

Historical research to understand the experience of a site by people in the past

Assessing the role of people and architects in research

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Thesis "Hembrug a Peninsula"

I INTRODUCTION

Architecture is an ever developing body of knowledge which looks into the use of space, about how people dwell in them and how they occupy them. In this, meaningful places are established and gives form to our surroundings. What we build comes out of the understanding of our world and at the same time, what we understand about the world is shown in our buildings. It is important to know the use of spaces and places by all people¹. People nowadays are likely different than in the past. Today one society consists of many people with different backgrounds, religions, views on the world and this will be a continuous process. Aspects of life today would have been unthinkable in the past. Architecture therefore acts on the changes in society. As an architecture student myself, I try to get a grasp on how people would use my design. This always goes hand in hand with the required research. Sometimes research cannot immediately lead to a design but rather becomes a tool to test if certain aspects of the design have had a right mind-set according to the outcomes of the research.

The lecture series of Research Methods made me realize that there are many options to do research on a certain topic. What I found pleasing was the amount of methodologies and methods which looked at the experience of people. Being an architecture student and someone with a 'disability', I find this one of the most crucial aspects in architecture. An important part which struck me was the fact that most architects and architecture students refer to the people who will live in buildings or enter public spaces as users. These 'users' are often placed in a box, the architect knows everything. However, without the 'users' there is no building. An empty building is not a place where one wants to be. It should be lively and therefore architects and 'users' together make architecture².

The MSc3 studio of Heritage & Architecture: 'revitalising heritage' is about transforming a former industrial heritage site, called Hembrug. Hembrug is located in Zaandam and has always been closed off from the outside world. The 'Artillerie inrichtingen' was located here since 1900. They used to make weapons, ammunition, shells but later also civil products such as farm trailers. The site of Hembrug was divided into different parts and employees could not enter a different sector if they did not work there. Access was heavily monitored. Furthermore, the employees had to keep everything a secret. After the site closed its doors in 2003, people took the initiative to open it up again. The only difference now; it will not be opened for employees but to everyone. This leads to the interesting research on how the site felt like when it was closed off and to see how it can be utilized when opened to the public. Therefore the research question is: *How do you analyse a closed off industrial heritage site in order to understand the site better when it will be opened up to the public?*

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

There are three different kinds of research:

- context led,
- methodology led,
- theory led.

This research is aimed at Hembrug, a site in Zaandam and therefore is a context led research³.

Hembrug is a former industrial military site which contains national monuments. Before starting this graduation project, I had never heard of Hembrug. In order to get a grasp on how self-contained the area was while it was active, it is important to know the history of Hembrug. Therefore a historical research is required. We have been provided with a report of the cultural historical analysis on Hembrug, which gave us a brief overview of the whole history of the terrain and its values. Yet, this is mostly viewed from above.

My curiosity lies into the closed character of the site and how this was experienced. Therefore this is a qualitative research. The quality or aspects of the self-contained character cannot merely be viewed in numbers, especially when there is so little documentation on the site⁴.

After multiple archive visits, reading many letters and exploring old maps, the use of Hembrug became more evident. However, it did not completely satisfy my curiosity, especially related to the people and their experiences.

Historical research also includes searching for old pictures and drawings in archives⁵. These pictures from different archives gave more insight in people's lives when the terrain was still in use. After reading a story of a former employee it all fitted together. Another aspect of historical research was applied after gathering this information. According to Collingwood an important part of historical research is imagination⁶. During my research not all the blanks could be filled in, not everything was photographed or clearly written. In these situations the mind steps in in order to try to fill those blanks. I started to sketch from eye level perspective how workers would come to work by train, bike or ferry and how they continued their path to their workplaces. The sketches were made in Photoshop with the help of a graphic tablet.

The last part emphasizes on emic culture. It is quite subjective and close to peoples' everyday life (in the past) from eye level. It is merely a simulation of how it looked like, in my mind. However, there are switches between the etic and emic culture. The etic culture is mostly when looking from above, reading the history and investigating maps. The best research consists of a combination of both cultures⁷.

The behaviour of people in places was investigated in my approach to know how they experienced the site when it was still active. It is based on how one would walk in this area when going from/to work and what they see. This corresponds to praxeology. Praxeology is the study of human action and conduct⁸. Gehl describes the quality of public places⁹. Public space knows three kinds of activities: necessary, optional and resultant activities. Resultant activities are social activities, caused by the good quality of the outdoor space. It suggests that people would spend a significant amount of time outside, because people would interact with one another¹⁰. This does not necessarily correlate with the exact purpose of my research but it shows the importance of quality of the public space to people. De Certeau had a similar thought¹¹. He found that especially urbanists should not look at the city from a high level. He describes it as though someone is a God when looking down at the everyday life

which is not clearly visible¹². In this way it is almost impossible to get a grasp on how people act in everyday life in order to design for them. "The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it"¹². Gehl and De Certeau both describe the importance of the experience of people in outdoor spaces and therefore praxeology is most suited to get to know a site from the perspective of the former employees and maybe future visitors.

Also, Avermaete writes that the position of the architects has changed through time¹³. For a long time architects would not think about the people using the space. Cullen, for instance, was one of the populists in the 50's and he was the expert and considered the needs of the popular masses¹⁴. However, the role of the architect could go all the way to merely being a facilitator¹³. It shows how architects are more willing to listen to the future 'users', which I find very important. This is a fundamental reason for my research on the experiences of Hembrug when it was still in use.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Christine Frederick was the first woman to write about having a practical household. She studied a house from different perspectives. To analyse houses and the use of them she would draw the routing in floor plans, which were on a level of the whole house but were also only focused on one room. With the help of pictures of closets, cabinets or equipment she showed how houses could be ideally used. Afterwards, a new layout can be achieved by 'resolving' the old one¹⁵.

Bruno Taut plead that women should have a say in the arrangement within houses. At a male dominated time, the women would be in charge of the house; they stayed home and took care of the household. Therefore it should be designed according to their needs¹⁶. Bruno Taut was the first architect who stood up for the women⁸. He also applied the idea of routings of Christine Frederick in floor plans^{15,16}. They both try to get a grasp on how houses are used and how they ideally can be used. This is however on a small scale compared to the use of the Hembrug site. Moreover, on a small scale a floor plan with routings might be enough but on a bigger scale it might be more useful to work in 3D or sketches. This can show what people find attractive or not or how they walk in a certain manner based on these aspects.

In 1961 a book was published which was a breakthrough in urban design, written by Gordon Cullen. He 'invented' the concept of Townscape and has therefore had a huge influence on architects, planners, etcetera. He made a connection between the visual on ground level and the view from above as an urban planner, trying to get a hold on the experiences of the 'users'¹⁷. "But the main endeavour is for the environment makers to reach their public, not democratically but emotionally"¹⁸. Cullen showed the urban landscape by sketching it from eye level. He would sketch whole routes in a city, to show how places would or would not work properly. He not only included sketches in the book but also pictures¹⁷. However, pictures do not show the essence of a place because there is so much happening at one moment. When one makes a sketch, they clearly 'point out' the main characteristics of a street or a square. Therefore, one could neglect unnecessary parts. This method is similar to the one I used, with one difference. Cullen made sketches of existing places; he could see with his own eyes where people would walk and sit. Also, he could take pictures of outdoor places at any given moment. Yet, only the old pictures from archives were available to me, in which the focus was more on the site than the people. The following comes closer to the used method together with the method of Cullen.

Paul B. Jaskot, Chester Harvey and Anne Kelly Knowles made 2D and 3D digital models of the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Their aim was to investigate how the camp was used. They especially looked at surveillance and the perspectives of pictures. The old pictures could serve as evidence and can therefore be used to reconstruct the built environment and the experiences of the prisoners¹⁹.

These methods correspond to the changing viewpoints on where the architect should be placed in society. The architect used to be the professional who knew everything and every design would have been solely his idea¹³. However, in the 1900s the people became more important. Even the women were given an important role in designing, as Bruno Taut and Christine Frederick mentioned^{8,15,16}. As De Certeau mentioned, architects tried to be the God of the creation earlier, without considering what the people would experience¹². The work of Gehl and De Certeau show the importance of investigating the peoples' lives in order to create something suitable for them^{9,11}. Ronald Mace went even further than the everyday lives of the mass, he ended in a wheelchair due to polio. He was the first architect to introduce the term Universal Design. His book gave guidance for designers to make their designs as accessible as possible to a wide range of people²⁰. This was already in the 1970's and is still a very interesting issue nowadays.

IV POSITIONING

There are two main issues in praxeology. One of them is the placement of architects in society. The word 'user' creates a distance between the architects and the ones who are giving life to architecture. This is still an on-going discussion for which there is not a clear answer⁸. It does not limit me from having an opinion on this aspect myself. My research is based on the experience of people who used to work at Hembrug. The former employees and the future users are an important part in architectural research for me. Architects have changed their roles over time and more often projects are realized in which the future inhabitants are involved. The architect is not the main expert anymore, many other factors are involved, one of which are the future 'users'.

Another issue is the fact that ethnographers are never 'neutral' observers, so an unbiased research can never be performed⁸. This is an issue between the emic and etic culture. If the research is more focused on the emic culture, the research will be too subjective. It will then not be trustworthy, which makes it difficult to rely on. The project on Hembrug is more focused on the historical research, but at the same time simulates how people at that time experienced the site. The latter aspect has an overlap with ethnographical research. "Ethnography is the practice of writing about another group of people"²¹. The only difference is that the 'different group of people' is people from the same culture but in the past.

The unknown history of the site due to the small amount of pictures from ground level makes this research less 'neutral'. However, using your imagination isn't wrong when pictures are non-existent, especially when it comes to simulating the past.

Nowadays praxeology is still important for inclusive architecture (architecture which is accessible to everyone). People of all ages and abilities should be able to access buildings and public spaces easily. Therefore, the architect has to know the people and understand what they find (dis)pleasing. In this case there is a wide range of people which makes designing complicated. In every step of the design, one should look through the eyes of less abled people, children and the elderly. It is still an issue nowadays for less abled people because they feel excluded by the society²².

Cullen made drawings of urban landscapes which show whether places worked or not¹⁷. He probably looked at it from his own point of view and even if he took the public as a perspective, he still did not take into account the wider audience as less abled, elderly and children experience them differently. That is why I would alter the method of Cullen and his position as an architect towards the 'users'.

Collingwood explains the importance of imagination while doing historical research, which I completely agree with. "...a historian's imagination must indeed place himself or herself in the thoughts of the actors being described in the historical narrative"⁶. During the historical research of Hembrug it was

impossible to learn everything about the site. The maps, old pictures and a few experiences of former employees did not show all the information about peoples' lives in the past. My imagination took over to create scenes in which the people might have lived.

When it comes to architectural design it is important to see your work through the eyes of the people who are going to use the design in practice. I plea for the understanding of architects towards their public. It is the job of an architect to listen to them in order to make a coherent design which provides everyone's' needs.

The research question was: *How do you analyse a closed off industrial heritage site in order to understand the site better when it will be opened up to the public?*

To analyse a similar site it is important to know how the self-contained character was experienced by people in the past and this can be achieved by doing historical research and turn texts, old pictures and maps into real scenes on eye level.

¹ Ray Lucas, *Research methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 8

² Jos Boys, *Doing Disability Differently* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 34

³ Ray Lucas, *Research methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 11

⁴ Ray Lucas, *Research methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 36-37

⁵ Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 195-197

⁶ Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 183-184

⁷ Ray Lucas, *Research methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 10

⁸ Marieke Berkers, *Praxeology* (Delft, AR3A160 course 2018/19 Q3: Delft University of Technology , February 21th, 2019)

⁹ Jan Gehl, *Life between Buildings* (Skive: The Danish Architectural Press, 2006)

¹⁰ Jan Gehl, *Life between Buildings* (Skive: The Danish Architectural Press, 2006), 11-14

¹¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, Ltd, 1984)

¹² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, Ltd, 1984),92

¹³ Tom Avermaete, *The Architect and the Public: Empowering People in Postwar Architecture Culture* (Delft: Brightspace, Delft University of Technology, 2010)

¹⁴ Tom Avermaete, *The Architect and the Public: Empowering People in Postwar Architecture Culture* (Delft: Brightspace, Delft University of Technology, 2010), 52

¹⁵ Christine Frederick, *Household Engineering: scientific management in the home* (Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1923)

¹⁶ Bruno Taut, *Die Neue Wohnung* (Leipzig: Verlag von Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925)

¹⁷ Gordon Cullen, *The Concise Townscape* (Oxford: Elsevier ,1961)

¹⁸ Gordon Cullen, *The Concise Townscape* (Oxford: Elsevier ,1961), 16

¹⁹ Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 207

²⁰ Ronald Mace, J Mueller and M Story, *The Universal Design File – Designing for People of All Ages and Abilities* (Raleigh: The Centre for Universal Design, 1998)

²¹ Ray Lucas, *Research methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 37

²² Jos Boys, *Doing Disability Differently* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11-60