

REVEILING THE UNSEEN

Research methods that alter our perspective

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the role of the architect has been shifting from the expert of structure, material and design towards an interconnected, multidisciplinary team player. Due to the advent of environmental consideration, digitization and proceeding urbanization, an increasing number of actors, such as “sociobehavioral issues, design methods and energy conservation”¹ have been acknowledged as influential factors for architecture. To react to these changes, it is important to reconsider the conventional and explore alternative research and design methodologies. Investigating these topics newly tangential to architecture is only possible through a careful assessment and selection of the relevant methods per project. Furthermore, the awareness of heuristic research and design methods can help uncover inspiration in a time where the architect is at risk of being reduced to a stylist that relies solely on tools provided by digital fabrication.

This course, paired with the Msc3 project in Methods and Analysis, helped me to develop an awareness for research methods and gain a deeper understanding of the influence that research methods can have on the design process. The lecture held by Klaske Havik and her book *Urban Literacy*² was particularly influential in sensitizing me to the inclusion of other disciplines into research. Literature expands the way we think, imagine, and communicate architecture and can overcome the limits that the conventional language of architecture faces. In the early phases of my own research, I strongly integrated literary approaches to a degree where they shaped a fundamental part of theoretical research as well as site analysis.

In addition to the knowledge of the literary approach, the course taught me to pay closer attention to specific terminologies and their accurate use. This is of great importance whenever formulating research questions and becomes necessary to precisely convey an opinion. The lecture on typology, with its preceding discussions about the meaning of type and model, defined experience in this educational process. Within my own research I intend to put this attention towards questioning the terms used and becoming clearer in the formulation of research questions and, therefore, my future project. After all, the most important lecture of the course was conveyed after having heard all previous lectures through writing this essay. It highlights the importance of an early and comprehensive reflection on personal research methods to structure the process and personalize methods alongside a project of interest.

Within the studio “Positions in Practice”, my research takes place in the area of Teusaquillo, a central neighbourhood in Bogotá, Colombia. An early field trip highlighted the effects and pressures on the area through the constant growth of the city. After a workshop on site, I became interested in the study of pauses and breaks, which seemed particularly intriguing within the context of a changing public environment and the rapid growth of Bogotá. Observations of the fieldtrip showed that pauses barely take place in the public domain and it seems intriguing to search for spatial measures that could increase interaction and cohesion on different levels of “publicness”. Exhaustive theoretical research of pauses through different disciplines as well as several spatial experiments resulted in the following question: How can public space in Teusaquillo be enhanced by spatial measures to be inhabited instead of merely being space of movement?

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Within the investigations leading to this question, several approaches of research came to practice that ultimately had a strong impact on the topic selection. The first important approach was introduced during the studio workshop in Bogotá. The workshop marked the start of the semester and, in order to see the neighborhood through a different lens, the research method *Thinking Through Things*³ was implied by our tutor Alberto Altés Arlandis. Referring to the definitions of Wang and Groat⁴ this is an approach of qualitative ethnographic research. It relies on a method of analyzing the city by using a “thing” to provide a different perspective than our own. The method offers to take things as what they are and how they encounter the environment instead of thinking about what meaning we attach to them. Using this method facilitates a heuristic approach which the authors of *Thinking Through Things* call ethnographic fieldwork. In the workshop this included the use of a random domestic object, in my case a candle. Letting the candle lead me through the neighborhood brought me to the act of molding wax into the many cracks of the streets. The cracks became an initial interest and served as starting point for further investigations. Adding to this, *Thinking through Things* allowed me to strip cultural prejudice I might have had during my walk, providing me with an unbiased impression of the neighborhood.

Building on this, the aforementioned impression of Havik’s phenomenological approach through literature became increasingly more relevant as I delved deeper into the research. The abstract concept of the crack as identified through connecting and separating values led to an exploration of the literary “crack”: the “comma” as punctuation mark. Consecutive investigations on experimental literature by the Oulipo Group⁵ and James Joyce⁶ became a tool to reveal the importance and meaning of the “comma”. On top of that, developing techniques of reading the city highlighted “urban commas” that would have not been revealed by simply looking at drawings. An extension of research not only towards literature, but also to music and art enabled an interdisciplinary understanding of the “comma” or pause and allowed for broader comparison to the urban environment. My motivation to include other disciplines, especially music, does not only stem from Havik’s inspiring words, but also from a personal 15-year-long study of the piano and an interest of intersecting this discipline with my research.

Both approaches have shown the ability to illuminate inconceivable things through a shift of perspective. They contain the potential of continuously shaping a project as the methods of experimenting with text as well as *Thinking Through Things* can be subsequently tested as design methods and form important steps in the development of the intervention proposal.

Two important books that inherit recent discussions of these methodologies are the previously highlighted *Thinking through Things* by Henare et al. and *Urban Literacy* by Klaske Havik. Since the ethnographic methodology is proposed by the authors, there is rarely any other literature touching upon this. Yet, a collection of individual methods used by several researchers that have their own interpretations of “things” provides valuable insight and stimulates further thought. *Urban Literacy* is also a novel representation of a field that is barely discussed in the architectural discourse. It includes writings of several architects and philosophers but at times lacks a comparative section of their positions related to each other. The novel thoughts and links created between architecture and literature form a relevant source that simply demands further reflection.

To confront my research question and interest in the public sphere, it is necessary to first understand the notion of the public and different views related to this. I chose the book “Architectural Positions, Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere” by Avermaete, Havik and Teerds⁷ as it offers a collection of many influential architects and writers. As the book is curated by the actors of the chair of Methods and Analysis and there is an inherent risk of bias, however the quantity and variety of authors lends to the independence of this source. The authors cited within this book are key contributors to architecture history of the past and the present. Their writing and activities have not only been validated by the curators of the book, but by many other sources and projects that are renown worldwide.

Another book that is of great interest is "Silence: Lectures and Writings" by John Cage. During his lifetime, the New York Times stated that John Cage will be a significant actor within musical history and inspired a whole generation of experimental musicians.⁸ Responsible for many others to explore the essence of music and its relationship with modern technology, he forms a highly suitable primary source to learn from the search for new methodologies. *Silence* strongly connects to the interdisciplinary research initiated by Havik's *Urban Literacy*, yet it also creates links to the essences of "Thinking through things" by Henare et al. The connection exists through a particular work of John Cage, *Silence*, which is based on the withdrawal of the creator's influence on the performance of the music piece⁹. It offers possibilities to link this essence towards a design approach that inherits the idea of letting the user shape the space as a way to allow spatial appropriation.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The method of *Thinking through things* has been developed by Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell through their published book in 2005. They describe the origins of this approach to have taken place between the 1980s and 90s around anthropologists such as Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell, Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Roy Wagner¹⁰. These author's works are based on a change from the focus on epistemological questions towards richer ontologies. *Thinking through things* offers new concepts to derive from ethnographic encounters. Historically, ethnographic studies are used to investigate people and cultures beyond the western world. Nowadays it is also commonly applied in the researchers own social and cultural setting¹¹. Researchers such as Adam Reed ("Smuk is king")¹² have used this approach to investigate the material properties of a thing (in his case the cigarette) in relation to the meaning attached to it. He analyzed the prison environment in Bomana and the social patterns of inmates that existed through *Thinking Through Cigarettes*. In his case, the thing is infused with several meanings that are not originally attached to it outside of the prison environment and even diminish the meaning of other things. The demand within our workshop in Bogotá to use a domestic object as a "thing" could be seen as an advancement of the method in order to avoid using very personal objects that already carry many stories. In my research, I rely on the original essence of the method by taking a "thing" and removing my own meanings and preconceptions from the analysis of the neighborhood. Since the thing can be anything, I hope to also integrate this in my future research and use an intervention or theoretical concept as a thing. By stripping a concept off its meanings and thinking through it, it allows a new point of view free from prejudice and personal attachment.

The connection between architecture and literature on the contrary has existed for much longer than the documented concept of *Thinking through things*. Vitruvius already wrote his famous 10 books about architecture and established a relationship between architecture and writing. This relationship was developed from a rather technical and informative nature towards many different directions: In the 1960s for example, the British grouping around the journal *archigram* turned towards fiction and poetry as a way to reimagine the future. Furthermore, many other influential architects turned towards writing. Bernhard Tschumi, Peter Zumthor, Steven Holl, Daniel Liebeskind, Peter Eisenman, Juhani Pallasmaa to only mention a few that used writing in various techniques. One traditional aspect of working with literature and research is of course reading. Sennet's *Fall of Public Man*¹³ formed one historical, yet crucial input for understanding changes in the relationship of people and public space. A more recent approach by Isadora Monteiro and her Poetic Cartographies is similarly important for the development of this thesis.¹⁴ She combines the local experience of a sensorial walk through the city with the records from another perspective. Similar to Havik, she deals with investigations of experience, narrative, and a relationship between story and movement. Her project combines "levels of reading defined by narration and the act of walking through"¹⁵. Furthermore, she experiments with mapping "urban figures of speech" such as avenues with intense traffic as a hyperbole. An interesting new approach is her development from a research method to a practical design method. She uses an overlap

of maps that highlight an accumulation of urban narratives and chooses reoccurring locations as spot for interventions. This new approach is inherent in my literary experiments by the use of techniques for reading the city and subsequently working with the unveiled qualities and locations. She advances the connection of writing and architecture established by Havik towards an investigation of the structure within writing: punctuation. This is a very interesting and fruitful component of literary investigations.

The described approaches have been of great help to research the context of this graduation project and to arrive at a concise interest. I imagine other methodologies of historical or experimental nature as rewarding and interesting as well, yet they don't offer the shift of perspective that is so valuable for a researcher that does not perform in a well-known context.

IV POSITIONING

My initial research question touches upon a broad field that can seem difficult to grasp. The public sphere in the city is changing. Growing cities, rising housing prices, and a reduction of space highlight the importance to rethink public space in the city and the way we want to interact in it. Is there a shift towards dominant use of individual or secluded space? Do we interact less with others within the city since the emergence of the smartphone and the constant flow of information that is available in our pockets? Does this replace the need to interact in an unplanned way with other people anymore? These questions affect fields of sociology, anthropology and more. Thus, the literature I have chosen to be essential for the continuation of my investigations strongly relates to these fields and will support the necessary range of view needed to work on this topic. Nevertheless, as fruitful as phenomenological literary and ethnographic approaches have proven already in the journey of my topic search, in order to arrive at an intervention that is well carried-out, it is inevitable to supplement these methodologies with several others. I believe that research methodologies I used so far are most impactful in the early stages of project development and provide great inspiration. Developing them further and testing their potential as design methodologies will continue to be an interesting alteration of such approaches. Nevertheless, for subsequent investigations of spatial operation to test their effect on space and its use, it is crucial to shift the focus towards a more disciplinary and practical approach. Hereby I am not referring to the shift from research to design methods but the continuous interaction between research and design that instigated by the studio of Methods and Analysis. Yet, the research will no longer be focused on altering our perspective but rather on gaining knowledge about measurements, technical details and precedent studies as forms of Correlational Research¹⁶. These methods can be a valuable addition to the subjective nature of the preceding phenomenological approach through literature.

The decision to work with different research methods throughout different stages of a project is supported by the approach of Methods and Analysis. Introducing, educating and accepting several Warren F. Motte Jr, *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2008). an intervention. I believe this is an important lesson for the contemporary architect: There are many perspectives to consider when it comes to narrating architecture. We are often confronted with "star architects" and architectural branding that communicate the architect as an altered personality. I disagree with this image and argument for a need of taking on other perspectives. Therefore I support the approach of John Cage or Henare et al. and believe that sometimes the removal of the architect's dominant ego from a project can be beneficial. In order to bring architecture and its user closer together, it is crucial to understand the user's perspectives alongside the context we work in. It forms an important step towards the creation of meaningful space.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David Wang, Linda Groat, *Architectural research methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 19.
- ² Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and writing architecture* (Rotterdam: Nai010, 2014).
- ³ Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, Sari Wastell, *Thinking through things* (London: UCL, 2005).
- ⁴ David Wang, Linda Groat, *Architectural research methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013).
- ⁵ Warren F. Motte Jr, *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2008).
- ⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Books, 1968).
- ⁷ Tom Avermaete, Klaske Havik, Hans Teerds, *Architectural Positions: Architecture, modernity and the Public Sphere* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2009).
- ⁸ John Rockwell, *The impact and Influence of John Cage* (NY Times, 1987). Retrieved December 02, 2018 from <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/08/arts/the-impact-and-influence-of-john-cage.html>.
- ⁹ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1939).
- ¹⁰ Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, Sari Wastell, *Thinking through things* (London: UCL, 2005), 32.
- ¹¹ David Wang, Linda Groat, *Architectural research methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 225.
- ¹² Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, Sari Wastell, *Thinking through things* (London: UCL, 2005).
- ¹³ Richard Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man* (London, Penguin Books, 2002).
- ¹⁴ Isadora Monteiro, *Poetic Cartographies: A Literary Journey through the city* (Writingplace, 2018). Retrieved December 02, 2018 from <https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/index.php/writingplace/article/view/2652>.
- ¹⁵ Klaske Havik, Susana Oliveira, Jacob Voorthuis, Noortje Weenink, *Inscription: Tracing place* (Rotterdam: Nai010, 2018).
- ¹⁶ David Wang, Linda Groat, *Architectural research methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 263.