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Hupperetz, W.

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Wim Hupperetz (2014). The cultural biography of a street. Memory, cultural heritage and historical notion of the Visserstraat in Breda, the Netherlands (1200 – 2000). In J. Renes & J Kolen (Eds.), *Landscape Biographies*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press (in press)

Abstract:

Presented in this article is a scheduling principle that can be used to improve the practical approach to cultural history. In short, it means operationalising the three time levels of Fernand Braudel to form a conceptual-historical approach. The wealth of historical-cultural data can thus be arranged in a rather simple manner and opened up for architectural designers or town planners.

Keywords

Landscape biography, cultural biography, multidisciplinary research, historic city centre, Breda.

Introduction

The concept of cultural biography is applied to cultural landscapes and urban environments in order to get a grip on the complex and layered memory, stored in one way or another, linking spatial-physical environments and people, dead or alive. In my research I use the metaphor of *memory*, which focuses on the same aspects. A biography and a memory are similar, in that they are both linked to people and they reflect dynamic and cyclical aspects of the past.

Presented in this article is a scheduling principle that can be used to improve the practical approach to cultural history. It is not a new principle, but the way it is applied can be re-evaluated. In short, it means operationalising the three time levels of Fernand Braudel to form a conceptual historical approach. The wealth of historical-cultural data can thus be arranged in a rather simple manner and opened up for architectural designers or town planners. In my experience, contact between the domains of historical researchers and town planners is lacking, but this scheduling principle can be helpful.

In the first place, I want to discuss the possibilities and impossibilities which the current professional traditions of (historic building) archaeologists, historians, urban planners, architects and town planners bring regarding urban planning in a historic city centre. I will discuss this from the Dutch perspective in the context of the multidisciplinary study into eight hundred years of history of one street in the historical city centre of Breda.¹

Historical research traditions

The *memory of a street* is a metaphor I use for everything which has been stored in archives, in the ground, in houses, and in the people that can be related to human activity on a certain street; in this case, the Visserstraat in Breda (figure.1). On the one hand, this may concern the socio-cultural developments, or the fact that the street, in the period 1350 – 1590, was among the richest streets in Breda, or that the street became part of a district of cafés and discotheques after 1960. On the other hand, we see spatial-physical developments, including the petrification of the historical houses in the late Middle Ages, the growing density of

construction from the seventeenth century, or the privatization tendencies which led to extra front doors for the apartments on the first and second floors.

This bipartition of socio-cultural and spatial-physical aspects has not been chosen accidentally; rather it coincides with two important research traditions which work on historical city centres. One tradition follows a group of historians and art historians who have, mainly on the basis of written sources, a particular eye for socio-cultural developments. The other tradition is formed by a group of (historical building) archaeologists and geographers, who focus more on the spatial-physical aspects and distil their conclusions from vestiges, archaeological remains, and traces (figure. 2). These two research traditions have to interact more within the field of the historical city centres and especially in the early modern period, where this combined approach can be very fruitful. Although historians do indeed use archaeological data, they frequently do so on a basic level without having the ability or skills to combine the sources in order to achieve added value. Alternatively, (historical building) archaeologists still tend to use insufficiently historical concepts to reach syntheses, or they lack the possibilities and skills for combining historical data with their archaeological data sets or reports. In my own research, I have tried to combine these two approaches in order to show the added value of using a multidisciplinary approach (Hupperetz, 2010).

At present, the current academic organizations are not prepared for such research approaches and rarely offer a workable platform to carry them out. Real multidisciplinary research concerning historical city centres is still scarce and there is a significant need for training in this multidisciplinary approach; some recommendations follow at the end of this article.

Fig. 1 A schedule on memory(loss), historic notion and commemoration. The sources of the existing memory can be used and interpreted in order to create a commemoration. The validation of this commemoration is closely linked with the different kinds of historic notion.

Fig. 2 Archaeological research in the Visserstraat where the enclosure ditches of the different parcels from the 12th century were found (Photo: Bureau Cultureel Erfgoed Breda)

The historical city centre as playground for city planners

As if the problem of two separated research traditions is not yet enough, a second problem needs to be addressed regarding the *memory of a street*. This concerns the interpretation, translation, and applicability of the available data on historical city centres. Everyone knows that there are local archival specialists, historians, and archaeologists who represent their city or village in order to save important cultural heritage. The city planners, meanwhile, are working behind the scenes, more rapidly and efficiently, towards future developments. The main question is whether our historical-cultural analysis can be made applicable for and translated to the world of city planners and policy makers. Fortunately, the gap between historians and city planners is gradually getting smaller, but researchers of historical city centres, such as historians and (historical building) archaeologists, are still making analyses from their own professional traditions and historical perspectives, which often lacks a more open dynamic heritage approach. As a result, the historical research continues to stand apart from present-day developments.

While ethnologists offer interpretation frameworks and concepts for incorporating contemporary history into historical research, there is still too little applied historical research in town planning. Few (academic) researchers succeed in translating their historical-cultural analyses into policy recommendations or into the practice of city planners or architects. This is where historians and (historical building) archaeologists should be more concerned. The social relevance of archaeological and historical research will, in the long run, be more related to the applicability and translation of research data. The recent policy on validation and dissemination of academic work demonstrates this urge to bridge the gap between historians and archaeologists on the one side and town planners on the other side. The first group tends

to look to the past, while the policy makers look ahead to the future. Although not every historian demonstrates this gap, many city planners consider historians as professional fanatics, losing themselves in details with an esoteric jargon. Within the framework of the Belvedere mission, ‘conservation by development’ is approached using communication, aiming at encouraging discussion between these two groups. This demands openness, curiosity, interest, and knowledge for each other's working methods, insights and traditions.

Fig 3. Drawing and aerial photograph of the historic city center in Breda with the building blocks and large scale buildings at the Barones and Nieuwe Veste. (drawing Bureau Map, Bert Stamkot)

Bricks and people

Let us return to the historical city centre where we will assume the perspective of the city planner, who finds it remarkable that the city is defined by the perception of public space. The urban structure of a historical city centre is characterized by streets and squares; spaces which delineate construction block systems. What is happening inside or between these construction block systems is not registered, however, and for centuries the organism of the city has grown here. The façades are, in many cases, just showing the architectural trends. Especially since the 1950s, the façade policy lacked the dynamic social-historical perspective and was stimulating the protection of monuments. In several more reflective studies concerning city planning and monument care, the socio-cultural perspective of the inhabitant is lacking almost completely (see De Klerk, 1980,; Van Voorden, 1983; Heeling et al., 2002 and Denslagen, 2004). Additionally, the debacle of the town renewal in the 1970s and 1980s have made clear how devastating this lack of social perspective has been (Pruys, 1974). A positive exception is a little cited overview work by Doevendans and Stolzenburg (2000).

From the domain of city construction and architecture - despite all good intentions - one does not look further than the façade. When a (historical) building block is torn down, there is a tendency to think that the memory is also lost: tabula rasa. That memory is, however, more than the built surroundings; it also includes, as it has already been defined, the whole of human activities and events which have been registered in written sources, as archaeological remains, or passed on in oral traditions. If we return to the task of city planners, we see that they consider and develop a vision based on spatial structures, among other things, for historical city centres. They may or may not have a sensitivity for tradition and the location where they are working, yet city planners frequently have a hunger for historical (re)sources to inspire their new plans. From city construction and adjacent disciplines, such as historical geography and monument care, attempts are increasingly being made to address the complex historical structures as serious components of the design process

in historical city centres and urban environments (see Bekkering, 1999; Taverne, 1989; Renes, 1999, especially 495 ff. and Van Dun, 1997).

On the other hand, a situation is growing in which architects and city planners make a call on ignorance; since everything was torn down, no history is left: *tabula rasa*. “Fuck the context,” as the famous Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas, has been stating. His large-scale projects in China, and particularly in Beijing where complete quarters the size of the city of The Hague have been torn down, show the rigorous renewal of large parts of a city centre. Koolhaas has already been called the ‘Leni Riefenstahl of the Low countries’.² The occurrence of rigorous interventions with restricted assessment indicates that one only looks ahead and that no consistency can be achieved between the memory of a site and its related memory. The architect is creating a memory from his own, mostly fantasized version of history, and yet this is referred to as ‘historical inspiration.’ This leads to an irrevocable discontinuity with the past, which may lead to anomalies or solutions that deny tradition, showing that choices were based on structural aspects, but on the perspective of events. Too often this leads to spatial consumption and large-scale solutions that ignore the detailed complex structure of a historical city centre.

Fig. 4. The Visserstraat in four stages of development: 4.1. The cultivation phase 1175-1250 4.2. The land division phase and construction of the street in 1330 4.3. The parcels around 1435 with land consolidation at the Havermarkt. 4.4. The Visserstraat after the cityfire in 1490 when the Havermarkt was constructed. The housenames at the Vismarkt date between 1520-1530. (Drawing Bureau Map, Bert Stamkot).

Housing culture, parcels, building blocks and the body of houses

Within Dutch monument care, the complexity and detailed aspects of historical city centres received special attention at the time of town renewal in the 1960s. In practice, this meant that

large parts of historical cities and villages' historical façades could be protected. From 1961 there was the possibility of designating these protected urban and rural areas (Van Dun, 1997). In the 1970s, part of the Breda city centre was designated as protected façade. The term façade, however, already indicates a policy that was focused on the exterior of the building block, whereas the internal architectural structure of the building block was ignored (figure. 3). It is remarkable that the term 'building block' was not used in two important Dutch publications on city planning and urban design (Van Voorden, 1983; Van Dun, 1997).

The historical analysis of the Visserstraat in Breda makes clear that the permanent usage of the residences, the parcels (land lots), the body of the houses, and the system of building blocks are the most important structural aspects of the historical city centre. (figure. 4). All those centuries people have lived here; houses were built, arranged and inhabited. The housing culture and the identity of this street have thus been founded on this primary element. The design of the houses on the Visserstraat was stipulated both by technical possibilities and the availability of certain construction materials. The danger of devastating fires and the increase in the production of bricks changed the architectural set-up and, with that, also the way construction work was organized in the 14th and 15th century, and certainly after the big fires of 1490 and 1534. In the 20th century, the construction tradition changed once again and we see the transition from brick to more rigorous construction materials, such as steel, aluminium, and plastic casings. Materials become cheaper compared to labour, and more often it is cheaper to demolish and rebuild than to re-use an existing construction. The shift in materials also changes the volumes and therefore the internal structure of a house, thus also influencing the housing culture.

Fig. 5. The body of the medieval house Visserstraat 31 in Breda. View of the sidewalls; indicated in grey are the parts that date before the cityfire of 1490. BR-code indicate the dendrochronological samples. (Drawing author).

Structure

Much has changed since the construction of the Visserstraat around 1315; when the parcels (land lots) were created and then houses were built between 1450-1850. This is still the basis for the spatial framework of the Visserstraat. Instead of houses, we will speak about the body of houses (figure. 5), because the interior and the façade of the houses - under the influence of architectural trends - change constantly. Those changes can be carried out quite easily within the main structure or body of the house. Sidewalls and the façade at the back, the cellars, the

beam layers, and roof constructions were, for centuries, the starting point for new architectural plans. The building blocks were an important organizing principle of the urban development in the late medieval city and also symbolized the core antagonism in public and private, outside and within. Certainly, since the 16th century, but probably already earlier, the building blocks have been closed around the Visserstraat with façades and walled courts. It is important to note that modern urban planning often results in the dismantling of building blocks, with the aim of eliminating the closed façade and creating a more open-city perspective.

The building block concept around the Visserstraat has three important spatial characteristics. First, the borders of the different parcels (land lots) still refer to the main classification from the 12th century, before the street had been planned. Secondly, the construction of the street, the town wall, and the market stipulated the border of the building block. As the third element, the body of the houses, as far as still present, reflects the skeleton of the organically grown city. Those three main principles, which still exist today, visualize the continuity of this site and deserve to be used and appreciated in urban planning and development as a durable memory.

Fig. 6. A schedule with structural, cyclical and evenemential aspects that can be distinguished in the eight hundred years of living in the Visserstraat in Breda.

Historical notion

To appreciate and protect does not mean to suspend or to restore. Each attempt to do this goes against the dynamic culture of a street or a historic city centre. But how or what to appreciate? The main point from the analysis I have made is a threefold perspective related to everyday events, cyclical developments and structural aspects, as defined by Braudel (Braudel, 1979, p. 45-84; see also Jonker, 1996, p. 30-46). By using this division, these three time levels can also be linked with three different ways of historical notion (figure.6). Using

several time layers is not strange, since each historian does this by definition, although not everyone is consciously aware of it. The moment historical sources are consulted or arranged, historiography rises and gives the sources and interpretations a new presence within the newly written historical setting. On one hand, there is the time layer of the objective chronology and facts - that happened then, there - which, on the other hand, receives a place within a new arrangement of facts. It is this last arrangement that leads to the shaping of its own subjective time layer with its own meaning.

The evenemential and unconscious direct historical memory can be paired with strong, individual appreciation. We want to put cyclical developments into perspective and the historical notion that is coupled there, is arranging and relativizing. This leads to a certain notion of group identity. The structural aspects have a durable and collective character related to historical notion - this is frequently seen referred to as indisputable cultural heritage, to indicate the importance (Jansen, 2003, p. 526-527).

Dynamic cultural heritage

But what is cultural heritage about? Cultural heritage is not inheritance which 'is just happening'; instead, it is the result of active decisions made by a group of individuals about what they think is culturally important and what they want to keep and transfer to next generations, for personal, social, political and economic reasons. Cultural heritage is that which is kept and becomes part of our individually and/or collective memory. Nothing is born as cultural heritage, but must come to be considered as cultural heritage by a larger or smaller group who desires to transfer this to the next generation. Cultural heritage provides (regional) meaning and a sense of belonging, particularly in times of globalisation. Moreover, heritage has perceptible appreciation in terms of quality of living and environment. Cultural heritage makes a substantive contribution to the planning of the public space and makes citizens aware of pluralism, authority, and authenticity. In a changing world, heritage is also dynamic and changing. In fact, cultural heritage can be seen from three different perspectives in time (Frijhoff, 2007; Holtorf, 2010):

1. Cultural heritage as a reservoir or stock (frequently uncultivated and autonomous) from a retrospection;
2. Cultural heritage as a reflection on our identity, here and now;
3. Cultural heritage as an inspirational source for creativity and a start for future plans.

These three perspectives are bound together and have to be in balance. Without a reservoir, there will be no reflection, and without reflection, there will be no inspiration. Past, present and future cannot exist without each other; it is as simple as that. This concept of dynamic heritage is connected to the three time levels in the sense that we can classify aspects of the cultural analysis and try to valorise them in order to be aware of the different perspectives we are using.

Tradition and renewal

How do we deal with the past and with the cultural heritage of a street? A vital antagonism is, of course, that between tradition and renewal. In the past hundred years, tradition has been less dominant, while renewal seems to have become more important and has a higher frequency. In short, the past loses importance as an obvious precedent, and thus, respect for that past is no longer automatic (Perry, 1999, p. 111). Renewal after World War II and the

subsequent cleansings in the third quarter of the 20th century were the consequence of a 'positivistic vision', the rather dramatic demographic forecasts, and modernism. In city planning, the conflict between tradition and renewal has been considered since the beginning of the 20th century. Important questions which return each time address functions (where, which facilities?) and spatial usage (where are the borders of spatial consumption?).

A fundamental question is whether the change of a new building, or a new function, is worth giving up certain cultural-historical values. It concerns the appreciation of 'existing' with respect to 'new'. Renewal is mostly seen from a progressive perspective, leading to the tendency for intensification of spatial usage in city centres (Denslagen, 2004, p. 145, 151 and 153). Space in a city is scarce by definition and this automatically leads city planners to an intensification policy, as if they fear the vacuum. A deep respect for tradition within architecture and urban planning has arisen in the 19th century. Leading men in Dutch society Pierre Cuypers and Victor de Stuers, who were fed by the romanticism of the past, were trying to translate this to have national meaning and content. As a result, De Stuers was able to found a national monument policy (Perry, 2004). It was a response to the tempestuous rise of the modern industrial society, in which old traditions and buildings were rapidly disappearing on a large scale. The credo was mostly 'save what we can save.' In respect to the architecture, this led to the so-called neo-styles, where the longing for tradition is clear. It is, in fact, a historical architecture which was inspired by a strong historical imagination and the urge to link the present to the past. But this was certainly also the birth of monument care in the Netherlands. It was a romantic ideology that wanted to revive the past, but with anachronistic resources. It is understandable that monument care is still closely connected with this tradition in many respects. Conservation before renewal became the motto after the new monument law of 1961. Development is a difficult paradigm for monument care, as shown by a quotation of Kees Peeters from 1978: "Restoring is changing and is therefore certainly not the first incentive of the monument care that should always try to keep and conserve historical values" (Denslagen, 1997).

As close as architects like Cuypers or Viollet-le-Duc and their architectural colleagues were with 19th-century monument care, their relation became distant over the course of the 20th century. There was a strong reaction to traditional architecture which led to a movement of modernistic architects, who strongly tried to oppose the 19th-century tradition. Architects such as Berlage and De Bazel fall in between these two approaches. From the idea that the future is more beautiful than the past, one strives for renewal, and this created the New Objectivity (Nieuwe Zakelijkheid). According to this modernistic wave, neo-styles were seen as banal, anachronistic kitsch. But eventually these modernistic architects and city planners also wanted to pursue a fantasy (of a rational order). Moreover, this rational order is now disputed in the same way as the urge for tradition of the 19th century was by their predecessors (Denslagen, 2004).

Recommendations

If we count the aforementioned gaps and shortages, there is too little attention from both sides for 'a total of objects and events of acting people at the level of the historical city centre.' Even if a house, a street, or a building block is demolished, and even if the occupants have moved or died, then there is still a memory that can be the start for a new memory linked with this site, that house, or building block. The strange thing is that archaeological traces, which are generally destroyed to accommodate a new construction plan, can show this very concretely, whereas historical sources often remain invisible. The appreciation of multidisciplinary study into a historical city centre has been specifically presented with a link

between research of spatial-physical aspects on the one hand, and, on the other, socio-cultural aspects. By applying a long-term perspective, the layering and stratification emerges and the different speeds of processes become apparent. Furthermore, the step between research and design must receive more attention.

The most important recommendations are simple and focus on two things. In the first place they concern professionals, both from the world of historical research and from city planning, who have to discuss tradition and renewal in a historical city centre. With that, it is vital that the spatial-physical aspects and the socio-cultural aspects are combined, as they cannot exist without each other. Naturally, this will demand much of researchers and of designers, but also more attention in existing training and education programmes. In the second place, the discussion must also receive a formal context. In my opinion, this is possible through incorporation into the planning process. A cultural-historical paragraph should be linked with the relevant historical-cultural research – in analogy and with the current Dutch archaeological legislation, this multidisciplinary research must also have a legal basis.

Author description

Wim Hupperetz (1966) studied Ancient History and Provincial Roman Archaeology at Radboud University (Nijmegen); in 2004 he defended his PhD thesis on a multidisciplinary research on *The memory of a street* at Tilburg University. He was curator in the Limburgs Museum for 16 years and since 2009 he is director of the Allard Pierson Museum, the archaeology museum of the University of Amsterdam. E-mail: wim.hupperetz@uva.nl.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on my PhD research (Hupperetz, 2004), I would like to thank C. A. Ray MA for correcting my English.

² Typecasting by journalist Bernard Hulsman (NRC) in 2004.