

ETHNOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN HERITAGE

A research to the leftover spaces along the centre spine of Almere Haven

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Chair of Heritage & Architecture, 20C Heritage, 1 million houses

EMPTY•NEST

I INTRODUCTION

"We need to shift our focus from icons to buildings that may be less outspoken, but which make an essential contribution to the public domain." is something that Avermaete signalized in his inaugural speech for becoming a professor of Methods & Analysis at the Technical University of Delft.¹ Nowadays in Rotterdam the iconic buildings are popping up. It seems to be that there is less attention to the urban context with these designs. Something that I consider to be odd since the architect's design for the people and not for their portfolio. Adding "the common" into the development of a project is a new way of architecture and could be done in many different ways.

The course enlightened me with the diversity of possible approaches, some could contribute to shifting my focus towards architecture for "the common". The lectures of Klaske Havik and Marieke Berkens highlighted the need for architecture based on users' desires. Berkens explains that with the example of Bruno Taut, who analyzed how floorplans are used and elaborate on it in "Die Neue Wohnung".² The two lectures were an eye-opener on how to approach design questions, it also gives strength to what Avermaete said about architecture in his inaugural speech: "It is created, appropriated and then changed by its users. The biography of a building does not start until it has been delivered to its users."³

The principle of creating architecture for the users and their needs have been integrated into the research approach. Generally, within the heritage studio, the research is focused on the layers of time of a specific building or location. What changes have been made by the users, what is original, what not and what are their cultural values. In the heritage studio that I am attending, not a specific building, but a location is given, Almere Haven. Almere Haven is the first core of the so-called "new town" Almere and will become a heritage within a few years. The studio approach is to find the values of these new towns from the seventies on an architectural base. The centre of Almere Haven exists of one central spine with several buildings' blocks along with it. Each side street you take leads to parking lots, backsides of shops and gives an unpleasant or even unsafe feeling. These spaces are considerably large in comparison with the total square meters of the centre. From an architectural perspective, these spaces have architectural potential and are suited for improvement or infill. Within my design, I want to address the needs of the users and translate it into a design. But how to do so? This paper will address this with the following question: How could ethnographic research contribute to creating architecture?

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Nowadays the approach for researching and valuing a heritage project at the Technical University Delft is based on the combination of the theories of Riegl and Brand.⁴ A heritage design has to deal with future desires, values of the past, spirit of place (according to Riegl) and more. The entire new city, Almere Haven, has been developed without any urban context. Before starting designing, etic research to dwelling and street profiles of old general Dutch Towns has been done, such as Hoorn, Edam and Alkmaar. The architecture of the old town has been translated toward seventies architecture. By creating a 'spirit of place' comparable to ordinary Dutch towns the designers expected that the new inhabitants immediately would feel at home. According to Avermaete, this is something that is not designed but is created after the project is finished and occupied.⁵

My research approach is a combination of context and methodology led. It is context led research because the site has been analysed in several manners, such as photographing, analytical drawings and mapping the user's paths. According to Lucas, this context led research is establishing "the primary importance of the physical, the social or historical".⁶ To contribute to "the common" architecture I think it is important to implement an emic research approach. To grasp the 'spirit of place' the research approach is a combination of methodology led and emic. Since Almere Haven has been created with etic research. The new developments should have research from an emic

perspective to gain an understanding of the wishes and needs of the population. This can be achieved by using a methodologically controlled research, methodology led, using the analytical instrument of fieldwork in which residential research has been carried out. The residents of Almere Haven needed to fill in a seven-day diary with questions about their environment on the scale of city, neighbourhood and own house. The questions concerned what they want, would change and need. The answers were collected and analysed to get an overview of the needs.

To position the approach within the framework of epistemology, I would state that it is a combination of ethnographic and environmental psychology. According to Lucas, the ethnography is a field where the research spends an extended period in the field, interacting and recording in various ways.⁷ The aim of the ethnographic is to cut through what people say and what they do. By interviewing the people after they filled in the diary, I tried to figure out what they meant with their writing or drawings. Besides that, the diaries have been compared with etic point of view analyses, such as photographs of daily life, movements and interviews. To obtain useful and meaningful results, it is important to be aware of the total time and the number of participants during the ethnographic research.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

As an architect, we create most of the times spaces for unfamiliar people. An article in the Volkskrant addresses the issue in which not merely designers discuss with one another how to live in the future, but when the users are involved in the brainstorming session.⁸ Therefore, Awan, Schneider and Till introduce a new definition where architecture is not only the 'sole domain' of the architect but that it belongs to a much broader group of persons.⁹ Within our field of expertise, architects do see barriers to create community architecture¹⁰ and argue that it is not necessary and undesirable. According to Sanoff, changing people's environment works better if they are involved in its creation and are not treated as a 'passive consumer'.¹¹ To reflect on my chosen research methods and analytical tool three projects are discussed who used comparable heuristic techniques. Namely, open spaces in the old town of Edinburgh, Mulhouse in France and Hoidrift in Rotterdam.

In a lecture by Avermaete about constructing the commons, he stated that 'the interest of the commons could be a resource for co-creation'.¹² The first example which, dated from 1900, was coordinated by Patrick Geddens, a biologist, sociologist, geographer, philanthropist and pioneering town planner. Geddens mapped all the open spaces in the old town of Edinburgh. Together with the community, they decided what these open spaces needed and Geddens designed them. The spaces were transformed into the new function with the help of the community. These improved spaces of Geddens are still well maintained. This project shows that when the community is asked how to give infill and let them contribute, the project can be a success, as Sanoff stated. In a social housing project in Mulhouse France by Lacaton and Vassal, their approach is to create better and more generous living conditions. According to Awan et al., Lacaton and Vessel are working together with the users and stay involved after the construction and return several times to learn from the users of their design. With this form of ethnographic research, they aim to develop better floorplans for further projects.¹³ For a CPO project at the Hoidrift in Rotterdam, SUB Office developed an architectural system of rules, regarding the material and composition of the façade. This is based on meetings with the fourteen owners where they discussed everyone's desires. With this knowledge, SUB Offices created the toolbox intending to create a coherent street ensemble where the individual dwellings were still recognisable.¹⁴

The three examples are slightly different from each other in the way they handle the gathered knowledge from an ethnological research approach. Geddens translated the wishes into a final design of his own, Lacaton & Vassal researching their design in an ethnological way and design with that knowledge floorplans of new projects. In the last project the architecture, SUB Office made a tool that owners could use to design their façade. In my graduation project, a combination of the approach of

Geddens and SUBoffice would help to develop the infill and improvement of the left-over spaces of Almere Haven. The wishes that have been found in the residential research can be translated into several designs. By making a toolbox, this design can be adapted to the desires of the users when implementing it. As mentioned in the example of Lacaton and Vassal, where the researcher is part of the situation, the collected data will be enormous variate from a non-participant observation in the phenomena that has been studied.¹⁵ It is important to take this into account for my graduation thesis where I was the nonparticipant research, an emic point of view.

IV POSITIONING

The research approach that I have used have a link with two lectures given within the course. First of all, the lecture by Berkens where the position of the architects and the users were discussed. In the literature that comes along, several possible roles or methods of the architects are discussed. A method that has been elaborated on is one of the research studios by Venturi and Scott Brown. Where the question between architectural culture and popular mass was addressed. By investigating and analysing popular expressions by users in dwelling environments. With this foundation, Venturi stated that a 'more inclusive' and 'open approach' to architecture could be developed.¹⁶ This example is from an etic point of view, where De Carlo stated that the barriers between the architect and the common man must be abolished. He must have a committed role in the design and building process. An equivalent relation between architect and users is something that architect John Turner does not agree on. He made a plea for architecture without architects. These positions strengthen my research approach to involve the user's opinion within further design. Which incorporates the Venturi and Scott Brown approach and De Carlo statement, because we need to be aware of for whom we are designing. The position of Turner is beyond desirable. For me, the project Hoodrift shows the result of a good balance between the architect and the individual desires.

Havik made a plea in her lecture, for perceiving the location via other people perspective, via narrative writing.¹⁷ I agree that writing Architecture is interesting because there are no factual limits, which I experienced when I attended the Msc2 studio of Methods and Analysis. The residential research with the dairy is also about writing architecture via the perspective of the user. In the related literature, this position of Pallasmaa about how students perceive architecture via 'digitalized information', as Pinterest, and not via 'great literature'¹⁸ is one that I adopt and made me realize to be more aware of what architects design. Therefore, it is important to include the emic view in my research and translate it into design principles to not only create an iconic building that looks good in the picture.

To conclusively answer the self-assessment research question: how could ethnographic research contribute to creating architecture? I would say that it is not only the ethnographic research that makes architecture that users embrace. But it is the involvement of the users during the design and constructing period. The approach of Taut, Lacaton and Vassal and Geddens will be inspiring my design approach.

END NOTE

¹ TU Delft, "Inaugural Address Tom Avermaete: 'A Lot of Contemporary Architecture Is Little More than Navel-Gazing,'" 2014.

² M Berkens, "Lecture Investigate Social and Spatial, Class Lectures, Research Methods" (Delft: Technical University Delft, 2019).

³ TU Delft, "Inaugural Address Tom Avermaete: 'A Lot of Contemporary Architecture Is Little More than Navel-Gazing.'"

⁴ M Kuipers and W de Jonge, *Designing from Heritage*, ed. Dott Silvia Naldini and Nicholas Clarke, *Bk Books* (TU Delft - Heritage & Architecture, 2017), <https://books.bk.tudelft.nl/index.php/press/catalog/book/isbn.9789461868022>.

⁵ TU Delft, "Inaugural Address Tom Avermaete: 'A Lot of Contemporary Architecture Is Little More than Navel-Gazing.'"

⁶ R Lucas, "Introduction: What Is Architectural Research?," in *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 6–17.

⁷ Lucas.

⁸ J van Kuijk, "De Empathie van Architecten Voor Gebruikers Is Soms Ver Te Zoeken | De Volkskrant," accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/de-empathie-van-architecten-voor-gebruikers-is-soms-ver-te-zoeken~b90702d8/>.

⁹ N Awan, T Schneider, and J Till, *Spatial Agency Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

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- ¹⁰ In Sanoff, Wates and Kneivitt (1987) had made a "distinguish difference" between conventional and community architecture. Which is as followed: Conventional architecture: Users are a passive recipient of an environment conceived, executed, managed, and evaluated by others with a professional expert. Community Architecture: Users are the client. They take control of commissioning, designing, developing, constructing, managing and evaluation their environment.
- ¹¹ H Sanoff, *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning* (John Wiley & Sons, INC, 2000), [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0169-2046\(00\)00063-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0169-2046(00)00063-3).
- ¹² T Avermaete, "Constructing the Commons. Towards Another Conception of the Architecture of the City. Class Lectures, Delft Lectures on Architectural Design AR1A060," (n.d.).
- ¹³ Awan, Schneider, and Till, *Spatial Agency Other Ways of Doing Architecture*.
- ¹⁴ SUBOffice, "Bouwen Aan de Hoodrift," 2017.
- ¹⁵ L Groat and D Wang, *Architectural Research Methods*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, INC, 2013).
- ¹⁶ T Avermaete, "The Architect and the Public: Empowering People in Postwar Architecture Culture," *Hunch. The Berlage Report on Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape*, no. 14 (2010): 83–95.
- ¹⁷ K Havik, "Act of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmons and Alvar Aalto," *Montreal Architectural Review* 4 (2017): 41–60.
- ¹⁸ J Pallasmaa, "Domicile in Words, The Scriptive Approach to Architecture," in *Urban Literacy, Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2012), 6–15.

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