

THE MULTI-LAYERED ANALYSIS

Interpreting spatial narratives as a way to connect multiple research methodological approaches in architecture.

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I INTRODUCTION

When prof. ir. Kaan gave his opening speech of the 2019-2020 spring semester of the Complex Projects graduation studio he stated that in his experience there are three main types of architects; the sculptors, the painters and the writers.¹ And although that may seem like a simplification of the broad diversity between architects and architectural students which can be experienced on a daily basis within design studio's, it roots itself in an highly important notion. Understanding the different ways of working within the field of architectural research, and finding your own methodology and beliefs is a key part of the architectural practice and therefore should always be a key part of design education. Because without the proper understanding of research methodologies and heuristic approaches to architecture a large danger is looming. Being that architectural research becomes just a defensive mechanism for an already proposed design instead of the true underpinning of why such a design is needed or called for in the first place.²

This is an understanding of course which goes way deeper than just a broad categorization of three architypes. However, they can form a base layer for any architect searching for deeper knowledge on his preferred method by exploring the necessary methodologies that could serve to support it. Through this believe, it is that in this reflective essay I will try to come to a stronger understanding of my own architectural identity and position within the boundaries of the Complex Projects graduation studio. A studio that has shifted its focus towards the inner-city of Rotterdam and the effects that the process of migration has on its spatial existence.

Within that context my thesis topic is about the migration and evolution of the skyscraper as a typology and its use within the high-rise strategy of the city. As the city is in demand municipalities have the obligation to manage this process of rapid urbanization in a (socially) sustainable way by making good use of the limited space available. As in the realm of architecture and urban planning a shift is made from suburban sprawl towards a post-suburban way of planning. A way which, in theory, leads to a more walkable, livable and therefore more sustainable city.³ However, it is an ideology that is still linked to many controversy and severe debates.

What cannot be argued upon though, is that just as most topics in the architectural discourse, this subject can be viewed through many different lenses and scales. Leading me to question how to properly use the discussed methods within the Lecture Series Research Methods (LSRM) to help me form a clear, comprehensive and substantiated opinion on the matter. Bringing me back to the earlier statement by prof. ir. Kaan on the three types of architects and their relation to this lecture series.

I perceive myself mostly as the writer, which creates storylines to showcase his ideas to the world. So, I believe that I should always question which research methods are needed to convey the stories that in my opinion need to be told. Therefore, by critically reflecting upon the research methods used in my master thesis thus far and taking a small glimpse into the future I will try to get a better grip on how different methods can be used in complementary fashion rather than as different entities. In order to eventually answers the following research-methodological question; how can architects select the right spatially bound research methods to convey their design and research narratives to the public?

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The use of narratives and spatial storytelling is not always condoned in relation to architecture, and beyond that it sometimes is even perverted as harming the visual experience.⁴ Consequently the research on the use of literary ideas in architectural research remains relatively limited. However, the relation between storytelling and visual representation should not be considered a one-way stream. As in other branches of discourse visualizing research and ideas to convey a narrative has taken off with the emergence of new digital presentation methods.⁵ A shift mostly made to make large datasets comprehensible to the public. As for in architecture, according to Havik, it is the exactly the other way around as "the traditional tools of architectural research, often foregrounding rational and formal modes of thinking, fail to address the fundamental ambiguities of architecture."⁶ Meaning the visual tools used

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by architect's form a to analytical perspective in which the interpretation and experience of architecture gets lost. Which according to her theories on spatial narratives are better conveyed using a literary approach.

A perspective of extreme interest of course which in my opinion holds a lot of truths as I agree with the fact that many analytical methodologies do not convey the emotional embodiment of reality and design. Although I also believe that descriptive and emotional approaches alone to some extent lack a scientific rooting. Therefore, I would argue for a more symbiotic way of using research methods in architectural research. Combining multiple methods of analysis that both form an analytical and emotional perspective on architectural research, thus creating a more hybrid methodology. All In order to convey a narrative that engages and roots itself in discourse.

To explain what I mean with this relationship I would like to use an example from my master thesis research. The analysis in *figure 1* conveys a typological investigation into the programmatic power relations of the Chrysler Building. However, it occurred to me that this type of power relation cannot only be described by clear analytical tools. Therefore, a literary description is used to describe the buildings grandeur and impressive architecture. Disputing the fact that a literary approach to architecture should not be validated in terms of research because it would offer a considerable amount of scientific uncertainty.⁷ But rather stating that it can engage the public more in the deeper meaning of architecture.

This example shows a layering of two specific architectural research methodologies. With the typology being the main structure and the spatial narrative adding value to the analysis. However, I think way of integrating design methodologies within one another can happen on a larger scale as well. In which one research method covers a main structure, but multiple underlying methods are used to widen and support this. For example, when a more descriptive method is used to convey the city as a complex architectural realm, but visually research methods are used to strengthen this story. That is why I aim to further investigate how the realm of the spatial narrative could expand itself into an overarching tool used to connect different research methodological approaches. A tool which in the particular case of my master thesis will be used to couple research into the typology of the skyscraper and its meaning in social practice.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

At the university of Berkeley-California for several years an experimental course was run covering the subject of architecture and storytelling. The course called building stories can be viewed in close relation with the idea of spatial narratives as a way of understanding the architectural practice. Although architects are often depicted as visual thinkers to which storytelling as a literary medium is at most of secondary importance the course showed that using this approach can in fact have several benefits over more established methods. As according to the course coordinator at the time: "it allows for researchers to capture the tacit knowledge embedded in real-world building projects."⁸ Partly because the writing of narratives can go beyond facts and convey feelings and impressions that are more open to interpretation. Something that allows it to distance itself from the oversimplification to which so many other research methods are susceptible.⁹

Of course, it should be clear that this is not exactly the same as how Havik describes spatial narratives in her book on writing atmospheres. Spatial narratives are at this point mostly bound to how

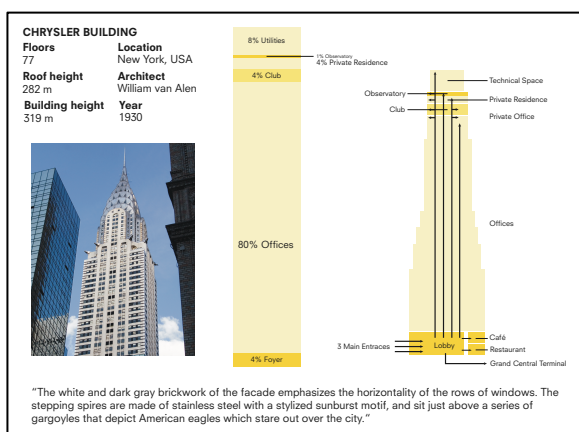


Figure 1: A typological analysis of the Chrysler Building by programmatic drawings in combination with a literary description.

one can experience urban and architectural environments. Viewing literacy studies as a way to express those ambiguous feelings that have long been absent in architectural practice.¹⁰ However, the example of Berkeley does show the broad interpretation and value of this theory within the world of architecture. As storylines allow for architects and designer to relate on a different level with each other, but also with the public. As purely scientific architectural research methods will not bring us closer to understanding how people unconsciously relate to the places we design and shape in our everyday practice.¹¹

Looking at more recent attempts to use this as a method of architectural research let's take a look at some workshops organized by the international network 'Urban Emptiness'. By walking through and engaging on the bodily experiences felt within the city students and architects got to a new interpretation of what really makes a place or a city. Design briefs were formed not necessarily based on factual research such as mapping and data collecting, but on basis what was truly experienced in the city, such as the smell of tires and the playing of children.¹² Elements that convey feelings as liveliness, emptiness and openness that truly touch everyday life in cities. But different from the experimental course in Berkeley the narratives weren't solely converted by the use of words. Students received an envelope which "the participants could use as a drawing board, a notebook or even a container of elements of the landscape."¹³ Through their experience in the city students proved able to convey the narrative of a city in everyday life. Only using additional elements to later on clarify their experience to a larger public. It shows to me that spatial narratives can go beyond the sole use of literature without losing their unique capability to convey a bodily experience.

However, the danger that this way of researching holds should not be forgotten. Certainly, when viewing it in the perspective of grounded theory the narrative approach is often criticized. Glaser for example stated that the use of narratives, especially when supported by other forms of data collection, cannot be considered objective. As he believes that objective data than could be made 'fit' to emphasize the researchers own point of view.¹⁴ Which on itself is a valid point. On the other hand, it is also true that the use of narratives, even in grounded theory, can have important benefits. As they can be used to not only convey the outcomes of the research better, but also help to place it in a broader context.¹⁵ But therefore it may need to be placed apart from more quantitative research methods as an overarching framework instead of being a fully integrated entity.

In general, we can notice a few different perspectives on the use of narratives as a research method. Perspectives that go beyond its application in architecture and focus more on its scientific grounding as a method. Spatial narratives can in fact at a lot of value by displaying a more human and emotional approach to architectural research. However, they also create a paradox where on the one hand they really allow for individual interpretation but on the other can also steer research in a direction by which it loses the notion of objectiveness. Which to conclude leads to a debate which is more about their exact implementation in the architectural practice than about their value.

IV POSITIONING

In my own research I believe it is all about finding a balance. Telling the story of Rotterdam and how its high-rise strategy helps in reaching its economic goals, but also how it alters the livability at the street level. That is partly something that can very well be covered by facts, figures and other forms of data, but the disbalance it causes in the city center does not become clear in that way. I believe it is important engage the public in such social issues and therefore the theory of spatial narratives offers a unique opportunity. Nonetheless, it should be undoubtedly clear that the research in my master thesis should not become biased towards any result or outcome that I personally prefer or see as relevant. Stating that objectiveness is one of the main aspects in academic research. Relating it to the danger of using research only as a defensive mechanism instead of a tool to expand discourse. Something which I shortly elaborated on in the beginning of this paper. Therefore, I believe that the narrative comes fourth

out of a combination of scientific research and spatial experience, using it first and foremost as a way to better convey an understanding of all the layers that make up a city.

As in architecture we see this notion that architecture is less and less about making icons for the city. It is more about creating places for the people. Designing for the user is the most important thing when creating new buildings, because that might be the ultimate form of sustainability. But in order to do so the language we develop to communicate architecture should not be a simplified version of reality. We should consider not only how we as architects understand our practice, but even more so how other people understand in. Because even if analytical drawings are great in making complex design understandable, it is not the way in which users interact with the built environment. So that is why I believe one of the main goals for designers is to constantly reflect on why to use certain methods and what they need to convey. Not only to sell your ideas, but to allow people to help you develop them to their full potential.

Bringing me back to my research question on how architects should select the methods that are best used to convey an overarching spatial narrative. I don't think that there is or should be a well-established framework for this. Just as the architectural practice the idea of using narratives and literary approaches to research the built environment comes with a certain amount of ambiguity. Therefore, architects and designers should always closely consider which methods convey the narrative without it losing the value of interpretation or the value of scientific evidence. Not meaning that spatial narratives lack scientific rooting, merely stating that they should be used to draw the fitting conclusions instead of the desired ones. As maybe in architectural practice there is a certain urge to sell your ideas, but in research the only goal is to widen the scope of architecture as a discourse.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kees Kaan, Semester Opening of Complex Projects, (Delft: TU Delft, 2020).
- ² Ipshita Karmakar, Understanding Research Methodologies in Architecture.
- ³ Eric Charmes and Keil Roger, "The Politics of Post-Suburban Densification in Canada and France" in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 582.
- ⁴ Juhani Pallasmaa, "Domicile in Words: The Scriptive Approach to Architecture" in *Urban Literacy Reading and Writing Architecture*, (Rotterdam: nai010), 8-9.
- ⁵ Wita Gregory Wojtkowski, "Storytelling: Its Tole in Information Visualization", (2002), 2.
- ⁶ Klaske Havik, "Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto." in *Montreal Architectural Review* (2017), 43.
- ⁷ Stephen Denning, In *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge Era Organisations*, (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001).
- ⁸ Ann Heyligen, W. Mike Martin and Humberto Cavallin, "Accidental Resource: A Fable of Design Research through Storytelling." (Sydney: Sydney University), 2.
- ⁹ Louis L. Bucarelli, "Design Knowing & Learning: A Socially Mediated Activity" in *Design Knowing and Learning: Cognition in Design Education*, (London: Elsevier, 2001).
- ¹⁰ Klaske Havik, Writing Atmospheres." in *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City*. (New York: Routledge, 2019) 271.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 274.
- ¹² Christos Kakalis and Stella Mygdail, "Performing Openness: Episodes of Walking Urban Narratives" in *Wrtingplace*. (Delft: TU Delft), 87.
- ¹³ Ibid., 86.
- ¹⁴ Barnet G. Glaser, In *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. (Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 1992).
- ¹⁵ Melanie Birks et al., "A Thousand Words Paint a Picture: The Use of Storyline in Grounded Theory Research." In *Journal of Research in Nursing*., 415.

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