures, knowing what the existing entails from a participant perspective could be valuable. 'Knowledge draws from relationships, interactions, reactions, interpretations, and appreciation of the Other.' (Harper, 2018)

Finally, narrative description is more distant ("A narrative requires a narrator and a reader, in the same way in which architecture requires an architect and a viewer.") (Psarra, n.d.), when the narrator has a different role than the narrated. It is less time-consuming, but therefor arguably also more superficial than participant observation, where the observer *is* the participant, and therefor on a similar level as the observed. By making this differentiation between the two, I think it should give a better idea of what to expect from either one of the conducted methods for a designer. For instance, while I was in Skopje, I tried to write narrative descriptions, but did not understand on what to focus. In the end, architecture and the interaction of either humans or even animals were equally treated. If I would have understood the difference in approach of both of these ethnographic methods, I would have focused on architectural descriptions, rather than using a free form of imagination to position the interactors in the space. With this statement I do not want to exclude participant observation completely. In the two weeks I was in Skopje, I did something I would call participant exploration. This means, I got to experience spaces I otherwise would not have, but I did not observe the people I 'participated with'. For participant observation, I would argue one needs more time(s) for a complete understanding of how people act. Since this can differ according to outside factors (weather, holidays,

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time of day, etc.), and the interactors themselves. So what you need for a valuable narrative-based ethnographical research, is a clear scope from the start, accepting the fact it does not describe human interactions as well as it does describe architectural features. For the human aspect, other fieldwork is more suitable, but might be more time-consuming and therefore not always feasible in a study-trip setting.

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