ETHNOGRAPHY; UNDERSTANDING (SELF-BUILDING) CULTURES
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According to Lucas, a research methodology is a way of finding something out about a topic – a set of practical and pragmatic activities that allow you to ask relevant questions and achieve robust conclusions.[1] In addition to Lucas, analyzing the etymology of methodology, meaning the logic of the method(s), one can conclude that a research methodology is not just a way to finding something out, but also the reasoning for that specific way of finding something out. So, being aware of the notion of a research methodology can contribute to the making of conscious decisions regarding the combination of the tools used in the design of the research. In relation to the architectural profession, a well thought research methodological design informs and confirms the quality of the architectural design. In a way, this paper is to define and improve the relation between the thesis' design-task and the research methodology.

Originally I commenced the MSc of Building Technology, wherein research often had a quantitative approach. The Lecture Series on (Architectural) Research Methods focusses more on qualitative research, which expands my knowledge on potential ways of finding something out in relation to the architectural design. This is quite new to me, and after following the lectures I was surprised of the quantity of the different modes of inquiry (i.e. the available research methodologies). The lecture series gives a good introduction and overview of potential architectural research methodologies and creates a general awareness of the relation between the research methodology and the design.

What opened my eyes specifically was the talk on heuristics by Jorge Mejía, who, amongst other things, questions the overall graduation track's approach, which is currently based on the concept of corroboration – a method understood to result in a 'good' design. The potential danger of corroboration is that one actively and consciously searches for information that reinforces the design; information that confirms what you already know or have researched. This closely relates to the quote by Stanford Anderson mentioned in Jorge Mejía's lecture; '*I claim that the architect's problem is not how to found his knowledge positively but how to make his knowledge grow.*'[2] Rather, I would be more interested in information that re-informs and changes the design.

Now to the project; the context of my thesis is the Caribbean island of Sint Maarten. It was occupied in 1631 by the Dutch in their search for oversees territories, and has since then known a building culture that is dependent on foreign building materials and methods.[3] This created a certain dependency, which the thesis project will try to reduce by means of an urban-architectural intervention. The overall design question resulting from the summarized objective above is; *How can an urban-architectural intervention stimulate a transition towards a more sustainable domestic self-building culture on a neighborhood scale in Sint Maarten?*

This question evokes more questions, and specifically for this paper I find it interesting to research how I can study a self-building *culture*. Both Lucas[4] and Rapoport[5] describe that in modernist approaches to design and research, the (cultural) context is too often erased and it has become apparent that this is a mistake, for context is what allows anything to make any sense at all. Lucas puts it in a semi-dramatic way, but I do agree with the fact that in the process of designing the (cultural) context may not be neglected. The conception of the intended user influences the design. [6] Adding up to Hill, Berkers suggested that architects and designers often neglect or imagine the intended users of the to be designed, instead of researching them. She clearly depicted this with the

[1] Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2016), 36.
[2] Stanford Anderson, from the lecture of Jorge Mejía.
[3] Joan D. van Andel, *Caribbean Traditional Architecture* (Leiden: Department of Caribbean Studies, Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology, 1985). 29, 37.
[4] Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2016), 167
[5] Amos Rapoport, *On the cultural responsiveness of architecture* (Journal of architectural education, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1987), 12
[6] Jonathan Hill, *The use of architects* (Urban Studies, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2001), 364

'Elephant path.' [7] In the light of the sustainability discourse, I would like to add that Rapoport describes that people leave unsatisfactory environments for those they regard as better.[8] Neglecting the prospected user (or people, or culture) of and related to a design, can have impact on the acceptance and longevity of the design. Reading Jaspers *Anthropology and Architecture, a misplaced conversation,* my attention was drawn towards studying how anthropological research methodologies could aid architectural design. He questions what insights contemporary in-situ ethnographic methods could offer to the design process.[9] I find this a very relevant question in relation to the beforementioned research interest. This results in the exploratory research methodological research question of this paper; *How can one use ethnographic methods to research socio-spatial practices in domestic self-building cultures?*

Heuristic technique; ethnography

Etymologically, ethno-graphy means graphing people or culture. It is a form of enquiry associated with the social sciences, but can find applicability beyond this area.[10] Lucas suggest that ethnography is the practice of writing about another group of people. I would like to mention here that writing is not the only method to graph a culture. In anthropology, ethnographic research is a specific and longitudinal study (from several months to years). The researcher accesses other people's lives and studies how they practice them and engage with their context.[11] In practice this means describing the behavioral and material expressions of culture, including architecture. Ethnographic research emphasizes engagement with site-specific settings through active and thorough observation.[12] It combines the etic (outsider) and the emic (insider) points of view.[13]

Ethnographic research is usually qualitative. In ethnography, subjectivity is often even promoted.[14] But, one could also imagine quantitative research to be a method of relevance to give an overview of a certain (self-building) community or culture, for instance, age sex distribution or income figures. Even the needs of a community can become quantifiable using a survey.[15] It depends fully on the method of question-asking in the survey whether the outcome will be qualitative or quantitative. It is unlikely to think though, that Turner could have written his article by just conducting surveys. He does not elaborate on his research methodology, though one sentence; '*the essential lesson I learned through long association with barriada-builders…*'[16] suggest that his research must have had ethnographic components.

Another way of ethnographic inquiry can be researching a material culture. Material culture studies is considered a branch of anthropology and archeology, concerned with the biographies of *things.* For instance, researching a process of gift-giving can give architects knowledge of a variety of activities of a certain place and give a more fundamental understanding of the conceptual drivers of that place, as for example reciprocity or obligation - aspects that might remain hidden to a non-critical eye.[17] Considering a *thing* less as a commodity, the entanglement of people and things could also provide answers to a specific research. Things are not isolated from engagement with people or with other things. They are part of a process, continually in flow and in relationships rather than in isolation.[18]

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[7] Lecture of Marieke Berkers; Praxeology. See appendix A.

[8] Amos Rapoport, *On the cultural responsiveness of architecture* (Journal of architectural education, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1987), 13

[9] Adam Jasper, *Anthropology and Architecture: A misplaced conversation* (Architectural Theory Review, 2017), 2

[10] Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2016), 164

[11] Ibid, 165.

[12] Linda Groat; David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2013), 224

[13] Pavlides and Cranz, *Ethnographic methods in support of architectural practice* (Enhancing building and environmental performance, 2011), 1

[14] Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2016), 166

[15] John Turner, *The squatter settlement: an architecture that works* (Architectural Design, 1968), 358.

[16] Ibid, p. 358.

[17] Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2016), 103-113.

[18] Ibid, p. 103-113.

Ethnographic-architectural research – historic and current perspectives

Ethnographic methodology – as in writing or describing a culture through observation and participation – emerged in the early 20th century. Several anthropologists aimed to establish a natural science of society that could create an objective description of a culture. This contrasted to the desk anthropologists who based their speculations on secondary sources. Ethnography sought to discover the natives point of view from within the context of their own culture. Influenced by the positivist paradigm of that time, early ethnographic research reflected Western interest in non-Western societies.[19] And so the history of anthropology is filled with accounts of longhouses, sketches of the layout of villages, and analysis of how spatial organization is embedded with cultural meaning. [20] It seemed to be in the vernacular where architects and anthropologists historically met.

But before the above mentioned paradigm shift in anthropology, Chestnova describes a more ethnographic material cultural approach. Nineteenth-century collecting activities in ethnography and archeology were analyzed as a project of definition of European identity by the means of establishing and describing the 'other,' and subsequently domesticating its artefacts. Scholars and travelers treated the world as a historical museum with Europe at its center, wherein 'primitive' peoples represented earlier stages of civilization in relation to the European one. *Their* culture was perceived in relation to *us*, in the process of helping *us* know *ourselves.*[21] This resulted amongst other things, in the Great Exhibition in 1851, that stimulated further interest in museums and collections, and gave momentum to the focus on things, as opposed to texts, as carriers of knowledge, especially in the study of human culture. Semper, greatly influenced by this exhibition, also owned a certain object-based empiricism, which eventually led to his seminal four-element theory.[22]

Recently, shown through numerous anthropological studies, it became apparent that globalization and modernization causes cultural homogeneity and goes hand in hand with local quests for identity, variation and authenticity. Stender argues that anthropological insights thus seem more relevant to architecture than ever, given the fact that architecture is increasingly becoming a global commodity and more architects are creating buildings for cultural contexts quite different from their own. Studies of vernacular architecture could provide an understanding of local building traditions and materials, but ethnographic analysis of contemporary cultural identity, spatial organization and everyday practice in a given society may be even more useful for the architect working abroad. [23]

In the current architectural discourse, the imposing effects of modernism and globalization are heavily criticized. Reactions to the suggested inclusion of a user or culture results in shifting research approaches. Aravena is a good example of an architect that embeds an (experimental) ethnographic methodology in the research phase of his designs. He tries to include (and study) the users in the design process by inviting them to workshops. Aravena's team aims at finding design solutions together with the user through these workshops, in this way, giving the user of the future architecture a voice – that will be listened to. Surprising insights might occur, like a semi-self-building culture desiring the infrastructure of a half-house instead of a smaller completed house, or having a bathtub before a heater is installed. [24] Similarly, atelier Bow-wow commenced a research approach that is more user or people inclusive. Realized by drawing, they desire to conjoin two different realms, the space of representation and the space of occupation. In their 'Public Drawing' workshops, together with students they observe and converse in a certain public space, of which the findings they secure in the drawing. In their view, the current relation between construction and occupation is similar to the relationship between thesis and antithesis in dialectics. They argue that in vernacular architecture there is a less distinct separation between construction and occupation because they are both parts of spatial practice for the ecology of livelihood. In the words of Tsukamoto; *'We listen to people and observe their behaviors – with a lot of passion – to understand what is really happening in each*

[19] Linda Groat; David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2013), 224 - 225
[20] Marie Stender, *Towards an Architectural Anthropology* (Architectural Theory Review, 2016), 3
[21] Elena Chestnova, *The house that Semper built* (Architectural Theory Review, 2017), 9
[22] Ibid, p. 9
[23] Marie Stender, *Towards an Architectural Anthropology* (Architectural Theory Review, 2016), 4
[24] Alejandro Aravena, *Elemental* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2018). See appendix B.

context. Every place reveals unique behaviors that are shared among the people who are part of that place. These behaviors are not something we can design. They are already there. We can only encourage or intensify them by intervening in existing conditions that define the behavioral capacity of that space… …Architectural design can spotlight certain behavior by accounting for it in decision making.' [25]

Positioning / reflection

Considering the research methods used in the above described ethnographical approaches, chronologically, it relied on studying the artifacts of a different culture, from a rather colonial point of view, wherein the artefacts were removed from their original location. Then as reaction to the desk anthropology, cultures were studied by participating in the daily lives of these cultures, combining the etic and the emic. These studies relied on thorough observation, writings and photography (and sometimes sketches), again from a colonial point of view (i.e. with a focus on traditional societies). Later, ethnographic methods were also used to study our own (western) culture. Examples are the studies that Lucas mentions of Gunn, Yaneva and Hagen, who use ethnography to study architectural practices. [26] Only recently, in the light of rethinking the effects of modernization and globalization, methods to research a user or culture in relation to architecture became more inclusive, resulting in designing with rather than for the people through interactive workshops in Aravena's work and graphing the behavior of people in drawings superimposed on constructional information in the work of Bow-wow. In that sense, there is a shift from imposing architecture to facilitating architecture, seemingly changing the modernist research and design approaches that we have gotten so used to.

In relation to my thesis work and the research methodological research question mentioned in the introduction of this paper, I have discovered several ethnographic methods to study a culture, some with an emphasis on self-building practices. What is interesting is that I am finalizing this research post-fieldwork. On location, I used similar methods as described in the literature I consulted. I photographed, sketched, observed, and wrote a day-to-day diary of my experiences. While meeting the self-builders and modern-vernacular typologies of the island in working with the Red Cross, I gained insight in the practices of the communities with an emphasis on how they build. However, the full length of the fieldwork was twelve days. The 'written culture' in my diary is definitely not considered to be a full ethnography. Nonetheless, photographs can still be examined ex-situ.

With the imposing effects of modernization and globalization in mind, I would argue generally for a research approach that generates a better understanding of the user-culture of the to be designed, specifically for the recent emerging ethnographic methods that focus on inclusivity in the research process. This would bring the architecture back into the hands of the people, not in the hands of the architects – the architect would be a mere facilitator. I would like to cite Fathy here, believing in the power of man to create its own environment, like it has traditionally always done;

'For, of course, a man has a mind of his own, and a pair of hands that do what his mind tells them. A man is an active creature, a source of action and initiative, and you no more have to build him a house than you have to build nests for the birds of the air. Give him half a chance and a man will solve his part of the housing problem.' [27] *– see appendix D.* [28]

[25] Tsukamoto & Kaijima, *Architectural Ethnography: Atelier Bow-wow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2017). See appendix C.
[26] Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2016), 38
[27] Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (The University of Chicago press, 1973), 32
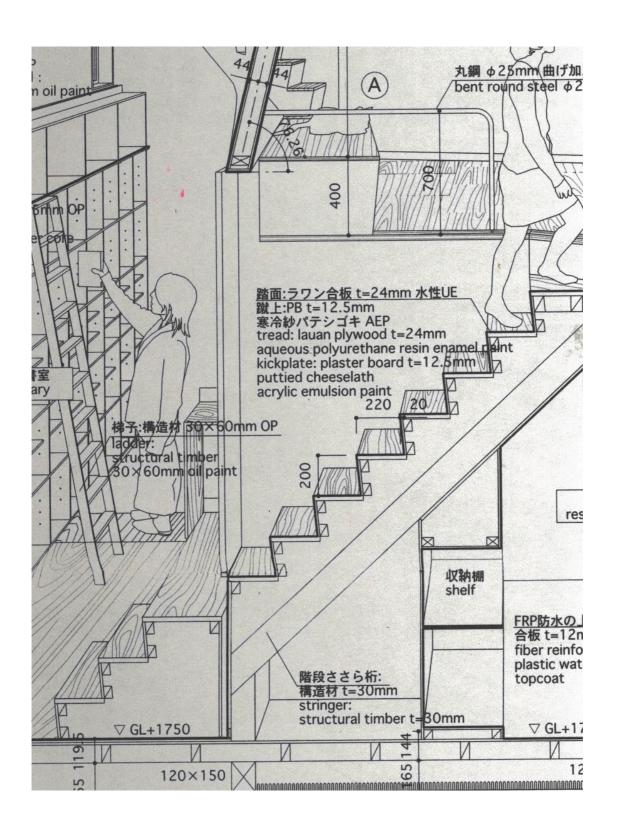[28] Alejandro Aravena, *Elemental* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2018).

Appendix A
Elephant path, intended use versus actual use.

Aravena's inclusive workshops

Appendix C
Bow-wow drawing, combining the space of representation and occupation

丸鋼 φ25mm 曲げ加...
bent round steel φ2...

Ⓐ

400

700

踏面:ラワン合板 t=24mm 水性UE
蹴上:PB t=12.5mm
寒冷紗パテシゴキ AEP
tread: lauan plywood t=24mm
aqueous polyurethane resin enamel paint
kickplate: plaster board t=12.5mm
puttied cheeselath
acrylic emulsion paint

220   20

oil paint

mm OP

...er core

...室
...ary

梯子:構造材 30×60mm OP
ladder:
structural timber
30×60mm oil paint

200

収納棚
shelf

FRP防水の...
合板 t=12m...
fiber reinfo...
plastic wat...
topcoat

res...

階段ささら桁:
構造材 t=30mm
stringer:
structural timber t=30mm

▽ GL+1750

▽ GL+17...

120×150

12...

'Half a chance and a man will solve his part of the housing problem.' – Fathy
Picture; the work of Aravena. Fathy's conviction literally translated into design. Half a chance; half a house.