

# A NEW PERSPECTIVE: DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY

The assessment of communal and social values through a different perspective on 'the user'

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Architecture should in its essence cater to the people who use the buildings, spaces and cities that architects create. However, in today's practice, the user has become a simplification of itself. The concept of 'the user' is a tool for the designer to argue why he or she should design a certain way, but the actual people are rarely involved anymore. Architectural education, where the student should learn the basics of designing, is no exception. To illustrate, in the complex projects studio at the Technical University Delft, the users are mostly diminished to simple numbers and statistics, so the students could handle the complexity of the site and deliver a coherent design project. There is no emphasis on the human aspect and individuality of the users.

When transferring into the graduation studio 'Revitalising Heritage', this former approach did not seem appropriate anymore, because as Hill (2001, 353) explains: "problems arise when we forget it [the user] is an abstraction and assume that the physique, race, nationality, gender, social class and experience of all users are the same". Heritage architecture requires a balanced and mindful approach, because it often deals with the valuable remains from the past. Not only the interests of the current users and future users are relevant, but heritage sites often play an important role in the collective memory of a community.

This leads to the research question that this essay will address. "How can a different perspective on the concept of 'the user' in architecture help to assess the communal and social values of heritage sites, leading to a balanced re-design approach?"

The field of Heritage certainly has ideas about how to assess communal and social values. Drury & McPherson (2008) state in the 'Conservation principles, policies and guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment' that it is essential in heritage design to determine who values a certain place and why. They claim that "to provide a sound basis for management, the people and communities who are likely to attach heritage values to a place should be identified, and the range of those values understood and articulated, not just those that may be a focus of contention. This involves engaging with owners, communities and specialists with a sufficient range of knowledge of the place, subject to the need for proportionality. Different people and communities may attach different weight to the same heritage values of a place at the same time." (2008, 31-32). It appears however, that the users either are defined as singular individuals or as a community and the text does not explain how to generate a balanced view out of these two extremes.

This is the reason for this paper to look outside the practice of architecture and towards the field of social sciences for the answer. An open mind towards other fields with different research methods can help to integrate and improve cooperation between them. Especially the social sciences have a lot to offer when it comes to learning about human behaviour in the built environment, which can help architects re-connect with the context they work in. The topic of this paper shows the importance of interdisciplinary work for the profession of architecture and that is certainly something that will be considered during the rest of the graduation studio.

## II REAL LIFE VERSUS IMAGINARY

For this interdisciplinary research, the ethnographic research method from the field of anthropology will be used to critically look at the concept of 'the user' in architecture. The core of this method is strongly related to the term 'emic'. To study from an emic perspective means, as Marx (1942, 13-15) states, that "we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real active men. In the first method of approach, the starting point is consciousness (mistaken) for the real living individual; in the second, it is the real, living individuals themselves, as they are in actual life".

The goal of this method is to gain a more personalized and detailed knowledge of 'the user', in contrast to the much broader concept that is usually employed in architecture. The broader concept to the user, or the so-called etic approach, refers to a more distanced and objective stance towards the

users, or as Pike (1967, p. 575), the linguist who coined the terms, states: "Etic statements depend upon phenomenal distinctions judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers".

One of the differences between the etic and emic approach that should be considered when applying it to the field of architecture is the required time span that each approach entails. It is important to note that a truly emic approach, requires a "fuller immersion in a culture to avoid detachment from the facts on the ground, and a more immediate engagement with people and their lives" (Lucas, 2015). In anthropological studies this immersion is accomplished by a long-term residence on site. As Moeran (2009, 150) states, "ethnographic fieldwork should last between six months and one year", so the researcher could have the full benefits of his or hers stay, incorporating seasonal or annual variations. This kind of study, with such a long-term commitment, is often not considered feasible in the architectural profession and other practices (Jasper, 2017, 1-3). However, in the field of heritage, where a more in-depth and extensive analysis of the existing and the longer-term maintenance of the design project is already established, there might be more time for this kind of approach towards the user.

Ethnographic research typically utilizes fieldwork, photo- and video-graphical documentation, or interviews as research tools and is part of the epistemic framework praxeology, also known as the study of human action and conduct. Ethnographic praxeology is on the rise in a lot of design practices and "has given a renewed significance to artefacts: so-called boundary objects have become valuable tools for starting a conversation among diverse groups of people. Making things, rather than just talking about them, has also become a powerful way to connect people to the mission of a project – and to each other" (Nova, 2014, 5). The potential of the ethnographic approach in the field of heritage architecture is analysed by discussing the work of two architects, Lina Bo Bardi and Aldo van Eyck, both operating in different contexts.

### III LIVING AMONG THE USERS

The first project that will be discussed is the SESC Pompeia located in Sao Paulo by the architect Lina Bo Bardi. Lina Bo Bardi's work has gained a lot of recognition since the 1980's because of her anthropological perspective and her ability to combine modern and vernacular architectural traditions.

Lina Bo Bardi was born and educated in Italy. The knowledge and experience with rationalism and neo-realism that she gained in her years there formed the basis of her work in Brazil. When she migrated to Brazil with her husband Pietro Maria Bardi, she came into contact with Brazilian popular culture. Even though Lina Bo Bardi was impressed with the modernistic structures that she encountered, she was very critical of the new Brazilian architectural movement. In the magazine *Habitat* she wrote in her essay *Bela Criança* that "the new Brazilian architecture" had many flaws (Bardi, 1951). Lina Bo Bardi believed that the architecture could only be successfully implemented into the society when "its spirit became the spirit of men and of their search for life values, or when it drew inspiration from the intimate poetry of the Brazilian land." (Bardi, 1951)

The SESC (Serviço Social do Comércio) Pompeia showcases this sensitivity towards people. On her first visit to the former factory site, Bardi was mainly fascinated with "the clarity of the prefabricated concrete structure" (Lima, 2006) and aims to preserve this characteristic spatial experience. However, the following visits showed the involvement of the local community and their flexible interaction with the spaces. Lina Bo Bardi wanted to honour the social values that were attributed to this place by the locals and preserving this 'existing lived space' (Lima, 2006) became the guideline of the project. Besides the local interests, Bo Bardi also addressed larger scale political and societal issues that played an important role in Brazil at the time. For example, her 'arquitetura pobre' (Lima, 2006), or simple architecture, aims to answer issues of material scarcity, privileged and disadvantaged social life in the country. The combination of her view towards modernist architecture, revitalising heritage and preserving cultural and social values results into the version of SESC Pompeia that is known today, with very minimal but efficient interventions in the large-scale industrial complex.

The success of the work of Lina Bo Bardi appears to be linked to her strong relation with the context in which she works. Even though originally from Italy, she became very involved with the

Brazilian people, their values and their traditions through her years living there. This raises the question whether the sensitivity that Lina Bo Bardi exhibits in her design approach is only achievable when being fully immersed into the culture of a place. This would mean that architects only should or perhaps could design in contexts that they are very familiar with. Designing outside these familiar contexts would require the before mentioned extensive time investment to truly honour the cultural and social values present.

This involvement with the locals, whether the architect originates or has spent extensive time there, is also a leading aspect in the studies on vernacular architecture. A good example is the work of Aldo van Eyck. Instead of serving purely as inspiration, he considered “the intelligibility of the vernacular tradition as complementary to other traditions that Western architectural thinking has brought to the fore: the classical and modern” (Frausto, 2010).

One of the projects of Van Eyck that shows his vision of the user is the ‘Hubertushuis’, that consists of filling an ‘urban gap’ and the renovation of the two existing historic adjacent buildings (Strauven, 1978). It embodies one of the core design principles of Van Eyck, the human measurements. According to Van Eyck architecture had lost its connection with the users. The interior of a building should serve the users, because that is the part of the building which is used. The interior is the main reason for building and consequently the exterior is required. A source of inspiration for Aldo van Eyck was the African folk culture. With very little resources they made spaces suitable for the people who used them. The human measurements and the simplicity of ‘het Nieuwe Bouwen’ of making a lot with a little are implemented into the buildings. The vernacular architecture “engaged directly with the symbolic aspirations and needs of the inhabitants” (Frausto, 2010).

Aldo van Eyck and Lina Bo Bardi have both studied the needs and the wishes of the people they were designing for and were both dealing with heritage transformations. Their end-results are however very different in appearance and approach. This shows that each user, and each building or site, also requires a different attitude towards the design of heritage architecture. Through the years, when the users change, this will also result in changes in the practice and therefore the used methods.

#### IV A NEW PERSPECTIVE

This brings us to the issue that the ethnographic research method presents in relation to the field of architecture. A general awareness of the influence of the perspective on the user, purposely chosen or not, is not present in the field of architecture. Even though this perspective has a large impact on the outcome of the final design and should therefore be a part of architecture and education. The views on the user that Aldo Van Eyck and Lina Bo Bardi incorporate in their designs should be part of the general architecture world, not off a small niche of architects.

Their views can however not be directly translated into today's practice. Both discussed architects demonstrate an in-depth relation with their subject of design. In the changing society, however, this local and invested approach, seems to be less important than the force of the international market. ‘One-size fits all’ design often overpower tailor-made solutions. Not only does this present problems for the usability of the project for the actual users, but it also leads to a very uniform and ‘un-inspiring’ architecture across the whole world. Thankfully, the rise in popularity of trans- and interdisciplinary studies, such as the use of ethnographic research in architecture, offers a counter movement. With the incorporation of ethnography into the design practice, the ethnographical method itself is also subject to change. As Nova (2014, p. 117) states: “the ways ethnography is employed by designers differ from its earlier roots in anthropology. In our study, we saw that there are obvious nuances between these forms of enquiries: the time spent on the field is shorter, the focus is more narrow, the analysis of the material is closely linked to design practices, ...” Of course, this limits the extensiveness of the research results, but it also allows architects to develop a ‘new’ ethnographic research method which is suitable for the architectural practice of today. The task lays now for the field of architecture to create a balanced approach. The knowledge on the subject of ethnographic research is there, the question remains how to implement it into architecture in a feasible way.

The heritage studio ‘Revitalising Heritage’ already incorporates certain elements of the ethnographic research method into their approach. Working with an existing context and having to

adapt an existing building or space makes it nearly impossible to ignore the people that are involved and the values that are at stake. The chair pushes the students to investigate these values, to identify which people are involved and why they value certain elements. Small scale projects, where the amount of different opinions is limited, tend to be successful with the use of this method. It becomes more complicated when the heritage project involves a large amount of different people. In this case, re-design or transformation projects often raise a range of emotions. A prime example is the Notre Dame, which recently suffered a lot of damage because of a fire. The reconstruction of this church is not a simple matter, mainly because it is nearly impossible to investigate and balance the values of so many people, while also dealing with a very complex structure. This presents also one of the main limits of the ethnographic method presented in this paper. Perhaps the previously mentioned etic approach should be included into the ethnographic method to account for these kinds of issues. However, the ethnographic research method does not currently offer an answer on how to deal with this problem yet.

So, a final answer to the question, 'How can a different perspective on the concept of 'the user' in architecture help to assess the communal and social values of heritage sites, leading to a balanced re-design approach?' cannot be given. There is however no doubt that a new perspective on 'the user' is absolutely necessary. Not only the field of heritage but the whole profession of architecture needs to realise that the architect is not the 'all-knowing master'. Architects need to implement a close-up perspective that does not disregard the actual user and a broad perspective which helps to identify large scale societal issues into the everyday practice. A proper combination of the two, especially in the field of heritage, is a must. How to achieve this combination needs to be the topic of further research. A start is to not just think about who you are designing for, but to interact with them. This change is necessary to make architecture accessible for humanity again.

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