

RECOMPOSING THE CITY FRAGMENTS OF ADDIS ABABA

Physical re-weaving of Addis from a social perspective

Student

Carolina Sánchez Barbero | 4930282

Chair of Architecture and Dwelling, "Global Housing Studio- Addis Ababa Living Lab"

Thesis "Recomposing the city fragments of Addis Ababa from a social perspective"

I INTRODUCTION

Understanding that architecture is a cross discipline, its relevance goes beyond a design outcome. Indeed, from my perspective its relevance stands out the ethics and its social role to transform communities enhancing and dignifying the quality of life of people. What I drawn from the course is whether research methods are quantitative or qualitative, both are equally valid and provide reliable information, even though qualitative research sometimes is underestimated because its limitations and its great component of heuristics techniques. Moreover, through the course I was able to recognize and clarify the different components of methodologies that I actually do intrinsically when I am involved in a process of design. Indeed, observing, taking pictures and doing literature about the socio-economic and historical context in order to understand the background and the dynamics of the site are elements of the research methodologies.

In that sense, the lecture series aided me to define the research methods whom approaches are focused on the social component and the relation between citizens and the cities. As my thesis "*Recomposing the city fragments of Addis Ababa*" has a strong social component, I find on praxeology, typology and the material culture the guidelines for doing my research. These methods make to rethink architecture as a process that involves diverse relations and cooperation with other disciplines in order to conceive a meaningful output enriching the reciprocal relation between research and design.

Indeed, the social element of my thesis is accentuated by the fact that Ethiopia is a country where only 20% of its population live in urban areas, which means that traditions, economic activities and the social structure are still highly attached to the rural areas. Additionally, that Addis Ababa, the capital where is located the project site, is an emergent city where around 80% of its population live in slum conditions faces a huge deficit of housing supplying. Nevertheless, despite the efforts made by the government to solve those issues through the Grand Housing Program providing massive blocks, there is no consideration to attend the urban needs of the people and either to provide solutions to the different types of families whose dynamics of functionalism vary. In that sense, my research question is about how to re- densify Kolfe (the self-chosen site) in a multi scalar way that provides an alternative solution to the condominium units by integrating the fragmented urban layers; and by adapting the traditional needs of the families into a modern approach enabling future developments while upgrading the character of community.

To answer my research question and translate it into a design, understanding the context is the base of a successful design. As Bruno Taut was cited in the lecture given by M. Beckers, Taut argues that the socio-political context influence the way of how cities grow and develop. Therefore, the study and the analysis of the social and physical patterns as well as doing participant observation serve as guidelines to understand the human actions and their relations with the cities in order to develop a meaningful project.

II DISCUSSION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Architecture rather than being considered a design discipline foremost is a humanities discipline¹, based on the sensory perception and experiences of people's daily life. As it is a cross-discipline¹, collaboration among other disciplines y is fundamental in understanding the complexities of the world and the needs of its people. In that sense, praxeology², the study of the human action and its behavior, is the epistemic framework I will use to conduct my research based on the visual architectural ethnography.

¹ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016),p6

² Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, p8

As my thesis research is mainly based on the analysis of how people interact among them and with their immediate surroundings in a foreign context to me, the fieldwork is essential to understand the non-familiar context, and “participant observation” is the method I used to get involved in their culture to get insights on locals experiences. Due to the short timespan we had, complementary methods need to be used in order to get more familiar with the Ethiopian culture.

Saying this, literature research, serves as a general intellectual framework to get familiar with theories, concepts, while specific literature is also used to understand the roots of the social, political and economic background of Ethiopia. Meanwhile, typological research, carried out firstly in a familiar context such as Rotterdam, gave us the opportunity to analyze from a morphological perspective and from a multi-scalar way the relation between the urban and the dwelling, but also how the physical aspects and the socio-economic environment define the social interactions among neighbors. Moreover, during the design phase, it will be fundamental in order to provide alternative solutions to the generic condominiums in Addis, taking as referent the traditional houses and the typology of the dwellings of Kolfe site.

The architectural ethnography, is without doubts the most enriching type of research. It is the complement of the theoretical framework that literature and mapping are not able to transmit. The fieldwork itself is the main tool to gain knowledge and understanding of the culture we are studying, whereas the techniques used to collect data to subsequently analyze it were:

- Observation, in order to experience the place with the own senses, the smells
- Photography and drawings, in order to remember experiences, colors, the atmosphere, the locals, their activities
- Informal interviewing with the residents on the streets but also inside their homes helped to create an own perception of the context and an idea of how is the relation and interaction among neighbors. This technique perhaps was the most excited but at the same time the hardest due to the limitation of the language. Even though, we were always working side by side with the Msc students from the EiABC (Addis Ababa University) we will always miss some information.

As this method is mainly perceptive and subjective, we, as researchers draw our own conclusions based on what we observed. The different strategies used to collect data have served to take a rational position of the Ethiopian context. However, as this is a qualitative research and is limited by the lack of time to actually get in a deep understanding of the context, the use of heuristic practices such as intuition and common sense are fundamental to discard speculations and information that may be not as reliable, especially during the interviews to locals where they tend to provide self-evidences and partialize the reality according to their own experience.

III REFLECTION ON ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In order to understand how the architectural ethnography has evolved to become a widely used technique to document daily life with Momoyo Kaijima as one of its greatest exponent nowadays, first is precisely to contextualize the roots of the anthropological discipline and its overlapped interests and collaboration with the architecture field. Thus, ethnography is an anthropological method which focus its study on the analysis, understanding and documentation of a culture or society through holistic investigation. It involves patterns of behavior, testimonies and actions that help researchers to gain knowledge about the ways how humans organize and experience their lives³.

Saying this, anthropology and architecture seem to have a lot in common by sharing intellectual origins⁴. However, the first show little interest in architecture even though the design and in general how dwellings

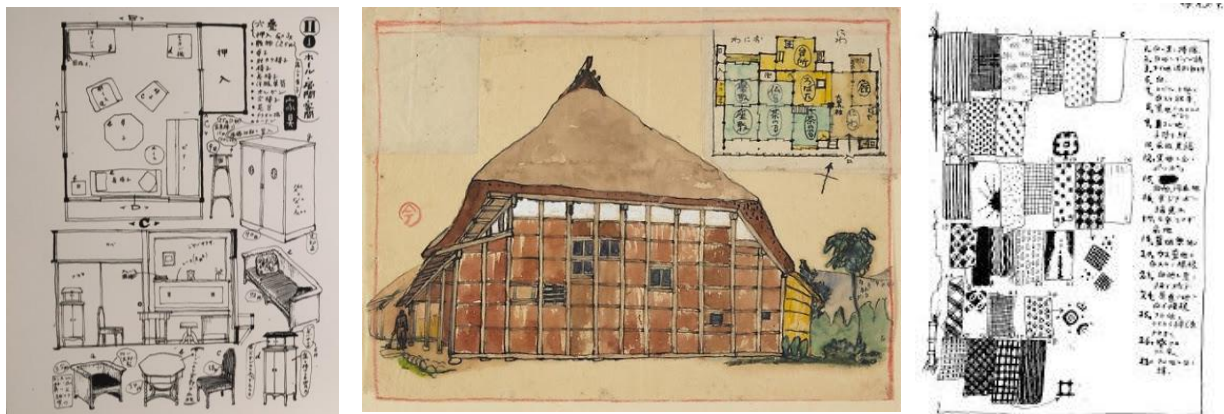
³ Howell, Signe. “Introduction: Ethnography and Anthropology,” (2018): 1-14, p3.

⁴ Jasper, Adam. “Anthropology and Architecture: A Misplaced Conversation (Part 2).” *Architectural Theory Review* 21, no. 2 (2016): 111–13, p111 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2017.1373412>.

are clustered are part of the key material to anthropological studies⁵. Despite the differences among them in terms of communication, temporality, and normativity as M. Stender stands out, is not very clear where both fields converge, or, what architecture do to anthropology and vice versa. Indeed, if we look back to the XIX century, Gottfried Semper tried to involve both practices in his book “*The four elements*”⁶. Later on, just after the WWI, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, considered the founder of the modern anthropology developed the method of participant observation. Through his long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Trobriand island he documented the everyday social life of the islanders, to finally conclude that the aim of his theoretical position is to grasp the native’s point of view⁷ through a close relation with people’s lives while observing them from distance⁸.

Meantime, the British embraced this method while they developed a more social approach focusing on kinship systems⁹, that in contrast to the American perspective with Franz Boas at the head, each culture should be studied according to its own believes and values. However, both believed in the empirical investigation¹⁰. In the 20’s The Chicago School of Sociology even if it was not strongly influenced by anthropology adopted some fieldwork methods. In Richard Sennett book, the author points out as examples how the School was empirical attached to ethnography. One of the studies was conducted by researchers Thomas and Florian Znaniecki who focused on Polish immigrants contrasting their peasant past with their working conditions in the present through interviewing. Likewise, Harvey Warren also used the method of working street by street conducting conversation with the people on the north side of Chicago to study the tensions between rich and poor groups living next to each other¹¹.

However, not all ethnographic research has been done by western anthropologists. Indeed, Japanese Kunio Yanagita in the early 20’s and founder of the Japanese Folklore Studies conducted surveys in remote rural locations collecting folk tales and information about local costumes while using interviewing and documented in writing. In contrast, the architect Wajiro Kon document his research on the vernacular and on the patterns of the everyday life through sketching¹².



Wajiro Kon sketches

⁵ Jasper, Adam. “Anthropology and Architecture: A Misplaced Conversation.” *Architectural Theory Review* 21, no. 1 (2016): 1–3, p1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2017.1289709>.

⁶ Jasper, Adam. “Anthropology and Architecture: (Part 2), p111

⁷ Howell, Signe. “Introduction: Ethnography and Anthropology,” (2018): 1-14, p6.

⁸ Howell, Signe. “Introduction: Ethnography and Anthropology,” (2018): p3.

⁹ Howell, Signe. “Introduction: Ethnography and Anthropology,” (2018): p6.

¹⁰ Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley, “15. Ethnography And Participant Observation”, in *Handbook Of Qualitative Research* (repr., hevra.haifa.ac.il, 1994), 249-251.

¹¹ Sennett, Richard. *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, (2018) , 63-65

¹² Momoyo Kaijima, “Learning From Architectural Ethnography”, in *Architectural Ethnography* (repr., Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stalder, Yu Iseki, 2020), <http://urban-design-reader.de/atrium-behaviorology/learning-from-architectural-ethnography>.

Following the Chicago School ethnographic tradition, Jane Jacobs, as also Sennett refers in his book, uses methods of observation and informal interviewing to describe the complexities of the neighborhoods and the informal street life, avocation informal relations¹³. By that time (late 60's), John Turner uses visual documentation such as photography is the method to collect information of the *barriadas* and the daily life of the locals. Likewise, Paul Oliver, an architectural historian published in 1997 the "*Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*". The use of photography as well as drawings served to document traditional architecture and to classify it according to anthropological criteria¹⁴.

Without doubt the methods to collect information through observation and informal interviewing have developed. In the XXI century, architectural ethnography is still widely used emphasizing the visual and the use of computer software to describe and illustrate human behaviors, and ways of life. Momoyo Kaijima, co-founder of Atelier Bow-Wow, and author of "Made in Tokyo" and "*Architectural Ethnography*" has an impressive career using visual architectural ethnography to understand the relations among people and with their social environment.

IV POSITIONING

In order to answer my research question, personally I believe that the understanding of the daily life practices of the local people in Addis Ababa, as well as understanding their culture and patterns of life are the guidelines of the design. In general, as architecture has often been manipulated by politics and commercial activities¹⁵, at the end, architecture is used to divide individuals, both spatially and visually, imposing a relationship between society and nature¹⁶. Therefore, in order to avoid what the architecture practices tend to do, I find in the research of the human behavior the answer to my research question.

Through observation and the interviews conducted at the site project I could infer that highlighting the importance of the public realm, which includes the open spaces and public spaces, the public space becomes the element of social transformation and the element of social cohesion among locals. In that sense, the current situation where there is a lack of public space and the few existent are used as garbage disposal lots, it is necessary to bring back that sense of community that locals always refer, but is not tangible to the sight. From my own experience in the site, I could not perceive that feeling.

Actually, this makes me to think in the importance that fieldwork has for anthropologists and researchers. As it is the tool to collect data and get involved with the foreign culture, I totally agree that in order to carry out an ethnographic research is necessary to live a long period of time in the site, learning from their own traditions and by learning their own language. As Marilyn Strathern points out as she refers to anthropologists and their practices is they study social relationships by *making* social relationships¹⁷, unlike Malinowski who emphasized being involved with people's lives but observing from the distance. What does it mean?

As other methodologies, the praxeology has its challenges in the way on how the researcher is going to take a position in the process. Understanding it is a qualitative research and tends to be subjective to the lens of the researcher, I find some failures on how the methodology is conceived. First, in order to make a serious and well based research, it is necessary to carry out the investigation for at least four months according to Alazar G. Ejigu, author of the chapter 6 of the book "*Sustainable Cities*". He carried out an ethnographic research in a condominium housing in Addis Ababa in order to understand the

¹³ Sennett, Richard. *Building and Dwelling*, (2018) , 78-80

¹⁴ Jasper, Adam. "Anthropology and Architecture: A Misplaced Conversation (Part 2), p111

¹⁵ Jasper, Adam. "Anthropology and Architecture: A Misplaced Conversation." P2

¹⁶ Delitz, Heike. "Architectural modes of collective existence: Architectural sociology as a comparative social theory." *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2018): 37-57, p38.

¹⁷ Howell, Signe. "Introduction: Ethnography and Anthropology," (2018): p10.

socio-spatial tensions and interactions of its residents. Indeed, as part of his research he moved out with his family to one of the units to get more involved in the participant observation. Moreover, according to R. Lucas research must take months, even years to be able to understand the context. In that sense, I completely agree with his statement, that may take years to understand non-familiar environments. Conceptions, cultures and social behaviors shift from country to country even though they may look similar in patterns. For that reason, I also believe that foreign researchers who develop theories about somewhere else do not fully understand the social context. Second, the researcher must be able to be objective and participant and operate like that according to the presented situations. Third, not all the informants (interviewees) as R. Lucas referred to them are reliable, for example the children. The use of heuristic practices such as intuition and common sense are fundamental to discard speculations and information that may be not as reliable. For that reason, it is important to choose informants that show a clear understanding of the context, their people, their neighborhood.

V BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atkinson, Paul, and Martyn Hammersley. "15. Ethnography And Participant Observation". In *Handbook Of Qualitative Research*, 249-251. Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley. Reprint, hebra.haifa.ac.il, 1994.

Howell, S. 2018. Ethnography. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (eds) F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez & R. Stasch. <http://doi.org/10.29164/18ethno>

Jasper, Adam. "Anthropology and Architecture: A Misplaced Conversation." *Architectural Theory Review* 21, no. 1 (2016): 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2017.1289709>.

Lucas, Ray. *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016.

Multiform African City, edited by Elias Yitbarek Alemayehu, and Laura Stark, 77-126. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

Sennett, Richard. *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.