

Researching in architecture practices: methodological fragments

Design (artef)acts that fuel the research

This paper addresses an embedded approach of methodological elements regarding existing researches in active (professional) practices. Four research works involving the author are used in this survey. The author obtained a PhD in his own practice (Fallon, Harold, “Metarbitrariness? AgwA – an architecture of practice”, 2012, RMIT). He is currently supervising one doctorate nearing completion (working title “Yard & World: To Draw a Distinction: an architectural inquiry into the liminal”, Ooms, Tomas, KU Leuven, started in 2015), in which the architectural practice is pivotal. Finally, he currently supervises two PhDs proposed at proposals in young promising practices (“Schenk Hattory, a practice of perception and imagination”, Schenk, Steven, KU Leuven (submitted in 2019) and “Sugiberry: In the beginning, Oyakodon”, Berry, Johannes, KU Leuven (submitted in 2019)). At some points, it will be referred to some other theses and researches, as counterpoints.

Each research follows a different, specific methodology, the details of which are explicated in the the development of the PhD. On the one hand, we can study how these individual researches form together a possible, stable, meta-level framework.

It is worth mentioning here that “Metarbitrariness?” followed the methodology developed at the RMIT (Australia), which proposes a circling conical sequence of designing activity and reflection. Each circle informs the future practice and allows to fill in gaps in the former reflections. The PhD ends in the “PhD” moment, corresponding the possibility the grasp the practice and the reflections in a coherent whole, which is embodied as a core sample of the different layers of the process.

Pragmatically, next to research project specific activities, the functional methodology consists of bi-annual public presentations to panels of invited academics and practitioners. In regard of the methodology, it is useful to refer to the description of the model published in the Sint Lucas ‘Reflections’ⁱ. This ensures constant progress in the research and embeds peer reviewing. The two PhD proposals considered in this paper follow this functional methodology, next to the milestones imposed in the KU Leuven doctoral program.

On the other hand, we could have a closer look on research actions that fueled the research. Not the design processes, or the design outcomes, or the reflections about them, but rather, the design acts that are the engines of the reflexive moments between the activities of the design practice itself. These local strategies are designed artefacts, they are unique and related to the projects, to the practices, and to the research to which they belong. This papers aims at identifying similarities and differences, establishing a starting *taxinomia*ⁱⁱ.

Before doing this, it is useful to reflect upon the fields of interests that are addressed in these researches. You could call them *the subjects* of the research.

The coherence of a practice

First, quite obviously, there is the field of interest circling around the practice itself. The objective here is to explore and to contextualize a practice – and hopefully to make the practice itself better, self-conscious and communicable. In some cases this practice can be multiple. The aim is to give a rigorous and subjective account (point of view of the designer) of the coherence of a practice, its history, internal processes and perspectives.

In the case of “Metarbitrariness?”, the research spans the first nine years of AgwA’s practice, based in Brussels. The first page of the doctorate states : “This doctoral work by design practice is developed about and through the design work of AgwA. It aims to name, understand, contextualize

and develop further the context, the ambitions, the reality and the perspectives of the practice.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the case of “Yard & World”, the research addresses a manifold of four practices, being the architecture practice of the author (now named Yard & World and partially embedded in the office Conix-RDBM architects), the teaching practice at KU Leuven faculty of architecture, the research practice in the framework of his PhD, and finally his composing and piano practice^{iv}. In the case of “Schenk Hattori” and “Sugiberry”, the title of the research proposal explicitly bears the name of the explored practice.

In the exploration of these practices, one can imagine different approaches. A first possibility would be to observe the inner workings of projects such as design processes. Another way is to observe filiations, causalities, differentiations and other relationships between past, current and future projects. Then, relationships with external elements such as literature, other practices or references can be examined. Last, some issues can be explored or questioned through specific setups and designs which are not directly part of the examined practice (research related artefacts).

The operationality of inspirational forces

Second, there are the themes addressed by the research, that appear to play a crucial role in the theoretical development of the practice. In research in design practice, it is maybe a little bit unfit to consider that the research address these themes as research questions or as the subject of the research, in the commonly accepted sense implying objectivity and exhaustivity. Indeed, in most cases, the research does not aims at researching these themes for what they are, but rather, on the one hand, to explore how these themes play a central role in the development of the design practice (from a subjective point of view of operationality), and on the other hand, what the design practice can teach us about these themes (even fragmentarily). In this way, it may be fitter to speak about *inspirational forces* instead of themes. These fields of interest are not closed from the start: other themes can appear during the research, similar to new projects that will appear in the practices during the PhD process.

In the case of “Metarbitrariness”, after a short quote of poet Francis Ponge, the footnote states : “Francis Ponge is a french prose-poet I used to read a lot during the period 2000-2010. The influence of his writings on my practice agenda is undeniable, he’s a muse.”^v. The research evokes a search of designerly coherence in a realm of contingency and arbitrariness, and in doing so, the inspiration value of Francis Ponge is explored. In return, the research about the practice provoked considerations on Ponge’s work : “His (text entitled the) «Soap» becomes a programmatic text on literature, what literature is, and should be. While making poetry, and only poetry, he is also engaging with literature and philosophy. He is a philosopher who hides his nature. I am very interested in this idea of multiple agendas. I think what I’m looking for is something of this nature”^{vi}. In the case of “Yard & World”, the inspirational force “Yard & World” departs from a novel by De Wispelaere^{vii} and by the his collaboration with RDBM architects to elderly housing projects, for which the relationships between the private, the collective and the public is central. This then becomes an sounding board for the exploration of his four practices. Johannes Berry evokes these inspirational forces through a set of concepts : Presence, Transculturation, Building in Time, Universalism, Primitiveness. Steven Schenk will address the themes of Imagination and Perception.

Relating Inspirational forces to practice

The practice-related findings (the projects, their references, the genealogy of a practice, etc.) interact with the research on the inspirational forces (the themes and subjects that are developed). The researched themes sheds light on the practice. Inversely, the practice leads to new understandings on the themes. The complex nature of these interactions needs to be researched. This is often

related to the research-specific methodology. The design and explication of the methodology become a subject. I have experienced that often, for architects, the moment in which the developed methodology embodies the design attitude and the inspirational forces, the doctorate is judged to be achieved and one can proceed to the final presentation.

For instance, in *Metarbitrariness*, the “chart” is the core of the output of the research. “In the plan of the Philippeville project, it is not the actual plan, but the generative rules that gives birth to the plan. In the “chart” of the practice, it is not the tracks that are explicitly described, but the structure that makes them visible.”^{viii}. The research output behaves just like a project from the practice. In the case of “Yard & World”, the probable output will be a musical and theatrical performance responding the music practice, while taxonomic landscapes (tables of arranged documents) create a spatial blur which echoes the explored practice and themes.

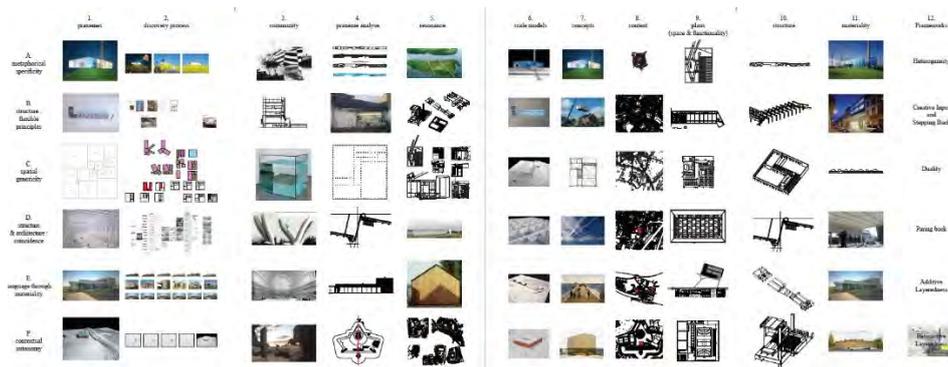


Figure 1 "Metarbitrariness?", chart, p 111 112

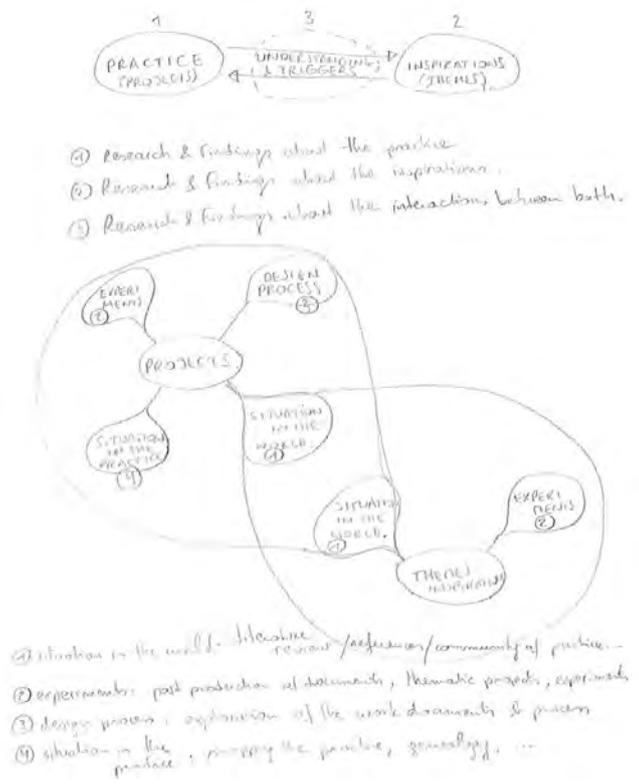


Figure 2 – drawing made during a meeting with Steven Schenk and Johannes Berry (Harold Fallon)

Methodological fragments

The considered theses develop the research about these three fields through a series of actions, following what you could call local or micro methodologies, in the sense that they do not really define the global methodology, but can be considered as tools that allow the research to progress. I do not intend here to propose an exhaustive list, but rather to pinpoint a few of them.

Experimental artefacts

These are small design artefacts^{ix} exploring topics which are directly related to the practice and to the inspirational forces, or not, expanding the field of interest. These artifacts are elements of embodied knowledge. The kind of artefacts that interests us here is probably not the ones that intend to embody a knowledge produced prior to its creation, like the chart mentioned above, or artefacts communicating the result of a research, but rather the experimental artefacts, which embody a knowledge *to be discovered*. They depart from a certain intuition, or urge to make them. In this way, they become somehow similar to projects from the practice, which are not made in order to embody any theory, but in order to respond a client's needs on a specific location. The underlying theory, embodied in the project, is to be discovered.

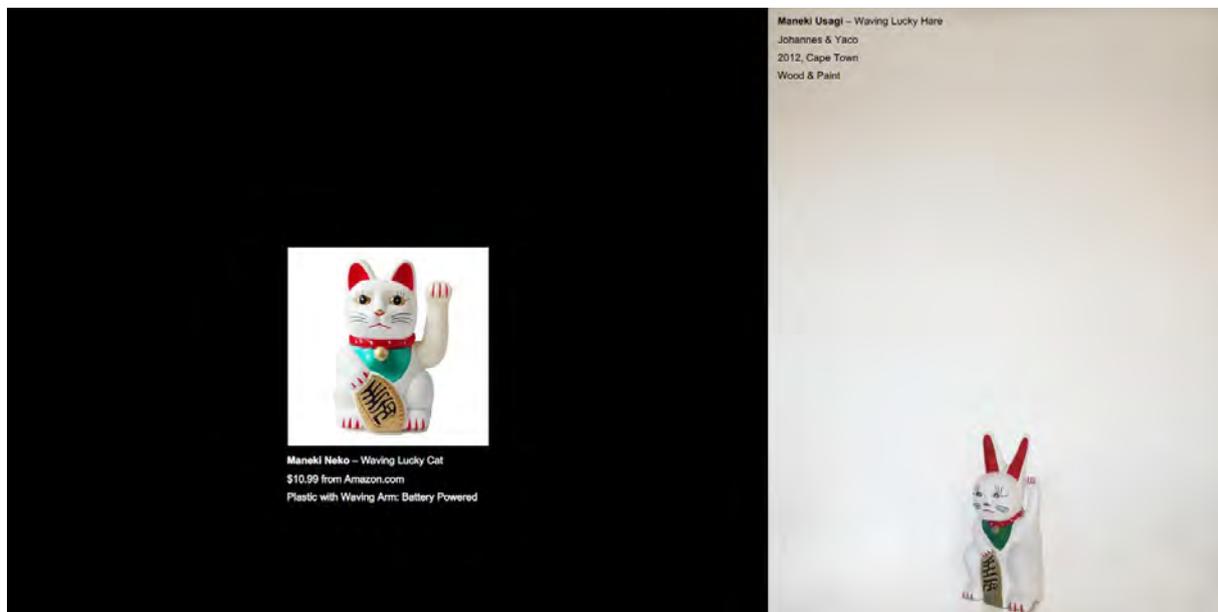


Figure 3 Johannes Berry and Yaco, *Maneki Neko versus Maneki Usagi*, presented during the *In Practice* seminar held in May 2019 at KU Leuven faculty of architecture

Johannes Berry presented small sculptures made on his request by a South African sculptor, giving him as reference a small plastic waving cat. This experiment has been executed several times, following a similar pattern (for example, with a small dutch ceramic windmill). These small artefacts allow to develop a reflection about how meaning traverses cultures – or not. What would happen if the small South African Waving Hare would be sent to an American illustrator, then to an Indian sculptor? They allow to reflect about the essentiality of material features, about universality of representation. They do not provide a definitive insight but trigger the reflection. Then, they can also be related to elements of practice, like the wooden formwork of a concrete shell becoming a wooden structure of the same house^x : displacement, re-interpretation, interpretation.



corrosive innocence

[click to recombine](#)

SENSE PRODUCER ([help](#))

[to AgwA](#)

Figure 4 Harold Fallon, *Sense Producer 1*, 2007

The Sense Producer realized by Harold Fallon is a simple webpage, consisting of random selections of documents from three databases, and is coded as a dynamic webpage. Every ten seconds, the screen is refreshed and a new combination of an image with a random combination of one adjective (modality) and a noun (an attitude, a type, a way of working). The illustration is a steel roller coaster, combined with the adjective “corrosive” and the noun “innocence”. The words and the images are predefined. For example, next to “innocence”, the words “paradox”, “one liner”, “name dropping”, “distortion”, etc. reflect a range of possibilities or a broad field of interest (or of interrogation). However, the structure of the page is fixed. Reflections arise about the unexpectedness made possible by this kind of enhancing spatial or syntactic structures, just as AgwA’s projects tend to question in their planologic approach.

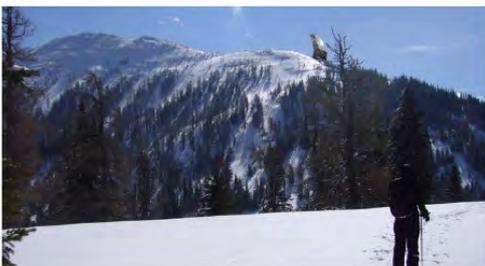


Figure 5 AgwA, *Touring Lanaken*, 2008

“A small model of a tower is playfully but seamlessly photoshopped in a wide range of very different contexts. Is architecture still a local issue? Is everything possible everywhere? What is our role as architects? Are we, architects, doomed to irrelevance and relativity?”^{xi} This artefact is a sequence of constructed images, realized collectively by the architects at AgwA, using one single scale model. The result is a thematic trigger to “Metarbitrariness”.

Layouting

Sometimes, the very layout embodies knowledge, by arranging pre-existing documents in articles or presentations. Sometimes, specific layout enable reflections that are substantially relevant to the research (to its content). The layout could in some way be considered as an artefact in the way described above, but it is useful to differentiate them, focusing on the arrangement of the (pre-existing) documents.



Figure 6 Steven Schenk, three consecutive slides presented during the In Practice seminar held in May 2019 at KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture

In his presentation, Steven Schenk splitted the screen in two halves. In some sequences, one image stays on two slides, while the other is changing. It looks like the comment he is making on an image is also relating to the former, or to the next image. The images become mutual comments too. The pyramid in the sun relates to the rabbit-shaped cloud, a comment on the two identical (?) houses, leading us to Alberti. The images are flowing, just as the discourse is. This continuous flow, the search for “recognizability”, or for “interpretativability” in a flow of appearances, is not so far away to the main themes of his research proposal (imagination and perception).



Figure 7 Ooms Tomas, taxonomic landscapes used during the "In Practice" seminar, KU Leuven faculty of Architecture, Noord, May 2019

The Taxonomic Landscapes of Tomas Ooms^{xii} are tables on which a diversity of documents are placed in an obviously intentional, yet mysterious way. The table becomes the common ground that allows the items to coexist, in the sense of Borges' "operation table" to which Foucault is referring^{xiii}. The tables are organized in a room. The space between the documents respond to the space between the tables. Both respond to the theme of the transition of from yard to world, and also the mutual embedment of yards in the world and of yards which contain worlds.

Process

Finally, I would like to refer briefly to three artefacts researching the design process. These are different from the former because they explicitly aim at understanding some aspects of the practice. However, they fit also in this paper because they are local research artefacts framing in a research, following different mechanisms which are not related to the global methodology.

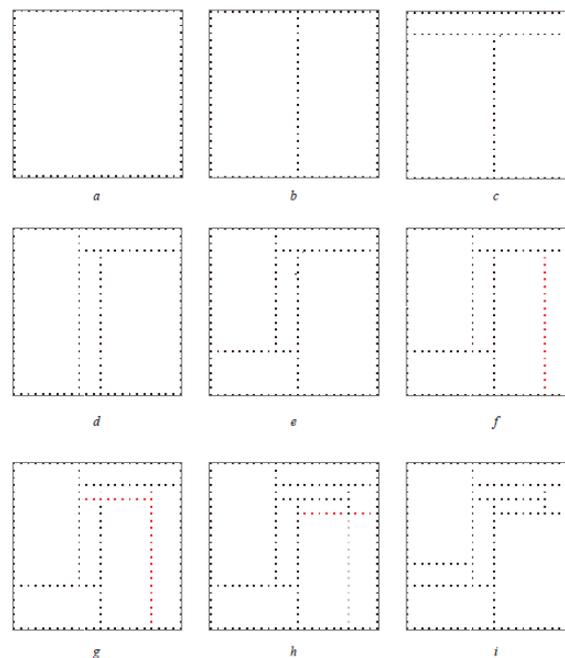


Figure 8 Harold Fallon, Philippeville (AgwA), decomposition of the compositional rule (postproduction)

The first one is a post-operational document realized to observe a design proposal or a process. The plan of Philippeville is decomposed in a sequence which shows a compositional rule generating the process. According to Benoît Vandenbulcke, this kind of post-operational artefacts make exclusive use of the tools of the designer, and as such, allow an embedded understanding^{xiv}.

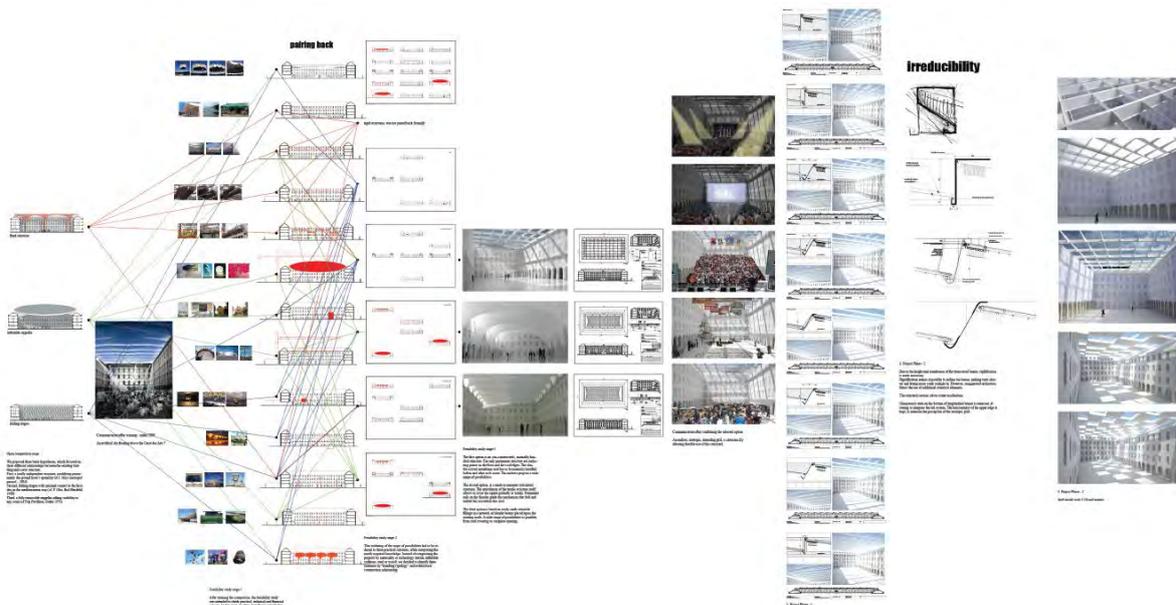


Figure 9 Harold Fallon, observation of the design process of the Carré des Arts (Agwa), GRC nov 2010, Ghent

In “Metarbitrariness”, Harold Fallon decomposes the design process of the Carré des Arts^{xv} by displaying a series of work documents in a way that reflects the ongoing choices and hesitations. This exhaustive display of sketches and presentation documents on a single display allowed to understand the mechanism of opening up hypothetical possibilities and closing again to workable options in iterative refinements.



Figure 10 Figure 2 “Philippe Vander Maren & Richard Venlet – In Practice”, Book Cover, picture by Mer Paperkunsthalte

The last one is still different. The book “Philippe Vande Maren & Richard Venlet – In Practice” addresses the entire design process from the point of view of the architects, making use of external points of view as sounding boards (a writer, a photographer, a graphic designer...). The account of the design process can easily frame in a research about the practice.

The list of these methodological fragments could be extended. The border between the items of the list is sometimes unclear. Maybe this is not really a difficulty. The value of identifying them is to consider them as underlying mechanisms rather than strict objects or procedures. They show that this kind of artefacts can fruitfully be realized following a diversity of paths. They show also that these experiments are carefully designed by the authors (of the practice and of the research), and thus can become part of both of them.

ⁱ Van Schaik, Leon, ‘Design Practice Research: the Method’. in Reflections + 6, Hogeschool Voor Wetenschap & Kunst, Sint-Lucas (internal document), cited in Fallon, Harold, “Metarbitrariness?”, 2012, doctoral these, RMIT, p 8

ⁱⁱ Foucault, Michel, « Les Mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines», 1966, Gallimard, p263

ⁱⁱⁱ Fallon, Harold, “Metarbitrariness?”, 2012, doctoral these, RMIT, p 8

^{iv} Ooms, Tomas, « Arrows of Operationality : (un)foldng the manifold work(s): taxonomic landscapes (TL) of artefacts, in the proceedings of the CA2RE Berlin 2018 conference for Artistic and Architectural (Doctoral) research,p. 74-75

^v Fallon, Harold, « metarbitrariness ? », 2012, doctoral these, RMIT, p 42

^{vi} Fallon, Harold, « metarbitrariness ? », 2012, doctoral these, RMIT, p 70

^{vii} De Wispelaere, Paul, « tussen tuin en wereld », 1979, Elsevier

^{viii} Fallon, Harold, « metarbitrariness ? », 2012, doctoral these, RMIT, p 118

^{ix} Artefact, as something that is intentionally made and requires skills (lat. ars - facere). It would be quite interesting to consider the nature of the contributions to the “artefact” category of the Ca2re Ghent 2019 conference in regard of the present considerations.

^x Sugiberry, Pine Stone Pavilion, 2019, South Africa

^{xi} Fallon, Harold, “crooked discursive paths”, 2011, Archtheo conference, Istanbul

^{xii} Ooms, Tomas, « Arrows of Operationality : (un)foldng the manifold work(s): taxonomic landscapes (TL) of artefacts, in the proceedings of the CA2RE Berlin 2018 conference for Artistic and Architectural (Doctoral) research,p. 74-75

^{xiii} Foucault, Michel, « Les Mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines», 1966, Gallimard, p5

^{xiv} Vandenbulcke, Benoît, « Savoir-faire/faire savoir : How to engage architecture practice as a research tool ? », U Liège

^{xv} Fallon, Harold, « metarbitrariness ? Book 2», 2012, doctoral these, RMIT, p D2