

Mapping a narrative walk

Research through a narrative of walking through Mid-town New York

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Thesis "The mobility node"

I INTRODUCTION

In the architectural field research has always played a role, old church structures have been researched since the 13th century, in the 1950s the focus within the research was mainly pointed towards climate and product design, but since the late 1960s early 1970s a broader range of topics has been researched e.g. sociobehavioral studies and design methods.¹ A more recent trend is that architectural office do research, which is called practice-based research, by doing architectural design. This is often referred as 'thinking by doing'.²

On the other hand the amount of time architectural practices have to design a building is getting less and less, and the business and marketing side within architectural practices are playing a bigger role than ever. The amount of time left to do research within practice therefore is far less than traditional academic research would take.³ To overcome the lack of time architectural practices are creating research departments, whom can focus on research, or collaborate with researches with different backgrounds.⁴ A problem which should be addressed is that we as student and also in architectural practice see research as gathering information to inform the design process, but never critically look at how we do research and how the type of research method can construct a certain type of outcome, which has impact on the design.⁵

The notion that writing in architecture can show more ephemeral aspects such as memory and use, which can't be found in hard data by Klaske Havik⁶, triggered my attention. I found that unconsciously I design a spatial narrative in my projects, but never see them as part of my design and research process.

My Complex projects graduation studio is sited in Mid-town New York and asks us to critically look at the deeply rooted forces that are manifested within the city and in particular its built environment. The studio tends to do research through research-by-design, the architectural design process forms a pathway through which new insights, knowledge, practices and products come into being.⁷ Through hard-data research we were expected, to get a grasp on the cities built fabric but as Klaske Havik writes in her paper about the design methods of Aalto and Salmons: "The true symbiosis of their approaches is that between humans and nature, between architecture as a social service and architecture as a response to local landscapes, climates and material traditions."⁸

During my site visit I realized what the difference between the hard-data and the actual city life of New York meant. This disconnect between the facts and the humans is what made me realize what the function of this course was it made me more aware of multiple underlying research methods. Methods like praxeology, the study of the human action⁹ and ethnography, focusing on the ordinary quotidian stuff of life, to understand some of the small things that indicate a more significant difference in world view or life-world.¹⁰

Within the graduation studio my aim is to design a building which looks at the relation between a mobility node and its function within the city and how this has impact on the growth of mid-town. To develop my design I will research spatial narratives to figure how these node spaces can be experienced. My research question is: "How does the spatial narratives method contribute to my research on the relationship between the development of mid-town New York and a mobility node?"

- 1 Groat, L.N. & Wang, D. (2002). *Architectural research methods*. New York: J. Wiley, 7-8.
- 2 Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 8.
- 3 Groat, L.N. & Wang, D. (2002). *Architectural research methods*. New York: J. Wiley, 5.
- 4 Groat, L.N. & Wang, D. (2002). *Architectural research methods*. New York: J. Wiley, 4.
- 5 *Chairs of Methods and Analysis*. (2018), 5.
- 6 Klaske havik *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmons and Alvar Aalto* p.44.
- 7 *Research by Design - International Conference (2000)*. - Delft University of Technology - Faculty of Architecture, in cooperation with the EAAE/AEEA, November 1-3.
- 8 Klaske havik *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmons and Alvar Aalto* p. 51
- 9 Wojciech W. Gasparski *Ergonomics and praxiology, (Theoretical Issues in Ergonomics Science, 1:4, 366-377, DOI: 10.1080/14639220052399168, 2000)* 2.
- 10 Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 37.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

For the complex projects graduation studio we have to research Mid-Town Manhattan in New York. We have divided the cities context into several different topic: character (people, business, tourism), real estate (zoning, housing market, vacancy), mobility (accessibility, nodes), public assembly (urban space, public amenities), environment (nature, threats). By reading “Delirious New York” by Rem Koolhaas and “Form Follows Finance” by Carol Willis, and by mapping the data on these topic we gained information on the site, but when thinking about all the hard data mappings and readings the whole Mid-Town seems to look the same, with towers built between this almost perfect grid. Through overlaying the mappings we were expected to find specific trends, but what lacked is how the people perceived and interact with the space.

Kevin Lynch has described in, *The Image of the City*, that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves.¹¹ This is where our fieldtrip in the beginning of May played an important role. How I normally encounter a site I by wandering around, absorbing feelings, observing people and writing down short notes or photographing small moments. This can be seen as an ethnographical research-methodology, which is a type of research that is deeply rooted in the social sciences, but is often subconsciously used by architects. It focusses on the ordinarily parts of life and through that starts to reveal small patterns that lead to a larger change or difference in the cities view.¹² This made me understand what was actually happening on our site and what the impact of mobility was on the city.

This ethnographic method of walking and through this understanding the city, can be related to Klaske Havik her method of writing a spatial narrative, by describing and experiencing the city in different times, and on different days we allow ourselves to better understand the context its in. The ethnographic approach is highly related to the methods of praxeology and phenomenology, the later will be elaborated on in the next chapter. This can be seen as a context-led research specifically looking at the unique, which Lucas describes as: “Allowing the context to take the lead in your research process is one way of establishing the primary importance of the physical, social or historical setting.”¹² With the unique I finally understood what certain parts of Mid-Town Manhattan make it different from others¹³ and how mobility played an important role in this. The methods of walking through and writing about the city makes you analyze the context from a personal perspective, this emic way of looking from within the city gave me a good perspective on how the actual city worked were as the mapping and the literature review, the etic perspective, made me less aware but showed more the diagrammatic nature of Manhattan, where land prices drive buildings to even greater heights and their specific shapes.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The experiences researched through walking and narrative, have many aspects in common. Spatial narrative studies is for me the main method for researching the utilization of the node spaces in Mid-town, but doesn't stand alone from the way we generate these narratives through walking through the city. Utilizing walking as a method to conduct research is not often used, although some urban researchers utilize this method, it's still seldom published as a research.¹⁴

11 Jameson, F. (1992). *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 89

12 Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 11-12

13 Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 12

14 Joseph Pierce & Mary Lawhon, *Walking as Method: Toward methodological forthrightness and comparability in urban geographical research* (The Professional Geographer, 2017)

Kevin Lynch describes the city elements as paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks.¹⁵ It's the paths we move along, like walking, they get their form and identity by nodal points and the passing of districts and landmarks, its these elements we walk along while observing the city.¹⁶ These nodes as strategic points in the city were we as the observer can decent into or come out are a concentration of interactions, which will differ every time. Lynch than maps these walks by drawing, but also through narrative. His critique on the method mapping is that image analysis often by-passes the deeper rooted problems, by simplification, in the city and thus another method needs to be added to be able define the elements of a city, for this he proposes the methods of interview and writing.¹⁷ Through his research Lynch describes Beacon hill in Boston as¹⁸:

a sharp hill
narrow, pitching streets
the State House
Louisburg Square and its park
trees
handsome old houses
red brick
inset doorways

brick sidewalks
cobblestone streets
views of the river
a residential area
dirt and trash
social distinctions
corner stores on the back side
blocked or "curving" streets
the fence and statues, Louisburg Square
varied roof tops
signs on Charles Street
the gold dome of the State House
purple windows
some apartment houses in contrast

Micheal de Certeau states that the city cannot be looked at from above, he sees that the city only can be experienced when you start walking in it. What the importance of the act of walking is to the urban system is like the act of speaking is to language.¹⁹ These walks inform us about invisible structures of the city: "The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other."²⁰

As de Certeau talks about the story of the city perceived by walking through the city, Paul Ricoeur sees that the narrative as a method to open the researcher to a sequence of events and through this get a better understanding of the whole. This is very related to phenomenology, which is a method, that sees ever new experiences, without taking a position in advance, to reveal the universal or essential qualities of the phenomena.²¹ The narrative connects these events and experiences and through this it gets meaning as a whole due to the dynamics of plot. Plot can be seen as the arrangement of different events through a causal relation.²²

15 Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1960), 47-48.
16 Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1960), 84.
17 Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1960), 155
18 Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1960), 162-163.
19 Michel de Certeau, *Walking the city* (London, University of California Press, 1988), 97.
20 Michel de Certeau, *Walking the city* (London, University of California Press, 1988), 93.
21 Groat, L.N. & Wang, D. (2002). *Architectural research methods*. New York: J. Wiley, 228
22 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 64-70

Christopher Tilley describes narrative as: "Narrative is a means of understanding and describing the world in relation to agency. It is a means of linking locales, landscapes, actions, events and experiences together providing a synthesis of heterogeneous phenomena... In its phenomenological form narrative seeks to capture action not just through description but as a form of re-description."²³ Like Ricoeur he relates the narrative to a series of events, landscapes, actions and experiences, which could be seen as following the path of Lynch and along that path we encounter the other elements: edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. The re-description of the action mentioned by Tilley is where we look different to certain action we think we know what it is and is the moment we find new relations within the city.

More recent Levesque has used the method of narrative walking, for her 2015 research on in-between spaces within cities' fabrics, in Montreal. With a 42-hour walk, divided over 6 days, she documents and reveals conditions, which seem to have no relationship, but through the continuous slow movement of walking and observations she allows to create an ongoing narrative, that informs us about the places and its relationship with the city.²⁴

IV POSITIONING

The research method I use and describe relates to the lecture of Klaske Havik, whom I have mentioned before, about investigating spatial narratives. Klaske states that using literary description as a mode of architectural investigation, it shows how the use of writing in architectural analysis can bring to the surface some of the more ephemeral aspects of architecture.²⁵ She mentions that this method of research should be seen as an addition to the more common methods in architectural research like typological research and mapping, which are often image based. The method described by her can contribute to the very meaning of architecture, but notes that it is hard to describe in purely factual terms.²⁶ Like Klaske mentions the spatial narrative adds another layer next to the more factual terms. The spatial narrative works really well with the topic of transport nodes in the city, since a large group of people is constantly moving through, utilizing the space, perceiving the space in different ways and very much so have an opinion about the space, which is often not a positive one. This is also were in my research during the field trip the walking in the city should be laid next to the mapping, as Lynch also describes.

Therefore I would position myself behind Kevin Lynch who suggests a hybrid form of research method, where he acknowledges that mapping on its own is not a way to fully research the city. He states that image analysis often by-passes the deeper rooted problems²⁷ and therefore needs to be accompanied by another method. I particularly mention the hybrid and that these methods coexist next to each other to address that this is slightly contradictory to the Complex Project graduation studio, where hard data mapping is often taken for granted and we make many assumptions, by for example looking at the city from above. The complex studio describes it as research-by-design, which makes it visible how the research led to the narrative, and how this in turn is translated in design.²⁸ So the narrative itself is not seen as a research method, but as a result of research.

On the other hand I also don't fully agree with De Certeau, who says that by looking from above you don't get any grasp of the city.²⁹ The walking through the city makes you very aware of the context and the elements effecting this, but don't always show the underlying arguments for why certain elements are like that, which could be understood through literature or data.

23 Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), 32

24 Lévesque, C. (2017). Narrative Walking as a Research Method. 42 Hours across a Terrain Vague. *Narrating Urban Landscapes*, OASE, (98), 116–118. Retrieved from <https://oasejournal.nl/en/Issues/98/Narrativewalkingasaresearchmethod>

25 Klaske Havik, Acts of Symbiosis (*Montreal Architectural Review* : Vol. 4, 2017) 41

26 Klaske Havik, Acts of Symbiosis (*Montreal Architectural Review* : Vol. 4, 2017) 41

27 Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1960), 155

28 Triggianese, M. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/education/programmes/masters/architecture-urbanism-and-building-sciences/msc-architecture-urbanism-and-building-sciences/master-tracks/architecture/programme/studios/complex-projects/>

29 Michel de Certeau, *Walking the city* (London, University of California Press, 1988), 97.

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The walking narrative or mapping doesn't fit in de complex projects graduation studio, which focusses on research-by-design. But the course research methods made me aware of the often missing link between research in practice, my experience in architecture school and phenomenology. It wouldn't be honest to fully say that I am an ethnographic researcher, but got interested in the line of thinking and researching, since one of the core characteristics is to that the researcher spends extended periods in the field to find out more about a given context.³⁰ Which I clearly haven't done, but my intention of this type of research is to approach mobility and transport, within a for me unknown city, in a different way and to be part of the system. By this I am aiming to redefine the way mobility can be used in Mid-town and to generate a project that generates a different perspective to the topic.

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