

THE NEW TRANSITIONAL SPACE

How to study the social structures of city dwellers, that would provide the best understanding of their traditional (cultural) dwelling patterns?

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I INTRODUCTION

The architectural profession cannot manifest by itself. The profession of an architect is rarely an abstraction. However, without abstraction and deeper meaning in the process of design, projects seldom find any success in the everyday life of city dwellers and users. The often-deeper meaning is embedded in the design and felt by the users unconsciously, therefore it is intuitional success in some cases. Using any approach for problem-solving might not all the time be optimal enough and only provide a short-term goal that would lead to a short success. Hence, in the long-run, it may appear as a failure. Methodological research is extremely important to prevent these practices from happening, to analyse different aspects in the more subtle matter and put new perspectives on the research findings to provide the best design solutions.

The introduction of different research-methodological techniques by given lecture series broadened my views, helped me to realise, that a lot of times I have “felt” design which led me to vague research stages; thought of them being intuitional. However, that intuition could have been expressed by better research and provide more insights into further developments. The different research techniques that were represented in the lecture series as well as high-quality discussions, helped me to gain the perspective, that new ways of researching could be introduced in the design creation process, which I did not know about before. Architectural theory, no matter what kind it is, must be led by the research and needs a project to be realised as an ambition. It needs research as a backbone, otherwise, generic thinking would be present and lead to failure of the architecture as a whole.

The Chair of Architecture & Dwelling implies the best equilibrium between architectural theory and design to prevent vague architectural decisions. The space of the housing is introduced as the most important aspect of human life: this is where the day of human starts and ends, this is the place where most life-changing decisions happen. As the Global Housing studio is approaching obstacles of unknown contexts, often in the Global South countries, the deeper social analysis must be implicated. The vast migration process in Ethiopia implies a lot of problems in the growing city of Addis Ababa and its rural newcomers, as well as urban dwellers. This results in the lack of the transition spaces, that would sustain the cultural and traditional dwelling patterns, but also would offer a flexible way to adapt towards the lifestyle of the city by providing the flexible housing arrangements.

The master thesis topic according to the site visits and stated problems were arranged like this: *What kind of urban neighbourhoods and housing types can accommodate a different variety of social structures of newcomers and city dwellers, helping them transit towards the lifestyle of the urban city, that would sustain their traditional (cultural) living and dwelling patterns but also deal with urban conditions of certain density in a constant growing megapolis of Addis Ababa, in exchange providing the environmental and social sustainability for the capital city itself?*

However, to provide the best possible solutions to existing problems of the arrival city of Addis Ababa, and answer the thesis question thoroughly, the further sub-question was raised: *“How to study the social structures of city dwellers, that would provide the best understanding of their traditional dwelling patterns?”* To find the best possible way of designing in the context unknown socially, economically and environmentally, the epistemic framework of praxeology was chosen. Therefore, the methodological research used in the graduation thesis revolved around visual and micro-ethnography.

I believe that the lecture series, in combination with the bibliography and theories offered by The Chair of Architecture & Dwelling Global Housing studio, introduced me with the best possible approach of *praxeology*, to deal with the context and dwelling patterns and find possible solutions for my research question.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The ethnography as the tool of research falls under the epistemic framework of *praxeology*. Praxeology, as introduced by Marieke Berkers in the lecture series is “the study of human action and conduct, that

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considers the built environment as a stage for everyday practice.”¹ The way people act is defined by their surroundings. Historically, *ethnography* is a process of inquiry that involves the description and interpretation of the cultural and social practices of people, “the written representation of culture” that emerges from a lengthy period of in-depth study and, often, residence in, a particular setting.² As Ray Lucas stated in his book *Research Methods for Architecture*: “A methodology closely associated with anthropology, ethnography is somewhat discipline-agnostic, and can be used by a wide range of academic fields.”³ He offers, that ethnography is a research method closely correlated with fieldwork that requires careful planning and application, as well as “openness to serendipity and happenstance.”⁴ However, ethnographical research often requires staying on-site for a long period of time to provide the most accurate findings. Due to that, the *micro-ethnographic* practice was used to engage in the site of Kolfe, in the city of Addis Ababa. The micro-ethnographic approach uses exactly the same research objectives as the ethnographic research, however, focuses on a site, community, or issue for a short period of time.⁵

To help conduct the best research possible, the visual methods of ethnographic research, *visual ethnography*, was chosen. Certain methods mark ethnographic research: participant observation, in which researcher is immersed in the context of those studied; detailed, daily written fieldnotes based on first-hand encounters and observations; the development of rapport and reciprocity with participants; interviews with participants; and the collection, recording, and analysis of documents, records.⁶ Visual ethnography uses all these tools and research methods but does it through the lenses of visual representation as short videos/movies, photography, and drawings.

The answer to my research question was conducted through the communication with local urban dwellers of the site of Kolfe and observation of their lifestyle practices, movements in housing units through drawings and photography. Working in an unknown context required local students' help. Therefore, three local students from the *Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development* (EiABC) were assisted to help with interviews and further translations. Together with other students from the same Global Housing studio, we spend two days in the site, interviewing people from the neighbourhood, visiting their houses, listening to their personal stories, taking pictures of occupation of public and private spaces, drawing and mapping details of the site. We prepared basic interview questions, to help us keep on track, however, added new ones or shifted interviews on the outcome of the answers. Noticing the dwelling patterns of local people gave a huge insight into how living culture looks in Addis Ababa and Ethiopia. This way of approaching design led to a more successful outcome and is more related to people's scale developments rather than anonymous interactions.

The current literature talks a lot about people's interactions with architecture, maybe because most of the developments are projected already built and the in-situ changes have to be considered more thoroughly. People are occupying existing places faster than the new ones are being built. Humans are the users of architecture, therefore in the book *Building and Dwelling*, Richard Sennett emphasises the importance of differences in the way people live. The dweller will change the space (or space will make him evolve) based on the requirements of everyday life. Followed by the approaches introduced by Jane Jacobs in the early '60s by the observations of human beings in a community, research can easier define the complexity of interactions between the body and space, providing the best contextual ideas needed.

Places produce value and if inspired, humans can successfully evolve. Another author David Sim in his book *Soft City* introduces the ways of small things, sometimes really banal aspects of everyday life, that influence the behaviours of human beings. He wrote: “I also learned that most of what I needed to know

¹ Marieke Berkens, TU Delft Lecture Series Research and Methods, 2019.

² Powell Kimberly, “Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers”, *Art Education* 63, no. 6 (November 2010): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2010.11519102>.

³ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, (Laurence King publishing Ltd, 2016), 164.

⁴ Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, 164.

⁵ Kimberly, “Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers”, 45.

⁶ Kimberly, “Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers”, 45.

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about how to design could be found by simply watching people and looking at the environment around me; by seeing what works and what does not.”⁷

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Ethnography is a practice, that is capable of expressing the historical past and also includes the philosophical, political, spiritual, and aesthetic elements. As Robin Patric Clair notices, “these elements have at times defined cultures, named people, and told them who they are and what they might become.”⁸ In other words, ethnographical research and the study of different cultures grew at the time of colonization, however as a study method, it could be traced back to ancient Greece. During the years, ethnographic research was used in a variety of different study fields as philosophy, psychology, economics, and architecture. There are many approaches in the ethnographic research, however, I focused to explore my design research through the lenses of participatory observation and mapping, a visual research method.

In the 1930s, architect Nishiyama Uzo founded the science of dwelling in Japan. Nishiyama introduced the separation between the dining room and sleeping room, which was derived from a meaningful analysis of ordinary houses and people’s lives. The architect used the technique of drawings: sketched three-dimensional plans, that showed movement schemes and space occupations with comments or diagrams, that presented his research paths. Uzo introduced *Image Planning* as a method for discovering conflicts in living spaces and acknowledge the visual perceptions of space. Therefore, the ideas of Nishiyama, which asserts that the movements of dwellers and even the opposing ones are the keys to creating the new spaces, are important even today. This was the first attempt of *mapping* the existing patterns of the city and particularly: dwelling.

In 1953, North-African grids were presented in the ninth CIAM meeting. Here, the slum of *bidonville* in Casablanca was one of the main focuses. Even though a lot of architects worked on the North African colonial territories to realise their architectural ambitions on the “tabula rasa” principles, the empathetic perspective architects had on the *bidonville* was incredible. The migration from rural lands to urban areas led the territory to become a shantytown – a place where rural migrants were captivated and daily struggles could be clearly visible. The architects depicted in great detail, dwelling practices like preparing meals, sleeping, gathering as well as building practices like constructing shacks.⁹ Young architects were impressed by the persistence and adaptive ways of traditional living patterns that later encouraged them to rely on the anthropological way of researching: traveling through different towns and villages, investigating indigenous dwelling patterns and documenting everyday life through *mapping* and *photography*.

In 1961, Jane Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, where she argued that rational planners, as Robert Moses and Le Corbusier, overlooked and oversimplified the complexity of communities and people. Even if she did not describe her work as ethnographical research, the topic of the connection between the human and the space surrounding him unintentionally puts her work in the research methodology of ethnography. Jane Jacobs’ research mainly focused on the 1950s West Village in New York and was conducted through writings about the community. Her writings introduced the *observation* method: curiosity of people’s doings, watchful observations of strangers, incidents in the community and so on. According to R. Sennett “she was the direct heir of Chicago School: her aim was to open the city, from the bottom up.”¹⁰

More thorough documentation in the mean of participant observation and mapping was released in 1990 through the research done in McGill University, *How the Other Half Builds*. The site analysis, space occupation or living units through drawings greatly contributed towards the visual ethnographic method of researching. Through drawings, the message of how people adapt their house’s space to different

⁷ David Sim, *Soft City*, (Island press, Washington, 2019), xiv.

⁸ Robin Patric Clair, *Expressions of Ethnography: The changing story of Ethnography*, (Suny Press, 2003), 1

⁹ Walter Nägeli, Niloufar Tajeri, *Small interventions: New ways of living in post-war modernism*, (Birkhäuser,2016), 30.

¹⁰ Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, 79.

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functions (commercial, living or farming) during the day or night helped to greatly interpret dwelling patterns of India (also relatively close to the patterns of dwelling in Ethiopia). A lot of drawings were made through observation and even interviews, therefore, it is a crucial research method, where two methods interact and strongly correlate together.

In the 21st century, the Momoyo Kaijima, co-founder of Atelier Bow-Wow, uses ethnography to define the living conditions of people through various fieldwork and design practices. The interest of the relationship between house typologies and urban fabric to the relationship between public space and common resources enabled rediscover architecture as a central mean of practicing livelihood and develop the concepts of architectural ethnography.¹¹ Detailed drawings are used to show space occupation and building construction practices. However, Atelier Bow-Wow not only researches using the architectural ethnography practises, but also introduces them to the new generation of architects, through series of workshops, expanding the perspectives, ideas and views of young architects. They raise awareness of importance of drawing and analysis that comes with it.

The evolution of visual anthropology throughout the 20th century raised the discussions of further research possibilities. Therefore, usage of the images in the research of ethnography has been constantly improved and importance re-evaluated. Despite the functionalism and “tabula rasa” planning in the early 20th century, nowadays architects turn back to the research methods as ethnography. The standardised architecture solutions do not provide success in the design of building everywhere, as cultures are not the same. Reading through the past research studies helps to conduct and understand which tools are best in analysing different contexts. As visual tools are getting better due to modern technologies, it becomes easier to produce more accurate research. The multi-scope analysis can be introduced, where three-dimensional plans can be reflected in sections or the interviews of participants could transform into a three-dimensional form. This way more important conclusions can be obtained.

IV POSITIONING

The position I concretely embrace through my findings is that designing in unknown contexts must include the local dwellers of the actual territory. Architecture must become a socially-driven factor of participatory design, where the architect becomes more a moderator between the ideas of locals and governmental goals as same as his own ambitions.

However, ethnographic research has some drawbacks. Translating the findings of such research is challenging, particularly as ethnography depends on an open-minded researcher, who is there to observe and interact, but not to pass judgment or to say what is wrong or right.¹² As micro-ethnographic research is relatively short-timed, it is difficult to conduct a lot of information through interviews. Being a researcher from a different culture makes it difficult to convey people to trust you and open up. The language barrier plays a huge role because often particular questions like “what would your dream house would look like?” are misunderstood: people tend to start describing their own existing housing arrangements. Or the common practice of “community garden” which is understandable in the Western countries, cannot be understood in the Ethiopian culture. Therefore, to pass judgment on the outcomes of the interviews sometimes become almost impossible.

Even if modern technology made it easier to conduct visual matter, if local people do not trust the researcher to enter the housing units are forbidden and therefore the visual research interrupted. Hence, spending more time on the site, introducing the purpose of visit and letting the community get to know the researcher through communicating must be a key figure in conducting successful architectural ethnographic research. Moreover, the reassurance of not making false promises to local people is a must: stating the purpose is the first and foremost element of research.

¹¹ Harvard University Graduate School of Design, “Architectural Ethnography: Atelier Bow-Wow”, accessed January 15, 2020. <https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/exhibition/architectural-ethnography-by-atelier-bow-wow/>

¹² Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, 164.

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Researcher Alazar G. Ejigu moved to an area of condominium housing in Addis Ababa to have the most thorough research possible on the way people use the standardised architecture for their daily dwelling practices. Unfortunately, people were looking at him suspiciously, women of the neighbourhood would not talk with him. However, once he brought his family to live together, to his surprise, women became more open about the problems with his wife, rather than him. They only started trusting his being, as they saw him constantly playing with his daughter in the common playground, where everyone could see him. This practice helped to understand how important it is to introduce yourself to the community before starting asking questions.

I adopted the mapping and participatory observation approach to analyse site. Mapping the elements of the multi-purpose use of space (private and public) of private housing, as well as the multi-action space (where many things happen at the same time). To my surprise, I could see the similarities of findings in the design language of Dutch architecture as well. The architectural approaches now try to create an integrated community and refuse the modernistic zoning of the city, mix the functions and social groups of people not only in the same neighbourhood, but also in the same block of buildings. This is also the general approach of the Chair of Dwelling & Architecture, because of the importance of lively cities.

On the other hand, the analysis of only the interior dwelling patterns is not enough. I believe, that the analysis of the appropriation of internal spaces does not fully analyse the impact of dwelling patterns on the neighbourhood and even further to the city itself. It becomes especially difficult for future developments due to this to be successful. Otherwise, standardised solutions will continue to grow and produce vague architectural designs. Therefore, I would like to address the problems of the Kolfe site and find the best balance to approach the design and provide a positive outcome also for the city of Addis Ababa.

The architectural ethnographic research relates not only to the Marieke Berkers lecture of praxeology but also of the *Material Culture* lecture by Eireen Schreurs. The Berkers described, that “by studying the praxis of architecture one can develop an eye for the actual users of the building, and not the imagined ones.”¹³ This strongly correlates to the study of material culture, as materials in a way define social relations, and become the central core of understanding cultures. The use of materials in the living environments gives a different understanding of income generation, sustainable solutions and so on.

To conclude, in my opinion, through participatory design, architecture could become a great tool to provide changes in the life of urban poor and solve the problems that great migration of the 21st century brought to the city of Addis Ababa. The usage of the ethnographic research method helps to design for the actual user of the dwelling and take the important dwelling patterns into consideration, therefore create socially resilient architectural designs. Communities bring dynamics to the dwelling of the city; however, they require the space to nurture it. Through the tool of visual ethnography, the field trip gave a broad understanding of different aspects: the community, the usage of multi-layered functions that occupy the street and the mixture of people living together.

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¹³ Berkers, TU Delft Lecture Series Research and Methods, 2019.