Chair of Housing and Design Basics and Institute of Housing
RWTH Aachen University, Germany

From "the Primacy of Presence" to: "Design First, Ask Later"

Article by Julian Feriduni, Florian Fischer [a], Hannah Nowak, Thilo Preuß, Robert Saat [a], Nora Schlöder, Clemens Urban and Nina Vollbracht [a]
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a   Chair of Housing and Design Basics and Institute of Housing,
     Faculty of Architecture, RWTH Aachen University, Germany

Abstract

How should architects enter the spaces they work in and intend to transform? It seems obvious that they would align their actions with paradigms of appropriateness and attentive observation. But do they really? Given our responsibility toward the looming ecological catastrophe and escalating social issues, shouldn't architects instead approach the field with friendly and good-humored impositions? Isn't this precisely how they can help initiate the sometimes disruptive processes of change? This might seem presumptuous in an age that continues to criticize past episodes of architectural history – especially modernism – for such behavior. Yet, this is exactly why the following method blends well-measured activism, scientific methods, and an optimistic approach to 'designing out into the world.' It aims to test our willingness to make concrete changes.

Content

1. Introduction

(1) Find a team partner. (2) Select a specific living environment for yourself as the starting point for the task. (3) Then, choose a different, distinct living environment with your partner. Over the next few weeks, you will immerse yourself in three different living environments or situations. (4) Invite yourself to all three living environments as a guest for one or two weeks at a time, depending on your availability, and organize your stay and activities in advance. (5) While it may be obvious to do this with family and/or acquaintances, it is not a necessity or prerequisite. (6) In addition to planning your stay, develop a specific concern, mission, or spatial intervention that you'd like to address while in the host environment. (7) Understand that your presence and concerns should be seen as interventions in the lives of your hosts. (8) Collaborate closely with your team partner on your respective missions. (9) Prepare for your stays together with us; we will help you define goals and design missions. (10) Remember that success or failure of the missions does not matter in the end; (normal) failure is always an option. (11) Document everything during your stays, from the relevant to the seemingly irrelevant; insights are valuable, but perplexity is also okay.

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2. On Your Own Initiative

Participant observation is a method of ethnographic field research. Researchers immerse themselves in everyday activities to collect data and study aspects of social life directly in the field. "Participant observation is a method of data collection in which the researcher takes part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life through the observation of events in their natural contexts." [1] Unlike architectural design practice, which can often be conducted from a writing or drawing table and is generally location-independent, this research method requires what is known as the "primacy of presence." [2]

However, mere presence does not constitute scientific research. The presence of designers, through site visits, inspections, and excursions – usually for the purpose of site analysis at the beginning of projects – can even be described, somewhat provocatively, as anti-scientific. Designers are economically dependent on their clients and are therefore biased. Their methods of analysis are geared towards one goal: justifying subsequent intervention. Presence only becomes a research method when researchers ask questions, allow contradictions, document their observations, and reflect on their own presence.

Participant observation is "interfering observation," [3] and various methodological difficulties arise in connection with this approach: for example, overcoming personal unease, gaining access to the field, and earning the trust of those being observed to obtain permission to collect data. R. Lindner describes "the researcher's fear of the field" as resulting from an exceptional physical and psychological situation. This anxiety manifests itself, among other things, "in psychosomatic symptoms such as palpitations and abdominal pain; motor restlessness coupled with indecision; postponing and rationalizing appointments; and [evasive behaviors like] walking or driving around the block". [4]

To attract as little attention as possible, or at least positive attention, and to appear trustworthy, "researchers often adopt a social role that they believe will put the object of investigation 'at ease'". [5] Wouldn't it make sense for designers entering a field as researchers to do architectural ethnography by taking on the role of an architect? In other words, to enter the field dressed as an architect – with model and plan in hand? Ideally, this role would offer them a certain degree of protection. They can rely on familiar protocols and tools, know what is expected of them, and understand their responsibilities.

After this introduction, we allow ourselves to experiment with the methodological repertoire of architects. These methods have sometimes included observational techniques such as interviews, mapping, photography, and, more recently, ethnographic drawing in the sense of a "visual ethnography" [6] : "Design first, ask later." The participatory observation by architects should be preceded by creating a draft. Before observing or interviewing, researchers should first create a design or become active in planning – whether alongside a thesis or out of curiosity—often willfully and somewhat naively. As with ethnographic field research, these intentional missions do not strive for empiricism. There is no scientific experimental design; the selection of the field follows initial associations and individually available approaches and resources.

Most debates or ideas about architecture and participation – or, more precisely, about an architecture focused on use value and closely aligned with (future) users – are rooted in the notion of attentive observation and listening. While this remains essential at certain points, we question whether attentive listening alone can suffice for the significant changes society will inevitably face – whether we like it or not. [7]

So how can we achieve the necessary changes? Changes that might be less about being cautiously "appropriate" and more about what we once considered radical, if not downright brutal? Perhaps we need to act a bit presumptuously, freely, playfully, radically, or even with friendly provocation. We should try out or simulate changes together first and then assess how we feel about them – whether we can and want to live this way (if that's even still the question). In all likelihood, we will have to establish – or at least learn – new habits. And whatever these new habits may be, they probably won't emerge from simply observing and questioning old ones. It's precisely this boldness that the title "On Your Own Initiative – in Someone Else's Life" refers to.

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3. Case Studies

3.1. A Family-Shared Flat

During the day, and mostly in the absence of its residents, a shared family flat in an old villa served as a framework for testing various scenarios that introduced a new order to the rooms and their use. With subtle surrealism, new spatial images and atmospheres were created. However, the aim was explicitly not to answer real questions about living or to suggest possible optimizations of existing rooms and fittings; rather, it was an experiment in perception – an attempt to deprogram and reprogram prevailing images and habits or, to put it somewhat grandly, the supposed truths of living.

The factor of habit in living is seen as key to what might be termed an epistemological meta-truth: There is no such thing as the right or true way of dwelling; there are only observable and ascertainable time-specific habits of human habitation. This understanding justifies experimental changes as opportunities to explore new ways of living.

Dream, play, disorder, and destruction – when understood as artistic interventions – can help blur the boundaries of supposed truths about living. They challenge, transform, and reorganize existing arrangements. The authors are not sole creators; they foster change in interaction with others: an exercise in letting go of fixed ideas and co-creating new ones. Once the first design interventions – initiated freely by the authors without involving the residents – were implemented, reactions and interventions from third parties (the residents) followed. This set in motion a game of conscious linear design where results and interpretive authority became negotiable.

Confronting the seemingly misplaced opened up new possibilities for negotiating space, use, and atmosphere. These possibilities extend beyond traditional notions of living and pose new fundamental questions. Productivity, speed, and our fixed ideas about dwelling truths like kitchens or circulation spaces often prevent us from rethinking these areas. By deliberately adding new, seemingly out-of-place or unfamiliar elements, we can counteract the status quo. Manipulating surfaces and making seemingly minor interventions can change the appearance, use, and material properties of a specific environment.

1   Manipulation of the office.

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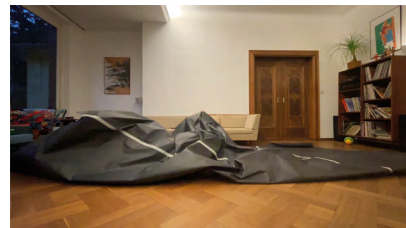
2   Manipulation of the living room.

3   New interpretation of the manipulation.

4   Negotiation process of utilisation.

5   Final interaction with the manipulation.

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3.2. A Suburban Villa

A suburban villa built in the 1960s, providing approximately 260 sqm of living space for a single occupant, became our test site for a week. Before making any changes to the space, the possibility of "filling up" the living space was discussed. From a technical standpoint, we considered increasing the occupancy density. To partially achieve this, we temporarily moved into the villa. Even with this increase, each person still had around 86 square meters of living space.

We then implemented changes based on guidelines for adequate living space per household size, as outlined in regulations for subsidized housing construction. At the time of our intervention, these guidelines specified approximately 47.5 sqm for a one-person household in the relevant federal state.

Over the course of a week, the house was reduced to a usable living space of just 47.5 square meters for its owner. The existing rooms were reshaped using net-like textiles, roof battens and building supports. The authors implanted an entirely new spatial figure into the existing structure. An appropriate proportion of all basic living functions and their locations within the existing building were cut out in accordance with subsidy guidelines and incorporated into the real and fictitious "new apartment." According to the guidelines, the new space included: 20 sqm for living and dining, 2 sqm for a workspace, 11 sqm for a bedroom, 7 sqm for a kitchen, 4 sqm for a bathroom, 5 sqm for a hallway and storage. Additionally, space was provided for a 4-square-meter balcony.

In retrospect, this led to the unsurprising realization that the simultaneity of existing and newly defined spaces, created by the semi-permeability of the curtains, resulted in a unique hybrid spatial experience. At the same time, it distorted the actual perception of space compared to that in a real small apartment. Interestingly, the occupants found that they could manage with less space than they initially thought and eventually became comfortable with the new spatial dynamics. For the authors as interventionists, the installation also raised previously unfamiliar questions about what is reasonable and the limits of hospitality. Living together in such a small space quickly revealed potential areas of conflict. [8]

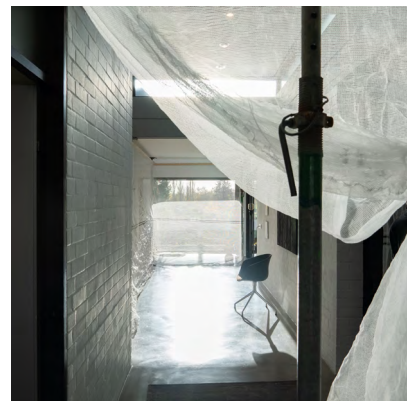6   A former circulation zone becomes the main living area.

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7   The divided living room.
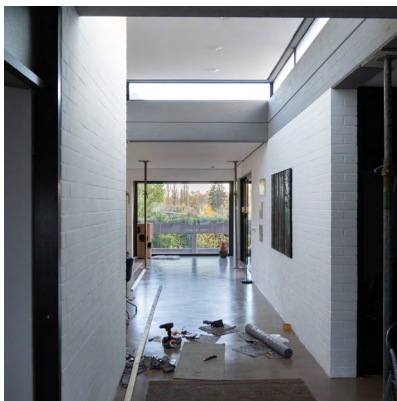
8   Construction material of the still incom-
     plete modification.

9   Intermediate step from the construction
     process.

10   Final state of transformation.

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3.3. A Residential and Medical Practice Building

The planned intervention aimed to repurpose unused but fully furnished rooms in a 1970s residential and medical practice building in Rhineland-Palatinate. Originally, the building served as a home for a family of four and housed the owners' medical practice. The practice is now rented out, while a widowed woman has been living alone in the 350 sqm residential area for nine years.
The least specific activity of living, which is practiced daily (or nightly) by every person in every household, is assumed here to be sleeping. Whether this assertion carries a subliminal provocation is something each reader can determine for themselves. The spatial-programmatic, but merely temporary intervention involved spending at least one night in every unused room of the house during the week-long residency. It did not matter whether this corresponded to the previous or original function or furnishing of the room. The existing furniture in various rooms, such as the hallway, TV room, or former children's room, was left unchanged. An idealized four-poster bed was added as a small room within the room.

The concept followed the idea of a kind of nomadism within a confined space, a house. However, it rather served as an initial experiment to gauge one's own flexibility and specific perception (during sleep) than as a concrete proposal for a solution to the housing issue. The issue of not having a fixed place to sleep or the lack of intimacy in housing is still far too strongly influenced by the excesses of the real estate market today and in the past. The phenomenon of night workers in precarious conditions, which was common in the early 20th century, should not be falsely or naively idealized or even romanticized here. Rather, the focus was on investigating contemporary questions and opportunities of housing and dwelling and outlining a potential line of development.
Inspired by Bruce Nauman's approach, [9] the authors subsequently created a (semi-fictional) memory logbook, in which they documented not only the chronological sequence of events but also emotional observations relating to their own state of mind during the intervention.

11   In the living room.

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12   In the bedroom.

13   In the adjoining room.

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Credits

1–5: Hannah Nowak, Nora Schlöder
6–10: Thilo Preuss, Clemens Urban
11–13: Julian Feriduni

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2   Strübing, J. (2018). Qualitative Sozialforschung: Eine komprimierte Einführung. De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110529920
3   Bührig, S. (2023). Grenzen des Miteinanders: Die Forschungsmethode Einmischende Beobachtung. transcript Verlag.
4   Lindner, R. (1981). Die Angst des Forschers vor dem Feld. Überlegungen zur teilnehmenden Beobachtung als Interaktionsprozeß. Zeitschrift für Volkskunde, Münster, München, Berlin. Waxmann, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde.
5   Lindner, R. (1981). Die Angst des Forschers vor dem Feld. Überlegungen zur teilnehmenden Beobachtung als Interaktionsprozeß. Zeitschrift für Volkskunde, Münster, München, Berlin. Waxmann, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde.
6   Kuhnert, N., Uhlig, G., Kalpakci, A., Kaijima, M., Stalder, L., Gatti, M., Keck, J., Koch, M., Ngo, A.-L., Rüb, C., Dünser, N., Flörke, L., & Kellermann, S. (Hrsg.). (2020). Architekturethnografie. Mostra internazionale di architettura, Berlin. Arch+ Verlag GmbH.
7   And yes, unfortunately, "The Climate crisis takes/beats it all" applies in this context as well.
8   During the intervention, the authors lived in the remaining spaces. As a result, there were unavoidable encounters with the occupants during the day, and reactions to the transformed space were directly conveyed to the students.
9   Nauman, B. (2002). Mapping the Studio II with color shift, flip, flop & flip/flop (Fat Chance John Cage)

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