The Hybrid Practitioner

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CHAPTER 4

Notes on Interpretation: Analysing Architecture from the Perspective of a Reflective Practitioner

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Definitions

This paper is about the interpretation of architecture in architectural research. It is a disciplinary discussion taking as its departure point that “what architecture is” depends on the position of the interpreter. In other words, several interpretations are possible. The concept of the architect – and what an architect does – reflects the ontological perspective. There is not “one architect” nor “an architecture.” Instead, architecture could be seen as a number of knowledge fields, each with its own roles, responsibilities, and architectural means for an architect to use. To illustrate this point of view, a “methodological thinking tool” will be proposed through which architecture can be analysed and understood from multifarious perspectives. The approach has a performative quality, like walking through the same building several times but in another condition, thereby seeing different realities. It is not about defining an absolute truth or tools to design. It is about opening doors of perception for the purpose of demonstrating the complexity of the architectural discipline mapping out possible work fields and territories of thoughts for architects. The analytical strategy was developed within the framework and research of the dissertation “Architectural Thinking in Practice.” Written from a reflective practitioner’s perspective, the aim was to bridge academia and practice. The interpretation of architecture exposed here is as such informed by experiential knowledge developed in practice.

While there is a strong methodological side to the argument made, the search to define an analytical framework for architects is not only abstract, philosophical, and didactic. It is derived from interactions with people in practice who made it clear that the territory of architects is challenged in today’s world. Through liberalisation, competition from neighbouring disciplines, and a
general lack of understanding of what architects “bring to the table” in the decision field, it is difficult for laypeople to assess the value of architecture and the role of architects in the development of, for example, large-scale complex building projects. Within the discourse on healthcare architecture – which was the subject of the dissertation – it is common to assume that an evidence-based practice is the way forward.² Despite that facts and figures indeed contribute to the narrative of a profession with a strong history of material evidence, this paper aims to put forward qualitative arguments to demonstrate the encompassing nature of architecture.³ For this sake, “the object of architecture” should be scrutinised and discussed professionally – leaving behind the definition of the architect as primarily “the artistic genius” and instead generating plural interpretations and possible role models that practitioners can identify with. This is the potential power of the methodological thinking tool – to surface tacit knowledge in practice and make it accessible to the outside world.

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Fig. 4.1  To the left in front, the interpreter – architect Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen – at the decision table. The other three people are not known. The image is evidence of the importance of spoken words. In fact, Krohn & Hartvig Rasmussen, in their work with the collaborating engineers, developed a lingua franca around the construction system, demonstrating how the two thought and knowledge fields were intertwined. Hvidovre Hospital archive, 1966. Photographer unknown.
The Analytical Foundation

The perception of architecture as a thought field that can be explored is informed by the notion “reflective practice” – meaning thinking about thinking. It is an important aspect of “practice-based professional learning” as well as “experiential learning.” In the dissertation, it meant taking a critical stance towards how architects think but also, and more importantly, looking at how their thoughts are constructed in relation to a number of factors, of which some are internal and tied to the individual thinking, others related to external stimuli, contextual conditions, and the collective. The reflective perspective as such questioned the definition of the design paradigm, leading to three interpretations of the design world, as, a. the production of e.g. physical objects; b. the things architects make being the result of e.g. a relationship, a negotiation, a situation in which architects participate; and c. designing as the materialisation of culture and ideas within history. In terms of architecture analysis, this meant that architecture can be analysed in three ways, as I. a media, II. a decision-making process in which the architect is agent and actor, and III. an interpretation of the role of architects and the meaning of their work in culture and society.

The work of the American philosopher John Dewey, the American theorist and philosopher Donald A. Schön, and the British design researcher Nigel Cross have been important for the way in which architecture is understood as a thought field. Complementary to the work of Donald Schön and Nigel Cross – which is primarily about how architects and designers think in the making – the research represented here is about how architects are informed in their thinking and act accordingly. From an academic point of view, the distinction between the two approaches corresponds to the split in architectural education between teachers who teach design studios and those who teach architecture analysis and research, architecture history and theory. In an ideal world, the artistic and often tacit research done by practitioners would be connected with the more scientific and academic attitude, leading to a communal definition of architectural means, possible roles and positions, and the classification of meaning. This type of work is important for the understanding of architecture, for people in practice as well as in education, where students in, for instance, architectural research long for a knowledge platform that they can use to develop their own thinking.

The Research Strategy and Analytical Procedure

The development of the methodological thinking tool is an example of the potential of merging practice related research with academic analytical and reflective activities leading to – in this situation – a contemplative model for
architectural research. It is derived from the practice perspective of the dissertation research, which provoked questions such as: How to describe what architects do, how they operate, how they think? What is architecture, and how is this made manifest through the architectural means through which an architect works? With whom do architects work? Who are the decision makers in the development of buildings? And what are the roles of the architects? This meant that the “design thinking” of particular architects was analysed, situated, and understood in relation to the way in which they were informed, with whom they worked, as well as what was going on in the surrounding society and culture.

The area of research was the development of hospital architecture within the Capital Region of Denmark over a period of one hundred years. Historical inquiries mapped the situation in which hospitals emerged in relation to a wide range of historical facts and societal changes. The information was sought in overview literature and translated into timelines. Methodologically speaking, the timelines were an analytical tool to record the most important moments in time – not only what happened but also the reason why. While the buildings on the timelines could be read as historical documents, each building also bears witness to the views, ideas, and values of the people within society who made them happen. From a qualitative point of view, the buildings were cultural artefacts. As a result, the case study research then became an archival study of who, how, and why the people involved acted and thought as they did. As public intellectuals and agents for people within society, architects were one group of citizens in the development of these buildings. The research aimed to unravel the role these architects had next to the clients and maybe also the users. As a consequence, material about the development of specifically Kommunehospitalet by Christian Hansen (1863), Bispebjerg Hospital by Martin Nyrup (1913), and Hvidovre Hospital by Krohn & Hartvig Rasmussen (1976) was collected and studied to trace how the architects related to the historical context and societal situation in which they worked. Next to this, an architectural analysis was made to see how they had translated their thoughts into actions and how their deeds materialised in buildings, drawings, images, models, and texts.

When ordering, analysing, and comparing the data, certain notions started to appear, and specific ideas became central to the perception and reading of the material. This made it possible to structure the source material thematically into conceptual categories, which could be written about and grouped visually. Inevitably, this was a repeated process in which tests were made to see whether it was reasonable to proceed this way. The analytical process and coding procedure was paralleled by an independent, academic, methodological literature research in classification. The interaction with students in architectural analysis played an important part in this work. The classroom was, so to speak, an analytical laboratory. In the classroom, models of interpretations
were discussed, and new analytical categories came to the fore, while others already established were adjusted, changed, or confirmed. The “methodological thinking tool” at some point surfaced as a stratified model for thought: a way of structuring information and research, which makes it possible to discuss the discipline of architecture as the combination of five different knowledge and thought fields. Together, they portray how architects can operate within several thought and knowledge fields simultaneously.

The Methodological Thinking Tool

The five knowledge fields in the methodological thinking tool were derived from the previously mentioned conceptual categories that could be used to order and analyse the case study data: 1. Public Building, Representation, Imagery; 2. Building Culture, Materialisation, Constructional Spaces; 3. Use, Organisation, Distribution of Activities; 4. Social Relations, Hierarchy, Power, and Bonds; 5. Experience, Imagination, and Memory. Each of the categories represents a specific research paradigm and analytical perspective: an epistemological and philosophical discussion about ways of seeing and being in the world. Per paradigm, an “interpretive lens” was defined, as were analytical parameters and the outline for a classification system. Concordantly, the in-depth analysis of the work of Krohn & Hartvig Rasmussen on Hvidovre Hospital confirmed how architecture is a complex field of interrelated thought and knowledge fields. It showed how large-scale complex building projects have, since the end of the 1960s, been organised and performed by a team of architects, each with their core qualities and roles in the decision-making process – not one “master builder.” It was (and is) nevertheless still primarily the image of “the design architect” that is represented in the literature on architecture – as confirmed in the press, magazines, films, literature – not the other possible architects. This gives a distorted reflection of the discipline.

In an academic setting, in classes on architectural analysis and research, the interpretive lenses do not only operate as a pedagogical device with which students can position themselves ontologically while researching and designing. It trains them to become critically aware of their own discipline, terminology, and means. In an international student population, the interpretive lenses can also act as a tool to bring to the surface different perceptions of reality, space, place, behaviour, and sense-making, of which some are more known in one part of the world than others. An example is the discussion on “the social aspect of architecture” (lens 3) or “the experiential aspect of architecture” (lens 5). Conversations with students and their analytical work demonstrate how doors, windows, passages, and thresholds are not interpreted the same way depending on the cultural background and lay perspective of the person perceiving. They are architectural means that can be used to articulate and
address specific aspects in the material culture. This is an indication of how necessary it is to include qualitative and cultural parameters in architectural analyses and research.

Finally, the analysis of the role of architects in the decision field uncovered patterns of behaviour and roles in practice not visible to an outsider. When architects talk and write about their work, they most often concentrate on “the object of architecture”: the product. This means that their role in the development of the project – and in society – is left out. As a consequence, what constitutes the everyday life of practising architects is invisible. And so evaluation, negotiation, critique, discussion, and debate usually are not presented as part of an architects work, and neither is research, analysis, nor experimentation. Pragmatic planning procedures, calculation, reading laws and regulations, administration, and steering the production process are most often also not included. The result is that the experiential knowledge developed in practice – about being a practitioner – is not being recorded and voiced. This is a missed opportunity to show people outside the architectural field what it means to be a practising architect. To make this change, the design paradigm needs to addressed in the architectural discourse.

The Interpretive Lenses – Lens 5

Seen from a methodological perspective, lens 5 – “the experiential aspect of architecture” – questions the translation between qualitative data and its conceptualisation in the methodological thinking tool. Is there any such thing as objectivity? Where and how does subjectivity enter the scene? And how do these abstract analytical ideas relate to the practice of architects? Within the classification system of the methodological thinking tool, reality – in the world view of lens 5 – is seen as a projection of imagination, memory, and experience: a place where humans are intuitive, emotional, and sensing beings. The hypothesis is that architects refer to this paradigm when they express the impression or effect they think their architecture will have on people or the poetic quality of their work. An analysis from the perspective of the experiential frames how these thoughts are articulated through different architectural media such as spoken and written word, drawings and photographs, models and buildings. Next to this, the analysis looks at how different architectural expressions merge with sociocultural beliefs as well as with interpretations of the architects.

A common interpretation of experience in architecture is to see it as the sensorial and perceptual space of, for example, sounds, smells, contrasts between light and dark, colours, rhythm, proportion, and tactility. Even more so, experience in architecture is often interpreted as something fantastic – the sublime, the beautiful, the poetic. While this view is present in the articulation of
lens 5, the analytical approach in the dissertation was fundamentally different, as it included considerations about the synergy between “spatial characters and effects” and the “conditions” of the people experiencing the spaces. In other words, it dissected how architecture can possibly support the existential processes of people like patients, medical staff, and hospital visitors. An analysis of the experiential aspect of architecture therefore necessarily contains a study of whether the architect(s) incorporated thoughts about being – in an existential sense – in, for example, the design of a building. The study thereby relates to the knowledge field of anthropology, environmental psychology, and the field of philosophy. It also relates to the world of art, theatre, literature, and film, in which human conditions and the sense of life often are used, described, and explored as part of the work field.

The 1963 competition proposal by Krohn & Hartvig Rasmussen for Hvidovre Hospital – represented by the two drawings included (fig. 4.2) – will be used for a short demonstration of the enactment of lens 5. The proposal author is one of the partners, Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen, who was known for his artistic qualities, his sensitive spirit, and kind nature. In the analysis – while investigating the experiential aspect of the projects means and accompanying decision process – it concordantly comes to the fore how Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen was the most explicit in addressing the life condition of ill patients. As he did not write much, his drawings are an important source for analysis. They bear witness that his thoughts were primarily tacit – expressed in his humanistically informed perspectives – but most importantly in the content and spatial character of the competition project. To give an example, the competition proposal includes a large roof garden outside – in addition to winter gardens and patio gardens inside. This was not an obvious solution in 1963, and the competition brief did not mention any green recreational areas. The garden is an example of Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen’s idea of agency: that sick people should have access to nature. In the competition proposal, he, in a few words, therefore also expresses how being in gardens is essential for patients. He refers to an experiential aspect of gardens demonstrating an awareness for the tranquillising effect of nature. This view was not based on scientific evidence but on a personal preference and cultural belief. The gardens were a means of association and memory. It was about reminding people of where they came from – their natural surroundings in the suburb of Hvidovre – much like a door, but then in the imagination. In that sense, the gardens were a place for mindful physical presence, where one could transcend reality, as the bed in the patient room could be a place for daydreaming.
Fig. 4.2 Two drawings from the Hvidovre Hospital competition proposal in 1963, by architect Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen. The urban plan depicts an abstract composition of building blocks. It seems to communicate that the white strings of patient wards – together with the large block of service facilities – will stand out, whereas the large rectangular treatment facility below the wards, coloured in grey, will blend in with the ground. The perspective adds to this impression by suggesting that the roof of the treatment facility is a patient garden. The drawing visualise how the garden will be a place of rest, plants, flowers, and maybe of pleasure being outside despite being bedridden or walking with crutches. Seen from a cultural perspective, the drawings are cultural artefacts and agents of their own. The handmade strokes of pencil on paper might even emphasise that this is a place of poetry. *Arkitekten*, no. 18 (1963): 336–337. Drawing: Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen.
The Connection Interpreter: Interpretation

The open-ended procedure and the practice of coding is characteristic to qualitative research and shares similarities with the approach of “grounded theory” – a way of thinking about and conceptualising data – developed by the two sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. While one of the main purposes of the Grounded Theory methodology was to challenge the hypothetico-deductive approach within sociology demanding precise theories and/or hypotheses before data collection can take place, neither Glaser nor Strauss believed in what is called “naive empiricism”. On the contrary, seeing itself is a theory-laden undertaking. An “open mind” should therefore not be confused with an “empty head.” Glaser and Strauss name the ability to see data “theoretical sensitivity.” It shows how methodological reflection is related to a deeper philosophical discussion about interpretation. Qualitative research is not only about gaining knowledge – in a rational sense – it is about being-in-the-world. This indicates that practising (concrete examples of real-world phenomena) informs theoreticalisation (abstract models of real-world phenomena) and vice versa. In relation to the case analysis presented above, it also cannot be excluded that an interpretive interference occurred. Seen from a historiographical perspective, it might even be argued that one cannot talk about “experience in architecture” in a project from 1963, as this type of awareness was not explicitly part of the architectural discourse before the late 1960s or early 1970s. While this critique is relevant, lens 5 provides an example of an architect who had an intuitive and cultural understanding of the role and responsibility architects have in designing for people. This exemplifies how architects in practice can introduce and reintroduce ideas in society as actors for a greater good, while at the same time being agents for deeper culturally derived values and myths.

Seen from the point of view of the interpreter–interpretation interrelation-ship, it is nevertheless obvious that the interpretive lenses are not neutral concepts. Their “coming into the world” is informed by a “theoretical sensitivity,” which was developed over many years. What is more, the idea that different knowledge fields exist is derived from an epistemological position that several worlds coexist depending on the interpretation. Fundamental to this type of “interpretive research” is that it is neither possible nor desirable to establish a value-free objectivity. It is about solidifying arguments for the qualitative aspect of architecture. The classification system of the five interpretive lenses can be used to think systematically about data and to relate data in complex ways. As the definition of the lenses are intertwined with the coding procedure, it works in a similar manner as Strauss “paradigm model.” The lenses refer to a specific research position and also theory about the world, thereby constituting the link between theory and method. Whether the “paradigmatic model” of the five interpretive lenses is the result of an inductive or deductive process is difficult to say. Another possibility is to see them as the result of the “hybrid
position” of a reflective practitioner combining practice, research, writing, and teaching. On a deeper experiential level, they are related to a philosophically driven curiosity to question, explore, and understand what it means to be a human and subsequently an architect, the modus operandi.

A Critical Reflection of the Outcome

Essentially, this paper stresses the importance for researchers in architecture to involve themselves with methodological research. Contrary to disciplines such as sociology or the natural sciences, there is no exact characterisation in the discipline of architecture on research methodology. While there is inspiration to be found in the neighbouring disciplines such as history or anthropology, which seem to have no problem addressing the issue of architecture as well as architectural practice in their research, it is less obvious, whether – or how – their methodological procedures and theoretical insights correspond with the architectural knowledge field and the discipline of practice itself. For this reason, this paper make a plea that practitioners entering the academic arena reflect upon practice itself, thereby constructing a bridge between the world of academia and the world of practice, between research (thinking) in and about architecture.

Seen from a practice perspective, it is evident that practitioners bring with them their own knowledge into the world of academia when doing research. In this light, the methodological thinking tool and the definition of interpretive lenses could be seen as the creative output of a “designer” doing research. As Nigel Cross stressed in his work, designing is a process of pattern synthesis, rather than pattern recognition. What is more, the experiential knowledge from being a practitioner is unconsciously or consciously translated into the research mindset and method in academia. To give an example, the idea of space as an enactment in time is informed by the work done as a designer in the field of site-specific performance art and multimedia. Having to design in the context of people and places furthermore introduces architecture as a complex field of diverse values, views, and interests – the sociocultural aspect of designing – where architectural knowledge interacts with the knowledge of other discipline. Thus, the interpretation of the design paradigm is informed by experiential learning in the field.

While the analytical framework of “the methodological thinking tool” and “the interpretive lenses” has reached some solidity, it is still experimental in character and not complete. It has been – and still is – an ongoing learning process open for future explorations and developments. The purpose is not to provide a rigid solution to design and thereby scare off intuitive practitioners. The methodological thinking tool is an analytical device, but it is also a mirror and an invitation for practitioners and academics to revise how they think,
act, and formulate their thoughts on practice: unlocking new paths for interpretation. The intention is to offer a critical and reflective frame of thought, systems of interpretations, and examples of different attitudes and types in the discipline. It can help make the complexity of the discipline known. Finally, it could be seen as the starting point for a discussion of the relationship between practice and academia, between practice and education, or all three of them.

Fig. 4.3  The photograph illustrates how the project for Hvidovre Hospital was conceived collectively by many voices. The building almost disappears in the natural surroundings of leaves, trees, and ground cover. It is an example of the interplay between architecture and garden, just as Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen envisioned. The architectural proposition of Hvidovre Hospital was creatively and productively reinterpreted by other actors in the decision field – here, the Danish landscape architects Morten Klint and Knud Lund-Sørensen. Source: Landskab, no. 6 (1984): 126. Photograph: Henrik Fog-Møller.
Notes

3. This view is informed by research done before the dissertation. Published in Birgitte Louise Hansen, "Is meten weten?, Notities over Evidence Based Design vanuit onderwerp-pectief," in AUI! Bouwen aan de architectuur van de zorg, ed. Peter Michel Schaap et al. (Rotterdam: College bouw zorginstellingen, Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur, and Atelier Rijksbouwmester, 2007); and Birgitte Louise Hansen, ed., Beyond Clinical Buildings (Delft: Het Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur and TU Delft, 2008).
4. For example, the work of the American theorist and philosopher Donald Schön.
5. Learning through experience is an old philosophical concept. In education, the American education theorist D. A. Kolb used it to define his "experiential learning model" in which the main elements are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.
9. This view is based upon participant observation at different schools and universities since 1995.
10. This view is informed by my role as a teacher in architecture analysis and research since 2000.
11. The practice of coding will be discussed later. Initially it was informed by culture anthropological methods described in Kirsten Hastrup et al. Kulturanalyse: Kort fortalt (Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, 2011).
12. It goes beyond this paper to discuss the literature study. The work of the Danish art historian Lise Bek was of particular importance methodologically: "Arkitektur som rum og ramme – en analysemodel," Rumanalyser (Aarhus: Fond til udgivelse af Arkitekturtidsskrift B, 1997).
13. The epistemological discussion relates to "Chapter 3: Systems of Inquiry and Standards of Research Quality" in Architectural Research Methods, ed. Linda Groat and David Wang (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 21–43. It also relates to the course Research Methods and Design Practices initiated by Tom Avermaete at the TU Delft, 2013 in which a number of "epistemes" were discussed based upon the book The Order of Things by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (London and New York: Routledge, 2005; published in French, 1966).
15. There are exceptions to this. One example is Reinier de Graaf, Four Walls and a Roof: The Complex Nature of a Simple Profession (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
17. Think of Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Om at opleve Arkitektur (Copenhagen: Gads, 1959).
18. Think of the phenomenological writings by e.g. Juhani Pallasmaa, in Oase # 58. (Rotterdam: naio10, 2002); Klaske Havik Oase #91 (Rotterdam: naio10, 2013); or Peter Zumtor’s book Atmospheres (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2006).
19. This particular focus relates to Kim Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Lars Heslet, “Rummets og Kunstens Metafysik,” in Sansernes Hospital (Copenhagen: Arkitektens Forlag, 2007), 260–261. It also relates to research in i.e. “The role of gardens and parks in rehabilitation” (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden, 2005–2006), as well as it resonates with my own experiential learning as a human and courses in psychotherapy.
20. This was the subject of the conference (and publication) Beyond Clinical Buildings (TU Delft, 2007).
23. Eigil Hartvig Rasmussen grew up in a nursery and was very fond of gardens. In an interview with his daughters, they explained how he, in dark moments of his own life, would sit outside. In the study of the jury report, the hospital gardens were mentioned as typically Danish.
24. The memory referred to here is not only individual and subjective but also collective embedded in Danish culture. The historical study, for example, showed how hospital gardens have a history in Denmark.
27. Think here of Martin Heidegger’s “‘Hermeneutic Circle’” describing interpretation as a circular process.
28. For example, the books by the Danish couple psychologist Ingrid Gehl and architect Jan Gehl, respectively: *Bo-Miljø* (SBI-rapport. Copenhagen: Statens Byggeforskningsinstitut, 1969) and *Livet mellem Husene* (Copenhagen: Arkitekten Forlag, 1971).
29. The experiential – as well as the symbolic – cultural historical meaning of gardens in Denmark is discussed in Hansen, “Architectural Thinking in Practice.”
34. Think here of e.g. engineers, technicians, construction workers, furniture makers, gardeners, etc.

**Bibliography**

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