

SUBMERGED - Architecture of Perception

Ethnography in education-based research

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In this paper I will propose different qualitative methods and tools for handling the problems and challenges arising in the relation between parallel courses of theory, personal architectural experiments and the work done by students. The methods discussed relates generally to education-based research planned for this coming semester, but might be relevant to discuss in relation to the full PhD as well. The project positions itself between a theoretical and an active, experimental search for specific architectural features (poetry?), which leaves it in the field between social science and artistic research. Hopefully it will widen and strengthen the rather blurred identity of architectural research balancing between science and art and between observation and suggestion.

Introduction to the PhD project “Architecture of Perception”

This work is a continuation of my experiences as a practicing architect and as a teacher at the Architecture School of Copenhagen. Through research in the studio with students and through my own experiments, I want to investigate possibilities of working, consciously and continuously, directly in a world of perception throughout the architectural process alongside the objective and necessary work of the metric. Defined as education-based research, my project focuses on ways of developing a poetic architecture through methods of conscious use of the senses - throughout the course of a project - working actively as close to the intended *experience* of the architecture as possible.

Some years ago I was doing a competition on a church in the Faroe Islands. Very early in the process I was struck by a sight of a preacher walking alone towards the altar. I had a strong sense of the light, sound and materiality of that particular moment and build a big model as a scenography to capture the scene on photo. The photo was taken and the rest of the process was a questioning to this image: what does the plan, section and facades look like, if the space is experienced as on the photo? A sort of backwards architectural process. This led to a series of exercises I did with my students, in which a similar process was conducted; starting with the architectural experience and perceptive qualities of the project, to which we could direct questions about “the metric and logic” parameters. The life experiences of perception – probably establish with hearing and touch as the first of the senses in the mother’s womb – spoke before the architectural knowledge established in the architect school.

Lots of architecture seems to be dictated by the logic of module, repetition, construction, or copying. Architecture develops as connected points in a spatial geometry and is concluded as orthogonal representations as uninhabited plans, sections and facades and monochrome, small-scale models. The metric space corresponds with human tendency to translate space to two-dimensional images and fulfill the demands for a final, measurable set of drawings, which translates directly to concrete elements and lays out the crane tracks. Projects are prepared in a

continuous process of scale-jumping from outside and inwards starting in the global or regional, through the local, ending up on the actual site. The plan is then developed and detailed accordingly in shifts in scale from the overall layout to a detailed and functional large-scale plan, which is finally wrapped in steel, concrete, brick or plastic according to the trend of the month. Often the awareness of architecture's spatial and perceptive character appears late in this process and then primarily as visualizations - as kinds of final documentation or "proof" - with no mandate to engage in the process. That's why creating architecture in the metric space demands a high degree of abstraction in the translation between the dry geometry and the kaleidoscopic reality of perception and often the gap seems too wide – both for the architect and his audience. Either the work is left eternally suspended in the seductive logic of the drawing and model – or – as inflated and rigid real-size version of a geometrical exercise. Architecture is created "from above and from the outside."

The reality of architecture surrounding us isn't perceived in the metric space though. Architecture is perceived and lived "on the inside" – in the world of perception – with all the senses. In this world abstraction is not an issue – it speaks to us directly through our bodily life-experience – its language is innate – immediately intelligible, subjective and yet surprisingly universal. The preacher in the Faroese church and the exercises done with students over a three year period forms the base for the investigation in this PhD. A consciousness use of the senses led to embodied and sometimes even poetic architectural stories which seemed relevant parallel to the general, often more rational and distant, studies. We could discuss fundamental qualities of spatial experiences like acoustics, materiality and light - subjects which often hasn't been reached when the gong-gong sounds.

As I am still only in the beginning of my PhD, I have a vague idea about the structure and substance of the research. They might change radically along the way. For now I propose to initiate my search through the following themes:

1:1 – context and material in the flesh. Drawing and model making is usually done in scale which contains a natural distance and abstraction, but certain parts of the architectural process can be done in 1:1 – in this world – for us to see and touch. In this chapter I will study the ways of working with architecture in the real - in context. The research seeks to challenge or add to the existing methods of observation and develop new ways of understanding and reacting on context.

SCALING – and the non-linear design process. This chapter will be an investigation of the scale architecture is developed in and its impact on the understanding of space and how deliberate use of scale-jumping can drive forward the architectural process in order to create sensuous and meaningful work.

ARCHITECTURE AS FICTION – moment and motion in architecture. This part of the PhD. will be researching into architecture of the moment and architecture in motion. It is my thesis that architecture captured in time, both in the instance and in the continuum, has a perceptual potential if developed as good storytelling – not unlike the suggestive power of a painting or the dynamic seduction of a film.

TRANSLATIONS - from poetry to science - and back... Ways of interpreting the intangible of the perceptive into the realm of a metric logic without loss. How do we translate ideas as words and images of experienced architecture into measurable architectural drawings? And how are these again brought back into the world of perception - thereby creating a method of constant shifting between the worlds of perception and of the rational?

Each theme should be backed by the general theoretical background and with their own relevant and more specific theory, as a foundation for exercises done by students in workshops of various lengths. Besides the student workshops I count on doing some preliminary architectural experiments myself. The major body of empirical material – the hopefully poetic evidence – will be made in close collaboration with students in workshops of various lengths.

The workshop, spring 2013

Through my work as practicing architect, my tuition experience and a fundamental reading into phenomenology, studying some of the writings of Heidegger, Benjamin and Böhme, I'm now ready to stumble into the world of the empirical, as I have been granted charge of a group of 17 second year students for this coming semester. This will give me fantastic opportunity to bring my research into action as physical experiments. It also leaves me with tremendous challenges to planning and considerations on didactics and methods of interaction and observation – playing the role of the all-mighty conductor of inspiration, assessing, initiating, comforting, evaluating – and observation. The whole project aims to be “submerged”. The architecture developed should be rich and embodied and created with an intention of sensual will. In this spirit I want to move my working place (table) away from the distant and quiet of the research Institute and straight into the crowd of students for the semester. My research and teaching will likewise be submerged directly in the “laboratory”. This will give me the chance to analyze not only the results of the exercises but also to observe the creation and follow the discussions and actions carried out in the everyday life of the studio. During a semester a massive amount of physical material like models and illustrations will be produced as well as observations and reflections on the acts and emotions in the studio in general. What kind of research methods and didactic approaches can catch a complex and entangled process like this?

Research Design

This research will be based in empirical data from students and from own experiments. When sitting among my students researching, I believe it will be necessary to define certain timeslots or spheres in which I do my teaching, my observation, my experimentation and my reflection. I will be floating in a constant stream of empirical data, and I will therefore try to exercise a deliberate balancing of my different roles. It will probably be impossible to separate these though. I observe, when I teach. I am in the studio and available for questions while reflecting. I will ask the students for their opinion on my own architectural experiments etc. I believe that, at least, a clear definition between the spheres will be useful. With this workshop in particular – and maybe for the full PhD – I suggest a loose organization of 4 different practice-spheres within the body of overall research: The spheres of **teaching, observation, reflection and experimentation**.

Methods

2 years ago, French artist Sophie Calle exhibited on Louisiana. The exhibition was an English version of her contribution to the Venice Biennale 2007 and was called Take Care of Yourself. Calle had received an email from her lover, in which he broke with her, and his final sentence became the title of this huge artistic project. Calle asked 107 women to interpret the e-mail through their particular profession, from the lawyer to the ballet dancer. The collected, multi-faceted collage of interpretations worked as a healing process and a way for Calle to understand her situation. The exhibition approximated in, many different ways and all together, the intangible of a broken heart. This work seems to me an inspiring example of a method to approach a notion, which seems both too vast and vague and at the same time too general and too personal. In my case the overwhelming question of relation between perception and architecture could be *my* broken heart, which again leaves me with Calle's method of illumination through very different and particular experiments – or points of view. Through the particular and the personal, it might be possible to say something about the general and relevant to the broad field of architecture.

As with her previous work Take Care of Yourself deals with her own life. She uses herself as a focal point for her storytelling which she establishes through a mixture of photos, text and film. Her method is based on a constant self-involvement and a sort of anthropology. She set up an experiment and watches its consequences. As for this PhD it aims to develop working methods in architectural practice, and is therefore not a case of classic social science either. I do not only watch – I initiate and propose. I am not the subtle ethnographer observing an alien culture. I'm deeply engaged in all aspects of the work: I do initial architectural experiments, I generate a hypothesis, I design the procedure of workshops, I do the tuition, I assess the projects, I collect the empirical material from the workshops, I interpret and analyze the data, I adjust and propose new workshops - and so forth. Metaphorically speaking I'm putting on a sketch to a stage play to which I have written a loose script and established a stage design – a scenography to act in. I will act out my initial ideas for the students and they will then improvise over cue-cards handed by me. I will together with colleagues be the audience and review the performance. The play will be recorded and analyzed. A revised version will be suggested and possibly performed again. As opposed to the free artist Sophie Calle, questions must be answered: What happens in the play? Why? How? Why is it relevant and to whom?

To catch this personal, complex and interwoven course of study, I have looked into research methods along with my theoretical studies of phenomenology. **Ethnography** seems ideal as way of understanding social acts and cultural production, as it nowadays fundamentally accepts and allows for participation of the researcher himself. *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* by James Clifford and George Marcus from 1986 questioned the prevalent claim of objective and absolute knowledge and the ethnographer as the invisible fly on the wall. Accepting the fact that the researcher himself has an impact on the world he observes started a wide range of explorations of the relationship between the writer, audience and subject. Modern ethnography now holds a wide range of interesting methods and tools to capture the observed.

Sarah Pink works with visual and sensory ethnography and uses media like video, photo and personal and common narratives of sensory experiences. In the coming workshop I imagine to define my observation methods in clear and deliberately different ways, inspired by her and others. Here I will be able to find good examples on these tools and the analyzing of the particular data they provide. For now I work with the idea of 4 different trails of data collection: a personal **logbook** for daily entries from the studio life (text, drawing and photos), a **common board** where the students and I chronologically record or challenge the course of the project with images, photos and texts, **interviews** with the students and of course the **physical material** we produce – such as models, drawings, photos, etc.

My particular ideas of submersion and heavy personal engagement along with the wish for iterative and open practice-based solutions leads me towards branches of ethnography, which opens for the possibility of massive self-participation. Qualitative methods as **autoethnography** and **action research** seem interesting.

Autoethnography

For my own initial experiments which will be models, drawings, photos and written pieces, I will need ways of documenting and analyzing them. They will serve as tests and hopefully as inspiration to more elaborate exercises by the students. Here autoethnography gives me the tools for personal accounts and experimenting. Why do I feel that Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris is poetic? How is my architecture and thoughts shaped by the cacophony of noise sitting “submerged” in the studio among the students? What constitutes my different feelings towards a model made from wood as opposed to one of cardboard? I believe that describing – in writing - not only own work, but also the world surrounding us in general, is an essential and powerful tool. This might seem banal but it is not in the world of architecture. Photos are taken, drawings and diagrams are made and verbal accounts are invented at the crit. The secret and powerful possibility of writing as way of analyzing and realizing needs introduction, and I have started a series of short architectural descriptions of different types and styles – serving as tests and hopefully as inspiration. Here autoethnography allows for personal accounts in order to improve the ability to understand and analyze in a more general sense. Charlotte Baarts defines the method:

The researcher relies on his or hers personal life by being attentive to own physical reactions, thoughts and feelings... The researcher uses it to understand specific experiences, which he or she writes down as a narrative. The personal life experience is used to generalize to one or several groups experiences.¹

When the notion of autoethnography was introduced by Hayano in 1979 this research tended towards a more personal approach, acknowledging that in all kinds of qualitative methods, the scientific text is a construction in which the scientists own values, sympathies and interests are biased - to a certain extend. This acknowledgment led to an acceptance and “surrendering with autoethnography:

¹ Baarts, C. (2010) *Kvalitative Metoder – en grundbog*. Hans Reitzels Forlag. København. p.162.

In the practical execution of ethnographical method the development became visible by the ethnographer not only focusing on the experiences of the subjects but also concentrated on own experiences in the field. This self-reflection ideally meant, that the ethnographer used all his or hers senses, feelings and thoughts to learn about the field.²

The degree of “surrendering” defines the many different types of autoethnography existing now. Charlotte Baarts broadly defines three main branches of it according to the name itself. ‘Auto’ means ‘self’ and represents therefore introspection, in which the scientist makes himself the subject of observation, reflection and investigation. ‘Ethno’ means ‘culture’ and mirrors an extrovert research praxis, in which the scientist directs his gaze towards the studied subjects and the context, in which their actions and experiences are generated, and in which the scientist himself is shaped. Finally ‘Graphy’ refers to the scientific process, the qualitative research and the system, with which the personal accounts, experiences and observations is transformed from personal insight to scientific knowledge. Depending on the balance between the auto, the ethno and the graphy, different types of research materialize. In *this* research I count on an autoethnography with a focus on the ‘ethno’; “what happens?” in my own experiments (focusing on my work and not me as a person) and my experiences and thoughts of students in work in the studio and in the field.

Action Research

Setting up, observing and analyzing the work done by the students, I need methods for capturing the architecture and events in the process while deeply engaged myself. Action research seems as a possibility. Kurt Lewin founded the notion of action research in USA after the 2. world war in order to engage and develop solutions to social conflicts related to class and race issues. He felt that the dominating research was unable to grasp the relevant knowledge necessary to change the existing and very urgent tensions in the American society. In his view the existing research was too abstract, distanced and “academic.”³ Action research was an alternative, which placed the researcher in close contact – even within - his field of interest and through active intervention, through continuous experiments, improve a given praxis. This method has been widely used and elaborated since, often in the fields of education and processes with employee- and citizen participation. It differs from the more classical tradition of scientific research, in which an experiment is conducted and observed and the empirical data dragged off to the office to be untangled and analyzed - far from the “laboratory”. As Altrichter puts it:

Traditional social research is split in temporary phases: a phase of contact to practice is followed by a retreat to the research institution, in which experiences are reflected and analyzed. This is its strength, because much effort can be put into this phase of distanced criticism. However, there lies also its weakness, because the test through practice is temporary and discontinuous. Action research does not strictly

² Ibid. p.154

³ Lewin, K. (1948) ‘Action Research and Minority Problems’, in G.W. Lewin (ed.) *Resolving Social Conflicts*, New York: Harper and Brothers.

separate phases of action from phases of reflection. Reflection occurs in part within action: the more distanced mode of reflection on action is not limited to specific phases in research.⁴

This recognition and deliberate interplay between the phases - the merging of action and reflection – seems relevant to my idea of the submerged teaching. Their relation and dependability on each other leaves the research open and iterative. The theory can initiate an action and the action can alter the theory.

Action research is characterized by a continuing effort to closely interlink, relate and confront action and reflection, to reflect upon one's conscious and unconscious doings in order to develop one's actions and to act reflectively in order to develop one's knowledge. Both sides will gain thereby: reflection opens up new options for action and is examined by being realized in action.⁵

As I am still in the beginning of my PhD, I will let experiences from the workshop help me define my over-all themes. The action hopefully will strengthen, confront and provoke my ideas on the relation between architecture and perception; I do not yet know the key question to my project: Am I searching for something (poetry) as a specific (and personal) goal in the PhD? Am I developing an open set of rules or methods for involving perception in the architectural process? Is my agenda to increase spatial and atmospheric awareness and lift them to becoming architectural intention? My observations in the coming semester will hopefully help me define it. This openness, which lies in core of action research, appeals to me. It is far from the sterile work in the laboratory or the detached world of the quiet research office. It is in some ways out of control. It is “in the middle of life – on the inside” and in essence equivalent to my overall questions to architecture and its creation. This openness also indicates that the “answers” – the structure and conclusions in the PhD are left somewhat open. Treating the relation between architecture and perception can be done in so many ways, and this work will (hopefully) eventually end up as one tiny but relevant ripple in the vast sea of the eternal discussion on the matter. Therefore I will aim to establish examples and analyzes which themselves are open to further discussions and inspiration. The work should be open and curious and action research is founded on the idea of an iterative process of continuous development through the cycle of action – observation – interpretation – consequence – action - etc. It is essentially open ended.

We use the somewhat eccentric term “iterativity” to name this characteristic of action research in which results of reflection again and again gain practical form and in which this form again and again can stimulate new reflections and development.⁶

At the same time action research is recognized by the fact that it insists on knowledge production to take place as shared or common experiences between researcher and participants

⁴ Altrichter, H. (2008) *Teachers Investigate their Work*, New York, USA: Routledge: p. 279

⁵ Ibid. p. 14.

⁶ Ibid. p. 280.

– in this case students. This is of course of great importance. The students and I - as a researcher - are part of the same team and their gain should be as big as mine. They will be aware of their role in the experiment and be challenged with the same wonderful and painful obligations of critical self-reflection, evaluation and opening of the black box of architectural methods. And even more important it is that along with the research, their actual studies – their architectural projects and their general education as architects - maintain the suspected high quality.

The validity of Autoethnography and Action Research

Both research methods has been accused of focusing on local or personal problems instead of the general overall perspective. When working with action research, one might be asked how a heavily contextualized knowledge relates to general notions and ideas. Is research performed in a restricted local context relevant and beneficial to a fundamental and common body of knowledge? Or even worse in the case of autoethnography; how can personal accounts on the singular be of any interest or benefit in general? In other words, how do I avoid my project is only of interest to myself? Who will read it? Danger lingers in both methods – but also possibilities. The methods live through personal engagement and this means putting oneself at stake. I have to pull myself together and as the whole project is based on my own experiences from working and teaching architecture, it seems obvious that the ‘I’ should be present. Of course I have the responsibility to deliver research of general interest, but with the chosen methods and the submerging into the studio it also leave me with the responsibility to educate and inspire a group of students, who trust me. With this project I hope to conduct and present research from which experiences from the *inside* and *out of* local and particular experiments - general and relevant perspectives of the architectural creation can be discussed. It is committed to the restricted and particular and to the participating students of course, and at the same time committed to take its place in the world.