ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Pedagogical Approach Towards Understanding Patterns of Inhabitation

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I   INTRODUCTION

The intersection of Research and Architecture

Architecture is a practice that primarily focuses on how humans experience their environment and how it affects their daily life. For this reason, it often requires the integration of a variety of methods to reach its goal of improving humans' quality of life and how they experience the built environment. An effective way of doing this is often the integration of different skill sets in the process, and conducting multiple research to understand the inhabitants and the specific context. Conducting research and using one or multiple methods of gathering useful data is often a heuristic activity. Although figuring out the best option can, at times, take a few attempts, a clear understanding of the available methodologies beforehand will be the first step towards fruitful research for the projects. Jorge Mejía mentioned in his lecture for "Lecture Series Research Method" that research is a "cognitive practice...a joint knowledge that allows us to examine the environment."[1] It is hard to say that this course enlightened me on any of the research methodologies I selected to use for my thesis project, specifically since the course was taking place while I was conducting a group research in Rotterdam, Netherlands for the Research Seminar Global Housing course in preparation for a design studio based in Addis Ababa. Regardless, the course materials were a comprehensive presentation of the variety of methodologies available in the field of architecture. This was very informative and lead me to realize the possibility of combining multiple approaches to enhance the result of the research.

Pedagogical Application and Thesis

Shelter is one of the basic needs for human beings, yet, like most countries around the world, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – the site for the thesis project – is struggling with a severe shortage of housing. Ethiopia is one of the countries struggling with rapid urbanization and economic growth[2] in East Africa. This has caused Addis Ababa to expand at a rapid and unbalanced rate to accommodate for the influx of migrants travelling into the city from the rural areas. Addis Ababa's resettlement program has mostly focused on fast and short-term solutions resulting in a patchwork of buildings and regulations. The inadequate affordable housing and lack of a coherent plan for the issue have also exacerbated land-related conflicts in the city. Since initiating the Integrated Housing and Development Plan (IHDP) mass housing scheme in 2005[3], the Ethiopian government has championed the construction of hundreds of condominium buildings, mostly at the peri-urban areas of the city by force-evicting farmers from lands which have been in their families for generations.[4] The top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to mass housing in Addis Ababa resembles the postwar Western modernist housing estates[5] and – despite statements reminiscent

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[1] Jorge Mejía, Lecture, "Methods of architectural exploration, evaluation, and discover", TU Delft, 5 September, 2019.

[2] Edmond J. Keller & Edith Mukudi-Omwami, "Rapid urban expansion and the challenge of pro-poor housing in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia," *Africa Review* 9, no. 2, 173-185, (May 2017): 174.

[3] Larissa Larsen, et al, "The Impact of Rapid Urbanization and Public Housing Development on Urban Form and Density in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia." *Land* 8, no. 4 (2019): 66. https://doi.org/10.3390/land8040066.

[4] Hayalnesh Gezahegn, "Multiple Protests Across Oromia Region in Wale of Condo Houses Distributed by Addis Abeba City Admin", *Addis Standard,* March 7, 2019.

[5] Tom Gardner, " 'Addis Has Run Out of Space': Ethiopia's Radical Redesign," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2017.

of George Orwell's Ministry of Truth – has failed to provide for the specified targeted group – the low-income individuals of the society.

There are great opportunities for a city to improve the life of its inhabitants during rapid growth. Addis Ababa's growth has mostly been horizontal and has failed to take the opportunity to explore a balanced and integrated way of densifying the city which accounts for the existing symbiotic relationship between neighbourhoods and their cultural heritage. The specious housing policy and resettlement process implemented with little to no regard for existing communities and livelihood have exacerbated the tenuous housing stability of the urban poor. Addis Ababa's mass housing scheme is an embodiment of how poorly planned and implemented urban growth can have economic and social costs[6] causing "conflict and disorder".[7] The selected site for the graduation design project – Kolfe, Addis Ababa – is a residential site of about thirty-two hectares and predominantly with low-income dwellers living in rental homes owned by the Federal Housing Commission (FHC). Kolfe is currently one of the neighbourhoods in the inner city of Addis Ababa earmarked for redevelopment and densification, but the fate of the current inhabitant remains to be unclear. This issue raises questions such as: how can rapid urbanization result in positive outcomes without causing tension between communities and the denial of neighbourhoods? How can a city achieve efficient densifications without having negative ecological and economic impacts? What would balanced, human-scale densification for a neighbourhood such as Kolfe with low-income inhabitants and existing strong social ties look like? What is architecture's place in a city plagued with conflicts?

II   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Selected Research Approach

The Global Housing studio course is focused on exploring different approaches that can be used for gaining a better understanding and forming a position for the design of affordable housing in the "Global South" – as it is usually referred to within the department. Ethnographic architectural research method was selected as a methodology for this course since it is one of the most "hands-on" and "on the scene"[8] heuristics research methodologies. This approach is useful in revealing the social relations, customs and traditions, and the space-people interaction of a specific society.

This approach was also used as a tool for understanding "patterns of inhabitation and the morphological and typological characteristics of housing settlements"[9]. These "patterns of inhabitations" can be described in terms of domestic practices, tangible or intangible borders and thresholds, income generation, building techniques, public spaces, and so on. Consequently, ethnographic architectural research methodology was used in Global Housing Seminar to gather data for the two contexts chosen for the course – Blijdorp in Rotterdam, Netherlands, and Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – with the use of architectural drawings, participatory research, and visual ethnography to produce the deliverables. The

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[6] Ricky Burdett and Philipp Rode, *Shaping Cities in an Urban Age, (London, London School of Economics, 2018), 14.*

[7] Marco Di Nunzio, "Street hustlers helped build Addis Ababa. Now they're being pushed out," *City Metric,* August 27, 2019.

[8] "What Is Ethnography? | Anthropology@Princeton." Princeton University. The Trustees of Princeton University. Accessed January 20, 2020.

[9] "Research Seminar Global Housing AR3AD030, Q1 2019/20 COURSE GUIDE", TU Delft. Chair of Architecture and Dwelling, Global Housing

goal for the course was two folds: to prepare two graphic novels – one graphic novel for Blijdorp and the other for Summit – as a way of comparing and contrasting the two contexts; and as an introduction to the method to open up the possibility of implementing the approach for the research and design process of the thesis project.
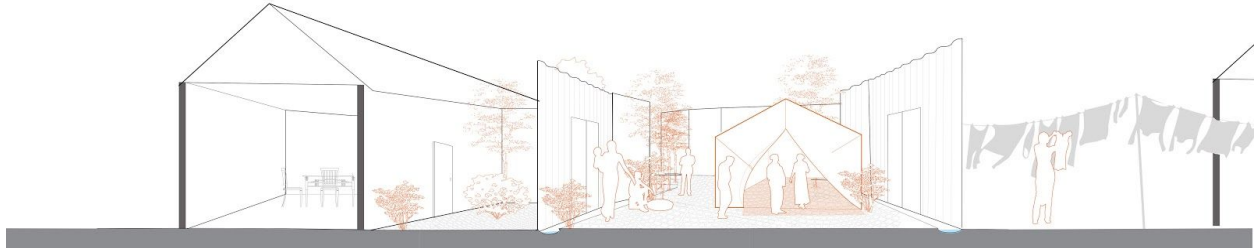

FIG. 1 Thresholds, income generation activities, domestic practices, public spaces, and building techniques of Kolfe's secondary street.

FIG. 2 Kolfe's informal street market

Epistemic Framework: Graphic Storytelling in Ethnographic Research

The first step for the research process was understanding and familiarizing ourselves with the area and the context. With a group of three individuals, we started our ethnographic research in Blijdorp by attempting to understand the architectural and historical heritage of the neighbourhood using archives of literature and existing housing plans of the area. After gathering what we considered to be some foundational information about the neighbourhood, we conducted visual ethnography by travelling to the neighbourhood several times to walk around, observe, sketch, and take pictures of the activities that take place during different times of the week. We conducted qualitative research by observing the way people interact with one another and their surroundings.
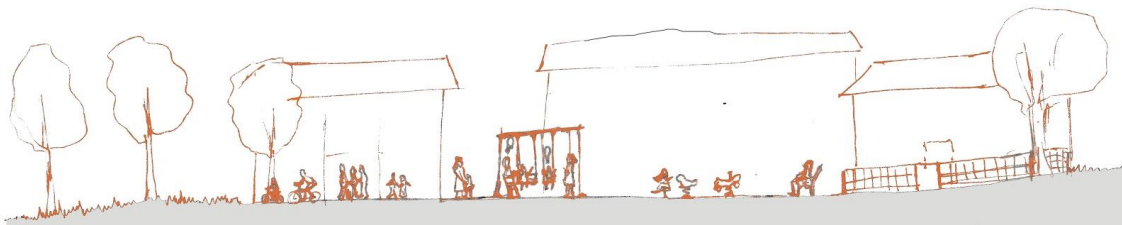

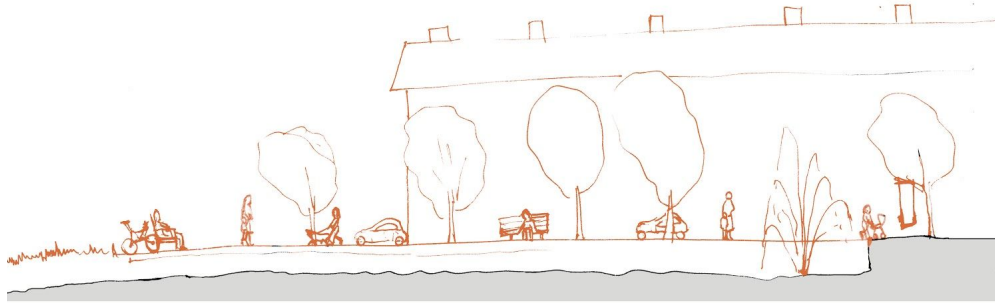FIG.3 Analysis and street section of neighbourhood activities in Blijdorp

FIG. 4 Analysis and canal street section of Blijdorp

Gathering information about the history of the neighbourhood and the historical heritage lead us to the discovery of a neighbourhood open house at one of the most prominent post-war buildings – Eendracht housing complex – built in the 1930s which describes the postwar history and building technique morphology. During our visit to the Eendracht housing complex, we conducted interviews with the inhabitants of the apartment units and asked them about their daily activities within their homes and in the neighbourhood, about the community life, and a typical day for them which were portrayed in the graphic novel.
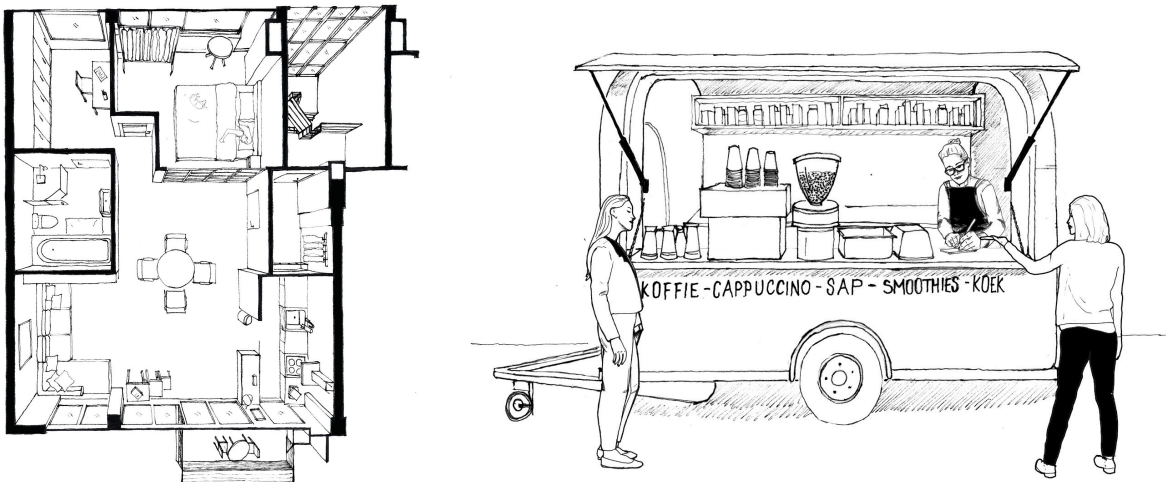
FIG. 5,6 Selected images from Blijdorp's graphic novel

On the other hand, to our surprise, our survey and analysis in Summit, Addis Ababa was more challenging. In Summit. the community life during the day was mostly dominated by the domestic housemaids who work in the neighbourhood. For this graphic novel, although we managed to talk with few individuals in the neighbourhood, our data was mostly based on observations and photography and less on accounts gathered from residents.

FIG. 7,8 Selected images from Summit's graphic novel used as an ethnographic research output

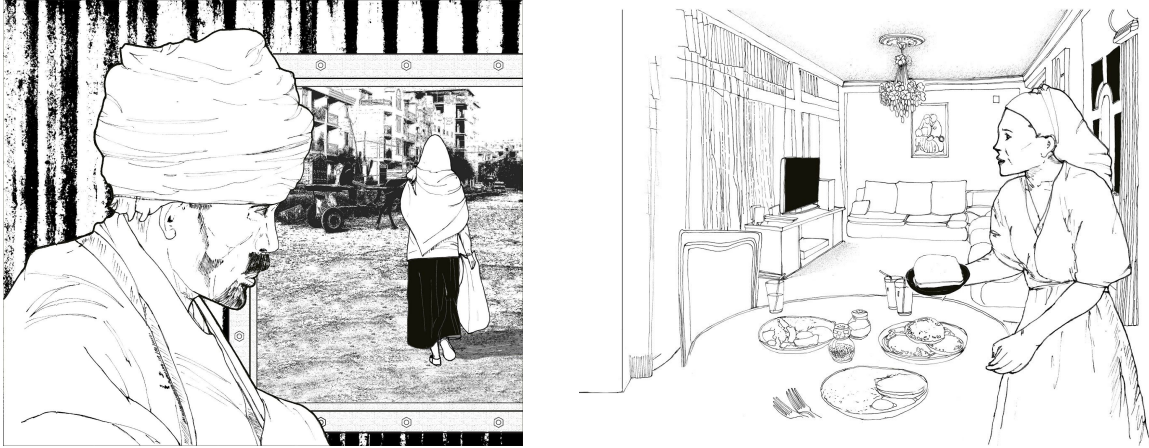These methodologies – ethnographic research and participatory design – were also implemented during the survey and analysis to explore answers for the thesis research questions and present a proposal for creating a human scale and integrated neighbourhood for Kolfe. These approaches were the first step towards answering the question of what architecture's place could be in a city of conflicts, and how it can be used to create peaceful and organic daily interactions between different groups with open spaces such as markets, public courtyards, and porches– buffer zones. This phase of the project resulted in more of a critical ethnographic approach than the previous phase.
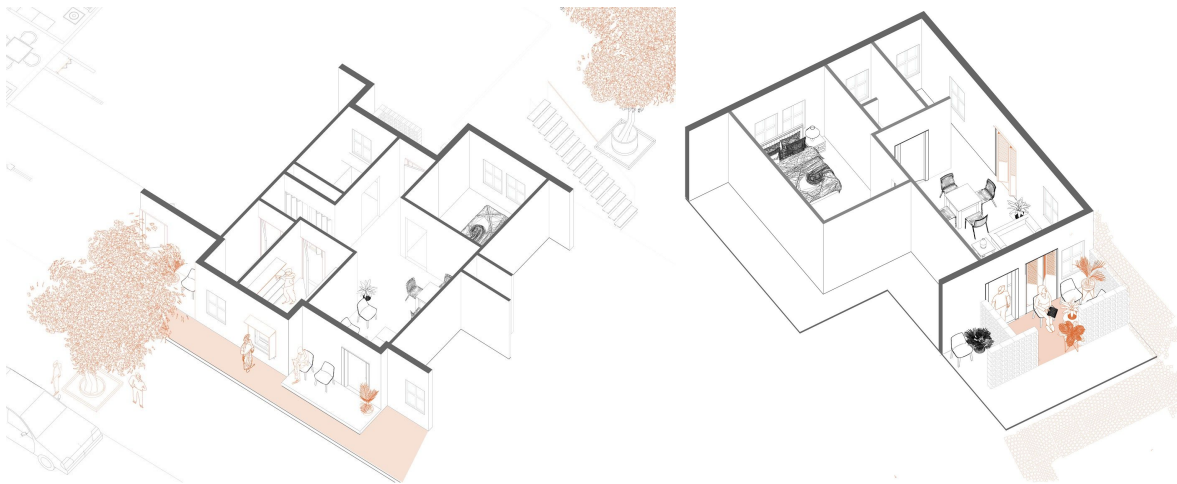
FIG. 9 Thesis project proposed co-operative housing "buffer zones"

Current Literature

As a sociologist, in his quest for understanding the human socio-historic morphology and the city life, Richard Sennett has succeeded in becoming an advocate for the forgotten groups of our society and using ethnography to formulate his theories on how to create balanced societies over the years. Sennett "focuses on how people can become competent interpreters of their own experience, despite the

obstacles society may put in their way. His research entails ethnography, history, and social theory."[10] For instance, in one of his earlier works, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* published in 1998, Sennett uses a critical ethnographic qualitative research to account his interaction with a blue-collar worker who he argues has been affected by the corrosive nature of employment in capitalism.[11] Again, years later, Sennett uses a similar method in his book, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City,* to tell the story of a small informal shop owner in Delhi – Mr. Sudhir – whom he observes for a day and decides to have a conversation with while the shop owner conducts his daily business. He writes: "In Delhi, the 'rubble' below the storm of Progress is its marginal people who, like Mr Sudhir, struggle to find a place for themselves in places where they do not belong. Power stands against them, yet they have made something out of their marginality."[12]

Richard Sennett is a scholar who continued the work of his predecessors such as John Dewey – an avid supporter of social reform and the use of philosophical approach to anthropology in the early twentieth century. Individuals such as Jane Jacobs, who also makes several appearances in Sennett's *Building and Dwelling*, was an activist who coined the term "eyes on the street"[13] and observed the way small neighbourhood formed organically. She echoed Aristotle's idea of forming small and diversified cities (or villages) which are formed by small interactions at local stores and playgrounds. According to her biography written by Robert Kanigel, Jacobs first became inspired by the vibrant life of Greenwich Village in 1934 while taking subway rides to different neighbourhoods in Manhattan and observing the street life[14] Although she was not trained in urban planning, her movements and writings such as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* influenced a generation of urban planners around the world. Jacobs was against car-centred master planning, especially the use of expressways in cities and spearheaded the movement against Robert Mosse's city planning approach in lower Manhattan. She believed that cities had their own disorderly chaotic way of developing. She wrote:

> "...that the sight of people attracts still other people, is something that city planners and city architectural designers seem to find incomprehensible. They operate on the premise that city people seek the sight of emptiness, obvious order and quiet. Nothing could be less true. The presences of great numbers of people gathered together in cities should not only be frankly accepted as a physical fact - they should also be enjoyed as an asset and their presence celebrated."[15]

Prominent figures such as Robert E. Park who taught at the Chicago School of Architecture led empirical research to understand the neighbourhoods in Chicago by "living in communities for extended periods, asking systematically what was in people's heads."[16] These studies were inspired by a research conducted in Poland by Florian Znaniecki and W. I. Thomas among the poor immigrants who became industry workers.

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[10] "Richard Sennett." Institute for Public Knowledge, June 21, 2017. https://ipk.nyu.edu/people/richard-sennett/.

[11] Sharon K.Sagiv, Jeff N. Epstein, David C. Bellinger, and Susan A. Korrick. "Pre- and Postnatal Risk Factors for ADHD in a Nonclinical Pediatric Population." *Journal of Attention Disorders* 17, no. 1 (January 2013): 47.

[12] Richard Senette, *Building and Dwelling : Ethics for the City* (London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2019), 120.

[13] Richard Senette, *Building and Dwelling*, 83.

[14] Maureen Corrigan, "'Eyes On The Street' Details Jane Jacobs' Efforts To Put Cities First." NPR. NPR, September 28, 2016.

[15] "Jane Jacobs." RSS, January 2, 2010. https://www.pps.org/article/jjacobs-2.

[16] Richard Senette, *Building and Dwelling,* 64.

Even though ethnographic research is mainly based on primary data collected by the researcher, this method can sometimes pose problems as the observer is an outsider looking into an unknown context or society. This qualitative research method does have its advantages since it gives the researcher the liberty to observe all aspects of the environment, in most cases, without any constraints. On the other hand, this can also become very challenging because most of the process is based on subjective experience and forming a position of the context.

III   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Historical and Theoretical Background

The word 'ethnography' is derived from two Greek words: *ethnos*, meaning 'people; and *graphia* which means 'writing'.[17] The term is generally used to describe the practice of writing accounts of the customs and cultures of other societies other than one's own context. Although the origin of this practice can be traced back to ancient history during the 5th century by Herodotus from Greek who wrote about his accounts with fifty different people[18], the prevailing cases were during the height of colonialism by Europeans, mostly missionaries, travelling to and writing about non-European societies. These societies were often seen as primitive and inferior, and therefore ethnographers lived with the natives and wrote accounts of their experiences to understand the societies. This was widely used during the time as an early stage of "civilization development" which later faced a barrage of criticism.[19]

Ethnography – also referred to as cultural anthropology – is a subset of the study of anthropology. It is sometimes lumped with other qualitative research methods, but it can be used as both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The main goal of this approach is understanding and comparing different cultures and customs with a vantage point of societal interactions. As mentioned in a previous section, this method is often selected because it is a hands-on, heuristics research methodology which helps the ethnographer identify the social relations, customs and traditions of the specific community. This method is a scientific approach and can integrate multiple approaches, including subjective and detailed descriptions of personal experiences. Most ethnographers live in the specific community they are studying for a year or more to conduct this research. The use of this discipline as discourse then as a scientific method spiked in the twentieth century. The graph below from Collins Dictionary indicates the trend of the usage. These days, it is common for cultural anthropologists to use this method at least once during their professional development.

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[17] J. A. Cuddon, Claire Preston, and J. A. Cuddon. 1999. *The Penguin dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. London: Penguin Books, [page unknown].

[18] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Ethnography." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., January 18, 2019.

[19] J. A. Cuddon, Claire Preston, *Penguin dictionary of literary terms,* [page unknown].
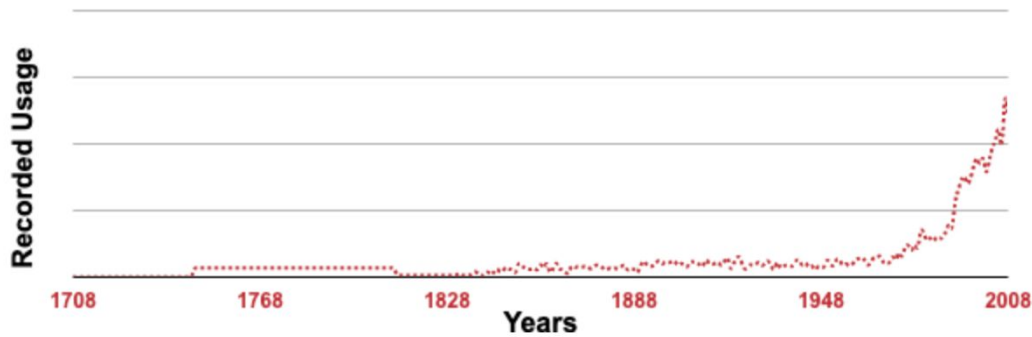
FIG. 10 The trend of word usage of "ethnography"

Ethnographic research can go beyond simply documenting one's observations from an "etic" point of view – an outsider looking in – and writing accounts of one's own experience with the "natives" and reporting it. Oftentimes, ethnographers use their empirical data for the understanding of what might be an "emic" – native experience– and to form a position. An emic experience can also be described as the internal experience or knowledge of the customs and cultures. The pioneer anthropologists of the ethnographic research are commonly known as Bronisław Malinowski and Margaret Mead.[20] Bronisław Malinowski was an influential British anthropologist who rejected approaches by his predecessors such as Émile Durkheim and their generic representation of societies. With his functionalist theory, he argued that "all aspects of a society—institutions, roles, norms, etc.—serve a purpose and that all are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society." and were vital ingredients for understanding a society.[21] On the other hand, Mead was an American anthropologist whose work concentrated on her ethnographic research among the Samoan community. Her research and books depended heavily on her observations and lacked any qualitative data which jeopardized the legitimacy of her results and theories.

Reflection on the Changing Viewpoints

During a time when Japan was venturing to become the global figure in urban planning of the mid-nineteenth and twentieth century, Nishiyama Uzo became a prominent figure in the process by introducing foreign (and Western) approaches to the country.[22] He was an architect-planner who was mostly known for his teaching and theoretical and historical writings. Although he had few built works, he carefully recorded the morphology of Japan's built environment with the use of multiple sketches and photography. Nishiyama's methodology was a little out of the norm and have been of interest to most Japanese planners and scholars because he used a more in-depth social approach to urban planning. He was an emic observer of the cultural context while acting as an etic observer and critic of the foreign urban planning approach he was attempting to import into the cities.

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[20] Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Ethnography."
[21] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Functionalism." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., October 15, 2008.
[22] Carola Hein, *Reflections on Urban, Regional and National Space - Three Essays.* New York, NY. Routledge, 2018, 6.
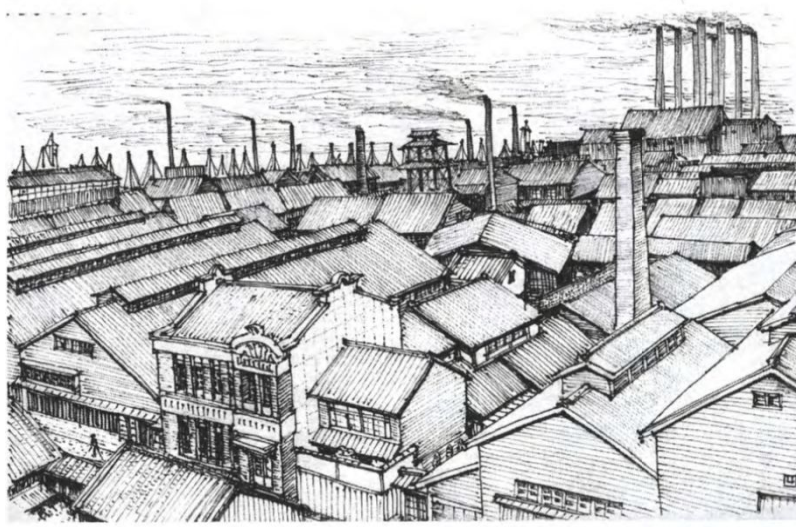
FIG. 11 Nishiyama's sketch of industrialised Osaka
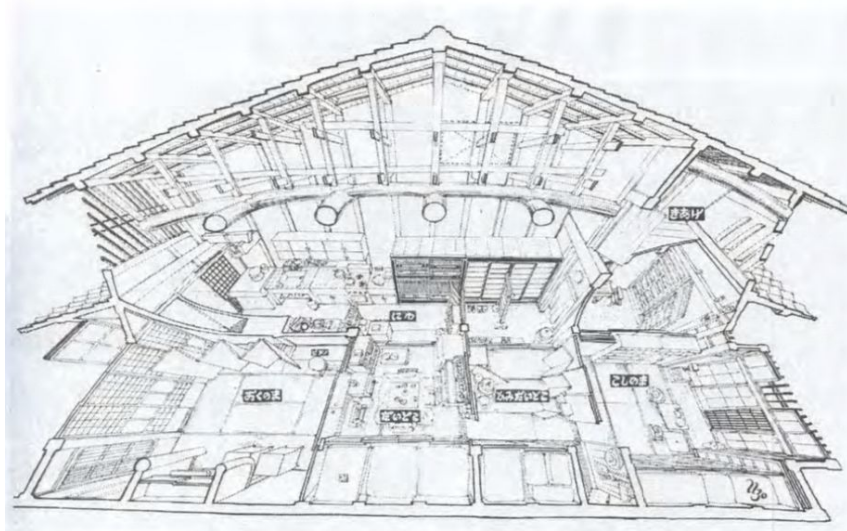
FIG. 12 Nishiyama's interpretative top view sketch of a traditional Japanese home

Nishiyama observed the lives of the common people and produced multiple creative representations of Japanese dwellings. He used his observations and ethnographic representations to devise a Westernised master plan for the reconstruction of Japan after the war with a vernacular approach. Although he was not political in his approach, he was a big supporter of using the opportunity of post-war reconstruction as a way to structure the cities – without actually talking or commenting on the war. "carefully examined changing lifestyles and everyday objects of traditional Japanese people from the earliest times of Japanese construction to post-war practices. As such, Nishiyama provided detailed and carefully documented insight into changing lifestyles, as through his drawings and photographs of traditional Japanese row houses, the *nagaya*." [23] One can imagine that studies of small traditional housing can be difficult to apply to an urban plan. For this reason, he resorted to integrating other formulas to devise a

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[23] Carola Hein, *Reflections on Urban, Regional and National Space*, 6 .

plan and gave way the political economy most of his colleagues were supporting. As a man widely known as a Marxist, his pragmatic approach towards mass urban planning seemed to contradict with his ideals.[24] which might have tainted the accuracy and genuineness of his approach.
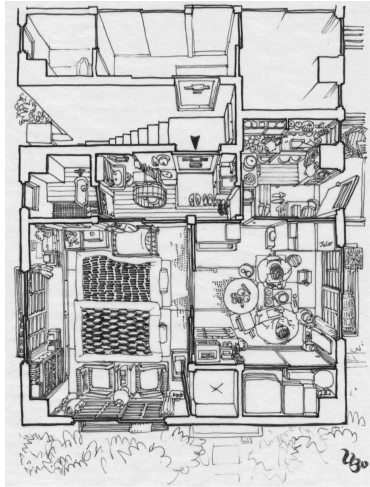
FIG. 13 Nishiyama Uzo's top view drawing of a Japanese home
FIG. 14 " Kon Wajiro and Nishiyama Uzo's participatory research of everyday space in Japan" representation
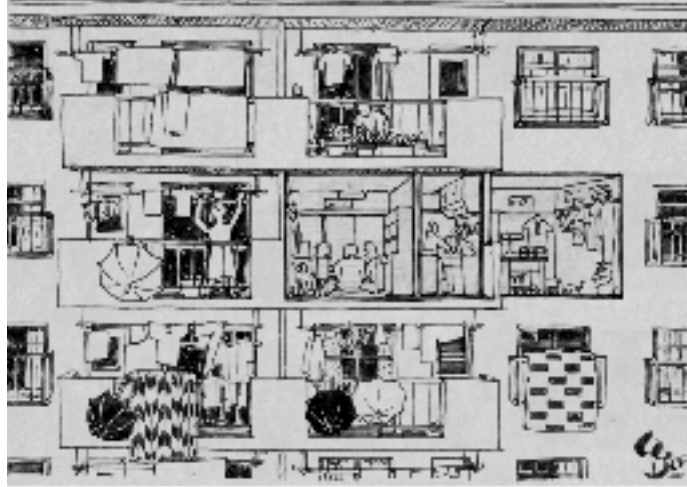
In contrast, a more contemporary approach that has been gaining more traction in the architecture field is the method popularized by the Tokyo-based architecture firm, Atelier Bow-Wow. Founded in 1992 by Yoshiharu Tsukmoto and Momoyo Kaijima, this firm concentrates on research-based cultural architecture. Atelier Bow-Wow studies urban conditions and introduces its hybrid and impromptu nature with creative visual representations that easily communicate the conditions to the readers. Their books, such as *Made in Tokyo,* act as guidebooks and introduce an alternative view of Tokyo (which is need-based instead of being driven by aesthetic goals). This architecture is informed by their studies of " instances of hybrid, cross programmed building types with unlikely juxtapositions, the result of the extreme pressure on land... what they have termed 'micro public space' ".[25] The firm occasionally studies behaviours by installing furniture to create "situations" and invoking chance meeting by " leaving room for users to adapt and appropriate space".[26]

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[24] Carola Hein, *Reflections on Urban, Regional and National Space*, 10.
[25] "180Spatial Agency." Atelier Bow-Wow: Group - Tokyo, Japan. Accessed January 21, 2020. https://www.spatialagency.net/database/where/social structures/atelier.bow.wow.
[26] "180Spatial Agency." Atelier Bow-Wow: Group - Tokyo, Japan.

FIG. 15 Visual representation of ethnographic research by Atelier Bow-Wow

The ethnographic research approach is often used with an attempt to understand the cultural context and customs and behaviours of the specific community. In that sense, Atelier Bow-Wow's approach seems to be more successful in the field. The representational drawings introduced by Yoshiharu Tsukmoto and Momoyo Kaijima – and other architects and artists they have collaborated with over the years – from their multiple studies of Tokyo and other cities are more experimental. This approach opens up the chance for discourse and bridges the gap between the empirical research and theory building process instead of jumping to the end result of forming positions (which has been a drawback for most ethnographers in the past).

IV   POSITIONING

Throughout this process of exploring few methodologies for the survey and analysis phase of the thesis project and writing this essay, although I am critical of some aspects of ethnographic research method, I find the approach to be quite helpful in understanding the living patterns of a specific community. My criticisms mostly revolve around the purely qualitative approach which has been used in the past without taking quantitative data using case studies or first-hand accounts of the inhabitants. This often leads to assumptions and imposing one's own experience. For instance, as mentioned previously, when Europeans travelled to non-European communities, they had preconceived notions of their primitiveness, and this mindset tainted much of their studies and writings. This is becoming less and less of a problem these days as the use of case studies has become highly recommended in the process. Yet, this problem occasionally seems to seep through in the practice.

While conducting our research in the graduation Seminar course, we came across some revelations. For instance, during our survey in Blijdorp, we discovered some discrepancies in our results. From an ethnographic approach of using simple observations and 'mapping' with the use of photography and sketches, we discovered that Blijdorp was a very green neighbourhood with multiple public spaces and friendly activities which attract people from different cities who enjoyed a harmonious and tightly knit society. We used the qualitative data that we gathered and tested it with the use of a few case studies

with the help of interviews. While using interviews and more participatory approaches, to our surprise, we discovered that the individuals who lived in the area actually lead very private lives. This proved the necessity of testing our empirical assumptions and using first-hand accounts while using the methodology. As we conducted more interviews around the neighbourhood, we discovered that this lifestyle was shared by the majority of newcomers to the neighbourhood (which were predominantly the residents of Blijdorp). The graphic novel produced for this context communicates this revelation with the minimal interactions that can be seen between the different characters.

Similarly, during the trip to Addis Ababa and the site survey and interviews in Summit, we discovered that the community life during the day seemed to be mostly dominated by the live-in housemaids who work for the high or middle-high income families of the neighbourhood, and due to the nature of their work, have limited interaction with others in the neighbourhood. Although the community life was similar in these two contexts, again, we discovered through interviews that what was driving them was also slightly different. Both neighbourhoods had mostly young working individuals or families, but in the case of Summit, the privacy issues were also driven by the urban insecurity which was present in most neighbourhood. This explained the multiple guard post they had in the area.

Architecture's Place in Conflict and Its Potential

Although this topic needs further discussion and more in-depth research, I believe, similar to any conflict resolution approach, understanding the context should be at the epicentre of this process. This brings us back to the ethnographic approach of not only observing the context and culture of the specific area but also the need for documenting and analysing first-hand experiences of the inhabitants. This method can be combined with other methods such as mapping the city. The individuals who experience the conflict on a daily basis are the best authority in deciding the best remedy for the problem and how it will affect their lives.

Architecture and design can play a role in this process and have great potentials in peacebuilding for our modern cities. The built environment may not be able to resolve acrimonious political issues in our society, but it has the potential to alleviate the tension city dwellers feel in their daily lives and instead create situations which trigger friendly conversations in the neighbourhoods. Richard Sennett emphasises the reciprocity of the Pnyx – open amphitheatre – and Agora – open market – of ancient Greece which he believes played big roles in our modern democracy.[27] These two open public spaces invoked different parts of the human behaviours – organized and anarchic – which led the people to have productive and intellectual discourse and led them to have a democratic and balanced society.

During my site survey, ethnographic research, and participatory design interviews in Addis Ababa –specifically in Kolfe – I was every so often taken aback by the politically driven comments the inner-city dwellers made which communicated their dissatisfaction with the top-down urbanisation approach. My thesis statement and questions are driven by a general criticism of the city's approach towards urbanisation and densification of the inner-city neighbourhoods of Addis Ababa. These approaches often seem to discount the current inhabitants and the end result after redevelopment usually seem to bulldoze through their heritage identity. I strongly embrace my position in the need for a balance in a bottom-up and top-down approaches towards densification; and the selected research methodologies, if done right, have the potential to deliver the right path towards solutions which can succour the struggling neighbourhoods and create democratic neighbourhoods.

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[27] Richard Senette, *Building and Dwelling,* 207.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:

Cover image: Created by author. Analytical street section of Kolfe's primary street activities.

FIG. 1   Image created by author. (2019). Analytical street section of thresholds, income generation activities, domestic practices, public spaces, and building techniques of Kolfe's secondary street.

FIG. 2   Image created by author. (2019). Analytical street section of Kolfe's informal market street.

FIG. 3   Image created by author. (2019). Analysis and street section of neighbourhood activities in Blijdorp.

FIG. 4   Image created by author. (2019). Analysis and canal street section of Blijdorp

FIG. 5   Image created from group work with author. (2019). Perspective plan from Blijdorp's graphic novel used as an ethnographic research output.

FIG. 6   Image created from group work with author. (2019). Coffee stand view from Blijdorp's graphic novel used as an ethnographic research output.

FIG. 7   Image created from group work with author. (2019). Ethnographic research output of a guard post drawing from Summit's graphic novel.

FIG. 8   Image created from group work with author. (2019). Ethnographic research output of a housemaid drawing from Summit's graphic novel.

FIG. 9   Image created by author. (2019). Thesis project proposal of co-operative housing "buffer zones".

FIG. 10 Collins English Dictionary. (2008). Graph of the trend of word usage of "ethnography".

FIG. 11 Uzo, Nishiyama's. (1950s). Sketch of industrialised Osaka.

FIG. 12 Uzo, Nishiyama's. (1950s). Interpretative top view sketch of a traditional Japanese home.

FIG. 13 Uzo, Nishiyama's. (1942). Interpretative top view sketch of a traditional Japanese home.

FIG. 13 Uzo, Nishiyama's. (1942).Nishiyama Uzo's top view drawing of a Japanese home

FIG. 14 TU Delft. (2018). " Kon Wajiro and Nishiyama Uzo's participatory research of everyday space in Japan" representation.

FIG. 15 Atelier Bow-Wow. (2016). Visual representation of ethnographic research by Atelier Bow-Wow in Copenhagen.