

DESIGNING FOR DUTCH ELDERLY

The relevance of praxeology for understanding the lives of Dutch elderly

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I INTRODUCTION

Architecture is a practical profession with a simple task: find the best solution for a given design problem. In practice, often these solutions are found by using the creative mind. With means of sketching and modelling, an architect comes up with ideas to tackle a design task. Solutions that proved to be successful are often implemented into new projects. These best-practice design solutions provide the architect with a set of design tools for future design problems.

One of the reasons of implementing certain design tools to tackle a design problem, is the desired way how an architect wants the users to use his building in the future. Therefore, he uses certain measures to achieve this. If he wants people to be able to meet each other, he implements spaces into the plan that stimulate gathering and are attractive for people to be in. Otherwise, he implements different applications of daylight throughout the building to accommodate a person with a suiting environment: a darker place for more focused and concentrated work and a lighter environment that can be used for meetings and gathering.

With implementing such design measures, an architect can not only stimulate desired behavior as desired by himself, but also respond to the needs of the building's users themselves. With knowing which target group(s) a building will serve, the design tools implemented can be directed towards their needs. To be able to know what these needs are and how they can be translated into architecture, research on a human scale is needed.

For the Dutch Housing graduation studio Designing for Care, the task is to design an experimental inclusive living environment for care demanding elderly in the Netherlands. With an aging society, new housing solutions for future elderly are in demand to cope with the changed care system and rising numbers of care needing elderly for the coming years. To be able to succeed in this task, it is of great importance to know what the needs and habits are of this target group.

During the first weeks of the graduation studio, gaining experience by fieldwork was the focus in the course. One part of the fieldwork consisted of a one week stay in an elderly housing complex. Observational methods were used to learn how the people lived, how they used the building, how they felt like living in the complex and what their needs are. This observational focus was mandatory for students to follow during the first weeks of the studio, which meant that a big part of the research methodology was already fixed as the observational research consists out of aspects from the method of praxeology. Therefore, this paper will reflect on the relevance of this prescribed methodology on the graduation topic.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The care system in the Netherlands has changed drastically over the last decades. Where it used to be common for almost all elderly people to move to an elderly home when they demanded care, recent financially driven developments in government policy forced elderly to stay at home with support from their surrounding network. Only elderly with the highest demand for care now are able to move in such care residences.

This assignment thus concerns thinking about a new environment where people can spend the last years of their life. The target group of elderly people where this topic is about, is a unique group of its own. Every target group has its own characteristics in for example daily routines, habits, or in case of elderly, their range. All these characteristics come down to personal preferences that can differ per individual but on a broader scale align to the ones of the broader group. This makes clear that this graduation studio is centered around the person (the elderly), and not around the stones (the building).

During several fieldwork observations, from of which the most important one was concerning the stay of one week at an elderly housing complex, we gained knowledge about the daily lives of the elderly that lived there. Several observational tools were used during these researches. With the means of

sketching, photographing, talking, interviewing, listening and making notes information was gathered. This information concerned different aspects. On one hand very objective data was collected, like walking routes inhabitants took, places where people liked and didn't like to gather, the planning of someone's daily routine and the difference in use of certain spaces inside the building over the week. On the other hand, there was also a lot of data that was more subjective. An example are all the personal stories people told during conversations. Stories about how they felt living in the complex, or stories in which they expressed their loneliness and depressed feelings. Another example of subjective observations was the notion of atmosphere in certain rooms consisting sound and smell.

When looking to the focus of the observations that are stated above, the influence from praxeology could be recognized. The method of praxeology is based on how humans behave and react in certain situations. As mentioned by M. Berkers during her lecture on this research method, praxeology could be described as "the study of human action and conduct".¹ In stead of assuming how someone would use a space or a building, praxeology gives insight in how people actually will react to the built environment. As the person is the central theme during this graduation project, the method of praxeology thus could be a very useful way to gain knowledge.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Where the modern interpretation of praxeology derives from the nineteenth century, its philosophical background goes all the way back to the ancient Greek philosophers. Back then, praxeology was applied as a basis on how knowledge could contribute to luck and happiness; well-being. Aristotle, as being one of the most important philosophers to address this topic, had the opinion that well-being requires people to strive for knowledge on different levels. In this, not only on a theoretical level (thoughts, contemplation), but also on the level of action, people can have an influence on their well-being. For the Greek, praxeology was the bringing together of knowledge and action. In this, it was thought that knowledge was gained from action, and not before it took place.²

In the late nineteenth century, it was Alfred Espinas in 1890 that defined the term praxeology in a modern way for the praxis of economy. This was shortly after developed further in the field of economics and social sciences. Ludwig von Mises, an Austrian economist, was the first one to implement this method on the field of economy. Being part of the Austrian School, in his view humans have goals and apply action to achieve them, rather than being a result of reflexive behavior.³ He writes: "For man human action and its vicissitudes are the real thing." ... "Action is the essence of his nature and existence, his means of preserving his life and raising himself above the level of animals and plants. However perishable and evanescent all human efforts may be, for man and for human science they are of primary importance."⁴ By studying this behavior, knowledge could be gained on how people react and behave in certain circumstances.

Among architects, designing from the point of functionalism is a widely adopted point of view. Form should follow function, and not the other way around. The design should accommodate the future use as best as possible and should address the demands of the user. A famous example where this principle is used and that relates back to the study of praxeology, is the Frankfurt Kitchen. In this, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, an Austrian architect, researched into ways to improve the efficiency of the domestic kitchen. Between 1927 and 1928 she designed a new, standardized kitchen that would meet all the needs and practical demands for kitchen use.⁵ By means of scientific research into household activities, the results should lead to an ideal kitchen organization that reflect the demands. In the design, that should fulfill in high demands and cleanliness, she separated the wet and dry places to provide in these needs. Also practical measures, as a sink that accommodated dish washing and easy to clean materials were implemented. Her design was mass produced, and was installed in 10.000 Frankfurt homes before the 1930's.⁶

This example shows that from observations, certain design tools and measures have been taken that eventually have led to a standardized kitchen design. With this method, the designer assumes that a design will be used by the future user as he intended. The reasons why the design turned out in a certain way, moreover, derives from observational conclusions. Looking to the topic of designing for elderly care, implementing design tools that derive from studying human behavior could result in a design that can reflect their needs.

But, as Jonathan Hill claims, the future users may not always act the way a designer intended them to do. According to Hill, there are three types of users: passive, reactive and creative users. Passive users are consistent and predictable. They don't change their environment but adapt themselves to it in the way an architect intent them to do. Reactive users modify their physical environment, according to certain configurations that are defined by an architect. Both passive and reactive users behave themselves according to the intentions of the architect. Creative users on the other hand are also willing to change their environment. As a contrast to reactive users however, creative users don't act according to the architect's assumptions, but take unforeseen measures to achieve such a customization.⁷ Hill writes:

*"Each building and design strategy suggest a certain model of the user. In practice however, whether the user is passive, reactive or creative, is often unrelated to the intentions of the architect. Furthermore, use can be creative even if the architect predicts it; to suggest otherwise would be to make the opinions of the architect the arbiter of questions of use."*⁸

With stating this, he argues that no matter how good a designer focusses on translating observed human behavior into architecture, there will always be unexpected use by people who adapt their living environment to their own needs. Especially when looking to designing for elderly, the target group is very broad. Of course, the studio focusses on the older generation of the Dutch society, but because this group contains people from all different backgrounds, it is not possible to generalize their needs, wishes and habits as strong contrasts among these topics will occur.

IV POSITIONING

When attending the lectures with my thesis topic of elderly care in mind, the lecture as provided by Marieke Berkers immediately stood out for me. As we were preparing on the fieldwork for the coming weeks, the topics she addressed showed what the result could be from a praxeological approach to architecture. The different examples that were provided during the lecture gave insight in what way praxeological research could be carried out. This could vary from a small scale, as the Frankfurt Kitchen and the study to ergonomics to the translation of the voices of the inhabitants of Casablanca into design solutions.

This was interesting as it made more clearly visible how the coming weeks of fieldwork could contribute to the remainder of the research. As the studio had a strong human component to it, I realized that this type of research would be an essential basis for my graduation project. To be able to design for people, it is firstly important to understand how they (want to) live. Praxeology in this way can really contribute to the better understanding of the topic. The week's stay in an elderly housing complex therefore, was very useful to gain this understanding, and to be able to place yourself in the lives of the elderly people I am designing for. Praxeology therefore proved its importance.

On the contrary, caution should be adopted with using this methodology. I noticed during the week's stay in an elderly housing complex, that it is very easy to draw quick conclusions from observations and assume certain observed behavior in one or two situations accounts for that of all the elderly. Over-generalizing therefore, is a risk that is involved with this research methodology. Besides that, observations need to be interpreted by the observer afterwards to be able to draw conclusions from them. In doing so, he uses his perception of a situation which could make the conclusions subjective. Therefore, it is necessary that conclusions that are deriving from interpreted observations are checked

with the target group. Another way is to adopt an additional literature research in order to check the outcome of the observational research for its legitimacy.

As subjectivity in conclusions that derive from observations should be taken into account when adopting the method of praxeology, we shouldn't forget that the practice of architecture always will be a subjective translation of how an architect envisions the best solution for a given design problem. When adopting the method of praxeology, it is assumed that the implemented design solutions (that derive from observational research) will lead to certain behavior of the future users. What these solutions are, will differ per architect, and thus will have different outcomes on the people. As Hill already mentioned, these assumptions sometimes don't work out, or unplanned behavior takes place. This shows that architects cannot, in contrast to what some might think, control or condition every aspect of living. Humans aren't machines that all react in the same way on certain conditions. As Ludwig von Mises was already quoted in this paper, human "action is the essence of his nature and existence, his means of preserving his life and raising himself above the level of animals and plants."⁴

What is clear, is that no matter how thoroughly a target group is researched, there will always be unplanned behavior, as Hill already mentioned. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that architecture can't be a good reflection to a certain extent of the needs and demands that a target group has. Implementing the method of praxeology will definitely lead to a design that is more centered around the user, and not around the stones, which definitely contributes in a positive way to the design of an inclusive living environment for future elderly.

Literature

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