

Reflection on “Ethnographic Praxeology” Research Methods

Introduction

In *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science*, Abraham Kaplan considers methods as the study of the process, rather than the product, of inquiry. And the term methodology is used for “mid-range” aspects of the research process that are common to a broad range of disciplines¹. A methodological research provides a theoretical guideline to define the starting point of design in a logical way, which continues to help give directions in further design development.

From the course, I was impressed by the cross-disciplinary methods and methodology, which goes beyond the tradition architectural discussion and offers new possibilities for design. Different systems of knowledge were introduced during the lecture for further discussion. However, each methodological instrument has its own strengths and limitations, which should be noticed when doing research.

Base on the topic of my graduation studio and the personal interest, research methodology that I would like to study further is praxeology. The global housing studio looks into the current situation of affordable housing in Global South, Mumbai and tries to find suitable solutions for an inclusive development in the background of urbanization. One of essential questions from the studio is how will these new urbanites, who lives in the slum now, dwell in the future? To answer this question, it is necessary to have an in-depth understanding on the existing social patterns of people and different family structures in Mumbai. All these aspects can be considered as the reflection of praxeology. The issues such as social space, domestic space, income generation and borders are the result of human behaviors, which should be analyzed based on different families and communities.

Starting from people and their self-built extended space that I observed during the field trip, I was willing to solve the key issues of limited space and money by exploring the potentiality for participation of people in design and future extension. Thus, my research question is about how to meet the demand of future development in Mumbai by enabling the incremental housing possibilities for a inclusive, economical and sustainable community. The general approaches for investigation in the studio is participant observation and visual ethnography. Since the design of housing and community is mainly about on people, these two methods create a close and intimate connection with the urban poor and their daily practices, which will be helpful in providing materials and inspirations for the design stage.

Research-Methodological Discussion

In the book *Building and Dwelling*, Richard Sennett discussed the space as a reflection of the accumulation of differences in the way how people live there. He emphasizes on the importance of human activities that influence the physical space governed by architecture.² It is a dynamic process between architecture and users, who will gradually transform the space based on the demands of themselves. Also, people played an active role not only in using the space, but also in identifying place from social and psychological aspects.

When looking at the city, people's participation also shapes the urban fabric in a large scale. Jane Jacobs focused on the complexity that characterized by people in the community, which is against the idea of separation in modern urban planning. And she came up with bottom-up approaches to generate the diversity and density in city through in-depth observation and study in the everyday life of

people.³ The praxeological study helps to define the relationship between body and space, people and city, which provides an alternative approach for design.

As M. Berkers said in the lecture, praxeology is 'the study of human action and conduct', which considers 'the built environment as stage for everyday practice'⁴. The current praxeological studies pay attention to the specific results in a particular situation, looking into the relation among bodies, minds and desire. It is also necessary to place the practices observed within a cultural context. And ethnography, "the written representation of culture", is a process of inquiry that involves the description and interpretation of the cultural and social practices of people.⁵ By combining these two concepts, the methodology 'ethnographic praxeology'⁶ can be defined as the study on the behavior of human being in the social and cultural system. It 'describes the behavioral and material expressions of culture, including architecture.'⁷

Because of the rapid urbanization of Mumbai, a city of 18.39 million people, over 42 percent of them live in the informal settlements in poor conditions.⁸ Offering more affordable housing is an urgent issue. Housing has the closest bond with people, which served as a container for everyday practice. The approach for new housing proposal starts from the observation of existing living conditions and lifestyle of inhabitants, analyzing their characteristics in relation to space and exploring the potentiality for future development.

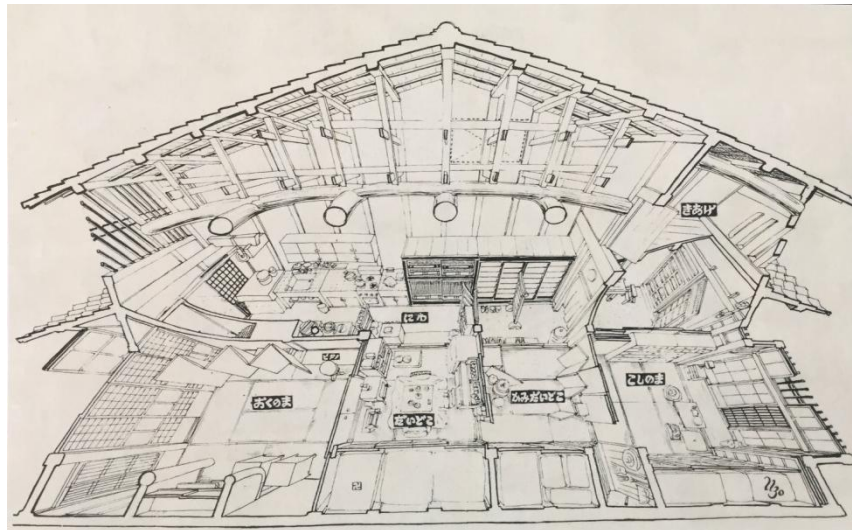
As a result of the high density in Mumbai, it is common for a family with 4 people live in a unit for around 14 sq meter. The limitation of space forced them to use space efficiently and extend their house in any possible way, such as building extra balcony, having temporary shed in front of their door or changing the room into a small shop by adding another entrance on the ground floor. Through applying ethnographic praxeology into research, it provides useful perspectives in learning about how people dwell in this extreme conditions and how individual participations transformed original space into a place called home. In the same time, the communal area was largely influenced by the extension of domestic space, public activities happened in communal yard and street reflect the characteristics of inhabitants in different cultural and religious background. In addition, when it comes to incremental housing system which I would like to research further, praxeological study on the existing living pattern gives valuable evidence to define and predict the involvement of participants in the design and construction process.

Research-Methodological Reflection

Historically, praxeological methodology is defined as 'a way to explore the object world through the body's sensory and kinetic experience of materiality' by Wamier, who developed the concept from Mauss's *Techniques of the body* (1936) and Foucault's *Techniques of the self* (1989).⁹ It concentrates on the process of identifying the bodily dynamic as well as the solid materiality between people and physical environment. Praxeology has been described and conducted in a wide field of philosophy, psychology, economics and architecture. It is also essential for product design, interactive design and other design-related field. Among all these researches, the study of subjectivity and individuality was especially highlighted, while the social relationship in a specific context is sometimes ignored by investigators.

Meanwhile, ethnographic study draws its legitimacy in both research area and contemporary art in recent decades. It is not limited to the definition as 'written representation of culture'¹⁰. By using the methods of visual ethnography, such as photograph, videos and drawings, researchers find new possibilities in qualitative study. For example, two Japanese architects, Kon Wajiro and Nishiyama Uzo, focused on documenting the everyday life of ordinary people, including on-site surveys of

objects, people's behaviors, living space and the surroundings(Fig.1). The ethnographic analysis they made help to propose the new form of housing in relation to the experience of people and their habits, which is different from the idea of functionalism that ignoring the relation between individuals and culture.



[Fig.1] Uzo Nishiyama's Notebooks on Houses and Living

There are several specific approaches in the methodology of ethnographic praxeology, And I chose two of them to explore in my design research, which is participatory observation and mapping. However, one should also realized that only visual ethnography is not enough to describe the real conditions between space and people. Although it is the most understandable and synthesized way, semantic ethnography is also necessary in explaining the meaning of human behavior and reaction.¹¹

The first method is participatory observation, which is a principal approach in ethnographic research. The social anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski elaborated the notion of participatory observation in the field research in the 1920s. It has been used in many disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography and social psychology. It is about gain a close and intimate familiarity with a certain group of people and their practices through an intensive involvement in their cultural environment.¹² When looking into architectural field, the idea of 'as found aesthetics' developed by Alison and Peter Smithson is an interpretation of participatory observation in design and urban planning. They observed the ordinary and prosaic objects through photography and re-energize their inventive activity. The Smithsons stated that 'it is not only about architecture, but all these marks that constitute remembrances in a place and that to be read through finding out how the existing built fabric of place had come to be as it was.'¹³

The second approach is mapping. In order to understand the site in multi-scales, it will be helpful to compare the detailed living patterns gathered from observation with mapping in the scale of community, district and city. Denis Cosgrove argues that "mapping is a 'visual architect' through which the worlds they construct are selected, translated, organized and shaped."¹⁴ Thus it is an representative tool to reveal the hidden information in the city, such as the transition between public and private space, the movement of inhabitants in relation with place. In the book *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*, James Corner applied a hybrid mapping technique in different geographic landscape. He considered mapping not as a finished, complete product, but a process for creative design. Layers of information on the map projected to an abstract quality of context, which goes beyond the original meaning.¹⁵

To answers my research question on how to enable the incremental housing possibilities for a inclusive, economical and sustainable community. The methodology of ethnographic praxeology helps

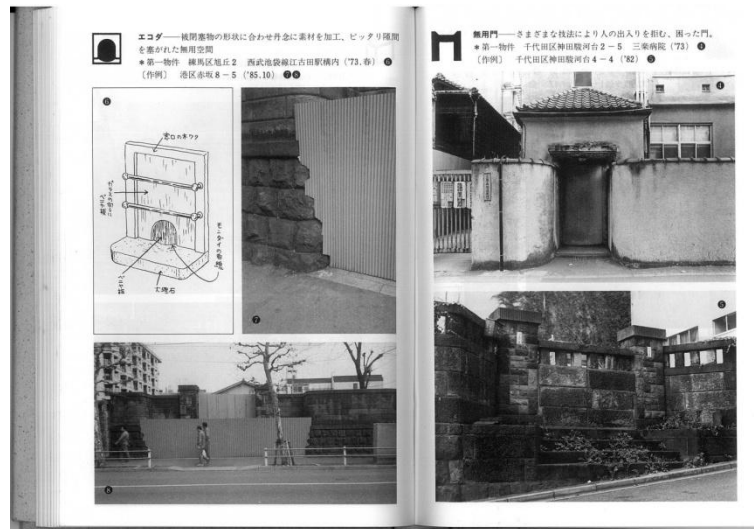
to investigate into people and culture in Mumbai. As Thomas Csordas wrote, “the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture”¹⁶ Through participatory observation in Indian cultural background, the subjectivities will be revealed in relation to how they dwell and build their house in this extremely dense area. On the other hand, the aspects on space and place in specific housing area will also be included. Mapping becomes a creative tool to define not only the material culture of a setting, but also the interaction occurring within that setting; and the situation’s sense of place¹⁷ As a result, the strategy for proposing new housing should be rooted in the context for the urbanization in the future.

Positioning

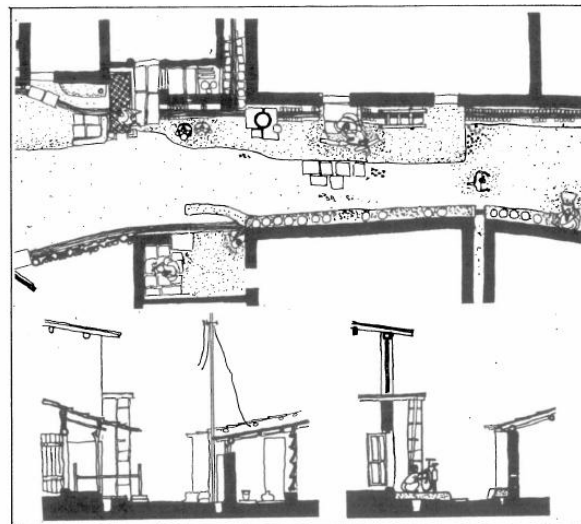
Based on the discussion above, the issue I would like to research further in my graduation project is the daily behavior of inhabitants that framed by existing living condition, and how they extend their living space spontaneously in a special cultural background. Along with the morphological study for different housing types, I will develop my approach for new incremental housing which fits into the context. Praxeological investigation will translate the socio-cultural practice of people into meaningful living patterns in the urban space.

Street observation society that established by architectural historian Terunobu Fujimori and artist Genpei Akasegawa is one of cases about ethnographic research(Fig.2). A small group of people started to record detail objects, buildings and incidents that they observed in the street through sketches, photographs and articles. Similar to Duchamp’s idea of 'readymades', they were attracted by objects that lost their original usefulness but were still functioned. From my point of view, in this case, they emphasized more on the objects themselves, not the relation with people. Because the forms that we built and changed through time are the consequence of the ways we live, by having a close look at the materiality and morphology of space, it will also indicates the behavior and movement of people, and the incidents happened on the site.

As for the situation in India, another relevant architectural study is from centre of minimum cost housing in McGill university in 1984. A group of people did an comprehensive site research in four informal sector settlements in Indore, India(Fig.3). they divided the characteristics of informal living place into house extension, work place, small shops, trees, public structure, vehicles and access streets, and made different tools like maps, plans, sections and perspectives to explain what they noticed from the site.¹⁸ In the end, they created a detailed manual of space, place and people, and this is the what I want to adopted in my research. Richardson stated that the significance of objects is defined by the actions of social actors. The material cultural along is not able to depict a whole picture of how the system works, especially in the field of urban planning and architecture, the role of people and their community is also significant.



[Fig.2] Thomasson typology in the street of Tokyo



[Fig.3] Accsee study for narrow alley

To sum up, I would like to approach my graduation project with a micro-ethnographic research under the methodology of praxeology. Mumbai has a really complex housing environment because of the large population and the lack of land. On the one hand, the way how people live is partly defined by the existing context, as well as influences from cultural, social, religious and political aspects. On the other hand, the involvement of people also influenced the built environment through a certain time period. The dynamic process between people and space needs to be further investigated. In my project of designing flexible incremental housing for an inclusive community in Mumbai suburb, conducting participatory observation helps to discover the hidden information inside everyday behavior of residents on the site. It is not only a way of collecting data, but a way to formulate interpretation through drawings and sketches after the site survey. Meanwhile, jumping out from what we actually see through eyes, the tool of mapping offers another scale of looking. It is about the study on the urban development in Mumbai, such as transport system, land use and open space, and the comparison and combination with what have gained from the participatory observation. By selecting, organizing, translating different layers of information gathered from the research, it will build up an comprehensive system of personal understanding and arouse new possibilities for design intervention.

Overall, defining the methodology of ethnographic praxeological is really necessary for understanding the people in related to their living conditions in Mumbai. I was willing to find the answer on how to encourage the participation of people in the incremental housing system to meet the demands for

future development. The tools that I choose for research gives a chance for a bottom-up process in design. It will continue to shape the way of thinking through research and design.

- ¹ Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science*, (San Francisco: Chandler, 1964). 34
- ² Richard Sennett. *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, (United Kingdom: Penguin Books Ltd, 2018). 237
- ³ Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York : Random House,1961) 126-140
- ⁴ Berkers, M. TU Delft Lecture on Lecture Series Research Methods, 2018
- ⁵ Kimberly Powell (2010) Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers, *Art Education*, 63:6, 44-53, DOI: 10.1080/00043125.2010.11519102
- ⁶ Nicolas Nova. *Beyond Design Ethnography: How Designers Practice Ethnographic Research*,(France. SHS Publishing. 2014) . 3
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- ⁸ Data released by Govt. of India for Census 2011
- ⁹ Laurence Douny , *A Praxeological Approach to Dogon Material Culture*.(University College London,2007). 64-66
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- ¹¹ Wolfgang F. E. Preiser. *Enhancing Building Performance*,(Chichester : Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). 03
- ¹² Participant observation by James P. Spradley
- ¹³ van den Heuvel, D. *As Found: The Metamorphosis of the Everyday. On the work of Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi and Alison and Peter Smithson(1953-1956)*. (Oase,59. 2002)
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- ¹⁷ Miles Richardson, *Being-in-the-Market Versus Being-in-the-Plaza: Material Culture and the Construction of Social Reality in Spanish America*, in *Low*, Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003,76..
- ¹⁸ Rybczynski, Witold. *How the other half builds, v. 1: Space*, (Montreal, McGill University, 1984) 1-2

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