Narrative Thinking in Architectural Education

Sebastiaan Gerards, Sylvain De Bleeckere

Hasselt University, Hasselt, Belgium

ABSTRACT: Recent research indicates that mainstream architectural practice is in a general state of denial about participation and client/user involvement. Within this paper we argue that this general denial is already acquired during architectural education. Given the fact that architects are influenced by this 'academic experience' to such an extent that it influences their professional careers, we argue that it is acceptable to look to education for the root cause and potential alleviation of the problem. Framed within phenomenological thinking (Ricoeur) and pragmatic theory (Dewey), we develop *narrative thinking* as a basic design attitude which combines user based research and moral imagination. We implement narratives in the design studio to (re)connect designer and client/user. Our main objective is to stress the importance of narratives as a sustainable starting point for a real participatory process. Methodologically we link narrative thinking and research by design. More specifically, we develop a design assignment on multigenerational dwelling at our school of architecture. We challenge our students to find 'real' client/users, to report about their narratives on the desired use of the multigenerational dwelling and to use these narratives during the entire design process. Most important outcome of our study is growing empathy and enthusiasm among our students towards their client/users. Narrative thinking initiates a participatory design process which brings about positive change and a more daring and less predictable design project in favor of all participants.

KEYWORDS: Architectural education, narrative, moral imagination, user/client, multigenerational housing

INTRODUCTION

Several observational studies have been made of how designers work (e.g. Lawson 2006). A general finding is that designers solve problems which are ill-defined, ill-structured or 'wicked' (Cross 2006). These problems are not susceptible to exhaustive analysis, and there can never be a guarantee that 'correct' solutions can be found for them. However, designers use a pattern language, or codes to control the design process. Designerly ways of knowing are embodied in these 'codes', which guide the process towards a final design product (Cross 2006). Of course there is no correct 'method of designing', nor one route through the process. Nonetheless, we observe that most design process models, especially within the field of architecture, tend to exclude the client/user from the design process (Parnell 2003). In most cases their role is limited to the provision of basic constraints. Consequently, it may be argued that collaborations between architectural designers and client/users tend to be nothing more than pseudo-participation (Till 2005). In fact, mainstream architectural culture is in state of denial about real participation, a denial that is tantamount to rejection but without a real need to be explicit about it.

Within this paper we argue that the basis for a general denial of the user/client by architects is already formed during education. In particular, the development of empathy and cooperation among students of architecture is recognized as most lacking in the traditional model of their education (Parnell 2003). Bearing in mind that architects are influenced by this 'academic experience' to such an extent that it influences their professional lives, we state that it is justifiable to look to education for the root cause and hence potential alleviation of the problem. According to Sara (2000), the involvement of clients/users in the design studio and the education process currently challenges the traditional model which generally tends to exclude these people.

Framed within phenomenological thinking (Ricoeur) and pragmatic theory (Dewey), we develop a narrative design method which sustains the involvement of the final users during the design process. This method breaks through professional codes by dissociating itself from the belief that the architect should be the one who is telling the story. To make this clear we explore narrative thinking as a process of collaborative design thinking, or - inspired by the ideas of pragmatist Dewey – as a process of moral imagination and joint inquiry. Motivated by this pragmatic perspective we develop an assignment on narrative thinking in the design studio. More specifically, we send out eighty architecture students to find possible client/users for an extensive design assignment on multigenerational housing. We question, what it means to occupy a structure; to use it. What does it mean to rearrange the activities within a building, to imagine its life over 20 years instead of just the two years of a construction period? By doing so we promote early user involvement and an iterative approach involving research, design and critical evaluation. Moreover, we challenge our students to invest their 'professional architectural competences' in a realistic and democratic environment.

1.0. EDUCATING FOR COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION

Collaboration and communication skills are not, apparently, strengths of the architecture profession (Parnell 2003). But, perhaps of greatest concern is that architects are described as arrogant, poor listeners, and their education is seen to be to blame (Sara, 2000). However, lack of communication brings a lack of understanding, and where there is a lack of understanding, relationships tend to break down. From this perspective, one can see how easily a non-professional might arrive at a negative impression of the professional designer.

According to Parnell (2003), a lack of communication skills, and the basis for a general denial of the client/user by architects, is already formed during their education. In particular, the development of cooperation and an empathic attitude among architecture students is recognized as lacking in the traditional model of their education. Recently, Steele, director of the AA School in London, remarked that 'the key project of the architectural school today is the making of audiences, not architects' (2013, 90). Parnell therefore urges to introduce the client/user into the design studio. Hence, despite the considerable differences in the process of educating future architects around the world, there is one remarkable similarity – the overriding primacy given to the design studio as the main forum for creative exploration, interaction and assimilation: 'The design studio is the kiln where the future architects are modeled' (Salama 1995, 1). In this respect, Parnell (2003) states, that studying people and communicating with client/users from day one in the design studio, would help architecture students to see their perspective on design and architecture and learn to respect their viewpoint. 'While they will necessarily develop their own professional position and inevitably become socialized into profession's culture, they will still be able to communicate with and understand non-professional culture' (Parnell 2003, 68). This should breed respect and ultimately avoid the public view of architects as arrogant and out of touch with reality. Of course, Parnell (2003) remarks, the involvement of client/user in the design studio and the education process immediately challenges the traditional model which mostly excludes these people. 'In so doing it challenges the implicit value position of the traditional design studio and communicates an alternative to students' (Parnell 2003, 68).

Undeniably, the empowerment of client/users demands that they not only play a role in the process, but that this role affects the final design in a real and sustainable way. By encouraging students to develop and use participatory methods, they are effectively being asked to reject a paternalistic model of practicing architecture and instead design *with* people. If this were to happen in architecture school, Parnell (2003) argues, it would clearly communicate to students that the school of architecture valued people within the design process. 'The skills and attitudes developed in students as a result of this interaction with client/users would potentially improve relations greatly' (Parnell 2003, 68).

Undeniably, Parnell's proposal for an alternative pedagogy in architectural education points towards the development of a listing approach. 'Characteristics such as empathy and co-operation and activities such as brief development, client/user involvement and client/user

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understanding, demand that the student architect learns to listen' (Parnell, 2003: 69). This is not just a skill, but also an attitude. Listening to find value in what other are saying is the only true listening process. In order to achieve this, Till argues, that it is necessary to look for a new model of communication, and 'the key lies in recognizing the power and validity of ordinary conversations as a starting point for the participatory process' (2005, 17).

2.0. NARRATIVE THINKING

In our view, the quest for real participation (in education) is appropriate. In line with Parnell (2003), we argue, that listening to the client/user is something that should be thought and practiced in the design studio. Yet, we want to stress the importance to (re)connect the act of listening to the act of narrating. By doing so we aspire that the act of listening does not degrade into a formal procedure without content and some kind of 'pseudo-listening'. To clarify this we introduce phenomenological thinker Ricoeur's narrative theory.

In *Life in Quest of Narrative* (1991) Ricoeur develops narratives a as structural and anthropological phenomenon. Without narratives it is impossible for individuals to live as human beings. In this sense Ricoeur takes a critical look both at the common-sense linking of life and narrative, and at the equally common distinction between real life and fiction. Ricoeur seeks to rework the Socratic claim that the unexamined life is not worth living (Wood 1991). To bridge the unmistakable gap between narrative and life, what we need to do is to rework our sense or meaning of each term. Narratives are not just configurations out there; they are completed only in the act of listening or reading. Moreover life is not only a biological phenomenon but symbolically mediated. And Ricoeur (1991) argues, that human experience is already riddled with stories in a way that suggests a demand for narrative immanent to experience itself. 'Indeed, psychoanalysis suggests that we might think of lives in terms of untold or virtual stories; recounting a life would merely be articulating these, rather than imposing them on an alien content' (Wood 1991, 11). Ricoeur (1991) suggests we think of the examined life as a narrated life, characterized by a struggle between concordance and discordance, the aim of which is to develop, not to impose on oneself, a narrative identity.

In his philosophical contribution*,* Ricoeur (1991) demonstrates that narratives manifest themselves in stories. At first sight these stories are fictions which have nothing to do with reality. It's as simple as that. Ricoeur points to the way in which these stories are perceived by readers or listeners. He states that 'it is in this way that we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero *of our own story*, without actually becoming the *author of our own life'* (1991, 32). By doing so, the narrative identity of the listening subject arises. According to Ricoeur (1991), this narrative identity plays an indispensable role in the formation of the subject, because 'the subject is never given at the start' (1991, 33). Without narratives the *subject* is in danger of being reduced to its narcissistic and egoistic ego. Ricoeur clarifies that narratives help the *subject* to build up its own identity. 'And these narratives give us a unity which is not substantial but narrative (Ricoeur 1991, 33)'.

From our point of view, this vision on the narrative identity of the subject is relevant for designers. Indeed, in modernism the architect's considered as an autonomous subject and in line with this: architecture as an autonomous discipline (e.g. Van der Rohe). This, however, leads to solipsism and narcissism of the architect. With Ricoeur we learn that architects, and designers in general, cannot 'work' autonomously. In this regard, the implications for the design process are pretty clear. Indeed, what happens in design can be understood as a process of *abduction* – a term introduced by pragmatist Peirce, which refers to a type of reasoning that is different from *deduction* or *induction*. In contrast with *deduction*, which proves that something must be and *induction, which shows* that something actually is operative; *abduction* suggest that something may be (Cross 1995). In abduction (open problem solving) one starts with a desired outcome (result) and develops both an object (what) and a working principle (how). The latter however is an approach of iteratively and creatively moving between 'result', 'how', and 'what' during the design process (Steen 2013). We believe that this creatively moving creates openings to involve the client/user throughout the entire design process. Knowing that a design process involves finding as well as solving problems (Lawson 2006), we state that it is justifiable to involve the client/user (and generator of the design

problem) throughout the whole design process. In our view the client/user does not necessarily become a 'co-designer' (e.g. Steen 2013) but a narrator, narrating about the future use of the desired object or building. Whenever narrator and designer meet, the possibilities arise for what we call 'narrative thinking'. In this regard, narrative thinking becomes a general design attitude, an anchor throughout the design process and a cure for pseudo-participation.

3.0. JOINT INQUIRY AND MORAL IMAGINATION

Following on from our belief that architects should be educated for collaborative practice, we argue that narrative thinking as a general design attitude should be implemented in the design studio. Before doing so, we introduce pragmatic thinker Dewey in the next section of our paper. With him we hope to refine Ricoeur's narrative theory. Our main argument is that narrative thinking can be understood (and organized) as a process of *collaborative narrative thinking and designing*, or – drawing from the ideas of pragmatist philosopher Dewey – as a process of *joint inquiry* and *moral imagination.*

From our point of view Dewey's interpretation of joint inquiry elucidates narrative thinking as a necessary attitude in architectural design and education. In fact narrative thinking implies joint inquiry as well as user based research. After all, narrative thinking is jointly organized inquiry, which aims to find solutions for a more or less clearly formulated problem. Additionally, Fesmire (2003) adds, inquiry is story structured. 'In Paul Ricoeur's terms, it has a narrative structure' (Fesmire 2003, 51). Nonetheless, a process of joint inquiry consist of five phases which are intimately related and addressed in an iterative process (Dewey 1938). The first two phases exemplified by Dewey include the indeterminate situation and the institution of the problem. Central to these phases is exploring and defining the problem. 'The way in which the problem is conceived decides what specific suggestions are entertained and which are dismissed' (Dewey 1938, 108). In the case of narrative thinking, we learn that defining a problem is drawn from the ability of both, designer and client/user, to express and share certain experiences, as well as to empathize with other people (e.g., engaging in narrating). During the third phase, problem(s) and imaginable solutions are simultaneously exposed and further defined throughout an iterative process. Dewey proposed that problems are best explored and defined using perception—one's capacities to see, hear, touch, smell, and taste current situations (what is)—and that solutions are best explored and developed using conception—one's capacities to imagine and envision alternative situations (what could be) (Steen, 2013). Of course, this combination of perception and conception (moral imagination) reunites designer and client/user. Indeed, client/user narratives stimulate the designer in designing several possible solutions for a jointly formulated problem. Finally, during the last two phases, these solutions are tested and critically evaluated. Of course this part requests cooperation among client/users and designer. Again, narrative thinking becomes a general design attitude which enables an iterative and participatory approach.

Apparently, imagination is key throughout the process outlined. Fesmire (2003) discussed two roles of imagination. Firstly, imagination as an 'empathic projection', as an opportunity to respond directly and empathically to others and their feelings and thoughts; and secondly, imagination as an opportunity to escape from current patterns and imagine alternatives. Imagination is, then, 'a capacity to engage the present with an eye to what is not immediately at hand' (Fesmire 2003, 67).

All in all, we can understand narrative thinking as a process of joint inquiry and moral imagination—as 'a reflective activity in which existing tools and materials (both of which may be either tangible or conceptual) are brought together in novel and creative arrangements in order to produce something new' (Hickman 1998 cited in Steen 2013, 24). In such a process, people use moral imagination as a capacity to see the actual in light of the possible (Fesmire 2003). 'Imagination expands our focus beyond a confused and dizzying present so that we can reflect and act in ways that may eventually bring about more desirable conditions' (Fesmire 2003, 146).

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4.0. NARRATIVE THINKING IN THE DESIGN STUDIO

Narrative thinking is a design attitude. It supplements the 'traditional' design process by enabling designers to imagine different perspectives. In this sense it is ideally suited to communicating change, stimulating innovation and realizing client/user involvement. In line with Parnell (2003) we assume that it is necessary to implement narrative thinking during education. Dewey's pragmatic 'moral imagination' helps us to translate Ricoeur's narrative theory into a general methodology applicable in the design studio and architectural education. To illustrate this argument, we discuss a design assignment developed in the design studio of a third grade bachelor at our school of architecture.

In this assignment for about 70 students each designed a multigenerational dwelling. Multigenerational dwelling indicates that this housing concept does not refer to standard single-family housing or apartments. It is a dwelling in which at least three generations live together. The residents do not necessarily belong to one family, but they are expected to know each other. Initially our assignment is an attempt to prepare architecture students to a future characterized by a new need for alternative housing concepts (De Bleeckere & Gerards 2013). Secondarily, and connecting up to this paper, we aim to teach our students to think narratively. By doing so we want to stimulate an empathic attitude towards the final users. Exceptional about our assignment is the fact that these final users were not fictional and determined previously. The only limiting conditions were a minimal amount of five residents representing three generations and a specific location for the final building.

The assignment took six weeks and promoted early user involvement and an iterative approach involving research, design and evaluation. In the following sections we discuss three phases of our assignment and focus on the ways in which students and final users engaged in joint inquiry and moral imagination.
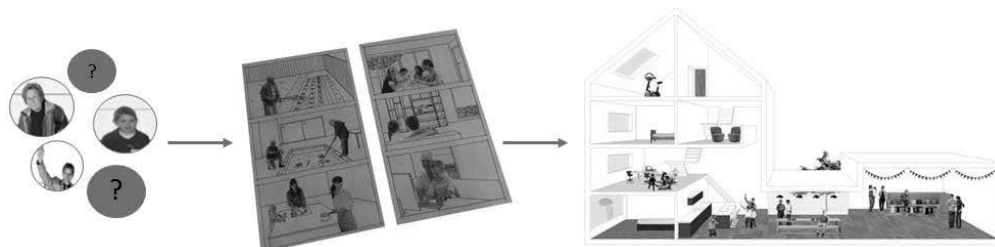

Figure 1: Design phases: scenario (1), storyboard (2), final design (3)

The first phase of our assignment included exploring and defining the problem. We asked our students to search and interview at least five possible clients/users (inhabitants) for a multigenerational dwelling. In this sense, they were invited to empathize with real persons, and to take them as the starting point for developing *scenarios*. Based on clear narratives by the chosen client/users about their proper demands towards the multigenerational dwelling, each student started to write a scenario-rapport. This rapport helped them to empathize with the final users and their experiences. Additionally, they learned to more vividly imagine specific problems that multigenerational dwelling as a new housing concept aims to solve.

During the second phase of our design assignment we aimed to perceive the problem and conceive possible solutions. More specifically we questioned our students to transform each scenario into a storyboard. Every storyboard consisted of five to ten drawings. For example, some students took the chance to imagine the opportunities arising from multigenerational dwelling. Based on client/user narratives they were able to demonstrate how different stories by different clients might fit to each other and create an added value for the dwelling of all future inhabitants. Moreover, some students used their storyboards to organize additional

meetings with their client/users. They talked with them about applications as early as possible – before any architectural designs were made. These meetings helped the architecture students to better understand people's daily lives, their expectation and preferences in relation to multigenerational dwelling. Creating storyboards and discussing them with potential client/users helped combine professional architectural perspectives (ambition to create a building) and user's perspectives (ambition to help people). It promoted an iterative process in which the young designers were able to discuss different narratives and solutions in the context of the overall goal of the assignment; to design a multigenerational dwelling.

In the third and final phase of our assignment, different solutions were tested and critically evaluated. Most students designed several possible multigenerational dwellings. They placed particular emphasis on interweaving the previously developed storyboards and conceivable design solutions. Moreover, these scenario-designs were tried out and evaluated in cooperation with the client/users and possible future inhabitants of the building. In this sense, students and client/users were able to jointly achieve concrete results and, at the same time to critically discuss these results, as well as to learn from this confrontation.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the first lines of our paper, we must admit a general denial of the client/user in current architectural practice. According to Till (2005), mainstream architectural culture is in state of denial about 'real participation', a denial that is synonymous to rejection but without a need to be explicit about it. Furthermore, Parnell (2003) demonstrates, that the basis for this general denial of the user/client by architects is already formed during education. Therefore, we think, that it is justifiable to look to education for the root cause and hence potential alleviation of the problem.

From our point of view, narratives might help to reconnect designer and client/user. Narrative thinking is a design attitude which stimulates the involvement of the final user of a certain building. It implies to deal with stories, told by client/users about past, present and future actions. In this respect, narrative thinking realizes joint inquiry and moral imagination about the desired use of a certain design. Through thinking narratively we encourage a critical, empathic and democratic attitude. In this way, it prevents architects from mutating into narcissistic subjects.

Our implementation of narrative thinking in the design studio demonstrates that narrative thinking can be facilitated through Dewey's concepts of 'joint inquiry' and 'moral imagination'. Surely what we need is a focus on people's practice and experiences, rather than on abstract theories. Narrative thinking should be understood as a process of collaborative design thinking: a process of joint inquiry and imagination in which diverse actors (student designer and client/user) jointly explore and define a problem and jointly develop and evaluate more daring and less predictable solutions. It is a process in which all participants are able to express and share their experiences, to discuss and negotiate their roles and interests, and jointly realize positive change.

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