

COMBINED METHODOLOGY

How to complement visual ethnography to address people's needs

I INTRODUCTION

The profession of an architect does not only involve the making of beautiful plans and stunning designs for people with high incomes. In the 21st century, the role of the architect has radically changed. Today we are facing more challenges related to rapid urbanization and extreme population growth, collapsing infrastructure, migration and the irresponsible attitude of governments. All these problems are clearly apparent in the world's growing cities such as Mumbai and New Delhi. As a student of the Global Housing Studio, I have the task to address the above-mentioned issues in a foreign environment I was not familiar with before. In my case, Nalasopara, a small town within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region that is rapidly becoming a harbor for thousands of newcomers. During the planned study trip, which lasted one week, we had only three days to develop our research approach. Hence, to avoid a value-free speculation of generating knowledge, it is important to strengthen our research by adding a complementary (different) method, acquire a clear understanding of what we are doing, and to frame our research intentions in the right way.

Architecture itself is about observation, exploration and experimentation. To be competent in solving different kinds of professional issues, it is essential to have a specific body of knowledge related to the subject; to understand the context, the people, their relations, culture and habits in a particular timeframe. In philosophy, this is defined as 'episteme'¹. Two main relevant components that help to increase and improve knowledge on this topic are observation and experimentation. Any survey should start with the knowledge gaining process through the methodically pre-determined frameworks. It is essential to know which approach works better in the specific case and why. Therefore, the Research Methods Lecture Series was very relevant and helpful for me. To conduct a detailed study or/and careful analysis of the specific case, one must be aware of the instruments through which he or she can do research. My personal interest leans towards understanding the main activities of different groups of inhabitants, their social relations, which reflects their values in life, though employing different methodologies. Thus, I referred to typological, ethnographic and praxeological approaches in order to correlate the relationship between people and the environment on different scales.

After visiting the site of Nalasopara it became obvious that the living conditions of the area are adverse and unlivable. The town that was expanding at an accelerating pace does not have any planning, is lacking of infrastructure and public spaces. The chaos is a result of governmental indifference and private stakeholders' economic interest which led to a formation of a monotonous and neglected town of concrete 'shelters' instead of propitious neighborhoods for people. Historically, when a town expands, its public spaces shrink.² This phenomenon relates not only to the reduction of physical space that has a negative impact on recreational possibilities, it also leads to the reduction in the democratization of the city. My aim in this project is to find out consensus of private and public spaces within the neighborhood and their impact on the community relations. Through addressing the before-mentioned issues, I want to research how the quality of public spaces can reflect the dignity of public life and the quality of the environment.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The analysis and translation of data assumes systematically searching, arranging, and categorizing all the collected materials. After the fieldwork that was based on a micro ethnographic study of an urban community where a range of live interactions, interviews, notes, sketches and photos were undertaken, the process of analysis began. The Global Housing studio is aiming to rethink the current system of affordable housing in Mumbai by stimulating students to contribute and find alternatives to future development scenarios. The chair of Architecture and Dwelling studies inhabitation typologies, practices and patterns of cohabitation of different groups by means of contextualization through a visual ethnographic and typological method. Based on Christopher Alexander's '*A pattern Language*'³, the first assignment for the studio was to create our own 'book of patterns' to help us understand, analyze and report the everyday practices of the existing neighborhood. By elaborating on a set of drawings related to such categories as social spaces, borders, income generation activities, materials and techniques and domesticity, the group investigated the way in which people relate to the environment and themselves. In my opinion, this method was appropriate and accurate in respect to our assignment. However, because of the fugacity caused by the limited amount of time, the response can never be completely objective and we should be aware of it.

Visual ethnography has become an instrumental method for the development of the future projects. It should be used as an analytical tool and as a projective device that helps the designer to communicate aspects of everyday life. This approach is relevant in architectural practice, since it helps to acquire vital knowledge of the ecosystem that supports everyday life. During the fieldtrip, my group was analyzing social spaces in the area of Nalasopara. By focusing on the way people use the outdoor and indoor space, we discovered that it contrasts to what we imagined. Proper analysis and consistent use of visual ethnography enables a deeper understanding of the social ecology of the site, and qualifies the reality beyond the fantasy of the stranger. Therefore, the lore of this approach can contribute in solving the existing problems of the area by shaping a design project in a practical way.

However, to achieve objectiveness, it is not enough to base our design referring only in one technique. Another approach towards a research method that was used in the studio is based on the investigation of adequate resources covering the topic. This involves archival study of literature and peer reviewed articles related to different narrative categories. As a base for the methodological approach selection, I used the book by Ray Lucas "*Research Methods for Architecture*"⁴. This book discusses research as an expanded field of possibilities and clarifies many aspects regarding the process and framework of a research study. As references of visual and text-based ethnography, I would like to mention the next literature: the first book, which represents the way people live and act during the daytime, is called "*How the Other Half Builds*"⁵, written by a group of authors led by Witold Rybczynski. The book contains measured drawings of selected locations, provided by observational notes and pictures. It views the 'street' as the main place of social and domestic activities such as work and shopping. It also describes the main transformations triggered by the changing human needs. Another book, which I already mentioned before, is '*A pattern Language*'. The book provides the reader with patterns of urban life and presents a method of classification. The authors assert that every society has its own language historically created by people. Interviews conducted by Doug Saunders and translated into his book "*Arrival City*"⁶ describe the global situation through a series of short, personal stories. By providing the reader with migrants' way of living and family backgrounds, the author clarifies the patterns of recent migrations. DASH "*Global Housing*" edition⁷ and "*In the name of Housing. A study of 11 projects in Mumbai*"⁸ by the studio of architect Sameep Padura study housing typology and illustrate examples of dwelling projects in Mumbai and other Indian cities. While the edition of DASH is focused on the issue of affordable housing design, Padura is analyzing original Indian structures with a view to understand issues of space organization and typology infrastructure. All these sources are highly relevant in the architectural practice. In my case, the gained knowledge of the social context, typology, migrations, population, density and legislation nature helped me to define the initial strategy for my project, which will advance with every new book.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Ethnographic research is a longitudinal and subjective process closely associated with anthropology. This qualitative method relates to the observation and interaction with 'informants' in their original environment. To achieve the desired results, it is necessary to spend an extended period of time among a group/society, gathering information, interacting and recording as much useful information as possible.⁹ This study typically lasts for months or even years. Since we did not have this amount of time, I am aware of the subjectivity of this approach. Visual ethnography is deeply rooted in the history even before the emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline in the 1880s. Ethnographers used visual methods with photography as a research tool. They filmed and documented daily life of small nations on the verge of extinction. However, the development of visual anthropology as an academic discipline took place much later. Historically, photography played an important role in the development of ethnographic research. Many ethnographers accepted that the photographic image is the reflection of the 'truth' in reality. Visual researchers such as MacDougall, Banks, and Happer noticed that photographs were significant features of ethnographic studies before the 1930s.

The use of ethnography in architecture has advanced in the 1950's, after a group of architects called Team 10 challenged the doctrinaire approach to urbanism of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM). It was a turning point in architecture, which resulted in the reorientation of values, including an application of ethnographic investigation by numerous researchers and architects all over the world. A set of drawings conducted by a Portuguese architect Octavio Lixa Filgueiras (former member of CIAM/Porto) called '*Urban Surveys*' is one of the first examples of 'humanism manifestation'. Hyper-realistic drawings reflect the idea of an architect on the shift from an autonomous position to being more engaged with the real environment. Nishiyama Uzo, the author of "*Notebooks on Houses and Living*"¹⁰ is considered as an innovator of scientific research in relation to housing. With the aim to improve ordinary people's dwellings, he created outstanding illustrations supplemented with observation notes, inconspicuous details and dimensions. Another example of the application of visual ethnography in practices is a field research carried out by the Centre for Minimum Cost Housing, McGill University in 1984. The outcome of the current investigation was a literature released called "*How the Other Half Builds*"¹¹ containing drawings of different elements of the city and description of their transformations according to people's needs. A recent example of using visual ethnography both as an analytical tool and as a projective device is the Tokyo-based firm Atelier Bow-Wow. The drawings included in their book called "*Commonalities. Production of Behaviors*"¹² demonstrates the potential of architectural drawings to communicate aspects of everyday life.

Architectural activity is an exploration based on observation and experimentation. The previously mentioned examples of practitioners used visual ethnography as a research method in order to understand the way people dwell and inhabit spaces. We still use the book of Ernst Neufert "*Architects' Data*"¹³ as a reference for spatial requirements in building design and site planning, even though it is more than eighty years old. The edition serves as a manual for architects and designers. Dealing mainly with ergonomics and providing analytical and explanatory drawings supplemented with text, it became a great example of praxeological approach in architecture. Praxeology gives us the tools to think about human actions beyond what we see and to understand human actions with the conceptual analysis and logical implications of preferences and choices.

Therefore, in my opinion, this approach is especially useful for the initial stages of the project. It assists to extend the study of social context, which is an important part of answering the research question. As an analytical tool, praxeology when combined with visual ethnography provides fresh answers that can help to resolve existing problems. The example of blind designing is the MHADA's approach towards slum redevelopment in Mumbai. While trying to solve the problem of housing shortage at the land of existing informal settlements Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority demolished the original one-storey urban tissue and replaced it with four to five storey buildings of similar typology, using the exact same footprint. The outcome of such actions led to extremely crammed and unlivable

conditions deprived of primary needs such as daylight access or ventilation. People, who got used to living on the ground floor, whose lives and activities related to the outside space, were resettled in high-rise buildings. It is obvious that little prior research of the area and typology was conducted. If it was done with a more social agenda, maybe the situation would have been more positive.

IV POSITIONING

One of the main research focuses of the Chair of Architecture and Dwelling is to understand the existing built environment. The fieldtrip and the observation study provided a great opportunity to learn more about the context. However, as Berker revealed, any observation study needs to be reinforced with the theoretical research. By means of mapping, photographs, interviews and sketches, a catalogue of social and spatial patterns was created. The book of patterns can serve as a benchmark for the entire project, shaping some detail or even the whole concept. Analyzing the existing built environment through the review of literature such as DASH "*Global Housing*" and "*In the name of Housing, a study of 11 projects in Mumbai*" was also very valuable. These books not only analyzes existing building technics, dwelling typology, materials and circulation system, it also provides the reader with the social and historical content of the type and its surrounding.

Even though all the aforementioned literature is highly relevant and useful, it is equally important, or maybe even more, to investigate recent books and articles with fresh perspectives. One of such examples is "*Chasing the Affordable Dream. A Plan to House Mumbai's Millions*" by PK Das, Gurbir Singh, Ritu Dewan and Kabir Agarwal. The lead author, PK Das, is an architect activist and the designer of Sangharsh Nagar, which is considered as one of the most successful contemporary rehabilitation projects. In his book, PK Das claims that the major reason for the housing problem of Mumbai is its housing policy, which I completely agree. In 2011, PK Das in cooperation with the Nivara Hakk organization presented the slum redevelopment master plan. They assure this gesture can change the role of the government in planning, project management, administration and the price control system, which will definitely influence the housing strategy. I believe this act may become a starting point and a new platform for my hypotheses and experiments.

By mentioning Sangharsh Nagar, my intention is to stress the relevance of the relationship with people in the aim for designing proper housing architecture. The reason why PK Das' project was very successful is that it was linked to the intentions and necessities of its future inhabitants right from its conception. By doing a proper praxeological work, PK Das managed to understand the desires and needs of people and make an architecture – accompanied by the necessary management job, which is crucial in contemporary India -, that is very committed to the necessities of its inhabitants.

Literature study and peer reviewed articles can help to gain both, general knowledge on the research topic, as well as understanding of the smallest, inconspicuous details concerning human actions. All these methods are useful for conducting the research in its own way by highlighting different aspects of architectural investigation. However, there is another very important aspect – it is our own, personal experience. We are affected by a variety of different factors, such as culture, background, religion, and context. As a result, we should be aware that all data, information, facts and knowledge that we gain from different sources is transformed according to our own experience.

In such a manner, I want to say that different research methods can be very useful for investigation, as long as we recognize their boundaries and subjectivity. Thus, to minimize the possible margin of error and maximize objectivity of research, it is necessary to introduce an additional method (or methods), which could complement each other and expand the frames of one's investigation by looking to the question from another angle. As it was described in Ray Lucas' "*Research Methods for Architecture*" the most conventional division is between qualitative and quantitative research. The comparison of the two kinds of research, qualitative research is meant to be uncertain and insufficiently accurate, based

on individual perspectives. While quantitative, by contrast, is always associated with objectivity, because of the big number of participants and large amount of data. From this perspective, I believe that the application of complementary methods towards our research can bring indisputable benefits to our projects.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1966)
- ² PK Das, *Ground Reality Voices* (Interview, 2012)
- ³ Christopher Alexander, *A pattern Language* (Oxford University Press, 1977)
- ⁴ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London, Laurence King, 2016)
- ⁵ Witold Rybczynski, *How the Other Half Builds*, (Montreal, McDill University Press, 1994)
- ⁶ Doug Saunders, *Arrival City* (Great Britain, Windmill Books, 2011)
- ⁷ DASH, *Global Housing* (Delft, TUDelft, 2014)
- ⁸ PK Das, *Chasing the Affordable Dream. A Plan to House Mumbai's Millions* (Mumbai, Bombaykala Books, 2018)
- ⁹ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London, Laurence King, 2016)
- ¹⁰ Nishiyama Uzo, *Notebooks on Houses and Living* (Ensemble of Publications 1920-1950)
- ¹¹ Witold Rybczynski, *How the Other Half Builds*, (Montreal, McDill University Press, 1994)
- ¹² Atelier Bow-wow, *Commonalities. Production of Behaviors* (2014)
- ¹³ Ernst Neufert, *Architects' Data* (Germany, Lockwood, 1936)