

ARCHITECTURE IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL COMPLEXITY

A critical investigation on spatial narratives

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Architecture as a discipline contains a wide range of methods and approaches in design and research. Especially in doing research it is important to be able to reflect and describe your process and thereby validate your own work. Because the discipline has so many facets it is important to be aware of the different methodological approaches. These methodologies help the designer to work in a way that ensures him to discover and discuss relevant issues with more accuracy and authority.¹ We could also say that a research method defines the way of finding answers for a topic. Therefore it is important to be able to decide which one fits the best to certain project objectives rather than looking for which kind of research produces superior results. In doing so we pick a research method with a specific goal in mind. However using a variety of methods could lead to outcomes from different perspectives that might also be valuable. As a researcher it is important to understand that the fact that you're able to compare these different outcomes makes you have a deeper understanding of architecture on itself.

The experience from the course helped us to set up a more deliberate research from the start of the graduation studio. Personally it helped me to have a deeper understanding of my past approaches and their position in the greater whole of methodology. According to Lucan Ray the most conventional division in methods are qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative methods are more subjective because they're based on interpretations from an individual or group perspective. Qualitative research might be more appropriate in understanding specific circumstances. In contrast, quantitative research is measurable because it often contains large numbers of generalized data and thereby seeks to establish irrefutable truths¹. During the bachelor and master most of my own research has been qualitative, while the graduation studio complex projects might call for a collaboration with the quantitative approach depending on your field of interest.

The graduation studio consists of individual and group work. Within this group you're supposed to focus on different research topics which are tested on the same site. By thinking out of the box the process of forming new ideas should be within the framework which you created yourself. The studio encourages to get people interfacing with each other through debate within the group. Their general approach of research and design is "thinking through producing". Thereby you create your own coherent toolbox with the different methods of producing. Meaning that you constantly produce products and use them as tools for your research. For example; model making, drawing, mapping and writing. Some tools are more regarded as a discipline for the eye and the visual media. According to Heidegger the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture². This turned architecture but also its research more into a product of images. Therefore I will focus on a method that has its focus on a different perspective; verbal expressions and literary writing. The research question is 'how can spatial narratives help in activating the designers architectural imagination in relation to urban parametric developments'. Furthermore I want to get more insight in how this methodology is influencing the way in which I conduct my own research.

In the studio writing will result in the form of an article which will expand during the process of research. The article starts with a comparison between areas of change. The projects will be linked through the phenomena; change, time and relation to the site.

1 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2015),

2 Rosbottom, D. (2017). Towards a Congruent Architecture. In Delft Lectures on Architectural Design 2017/2018

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

In the lecture and readings of Klaske Havik on Spatial Narratives she stated that the use of literary description in architectural investigation can bring some more ephemeral aspects of architecture to the surface, such as embodied perception, memory and use. These aspects contribute to a better and deeper understanding of architecture, but they are hard to describe in purely factual terms³.

In this paper I will explain why I chose for this particular research framework and describe the research methods which are used in the process.

Verbal and written expressions in architecture have been used in the description of technical aspects and also in clarifying intellectual design intentions. According to Alvar Aalto the complexity of architecture calls for a simultaneous solution of opposites³. Meaning that a solution to opposite directions and outcomes could lead to a deeper understanding of the design task. Metaphors, verbal and literary concepts all have their particular role in finding these answers and lead to more empathic imagination in the design task. According to Pallasmaa this ability of empathy is important in helping the architect to crawl into the mind of a possible client and thereby design something for himself instead of an anonymous user⁴. Furthermore the use of metaphors and poetic descriptions in literary writing can also stimulate the readers architectural imagination. In fact, they guide the reader to construct an image of something in their mind. Thereby they're able to construct entire imaginary worlds and cities which are inspired by the authors carefully chosen words. Sometimes the imaging of a written story about for example a city, can be so powerful that you'll experience the real city through your emotional memories from the story. We could say that this phenomenon is called the architecture of the human mind.

Knowing this phenomenon is such a powerful tool I can start implementing this in my own research and the writing that comes with it. Specifically in the writing of the studio article.

In comparing the area's of change that we had to explore, the solution of opposites is a good method to keep in mind. By using it's heuristic techniques I will be able to approach my research with a deeper understanding of the influence and benefits that the writing in itself has, instead of doing it only for the benefits of gaining knowledge from the research. Also it could lead to more imaginative solutions that I had not been aware of before.

Architecture could be seen as the bearer of the hidden mythology of a society. It makes the mythology available for interpretation by the public. Walter Benjamin states that in the modern sense, mythology is the 'set of symbols and narratives to which society gives meaning to itself'⁵.

According to David Spurr there's a philosophical tradition that relates architecture and literature through the question of what art is and how it functions. This tradition started in the eighteenth century, when architecture became more of an aesthetic representation of cultural influences.

Therefore architecture was now more conceived as fine art rather than merely the science of building.

On this moment in time literary writing started to refer to aesthetic qualities of the architecture.

In Spurr's book the philosopher Hegel states that there is a more spiritual relation between architecture and literature. It is poetry that gives meaning to architecture in a pure expression of the inner spirit. Subsequently Hans-Georg has a more pragmatic view on this in the twentieth century.

He states that the essence of architecture is always the result of a solution to some contextual problem and that the spiritual meaning is a function of its place in the world⁶.

From these positions we could conclude that architecture is the concrete translation of imaginative structures in the external world, whereas literature gives symbolic meaning to this world⁷.

In today's writings philosophers are trying to find a solution to bridge the gaps between the two art forms. Meaning to find their relation and interaction in the context of the modern age and its social, economic and cultural conditions. Therefore literature tries to question the rationality of modernism and also the strict functionalistic approach of parametricism. Both functionalistic and rationalistic approaches appear to be in contrast to what the literary writings of the twentieth century have valued; subjective and nonrational architecture⁸.

In most contemporary architecture schools the way of education is based on problem solving in relation to program and composition. In the journal of 'literary methods in architectural education' the authors are trying to introduce other perspectives of education through an investigation on how other researchers have used comparable literary methods. They're exploring how literary methods could play a role in more experiential aspects of architecture and also how it engages with the power of imagination in interpreting spaces and places. In this, literature and its mythical meaning has the ability to value space in a way that goes further than the known analyzing techniques. The question arises if a more literary approach in education will encourage students to explore their own sensitivity and creativity towards these ambiguous aspects⁹.

According to the journal Anca Matyiku is doing research on how literature and storytelling can play a role in the earlier mentioned interpreting of spaces. She does this by discussing a specific design task which is based on the approach of an ancient Greek architect, named Daedalus. The task for students is to find relations between tactile and literary mediums, where the focus lies on actions of building rather than the building as an object.

Another paper from Angeliki Sioli's discusses the effect of word collection in relation to designing in the urban environment. In this case the words formed the poetic basis for the design. The design process was divided in the process of collecting words, writing and verbal presentations¹⁰.

5 Spurr, David. Architecture & Modern Literature. The university of Michigan press. Edited by Ann Arbor. 2012. pp. 17

6 Idib. pp. 18

7 Idib. pp. 19

8 Idib. pp. 21

9 Havik, K, Perrotoni, D, Proosten, M. Literary Methods in Architectural Education. Writingplace, [S.l.], n. 1, 2018. p. 5-9

10 Idib. pp. 7

Finally a research about literary methods in bachelor's education is discussed by Mark Proosten and Katrin Recker. Their goal was to implement literary imagination in a design project by introducing a fictional character in a place or part of the student's project. Implementing this person and its specific social characteristics brought the narrative framework of their design to a more detailed and sophisticated level¹¹.

From the research of authors from different educational institutions we can conclude that literature is able to provide new insights and tools into the architectural discipline. In doing so it is influencing teaching methods as well as the entire educational philosophy. All of the efforts tell us that literary methods open up our approach towards design in different ways by essentially making it more imaginative.

IV POSITIONING

Within the complexity of today's digital architecture, parametrically designed areas are demanding new methods in design and research. The topic of architecture and its distrust towards human embodiment and connection with the spirit, accompanied by a distrust in writing and poetic imagination is reason enough to get excited about the new doors that might open when we do embrace these phenomenological methods. Going back to the lecture on Spatial Narratives, writing has a variety of uses. From a practical project description to aesthetic or philosophical analyses. Also the realm of the senses, apart from the overused visual sense, could be perfectly analyzed and grasped through verbal description. In this sense writing can grasp how architecture is connected to human mental worlds¹². According to Klaske Havik contemporary architects have to learn how to speak and communicate through their own imagination. She also states that in novels, architectural settings are often described as how you would describe a human character; with intensity and affection.

I would agree with her statement that in the age of rapid technological development, students have ceased to read classical poetry and literature. The position of architecture as a literary echo in human historicity and life is lost in the very conception of architecture¹³. As a result, architecture is merely based on aestheticization and formalism. Therefore she says that literary studies and the heritage of different cultures around the world should be a mandatory object of study in architectural education¹⁴.

The discourse of contemporary architecture is that it appears to be merely based as an object for the eye, and thereby the other senses are of less importance. According to Pallasmaa this leads architecture into the direction of an unauthentic and scenographic image for the eye¹⁵. Furthermore the connection with the architectural language and the deeper understanding of the human spirit is also disappearing in most parametrically designed buildings and cities. Thereby certain details and measurements of buildings are no longer designed for the human body. Architecture is pushed from how our bodies experience it, and thereby pushed from how we as humans affectively see the world. According to Mallgrave the meaning of architecture lies in a deeper understanding of our organic conditions and how we emotionally connect with our surroundings. He also states that only by allowing architecture to fulfil this social urge, will make us humans connect and develop a sense of mutuality and belonging. In this way architecture is unified by a practical ethos and becomes a social art¹⁶.

11 Havik, K, Perrotoni, D, Proosten, M. Literary Methods in Architectural Education. Writingplace, [S.l.], n. 1, 2018. pp. 8

12 Havik, K. Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture. Nai010 publishers. 2014 p. 6-14

13 Idib. pp. 10-11

14 Idib. pp. 11

15 Pallasmaa, J. The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2005

16 Mallgrave, H., F. From Object to experience: The new culture of architectural design. Bloomsbury 2018. p. 1-56

One of the modern day challenges is also to find the connection of social processes on a variety of levels in complex urban spaces. These challenges could also be seen as new opportunities that arose from the ongoing globalization. According to Patrik Schumacher Parametricism is the only style innovative enough, to find solutions to the challenges in architecture that arose from world civilization. Schumacher even dreams of cities where we as humans are able to navigate using only our basic instincts. More in a state of distraction rather than searching for signages¹⁷. However sceptics argue if there is any societal relevance in these complex parametric compositions. Ultimately architecture and urban landscapes are made for its users and have a social task to fulfil. Therefor the answers have to be found on a deeper level in the architectural disciplines and its methodologies.

The role of literary writing as a method for spatial narratives in this case, is to describe the spirit and needs of the human body in a more poetic way. Because writing can evoke so much imaginary thoughts, and it is this imaginative emphatic ability that brings us closer to our true self, this is the ideal method to do so.

To position myself in the realms of digital architecture and its distancing from our deeper human needs, it is not the question whether but how spatial narratives and literary writing is going to play a role in this. Parametricism as a digital style is relatively new and therefor generates and demands new methods and approaches. In my research question I seek to find an answer on the question whether spatial narratives can help in activating the designers architectural imagination in relation to complex urban developments influenced by parametricism. Using literary writing methods within the spatial narratives methodology will allow me to investigate my given project site, Midtown Manhattan more efficiently and with an existential depth that wasn't possible without the methodological research. Also writing in a more literary and poetic way, have helped me to create a natural sense of empathy towards the future users of the project in relation to mobility and transportation. Whereas before I would have designed my project as an external other I now know empathy is a crucial aspect which allows you to crawl into the mind of a possible user.

17 Schumacher, P. In Defense of Parametricism. Published by Machine Books in 2016, as part of the series: "Styles: In Defense of ...", edited by Austin Williams

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