RADICAL VERNACULAR
A New Ethiopian Urbanity

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I   INTRODUCTION

Architecture is almost a unique practice in that it is positioned between the arts and sciences, and moreover is hugely influenced by, and has great impact on, social sciences and humanities. Its position here, at the crossing of the three great practice areas, requires an in-depth knowledge of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative.

For my own project, *Radical Vernacular – A New Ethiopian Urbanity*, I will be researching dwellings and living patterns in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This will be done in the context of recent mass-housing projects conducted under the *Integrated Housing Development Programme (IHDP)*. These developments are in the form of condominium blocks, reaching 4-6 storeys in early projects, but now regularly reaching 20-24 storeys. These developments provide sanitary and modern housing for Addis Ababa's residents, but do not address their different and various living patterns or allow for expansions and adaptations. Furthermore, they do not contribute to placemaking within the city, and are not contextual. In this light, the research question posed is thus:

How could the density and living standards afforded by IHDP condominium blocks be matched by different forms of development which…
a)   Acknowledge the context of the site, the city and the country?
b)   Immediately and appropriately accommodate the various and different living patterns of residents?
c)   Provide opportunities for residents to expand or adapt their dwellings as their household incomes and expectations change over time?
d)   Create a strong neighbourhood identity?

The primary driver in my research will be the people that inhabit the city of Addis Ababa and the self-chosen site in the sub-centre of Gerji. Marieke Berkers' lecture on Investigating Social/Spatial practices (12 September 2019) addressed praxeological research methods, which focus on people and space, and the relationship between the two. In particular, Berkers' reference to Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's *Frankfurt Kitchen* was interesting. I have long admired Schütte-Lihotzky's pragmatic and user-centric design, and lament her frequent absence from mainstream architectural discourse, however this lecture made me realise the detailed and focussed research she conducted that enabled her design to be developed, of which I was hitherto unaware. As Austria's first female architect, she saw how contemporary kitchens were unsuitable for modern life, and through systematic research of how kitchens were used, she was able to revolutionise kitchen design. Significantly, many aspects of her design are still present in 21st century kitchens (which of course suggests that kitchens should perhaps become the focus of another praxeological study). This in-depth analysis of living patterns and practices is something I have integrated into my research, albeit in a more time-conscious way.

Additionally, Eireen Schreurs' lecture on Material Culture (October 10, 2019) referred to social and cultural aspects of architecture. Material Culture is an area of architecture and sociology that I have found intriguing since being introduced to it in my MSc1 studio. It is the link between architecture and people that fascinates me, and Schreurs' reference to the *"cultural connotations"* of materials was intriguing: she explained that if a material suddenly starts being used for another purpose, the connotations of that material change, but the fundamental properties of the material remain the same. Thus, Material Culture is as much a study of humans and human culture as a study of materials. In part due to my project title, which addresses the vernacular, the study of materials and their connotations is something I have integrated into my research, and plan to continue with as my design progresses with the intent of conducting 1:1 material studies of traditional Ethiopian building techniques.

This course made me aware of the variety of different research methods available to architectural professionals and students, ranging from the praxeological, through the phenomenological, to the typological.

II   DISCUSSION OF ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY

The primary area of my research is architectural ethnography, a strain of ethnography, which *"involves the description and interpretation of the cultural and social practices of people".*[1] This research method involves careful observation of everyday practices, looking with a *"naïve state of mind"* and specifically searching out the *"hidden obvious"*[2]. Two primary techniques are used to *"capture complex narratives of the lived experience of the place*[3]*"*, namely:
1. Photographs and drawings of buildings and urban spaces as found, ie. with inhabitation
2. Interviews with existing residents in and around the site, including questions designed to enable community participation

This research was conducted in groups of four students, supported by three local students from EiABC (Addis Ababa University), who were able to assist with translation.

The location for the research and associated design project is the area of Gerji in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a location far removed from my own European roots. The time assigned for fieldwork was limited, with only 12 hours available to conduct research on site. As such, it was necessary to be aware of and familiar with the research methods prior to the site visit. Therefore a research project using same techniques was conducted in Rotterdam beforehand.

To gain an insight into the lived experience of dwellings it was necessary to enter the homes of people. The initial aim was to sketch the inhabited interiors of these dwellings on site. As Momoya Kajioma et al describe, drawing is *"a means to understand and share our knowledge of the processes that are rapidly transforming architecture, cities, and the environment at large.*[4]*"* However, we found during our 'trial run' in Rotterdam that the limited time available (not only in terms of the total time assigned for fieldwork, but also in terms of the length of time people were comfortable with us in their homes) did not allow for this. Thus a simplified method was designed for the site fieldwork in Addis Ababa: whilst in the homes photographs would be taken, which could be sketched over subsequent to the visitation (see Figure 1). Additionally, whilst in the dwellings another group member would draw simple, measured plans of the spaces. These included some basic items of furniture, and combined with the photographs will be used to draw up detailed, inhabited plans subsequent to the visit. The same system would be used for public buildings and spaces in the neighbourhood.
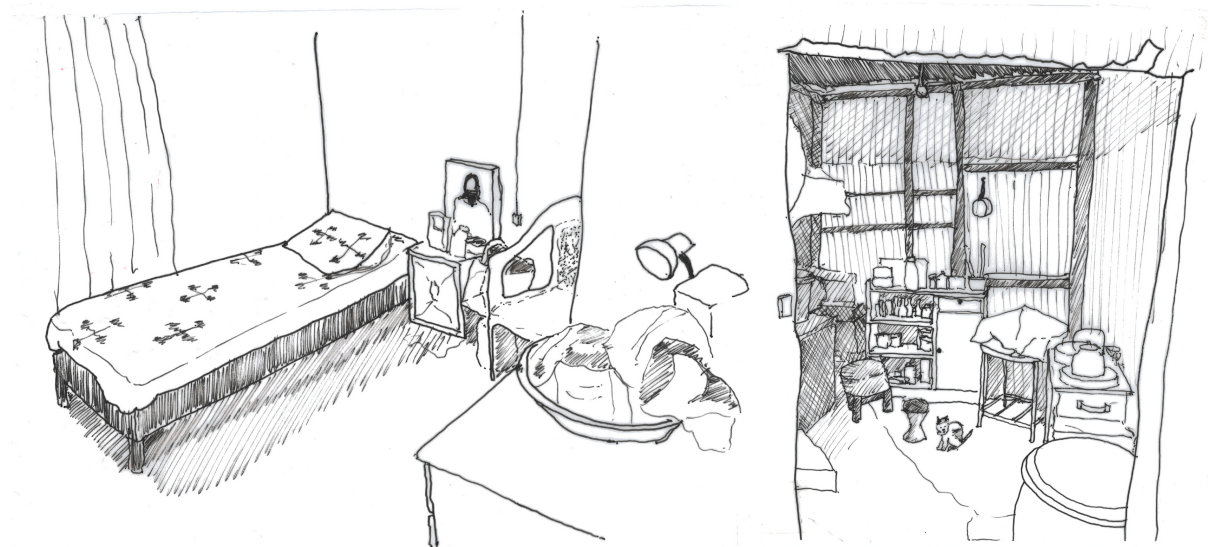

Figure 1- Dwelling sketches, from site photographs (student's own work)

Whilst two group members were taking photographs and drawing plans, the other two conducted interviews with inhabitants. Interviews were split into three sections: the first regarding their biographical information; the second concerning their living patterns and rituals; and the third concerning their desires and wishes for their homes and neighbourhoods (ie. community engagement). Interviews were based around Holstein and Gubrium's principles of "Active

[1] Kimberly Powell, "Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers," *Art Education* 63, no. 6 (November 2010): 45, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2010.11519102.
[2] "Ethnography: Ellen Isaacs at TEDxBroadway," YouTube video, 12:02, posted by "TEDx Talks", March 1, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV0jY5VgymI.
[3] Powell, "Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers," 45.
[4] Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stalder, and Yu Iseki, *Architectural Ethnography* (Tokyo: TOTO Publishing, 2018), 11.

Interviewing", in which both the interviewers and respondents are seen to be active participants, and inherent bias within interviews is acknowledged and accepted[5]. The interviews were semi-structured, beginning with biographical information about the participants, and moving on to a list of questions which were selected by the interviewer based on the biographical information given. For example, if the respondent was a parent, a question regarding the play habits of their children was asked; or if the respondent was a local business owner, questions regarding the nature of their business were asked. Follow up questions were asked as deemed necessary, allowing a more open and conversational dialogue between interviewers and participants. Finally, a set list of questions regarding their wishes for their neighbourhood were asked, including "If the city government had a pot of money to invest in Gerji, what would you like to see changed?" and "If you were to improve your home, what would you like to add?" Due to the language barrier between the students from TU Delft and the respondents (whose first language was Amharic), we relied on the assistance of Ethiopian students. During the interviews, two students were able to assist: one would translate the respondent's answers into English to allow our participation in the interview, whilst the other would write detailed notes in Amharic, which could be translated later to ensure no details were missed.

Both the interviews and the visual photographic and drawn data was worked up following the site visit in a workshop setting with local students from EiABC. Their knowledge of local customs, objects and lifestyles helped us to understand unfamiliar concepts and objects which were revealed during the interviews, for example the concept of the *idir*, a local organisation paid for by subscription which assists in funding weddings, funerals, and celebrations within the community.

III   REFLECTION ON ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Architectural ethnography could arguably have been first used by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess in the University of Chicago in the 1920s. Their research borrowed from anthropological methods and tracked the relationships between Chicago's working-class population and the city they inhabited[6]. However, according to Richard Sennett, their research *"imagined the shape of the city in primitive two-dimensional terms, and thought about three-dimensional built forms not at all"*[7].

Observation and interaction with communities are key to ethnographic research[8]. In 1961, Jane Jacobs published her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in which she argues for local, bottom-up development, celebrates informality, and advocates community engagement. Sennett puts her *"squarely in the Chicago School ethnographic tradition"*[9]. Though she did not (to my knowledge) describe her work as architectural ethnography, the intertwined relationships between people and place she observes and describes could place her work in this bracket. Her research was undertaken over many years living in the West Village of New York, through informal interviews and detailed observations, and the relevance and continued success of her work over 50 years later demonstrate the influence she has had on architectural discourse.

Visual documentation of architecture as a research method is pervasive and has been used for centuries, however much of this has been purely architectural, and does not address ethnographic, or anthropological concerns. In his 1968 paper *The Squatter Settlement: An Architecture that Works*, John Turner uses photography to capture the lives of people in the built environment they inhabit. In his photographs, the people and the objects with which they interact become more important than the architecture itself.

Equally, the 1984 paper *How the Other Half Builds* by the Centre for Minimal Cost Housing at McGill University uses drawings to document the various and different living practices of low-income people in India. These drawings again focus on the people, and how they interact with the space around them. Drawings showing people at work in the informal sector, for example, detail how residents adapt their homes and the spaces around them to become workplaces during the day, and convert them back to sleeping places at night.

In the 21st century, visual documentation of architectural ethnography continues to be used by researchers and architects. Atelier Bow-Wow co-founder Momoyo Kaijima, with Laurent Stalder and

[5] James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, "The active interviewer," in *Qualitative Research – Theory, Methods and Practice*, ed. David Silverman (London: SAGE, 2004), 140-161.
[6] Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 63-70.
[7] Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, 68.
[8] Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016),164.
[9] Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, 78.

Yu Iseki, published the book *Architectural Ethnography* as part of Japan's pavilion entry for the 2018 Venice Biennale. Architectural ethnographic research is a major part of Atelier Bow-Wow's work and can be seen in their large-scale drawings, in which buildings and urban spaces are inhabited and occupied by people performing their daily rituals.
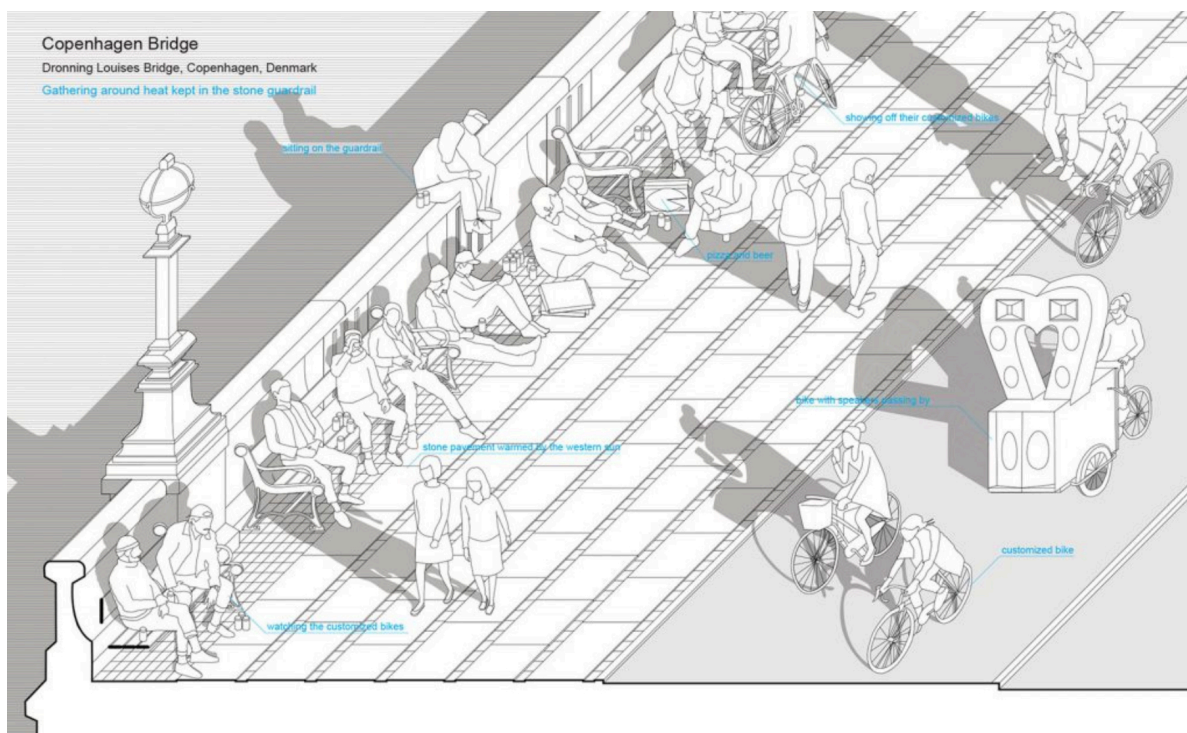

Figure 2 - Example of large-scale ethnographic drawing by Atelier Bow-Wow[10].

       I believe that modern technology has allowed visual documentation of living patterns to take place more easily. Most notably, high-quality cameras attached to smart phones are much less incongruous than larger cameras, and as such people are more accepting of them in their homes. Moreover, 'selfie' culture, which we discovered also exists in Addis Ababa, has regularised the taking of photographs, and people were less inquisitive of us taking photographs than sketching their homes.
       Interviews are often a staple part of research. These can take the form of informal conversations between the interviewer and the respondent; formal, but open-ended interviews; or structured interviews or surveys. Miller and Glassner describe two approaches to the interview – that of the positivists, who wish for pure, unbiased interview; and that of the emotionalists, who believe open-ended interviews are able to give a true account of lived experience[11]. They continue to note that bias exists in interviews, and that for example the gender, race, and class of the interviewer can affect the respondent's answers. Nonetheless, they suggest that trust and rapport can be built up between the interviewer and respondent regardless of these differences.
       Yonas Alemayehu Soressa and Imam Mahmoud Hassen used interviews to create 'Life Stories' of residents of Addis Ababa for their paper *Inner City Dwellers and Their Places in the Context of Addis Ababa's Urban Renewal*. Here, they collected biographical data from respondents, and combined this with information on living patterns including employment and daily routines, and concluded the interviews with the respondents' aspirations and wishes[12]. Collecting such stories does not provide a full representation of a community but does provide a 'snapshot' of different living patterns and lifestyles.

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[10] Atelier Bow-Wow, *Copenhagen Bridge*, from Harvard University Graduate School of Design, accessed December 11, 2019, https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/exhibition/architectural-ethnography-by-atelier-bow-wow/
[11] Jody Miller and Barry Glassner, "The "inside" and the "outside"," in *Qualitative Research – Theory, Methods and Practice*, ed. David Silverman (London: SAGE, 2004), 125.
[12] Yonas Alemayehu Soressa and Imam Mahmoud Hassen, "Inner City Dwellers and Their Places in the Context of Addis Ababa's Urban Renewal", in *The Transformation of Addis Ababa: a Multiform African City,* ed. Elias Yitbarek Alemayehu, and Laura Stark (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). 77-126.

IV   POSITIONING: SOCIALLY-DRIVEN ARCHITECTURE

The ethnographic research which I am conducting relates to the praxeological approach described by Marieke Berkers in her lecture of 12 September 2019. Berkers described how, by using a praxeological approach, one is able to design for an actual user, not an imagined one. She further described how this approach is particularly useful for studying non-familiar environments. As such, I would argue that the approach I have taken in my research is appropriate for studying the site in Addis Ababa, which was not familiar to me.

In the interviews conducted in Addis Ababa we used an open-ended interview format, approaching the interviews with the acceptance of bias. As Berkers noted in her lecture, the ethnographer is never a neutral observer. In *The "inside" and the "outside"* Miller and Glassner suggest that an interviewer who is of a different class, background, race or gender to the respondents can build trust and rapport equally as well as one sharing the same characteristics as the respondent[13]. This is perhaps possible when both the interviewer and respondent have considerable time allocated for their discussion, as in the example of the youth gang members they provide, however this was not possible in the short timespan allocated for my research in Addis Ababa. I would argue that having support from the students of EiABC, who were aware of local customs and lifestyles (despite being considerably younger than many of the respondents), was absolutely vital. This was not only for reasons of language, as even when respondents were fluent in English, certain customs and traditions that were alien to us as interviewers could be talked about at length with fellow Ethiopians, and explained to us subsequent to the visit. Furthermore, their presence made the respondents more comfortable with allowing us into their homes and offering their time for interviews.

Rybczynski et al's paper *How the Other Half Builds* and Richard Sennett's *Building and Dwelling* both advocate a people-centric design approach, which I plan to adopt in my graduation studio. They also push towards multiplicity of public space, with Rybczynski et al describing how the *"public areas of slums are characterised by richness and diversity"[14]*, a space which Sennett would describe as *synchronous,* meaning *"where many things are happening at once[15]".* These elements align well with my own position as a designer, where I aim to create socially driven architecture which is designed around the different and various living patterns of the inhabitants, and that provides vibrant and diverse spaces and seeks to positively impact the immediate and wider surroundings.

This approach is one that is adopted by architects such as Peter Barber, whose schemes include diversity in dwellings, and rich public spaces that invite inhabitation. His work, heavily influenced by philosopher Walter Benjamin, focusses on the social aspects of architecture, and the people who inhabit the built environment he designs. He says, of his firm Peter Barber Architects, *"We think that space conditions, and is in turn conditioned by, society and culture and that architecture can create the potential for social action and activity.[16]"* Furthermore, this approach currently appears to be in favour, with Mikhail Riches' Goldsmith Street development, a socially-driven, social housing scheme in Nottingham, UK, winning the Stirling Prize.

However, the work of both these architects focusses on friendly exchanges between neighbours, and the schemes are arguably introverted, looking closely at interaction between residents of the schemes at the expense of addressing the wider city. I would aim to weave my design into the fabric of the city, addressing the immediate and wider surroundings and impacting them in a positive way.

I believe that through people-centric design, architects are able to enact positive change in cities and communities. Using ethnographic research methods to study the lived experiences of people allows one to design for real users, rather than imagined ones, and enables the design of socially-minded architecture. My position of creating vibrant and diverse spaces is developed on the principle that different communities and groups of people inhabiting a city require different things from their space (ie diversity). However, multiple users can share the same space synchronously, creating vibrancy. Through diversity and vibrancy it is possible to design urban spaces that work for various and different groups simultaneously, which contributes positively to the city.

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[13] Miller and Glassner, "The "inside" and the "outside"," 131-132.
[14] Witold Rybczynski et al, *How the Other Half Builds* (Montreal: Centre for Minimum Cost Housing, 1984), 1.
[15] Sennett *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, 205.
[16] "Manifesto," Peter Barber Architects, accessed December 11, 2019, http://www.peterbarberarchitects.com/manifesto.

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