

THE MEDIOTER IN THE MODERN BUILT ENVIRONMENT PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND PROXEOPLOGICAL STUDY TO DESIGN A SOCIAL PUBLIC HUB

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Thesis "The meeting hub in Morgenstond"

I INTRODUCTION

I.I ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH METHODS

Design and research are inseparable and inter-related. In practice, many architects cannot differentiate between research and design acts since the boundaries between them can be extremely fragile and difficult to recognize; both design and research process go in multiple intertwined directions. Architects mostly rely on their unconsciousness and their previous experience to approach architectural questions. Yet, in this rapid changing and challenging world, specific research methods are necessary and required to approach certain problems. Research is conducted to make progress and to contribute new knowledge to the established architectural knowledge. Therefore, not all problems can be tackled by replicating the ready-made solutions and clichés ¹. According to Downton, research is the motor for acquiring knowledge, and this knowledge will assist architects during design process ².

Therefore, it is very vital for architects to be aware of the various design methods which help solving in very specific situations.

In the Lecture Series Research Methods, students made aware of the different research methods for architecture that can form the theoretical base for their graduation projects. The choice of the research method can be very subjective based on architects' preferences. Thus, for any architectural assignment, there is no singular right research method available, various research methods can be applied to approach the same architectural topic and different results may be achieved by approaching an architectural assignment differently.

I.II THE PUBLIC CONDENSER, THE HAGUE –SOUTH-WEST

For my graduation project, I participate in the Public Building Graduation Studio, *Public Condenser, in The Hague South-West*. The Public Condenser concerns investigating the future of public buildings and spaces in the ultramodern neighbourhood of Morgenstond in the South-West of The Hague. It looks also onto the influence of public buildings in the developing of neighbourhoods and its social role in the built environment. Multiplicity is a keyword for our studio. By applying multiplicity, the studio tries to create resilient, easily transformative and non-singular architecture.

STUDIO GROUP WORK: Before starting on our own investigation, a general research was required on two cities (*The Hague vs. Copenhagen*) and a specific research on two neighbourhoods (*the South-West Morgenstond (my preference) versus Vesterbro*). We investigated, *in groups*, four themes (City, Connection, People, and Power). These themes will later help us to formulate our own interest.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: Morgenstond is a modern neighbourhood characterized by large distances between its buildings, standardised monofunctional blocks and the abundance of unused collective spaces. Recently, it has become the destination of migrants who cannot afford living in the city which resulted in a multicultural character in the neighbourhood. Nowadays, 69 percent of its population has a migration background ³. The neighbourhood is segregated from the city of The Hague culturally, economically and ethnically. It suffers from poverty, higher rate of criminality and poor public life due to lack of public facilities ⁴.

The location of the Public Condenser was already determined by the chair of Public Buildings. It will be located in the main public park (Melis Stokepark) of the neighbourhood of Morgenstond. The Public Condenser, as a model, tries to change the conventional stereotype of the monofunctional public building in the modern cities.

Form my own interest in people's behaviour and their experience through the built environment, in this thesis I will investigate the influence of the Public Condenser on promoting social activities and the possibility of it in becoming a meeting hub in the modern context for the different people from different cultures and backgrounds who living there, Therefore, *my research question is how to design a public space which works as a mediator and meeting hub in the modern neighbourhood?* This mediator is a neutral space who facilitate negotiations between different people, among other things based on their real interests. This mediator gives interesting experience of our being through its space which will be shaped according to the need of people.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel wrote in his essay, *The Metropolis and Mental Mind*, 1903, about the influence of big cities on people's minds and behaviour. He studied social practices and relations in metropolises and examined how the modern city enforces people's individuality and impersonality and at the same time the social, economic interdependence of individuals on each other's. Simmel's essay received wide attention in the 1950s between urbanists and architects⁵.

The French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre wrote in his book, *The Production of Space*, that each society produces its own social spaces. He considered that space is the product of people's social activities, in other words, socially produced rather than physically determined. He defined the role of the design as the mediator between the different mental and social activities. The theories and notions of these thinkers are categorized under the study of social science that assist architects to understand how cities function⁶.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the modern notions were superimposed on societies and the public spaces produced by modernism were not a product of social activities as Lefebvre proposed. It was the modern architects who had deterministic approaches to city and architecture which influenced people's behaviour in public spaces as well as people's experience of architecture. Their space was not destined to people's need and social practices, but for car, infrastructure and connection.

With a modern mindset, Dudok planned Morgenstond in 1949 in the contextless agricultural polder Escamp as a mass housing scheme with wide roads and plenty of open green public and collective spaces with no attention to psychological and social effect on public spaces. The distinguish between public spaces and collective spaces are hardly possible.

This modern homogenous neighbourhood with its spaces functions as the enemy of the public realm and activities⁷. The complexity of public life and activities are missed there and was replaced by wide ways, big shopping centres and large collective spaces; the collective and public spaces don't encourage any social practices, such as events, meeting opportunities and playing activities. Public spaces are designed to provide people with a platform to perform different kind of activities such as traffic, social and recreational. Yet, the public spaces of Morgenstond experience decay of social public life, its social practices are reduced to their minimum level as the result of the functional zoning, homogeneous architecture and the reliance on cars.

In Public Condenser studio, we are free to determine our methods based on our own interests. The problem statement described previously motivated me to think about the inter-relation and the inseparably between built environment and human activities and the profound influence of architecture on people's behaviour and the experience of the modern spatial environment. Thus, I choose praxeology and phenomenology episteme as a framework for my research methods in my thesis. This leads to question what relationships are between built environment, and people's experience and how these influence people's behaviour in modern public spaces and how praxeology and phenomenology help to understand these issues?

III THEORETICAL DISCOURSE- PHENOMENOLOGY VS. PRAXEOLOGY

Phenomenology in the modern field was introduced by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early years of the 20th century. According to him, phenomenology concerns the conscious perception of the phenomena and the everyday experience of being in the world. Phenomenology was later developed by many other philosophers and sociologists such as Martin Heidegger and the French Maurice Merleau-Ponty who developed what so called existential phenomenology. It studied and focused subjective experience which is considered the reflection of individual's objects, emotions and values and overlooked individual behaviour and harmony, (Merleau-Ponty p: 285) stated : "*my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moon's light, it is as a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it*"⁸.

The application of the phenomenological approach is very relevant to architecture, since only architecture can provide the spatial stage for evoking authentic physical experience and sensory feeling of people through its spaces ⁹.

The Norwegian architect and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz was among the firsts who brought Martin Heidegger's phenomenological notions into architecture. He saw places as phenomena and analysed how every place creates different kind of spheres. He also studied the influence of the built environment on people and the psychological reaction of human beings to their surroundings. According to him each place is identified by concrete feature and materialised elements and characters ¹⁰.

Through human's experience in places, architecture offers the complete and detailed perception of all sensations such as tactile, visual, acoustic, smelling including the emotional sensations. As (Steven Holl, p: 41) stated: "*All these sensations combine within one complex experience, which becomes articulate and specific, though wordless. The building speaks through the silence of perceptual phenomena*" ⁹.

Recently, many architects use phenomenology in their designs such as Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa who wrote along with the architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez (*Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*) which is considered a thoughtful book elaborating the significance of people's phenomenological experience in the architectural context.

Praxeology, as the study of human's action and behaviour in logical system, received its modern definition by the French philosopher and sociologist Alfred Espinas in 1890. Praxeology first grew out of the economics through the study of economical logic in markets which explained not only the prices and economical action but the logic of decision making in general ¹¹.

The most thorough statement of the praxeological approach is defined by Ludwig von Mises in his book *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. As an undeniable fact or *apodictic certainty*, praxeology considers that all human actions are rational. Mises further described that human actions (*excluding reflex actions which are involuntary actions and out of control caused by stimulus such as sneezing*) are unique, universal and purposeful behaviour and under his control; it describes human conscious with its goals and ends regardless the motive behind these actions. Yet, the purposeful behaviour is also influenced by the uncontrol issues such as health conditions and the built environment; this explains why people have preferences in their decisions ¹². What concerns architects is the influence of the built environment on people conscious decisions and behaviour. If we can analyse how certain architectural elements affects people's uses of public spaces, it will assist us in designing meaningful and liveable spaces.

Regarding urban and architectural praxeological studies, Jane Jacobs discussed the economic and social behaviour of people in cities and neighbourhoods. In 1961, She criticised the influence of modern neighbourhoods on economic and social practices. As an observer, Jacobs studied human's behaviour in unsuccessful modern public spaces and compared them to the well functioned public spaces and neighbourhoods in New York city and other American cities. She opposed the modern notion that linked a healthy housing with a good behaviour in cities; mentioned that the behaviour of people is more related to the public life and the social activities on streets. She tried to determine what makes streets and neighbourhoods desirable for people. Concentration and diversity of activities as well as people during the day were essential standpoints in Jacobs' theory of a well functioned public spaces ¹³. Although, Jacobs theory is very effective, she overlooked issues such as infrastructure, connection and cities' growing population.

More recently, the Danish architect Jan Gehl studies the physiological and social aspects of the design of public spaces and buildings. He further developed some of Jacobs' notions and gives more attention to more friendly means of transportation such bikes and public transport. He is engaged in the formulating strategies to improve the patterns of social life and contacts in traditional, modern and new public spaces ¹⁴.

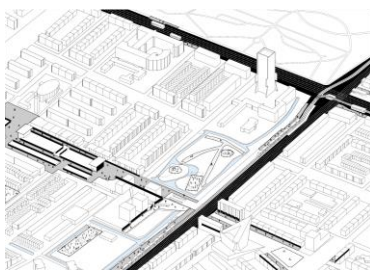
Concerning the public space of Morgenstond, the phenomenological along with the praxeological approach help me defining the problems regarding this modern neighbourhood accurately. The lack of sensorial experience as a consequence of the large scale-based design, standardization of building block and the functional zoning (*which causes less dense concentration and no diversity in neighbourhoods*) led to the loss of appreciation of modern public spaces. Modern public spaces de-sensualise human experience; and it replaces all sense with flat vision conceived by motorists. The public spaces in the modern neighbourhoods couldn't offer an intriguing walkable or inviting spaces for people to stay, sit and meet as in the inner-city centres do.

IV POSITIONING

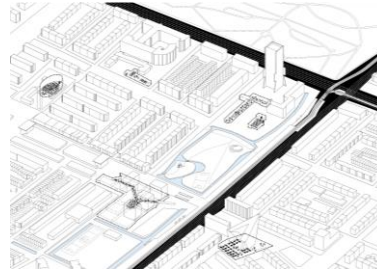
In order to tackle the aforementioned problem statements, certain analytical tools are required. First of all, in group, we conducted a typical historical, typological and morphological research in order to define the patterns and forms of there, such as the functional zoning, the decay of the buildings; it also indicates to the period when the neighbourhood was built and the socio-political situation in the 1950s. Yet, it is rigid and restricted to an abstract mapping of the functions, routes and public spaces and it doesn't tell us about the real use and the real users of these spaces, social problems and needs of the residents. This approach can lead to the same superimposed top-down architecture that causes the aforementioned problems of the Modern Architecture since the actual requirements of people will not be met and people will not be involved in the process.

Therefore, a thorough unstructured observational analysis and slightly structured interviews are designed in my thesis. This analysis takes place in the field by visiting the neighbourhood many times during the week and during the weekends. This bottom-up approach is done in order to record the actual activities taking place in the neighbourhood and to acquire a real sense and experience through the space and not an imagined and theorised one.

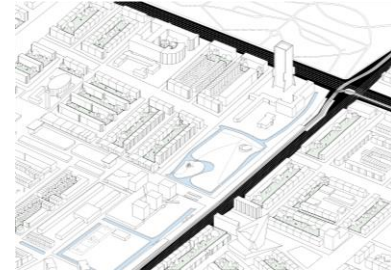
This praxeological approach allows me documenting people's behaviour in spaces. The scale of the study is determined in the main public spaces in Morgenstond (such as the main park, the shopping streets (Leyweg) and the collective gardens). The findings of the analysis are recorded by photographs (images 1, 2, 3, 4) and analytical diagrams (1, 2, 3) of the use in the public spaces ¹⁵.



Outdoor public activities. digaram (1)



Indoor public activities, digaram (2).



Collective public activities, digaram (3).



The leyweg, image (1, 2)





The collective gardens, image (3, 4)

Interviewing is also a relevant research tool in developing my graduation thesis because the need of data collection about people (the actual users). This approach offers in-depth information about people's experience through public spaces and a good perception of people's opinions in the neighbourhood ¹⁶. It gives the interviewees the space to express their need regarding the use of the public space. For example, many people give explicitly their need for more benches and sittings in the shopping streets and the main park as well as playing grounds for children and teenagers.

The interviews take place in the main shopping street and Melis Stokepark (the plot of the project). The interviews are designed in a lightly structured way in order to allow elaborations and further supplementary questions on some participants' responses. Therefore, only three questions were predetermined.

Since I'm aware of using this method requires long-term field work, I will be visiting the neighbourhoods during the course of my graduation project in order to gain a wider conception of the architectural experience of the public and social life in Morgenstond.

The conclusion of the observations and the interviews should lead to better understanding of the use patterns of the public space and the needs of people, in other words, as mentioned in the praxeology lecture, it helps developing the real eye for the users of spaces and building and not the imagined ones. This understanding (*acquired from the relation between phenomenology and praxeology approach*) will form the base for designing sensible social spaces which functions as a meeting hub of Morgenstond which should meet the social needs of all different groups living there. And I plan to use these findings from these social studies to formulate proper program for my own design project based on people's requirements and desires, which can promote everyday social practices and diversity of functions in the neighbourhood. Thus, this space will finally be a stage of social practices.

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