

# An ethnographical approach to understand a complex, social urban tissue

## Counteracting divisional narratives

### LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT

#### Self-Assessment on Research Methods

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### I INTRODUCTION

Architecture is an ever-developing knowledge-system that concerns itself with how we use space. This means understanding how people dwell and occupy, as well as establishing meaningful places and giving form to the world around us. The way architects understand the world, informs the way they build<sup>1</sup>. This understanding is framed by what has been built already and is developed further by conducting research. With regards to understanding how people dwell and occupy, architects have had a diverse relationship with the user. As a future architect, and currently a student in architecture, I constantly reflect on to what extent my designs are responding to what is relevant to the needs and practices of people. This means also reflecting on what ways to study the practices of people. Exploring the different ways that architects obtain information from people, and awareness about how such methods operate, impact future design strategies in the architectural knowledge systems.

The lectures series of the Research Methods course made me think more critically about the way architects involve the 'user' in research and design. Most of the bachelor design projects don't consider a method of acquiring information from people, unless they are written as demands. To explore these methods, my interest was directed to the praxeological and ethnographical field of research methods. Praxeology means the studying of human action and conduct, in which the built environment can be seen as a stage for everyday practice<sup>2</sup>. The position you put yourself in as the architect-researcher, is one that is willing to learn from the human-made context.

The Methods & Analysis studio 'The Neretva Recollection: Materiality of War, Flowing Memories and Living Archive' focuses on the city of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mostar has endured many wars with many periods of different rules. It has many layers of cultural, social and political structures, which makes the city a complicated being. The last civil war from 1992-1995 still lingers in the urban tissue of Mostar today. This includes the social tissue, in the way that certain social connections do not exist anymore. Before the last war, people of many different ethnicities would engage with each other in the city. The daily social life of Mostar was very active and this was practiced in the streets, as well as at the river Neretva. After the civil war the different ethnicities divided themselves from each other. This resulted in the former war-frontline separating Mostar into a west, neutral and east district and within these particular ethnicities settled. The war has 'erased' certain public spaces that were alive before, which is an aspect that I wanted to explore better, particularly during the field-research. I wanted to understand what the current social tissue of Mostar is actually like and find out which public spaces are used and whether this use is divided. I also wanted to explore how the patterns of daily lives of people relate to their environment, as someone 'in between'.

My research question is as followed: how can research on the everyday lives of people benefit to the complex social tissue of the city and how can an architectural intervention contribute positively to this social tissue?

## II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Before the field-trip to Mostar, different maps were made as a basis to start researching from. As an outsider, obtaining information from literature was crucial in understanding the past and present context of Mostar. Through lectures, literature and maps I found out that certain social activities had faded and that certain public buildings are ethnically divided by institutions.

I decided to step across this often reoccurring, divisive narrative, by looking at the current state of the social tissue of Mostar. I describe social tissue as the socio-cultural urban patterns established by inhabitants within a city. This meant to discover which public spaces people prefer to go to in the city, why, and what they do there. I define public space as a publicly practiced place, parallel to De Certeau's definition<sup>3</sup>, although inhabitants of Mostar have informed me of additional definitions of public space. In Mostar public spaces (before the war) would be known as spaces where there would be no judgement and people could be themselves. Here they were unafraid of consequences, could contribute and were open to learning. In this way, these practices shaped the public spaces. De Certeau explains how everyday practices are an 'ageless art' that holds a knowledge-system without a language, as it is tactical in nature<sup>4</sup>:

"[...]clever tricks of the "weak" within the order established by the "strong", an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter's tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic and warlike discoveries."<sup>5</sup>

I consider these tactics as valuable input for my research. In this way, praxeology forms a basis position in my research.

The divisional narrative makes a complex situation, which requires data from social practices. This is why I decided to opt for qualitative, ethnographical research, as it tends to emphasize a holistic exploration of this, where society is observed from the point of view of the subject<sup>6</sup>.

By asking a number of inhabitants about their everyday practices in the city, I could gather information that relates more to the actual, contemporary social state of Mostar and from there begin my quest to propose something of neutral value that works against the divisive narrative. Ethnographical research asks architects to actually find out about how people live and think, instead of making assumptions, which asks for a kind of "methodological atheism"<sup>7</sup>. These approaches will help me aim at making a project that is more in touch with the reality of the everyday lives of inhabitants and the contemporary social tissue of Mostar. Through this method, residents have direct influence on my research and design.

However, people can be uncomfortable about sharing information about their lives. Lucas states to take into consideration: *what people say they do in interviews, what people actually do in everyday life and the reasons why these differ, through theory and analysis*<sup>8</sup>.

The ethnographic methodology tries to cut through the differences between what people say and what they actually do.

Ethnographic research is about examining how people live and engage with their environment, it literally translates to 'culture writing'. Ray Lucas explains ethnographical research as a "[...]longitudinal and subjective study, where the researcher spends extended periods in the field, interacting and recording in various ways in order to find out more about a given context<sup>8</sup>."

Because ethnography is about people, the *people you encounter can be seen as informants*.

There are several ways to do ethnographical research, such as structured or free-flowing interviews or meeting informants and asking them directly about certain aspects of their everyday life. These are methods that are considered to be associated with participant observation, where the researcher is an apprentice to an informant, working alongside them and learning how certain parts of life are practiced<sup>9</sup>.

Lucas names the following ways how of interviews can be constructed,):

- *Unstructured interviews and free-flowing conversations*. Here, the interviewee gets the freedom to elaborate on topics that interest them and can take the conversation into different directions<sup>10</sup>.

- *Structured questionnaire-based interviews*. This involves preparation for large-scale interviewing and the data reveals more general information. The questions have to be the same for every interviewer, but the interview can be given more artificial air<sup>11</sup>.

- *Exit interviews and activity-based work*. These interviews are conducted after a certain event and are done without the interviewer being present at this event<sup>12</sup>.

- *Non-verbal interview techniques*. Architectural Interviews can also be presented in visual ways. These non-verbal interviews are however, backed up with verbal components. This can involve drawings, model-making, mental maps or (existing) base maps as forms of engagement.<sup>12</sup>

The way the questions are phrased, will influence the answers. It is better to avoid polarized questions and take care of preference questions<sup>13</sup>. Since I positioned myself as the researcher that is an apprentice to an informant, I avoided questions that place me in an authoritarian nature. It is important to keep record of each step of an interview process<sup>14</sup>. Interview data can be analyzed with reference to a theoretical framework, automated through software, or by reading it through carefully. Larger samples (tens or hundreds of responses) of interview data can be taken as a set to assess identifiable trends. Individual interviews are much more qualitative and can give much richer information that is less absolute<sup>15</sup>.

Using *ethnographic research done by others*, can be valuable in terms of the detail and longitudinal nature of such investigations. However, generalizations of the results can be a bit fraught, since cultural specificity is a major point of the research. Therefore, no large claims should be made for any similarities found between the context of interest, and the one that is read about.<sup>16</sup> I looked into the work of Carabelli in the *The Divided City and the Grassroots*, where she found different ways of how Mostar is divided. She then proceeded to do her partially ethnographical research in order to focus on Mostar more than a divided city. Her book supports the idea of Lefebvre's theory of space production. This theory gives credit to the practices set in 'everydayness', this confronts the traditional, abstract ways that cities are represented through<sup>17</sup>. Carabelli states:

„ In fact, it is by living in cities that people not only make sense of the built environment, but decide how to use it and, often, reappropriate these infrastructures to counter imposed ideologies and norms.”<sup>18</sup>. Carabelli's approach to analyse the city of Mostar was to look at the interplay of urban design, political discourses, and everyday movements within the city, so that a more complex rendering of urban dynamics became possible. She based the data in the book on observation, daily conversations, and participatory research<sup>19</sup>. It is valuable to know that she tried to counter the divisional narrative.

At the start of the interviews, I made sure to clarify my role as a researcher, the intentions and process of the interview and research, since it is important that informants are able to trust my motives and can make an informed decision about participating<sup>20</sup>. To not risk the position of the informant<sup>21</sup>, I only noted down people's first name and their age.

The choice of representation in ethnographical research is important and there is a possibility to misrepresent a picture<sup>22</sup>. I set up a structured questionnaire that allowed space for elaboration and a base map that I called the 'interview map'. This map functioned as a visual way to document the answers from the questionnaire. In order for the questions not to reinforce my presumptions, the map shows the basic public spaces and public buildings I found through literature and mapping like squares, parks, cemeteries, schools, shopping-malls, churches and primary roads. In this way, the informants had space to think and mention other public spaces that I am not aware of.

I interviewed 30 people in the course of five days. I set out to do my interviews on the site, choosing inhabitants as informants that are in their natural settings in public spaces and buildings. In this way, I take note of the places people say they go to, and where they are in public during the interview. In my approach of interviewing, I did not ask the interviewees what ethnical group they related themselves to. In this part I positioned myself similarly as to Carabelli. I questioned them based on the idea that it did not matter what ethnical group they belong to, to make sure that they formed their own individual patterns of public living in the city<sup>19</sup>.

### III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Ethnographic methodology appeared in the early 20th century through the work of several anthropologists who aimed at establishing a “natural science of society” that could provide an objective description of a culture<sup>23</sup>. In architecture it took a while to recognize it as a valid way to study people’s opinion and behaviour. Qualitative assessments that recognize the user’s opinion are known in architecture since the 60’s<sup>24</sup>. It was in this period that also the basis appeared for co-designing or participatory-informed design, in which the common man gets an engaged role in the design and building process<sup>25</sup>.

In 1966 Marc Fried conducted interviews for his architectural research about how the reactions from residents that were forced to move because of urban renewal of the West End neighbourhood of Boston<sup>26</sup>, were related to their ‘sense of spatial identity’ of the neighbourhood<sup>27</sup>. He documented the answers from questionnaires through non-verbal responses, like on base maps.

Zeisel and Griffin used physical cues, observing behaviour and interviews as research methods for their project of Charlesview housing in Allston, Massachusetts<sup>28</sup>. The interviews provided them with information on uses, perceptions, likes, dislikes and attempted changes. They provided respondents with base maps in order to find out how residents moved through their project, by letting them draw paths. This focused in particular on how often respondents passed through a central space that was planned by the architects to be an active, social area<sup>29</sup>. These two examples show a shift in regarding people’s opinions and feelings about a public space as valuable input.

During the 90’s certain studio’s developed more of an ‘insider’ perspective to the ethnographic research and acknowledge that architecture works in a social structure rather than just a physical constructed structure. In 1997-1998, the Millennium Dome was a project MUF Partners knew they didn’t want to shape from a fabricated “local”. Instead, they used the actuality of experience of people, which allowed people to tell what their own “locals” are like<sup>30</sup>.

Regarding the understanding of local society from people, ‘Architectural ethnography’ is a term that studio Bow-Wow developed as the search for a new way in drawing society-related<sup>31</sup>. Since the late 1990’s, Studio Bow-Wow has been involved in the development of the methodology of observing and recording the human environment. They examine the ways architectural drawings can work to explore the actual usages and needs of people, and the ways architectural drawings give shape to individual life in a globalized society<sup>31</sup>.

In his thesis called: ‘The Neighbourhood Doctor’, Alan Waxman directly gathered information from the residents of Brownsville, Brooklyn and worked on maps that are based on their perspective of the neighborhood, which express topographies of fear, safety and enjoyment<sup>32</sup>. He positions himself as a social organizer that sets the stage and invites the residents to do what they already do best.

These examples show a shift of the position of the researcher that examines people from the outside-in, to the inside-out. The latter refers to the authority of the architect and user being leveled out to the same plane. People directly influence the research and design of architects. The scale of research also enlarged, making the ‘social architect’ into a ‘social urbanist’ since architecture is considered to work in a social structure.

I rely on the aspect of architects working from the inside and reintroducing the simple act obtaining knowledge from the inhabitants. I found through my methodology answers about how people move in public space, why people prefer certain places and how people feel about them. Working on a base of knowledge of the contemporary social tissue of the city and understanding these spaces through the eyes of the inhabitants, lets me be more sensitive and aware of their direct environment in relation to making an intervention. This is not considered 'new' but rather an overlooked, traditional or perhaps 'everyday' type of method. Nowadays, this has been introduced under 'socially concerned architecture'<sup>33</sup>.

#### IV POSITIONING

The inhabitants directly informed me about their everyday, social patterns and needs, which helps to understand the actual reality better. I consider this an 'insider perspective'. How the architect relates to, and researches people ('the user') is an ongoing topic. In the lecture of Marieke Berkers, it was mentioned how "by studying the praxis of architecture one can develop an eye for the actual users of building, and not the imagined ones."<sup>2</sup> It was also stated that a remaining problem is that the ethnographer is never a 'neutral' observer. Is it possible to be fully neutral as an ethnographer? In the book *The Focused Interview*, Merton says:

"As the scope of the interview survey has grown, the research process has become increasingly bureaucratized: consequently, the responses sought become more stereotyped and further removed from natural modes of discourse. We therefore run the risk of losing sight of the seemingly simple social interaction process of asking and answering questions."<sup>34</sup>

If I were to distance myself too much, it would standardize the process. I chose to use the opportunity of the field-trip to do face to face interviews and applying the same questions and base maps to each person. Still, within this format, you have to 'maneuver' through answers. This maneuvering, is part of the tactics in everyday practices<sup>4</sup>. This is what Merton meant with 'simple social interaction'. So in the end, to retrieve information about the everyday practices, research should be conducted in a similar 'everyday' way.

Retrieved Information about a place from sources like literature and maps, is not always the 'the only or actual truth for the people that live there. Carabelli shares the understanding that citizens and urban movements initiate their own discourses on urban rights, a right to a city without ethnic rivalry<sup>35</sup>. I oppose of a position that assumes what people need. What people need comes from interacting with them, those who actually exist in that context and time.

It is a challenge to use ethnographic research methods because it requires an understanding that your own opinions are not important, since the research is about the informants as much as it can be<sup>7</sup>. This raises the question what it means for an architect to be a social scientist.

Crawford envisions an architecture that is in touch with everyday life that could help translate frustrated desires into a political language:

"[...]Therefore the practices of everyday urbanism should inevitably lead to social change, not via abstract political ideologies imposed from outside, but instead through specific concerns that arise from the lived experience of different individuals and groups in the city."<sup>36</sup>

Aureli states:

'With the 1990's avant-garde architects on the decline of political correctness, we are witnessing a new wave of socially concerned architecture. Symposiums, exhibitions, biennials, magazines, and journals have amplified this phenomenon by promoting new ways of practicing architecture that invest design with a social and political mission. The new generation of young architects feels the urge to focus not on aesthetic and formal concerns, but on the improvement of our urban condition."<sup>33</sup>

When it comes to doing their social activities, Inhabitants of Mostar don't act as divided as they are written about to be. The divisional narrative is less present in the social tissue of Mostar, as the daily lives of people concerns the whole city. It is within the public realm, where the division

blurs. Some practices are forced to remain divided since institutions ethnically divide certain public buildings, which the inhabitants find unnecessary. I understood from the inhabitants that they are tired of this divisive narration. Asking people about their city and the public spaces opened a different 'insider' perspective about what the actual contemporary social culture is like. Like this, a better framework was established for how the social tissue of Mostar is nowadays and that the potentials to contribute lie in certain public areas. Between the institutions and the people is where architecture can vocalize the needs of people within established social patterns. I position myself within the realm of 'socially concerned architecture', which concerns itself first and foremost with the lives and perspectives of people. I see myself as the 'neighbour' architect that is a type of 'inside-outsider', as well as a 'social organizer' that tries to understand people's everyday-lives within the built environment, and thinks about how to improve this with people.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 8

<sup>2</sup> Marieke Berkers, Praxeology, for AR3A160 course 2018/19 Q1 (Delft: Delft University of Technology, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 117

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40

<sup>6</sup> Linda Groat & David Wang, *Architectural research methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 222

<sup>7</sup> Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 190

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168

<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre in Giulia Carabelli, *The Divided City and the Grassroots*. (US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 12

<sup>18</sup> Giulia Carabelli, *The Divided City and the Grassroots*. (US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.12

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29

<sup>20</sup> Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 82

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167

<sup>23</sup> Linda Groat & David Wang, *Architectural research methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 224

<sup>24</sup> Klaudiusz Fross & Agata Sempruch, *The Qualitative Research for the Architectural Design and Evaluation of Completed Buildings. Part 1: Basic Principles and Methodology*. In *Architecture, Civil Engineering, Environment No.3* (Gliwice: Silesian University of Technology, 2015), 14

<sup>25</sup> Tom Avermaete, *The Architect and the Public: Empowering the people in Postwar Architecture Culture*, in Hunch. The Berlage Report on Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape, no.14, pp.48-63. (Delft: Delft University of Technology, 2010), 59

<sup>26</sup> Marc Fried, *Grieving for a Lost Home: Psychological Costs of Relocation*. In *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*, ed. Wilson, J.Q., 359-379. (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), 359

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365

<sup>28</sup> John Zeisel & Mary Griffin, *Charlesview Housing : A diagnostic evaluation*. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1975), p.11

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>30</sup> Alan Read, *Architecturally Speaking : Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*. (London: Routledge, 2000) p.63,64

<sup>31</sup> Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stalder, Yu Iseki, *Architectural Ethnography. Japanese Pavilion Venice Biennale 2018*. (Tokyo: TOTO Publishing, 2018), excerpt on book cover

<sup>32</sup> Alan Waxman, *Neighbourhood Doctor. Landscape Architecture for Public Health* (Cambridge: Thesis MLA Harvard GSD, 2014) Retrieved from [https://issuu.com/alanwaxman/docs/neighborhood\\_doctor](https://issuu.com/alanwaxman/docs/neighborhood_doctor)

<sup>33</sup> Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Theology Of Tabula Rasa: Walter Benjamin And Architecture in The Age of Precarity*. In *Log*. No. 27 (Winter/Spring 2013), pp. 111-127 (New York: Anyone Corporation, 2013), 111

<sup>34</sup> Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, Patricia L. Kendall, *The Focused Interview* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), xii

<sup>35</sup> Giulia Carabelli, *The Divided City and the Grassroots*. (US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.13

<sup>36</sup> Dell Upton, *Architecture in Everyday Life*. In *New Literary History*. Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 707-723, (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2002), 714