

Contradictory space as assemblages

The search of the intermediate between public and the artists group in Antwerp

Introduction

The term “research” has almost become a cliché when people constantly ‘abuse’ its application on every single academic discourse. Everyone in the field of academics is a researcher themselves. In the realm of architectural education, everything you do before carrying on to the stage of design is part of the notion of “research”. Is it the rhetorical-convenience embedded in the term itself enable one to evade the need to critically define the scope of study in a more precise manner? Does research facilitate the process of re-searching history as a mean to inform contemporary theories, or does it only legitimize our studies? Inevitably the term should be elaborated among architectural professions nowadays to distinguish between various heuristic techniques and methodologies.

Another critique to be put forward regarding the research-methodological awareness is that it is often set apart from design practices. Heuristic studies could be found mainly in academic institutions but not in the actual field of work. The discipline suffered from extreme capitalism and gradually become part of the production-chain that reproduce architecture from existing prototypes. Design becomes irrelevant to epistemological research, while research remain contained within conventional methods and preconceptions.

Throughout the lecture series, it is alarming to realize the necessity to define the scope of research and to reiterate its rhetoric power in design. It is also intriguing to peep into other research-methodological apparatuses being employed in the school. It is especially in this faculty that you could find a “coupe anatomique” of the contemporary architectural discourse and their respective approaches. By comparing these apparatuses, I could expand my own inventory of methods and learn to deal with various theories with appropriate approach.

The thesis theme for this year’s Interior Building Cities studio is the “Intimate City”. The studio group is dwelling into the city of Antwerp and each develop ‘city rooms’ of varied scales as the final product of the graduation thesis. The studio generally adopts an “thinking through making” approach which encourage one to synthesize their arguments through the making of drawings, photographs, montages, and models etc. It is more of a context-led research, as the production of architectural materials are based largely on precedent-cities and various typologies of public architecture. Reflections are made constantly jumping between scales of the city, the building, and its interior. My thesis dwell into a former modernist museum site in Antwerp and the task to accommodate an artist community and social hub within it premise. The friction between a completely enclosed architectural volume for exhibition and a completely open public room for social encounters would be

discussed. The transformation of the heritage site also critique modernism as incapable of remaining contemporary in the context of commodification in architecture. Apart from that, the diffusion of architectural types nowadays define building as an assemblage rather than an object of its own.¹ Therefore, the research question would rest largely on the theory of assemblage and theory of place as an intervention point for making a public room against a residential backdrop.

Research-methodological discussion

Typological research on the notion of “city room” will be carried out as part of the abstract machine that formulate the design project. Certainly, any public city rooms in the city could be conformed to a specific type of function, allowing the public mass to navigate through and gather, which is in contrary to any commercial space nor domestic space. Despite their incoherent and varying forms, catalogues of these architectural space help clarify the unifying abstract appropriation between each different public room and produce a set of generative tools for the design process.

Public rooms that are of the same type meaning that they share a common function and morphology. Since modernism has brought forward the loss of figure ground, contemporary public space failed to reinvent the morphology and adaptations of the traditional ones. Typology has structuralized this formal development and create a relationship between the historical excavation and the design solution². Instead of simply seeing these rooms as a common genre, typological approach replaces cliché classifications and provide a proper juxtaposition between architectural conception and realisation.

In Braham’s “After Typology”, he highlighted the emergence of non-linear design in postmodernism as a challenge to typological studies³. Previous mechanical operation of the concept of type inclines to a more dynamic one. He sees this as a predicted trend as Argan, the pioneer theorist in the notion of typology also defined it as a methodology that “mediate between complex factors and contain infinite possibilities”⁴. There could be a binary situation in terms of contemporary design methods as dynamic computational methods is taken up against the traditional instrumental methods. In his literature he proposes that typology could be a generative tool with certain complexity when it is critically examined, instead of being taken as a general categorization. It should be started with specificity and expanded with complex variables in play (i.e. context and theories).

As the studio commenced, a few European cities have been visited as contextual studies of the types of public rooms. The immediate distinctive urban context led the research into the establishment of types in relation to various settings such as social, economic, historical, anthropological, and physical setting. The distant context extracted from these European cultural counterparts enabled one to narrow down the primary constituent parts to the making of a public room and would be prone to the synthesis of methods and theories when it comes to the study of the actual site, Antwerp.

Before getting into Antwerp the studio started by studying architectural precedents of the type “public rooms”. By taking on the passages and arcades in Paris as a type, the research began with the conceptualization of this type as an ideal public city room. The making of models at various scales visualize and abstract the space in these historical monuments as assemblage of components categorized under specific typological structure. Alterations operate within the framework of passage ‘type’, in which these similar yet differentiated linear space are compared and contested. Communal circulation space, the type being studied specifically in this thesis, has certain dilemma and friction in its definition. By putting this conflict against the premise of publicity, various models of space could be designed and tested out as the elaborated derivatives from the original type.

Research-methodological reflection

Architecture has been empirical study as many people try to find their root of work back into historical precedents and build their practise on top of a recognition to empirical principles. People like Le Roy used typological methods to find out the root forms of architecture along the non-linear development of history. The emphasis on formal comparisons over chronological orders were crucial breakthrough and made people aware of the historical lineage in architecture discourse⁵. The study of types and typology as a method began in 18th century when people like Quatremere started to systematize the inventory of architectural types. He argued that instead of the rigid development of types that Le Roy proposed, typology is organic and is affiliated with socio-political appropriations. As the progression of types is mimetic in nature, he was also striving to get rid of misconceptions towards typology as a method of mere imitation⁶. After that, Durand took on the idea of methodology as a critique to the limitation of modernism in respond to the temporal social agenda, forming a much more rigid disposition⁷. Under his great influence on the field of education in architecture, Semper further manifest this abstraction in terms of style, in which drives the typological progression towards materialization. As per functionalists' point of view, architecture as an assemblage of distinctive parts reflects certain formal characters. Diagrams, which are mainly utilized in typological methods, abstract and instrumentalize these characters⁸. When the study of origins and archaeology blooms in early 19th century, typology in architecture has been carried forward as a rhetoric tool for historical analysis. It broke out from the preconceptions of genre in architectural imitations. It not only acts as the bridge between conceptualization and materialization, but also helps designs progress from historical origins to further productions of new typologies. The emphasis on style helps foster the negotiation between flexibility in art and the rigidity in typal studies. The notion of typology become articulated and the stylistic expression redefined how it is communicated. It has evolved from an abstract theoretical tool into an inventive tool that can synthesize and produce formal designs.

The study of types helps relate the thesis project back to the city from time to time. The tradition of typology enables one to see the separated parts of the city as an assemblage and establish relationships among them. As the research question is not confined to the specific space but also answer to the wider scope of problems that exist with the morphology of the city. The project seeks to accommodate a group of nomad artists who dwell in different parts of the city yet closely connected with one another through occasional appearances in the city. The artists population become the target group as the community is currently contested by capitalism as well as segregation of audiences. The occurrence of exhibitions, workshops, and symposiums etc serve as their public exposure, as well as to reinforce their in between connections. Typological approach helps visualize this specific type of occurrence and its affiliated spaces like museums and communal centres.

There has been an urge to reinvent new architectural type that negates the omnipresence of capitalism and to prevent architecture being employed solely by commodification. The loss of "city rooms" in contemporary urban context also poses questions to the loss of publicity in our daily lives.⁹ Praxeological approach, in this specific research, clarifies the disappearance of a public self and its rationale behind. People inhabit public space and streets less and less due to diminishing extents of participants' rights to appropriate the space. By using anthropological information, one could deduce the typal development that led to such an individualist society in terms of architectural intervention. The abstraction of actual perceptions and daily experiences is the first traditional aspect of typology that this thesis rely on as to respond to actual user groups and situations.

In addition to that, typological methodology also suffers from homogenization of instruments that confined imagination. There is a polarization of design approach: either pragmatic and confirmative to ongoing capitalist context, or abstracted within the realm of academic research, according to Braham's literature¹⁰. Through employing typology in the research, one also critiques its adaptiveness in channelling the already dogmatized conventions into new types. In the beginning of the studio, drawings and diagrams were also made to illustrate the broad spectrum of public space and blurred

public boundaries. Diagrams thus became a debatable tool in abstracting the complexities in post-modern methods while suffering from the danger of deviating from the focus of the building itself a manifest its own realistic qualities. Diagrams should be deployed as the systematic extension of typology. Pragmatic issues are opted out in this theoretical framework, but not completely neglected in the search for a contemporary design model that could be applied back to realities, as a critique to the flaws of capitalism. Typology persists in the contemporary practise as an instrumental method in terms of its diagrammatic approach that address that subject of design in a precise manner. The thesis tries to develop on its new aspect that it could be evolved according to the ever proliferating and elusive types if diagrams remained its major rhetoric tool.

Positioning

As mentioned, seeing the polarization of theory-making and architectural practise, a heuristic research is necessary in bridging the experimental with the rationalized preconceptions in the industry. Typology is effective rhetoric tool in this discourse because it illustrates differences rather than unifying them. This helps especially in breaking off the consistency that is inherited from mere imitation of types and brings disruption to the urban morphology. The position of this research however upholds certain invariables which is essential to the construct of a specific type of city room. The project believes that architecture should act more than just a carrier of functions but rather a catalyst for urban complexification. Only through the intensification and proliferation of layers, the general public from a growing variety of spectrums could find their way into sorting out their respective position in the city. This methodology hopes to overcome the psychological obstruction that tends to simply rather than multiply.

In search of an ideal typology that constitute to the development of a public room, various theories are considered to evaluate both metaphysical and formal qualities. Scenography is one of the key theories that add to the type of museum and exhibition space that was enduring at the affinities of the site area. The museums in Antwerp, which have undergone several transformations to adapt to the ever-changing scope of exhibiting culture. New spacious volumes are added to the courtyard of building blocks; new extensions are built as subsequent sections when the urban core began to decay; and many more renovate their interiors for new representation methods. The articulation of stage-setting has correlated to the theory of assemblage and the induced definition on place¹¹. The concept of assemblage as a process of correlation was first proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, and further developed by De Landa. "The abstract machine is like the diagram of an assemblage... we should not conclude that the assemblage brings only a certain resistance or inertia to bear against the abstract machine; for even 'constants' are essential to the determination of the virtualities through which the variation passes", Deleuze and Guattari wrote this in their *A Thousand Plateaus*¹², stating that assemblages (in this particular research could be the artists community) is of a same kind of linear variation like types and are both tools of abstraction. This broader theoretical framework echoes with the thesis position by seeing variable urban actions in play as organic process of heterogenization. The study of types dissects these processes through diagrams and take them as spatial configurations which is closely related to sociality. And after that, the making of place (in this case the city room) is then articulated in terms of phenomenology. Anthropological studies that have been carried out provided insights to the actual experience of space and concept of identity. These are the key theories that the project relies on to develop a comprehensive design of city rooms with regards not only to the specific site but answering to the larger scope of discourse (which is the making and articulation of the existing artists community in Antwerp).

In conclusion, the study of types is essential to the making of city rooms as it serves as a morphological transformation from its many public space precedents and is constantly under the influence of other variations like cultural and social compositions. Theoretical frameworks that are

borrowed negotiate the complexities embedded in the plurality of types; and help put contradictions into design action. Considering all the above, the thesis hopes to sort out new type of public space as a response to the proliferation of a specific community in Antwerp, almost invisible yet closely connected.

(2501 words)

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³ Braham, W. (2000). *After Typology: The Suffering of Diagrams*. *Departmental Papers (Architecture)*, 24, pp. 3.

⁴ Braham, W. (2000). *After Typology: The Suffering of Diagrams*. *Departmental Papers (Architecture)*, 24, pp. 2.

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⁶ Oechslin, W. (1986). Premises for the Resumption of the Discussion of Typology. *Assemblage*, No. 1, pp. 45.

⁷ Oechslin, W. (1986). Premises for the Resumption of the Discussion of Typology. *Assemblage*, No. 1, pp. 50.

⁸ Jacoby, S. (2015). Typal and typological reasoning: a diagrammatic practice of architecture. *The Journal of Architecture*, pp. 956.

⁹ Moneo, R. (1978). On Typology. *A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture*, 13.

¹⁰ Braham, W. (2000). *After Typology: The Suffering of Diagrams*. *Departmental Papers (Architecture)*, 24, pp. 3.

¹¹ Muminovic, M. (2015). Places as Assemblages - Paradigm Shift or Fashional Nonsense. *Athens Journal of Architecture*, pp. 299.

¹² DeLanda, M. (2016). *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp 108.