

The importance of visual ethnography in the design process

LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT Self-Assessment on Research Methods

Fleur Melchers
4275098
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Introduction

Architecture must be interpreted as a practical approach to serve the needs of people. It goes beyond the field of the built environment as it affects the daily life of real people. Research provides architects a method to gain a better understanding about the way people dwell and the relationship between social and spatial practices. In order to integrate these conditions in an architectural design, the architect must determine the core of these terms. Research methods and heuristics techniques are indispensable to obtain this information, as it forms the base on which the design will develop and elaborate. The choice of the right research method requires a profound knowledge and awareness of the research methodologies, as the predetermination of the final design is hidden in them. Thus, the deeper a research-methodological awareness is integrated in the architectural profession, the better the designer will be able to respond to people's needs in the built environment.

During the course Lecture Series Research Methods, my interpretation and understanding of the variety of the many different research methods that can be addressed, has amplified. As a result, it emphasized the exigency of diversification and interaction of multiple methods, to create a better understanding of a(n) (architectural) assignment. Now that the graduation project had started, in which the student must define its own plan of approach, an impressive amount of different research methodologies arrived was revealed at the exact right time. It made me realize that during the bachelor study of Architecture, the methods to address a design practice were always already established. The lecture series offered an overview of the existing methodologies, which helped me to define my graduation plan and develop my own position and tools for analysis and design.

This position paper will provide a reflection or self-assessment on the research conducted for a graduation project. It will evaluate which strategies and methods of architectural research have been applied, using the knowledge gained during the course. My graduation project is provided with the provisional title 'Preserving the Social Sustainability in an Increasing Urban Density' and is part of the Global Housing Studio 'Mixing Mumbai'. With half of Mumbai's population living in informal settlements and an increasing rate of urbanization, this studio aims to rethink the current systems of affordable housing production. Because of the shortage of affordable housing and a growing urban population, densification of the urban area is inevitable. During this graduation studio my personal focus will be on the social issues of necessary high-density city space. In the course of the study trip to Mumbai the differing social and environmental characters in the informal and formal housing districts became clear. In the low-density areas with baithi chawls, the community feeling and atmosphere of the space were significantly stronger than in the dense areas with the more formal mid-rise chawls. The graduation thesis therefore aims to explore how an increasing demand of affordable housing units can be supplied, creating more density, whilst maintaining a community environment with social sustainability that can be found in the low-density and more informal housing districts.

Research-methodological discussion

As a preparatory study for the field trip to Mumbai, the heuristic methods of interpretive historical research and mapping were used to investigate the political, technical, geographical and sociological context of the design location. As a group work, a collective knowledge base was constructed by gathering this data to provide us with the fundamental information for an efficient excursion to India. During the following site visit of approximately one week, in-situ research was conducted, investigating local characteristics that offered starting points for innovative affordable housing possibilities. Whilst being there, it soon became apparent that only by visiting and participating in the community of the site, one can genuinely understand the cultural, social and environmental conditions. I used several visual techniques, among which photography and sketching, to learn and understand the complexity of the area. These ethnographic, visual methods as a means to investigate and depict the place, could capture complex narratives of the lived experience that were not, and could not have been, addressed through the course's previous study.¹ Since the topic of my graduation studio requires an examination of the social characteristics of the community within the living environment, this position paper will focus on the essence of visual ethnography as a research approach.

It is by observing and interpreting, through watching and listening and paying attention, that we learn and understand. Ethnography is strongly connected to the notion of learning through observation and interpretation. Likewise, ethnographic research is intertwined with visual technologies. When ethnographers produce visual images, as photographs, drawings or videos, the experience of producing and discussing them becomes part of their system of knowledge.² Ethnography is perceived as a difficult to define methodology. Hence, it is not surprising that differing definitions exist, and therefore not one specified, set statement of the exact meaning. Literally, ethnography means 'description of people', and derives from *ethnos* translated to 'people' and *graphia* to 'description'. A literature review will highlight the current interpretations of visual ethnography, regarding an architectural point of view.

In her 2012 book 'Ethnographic Methods', Karen O'Reilly states that ethnography is a theory about how research should be conducted. This ethnographic methodology includes research related methods as participant observation, in-depth interviews and conversations. Through direct contact with human beings in the context of their daily life, it provides understanding of their social life over a prolonged period of time.³ Ethnography starts once the researcher has entered the area in which the examination should be conducted and involves gaining access to the people in this place. Tim Ingold defines ethnography as a methodology that aims to describe life as it is lived and experienced by people in a certain place and at a certain time.⁴ This can be done through visually depict this description in graphic media, such as a written text, a drawing or a picture. Hereby he highlights the visual aspect of ethnography. According to Sarah Pink, in her 2012 book 'Doing Visual Ethnography', ethnography cannot take place without engaging with media forms, since these visual media is a part of the way ethnographic knowledge is constituted.⁵ It involves an approach that engages with visual methods throughout its processes of research, analysis and representation. This reflects the definition of O'Reilly as ethnography being an iterative methodology: a practice of doing research in which the collection of information and the following analysis and processing of this data are not discrete phases, but inextricably linked.⁶

Important to understand is the difference between ethnography and the methodology of anthropology. For in most of the researches, the anthropologist and the ethnographer are one and the same person, combining the tasks of anthropology and ethnography.⁷ Both methodologies have much to contribute to one another, but their purpose and intention are different. An important distinction is the relationship with people during the conduction of the research. Ethnography aims to make studies of people, whereas anthropology is to study with people. The distinction is fundamental, since it converts observation into objectification. This causes anthropology to be a more speculative discipline concerning the conditions of human life.⁸

Research-methodological reflection

To understand what visual ethnography means today, it is important to comprehend where these methodologies have come from and how they developed over time. This will be done throughout identifying and describing the key sources and changes of ethnographic research.

The urban sociologist Robert Park plays an important role in the development of ethnography. When he founded The Chicago School as a sociology department of The University of Chicago, Park adopted field-work methods from anthropology.⁹ Between 1917 and 1942, The Chicago School produced several studies in which they analyzed the everyday life and interactions between people in the community of a specific group, in a specific location in an urban context. By living in communities for extended periods and asking people how they thought about the social and urban aspects of their life, the Chicagoans were experts in analyzing a community.¹⁰ The School was also influenced by another urban sociologist, Ernest Burgess. During his collaboration with the community of Chicago ethnographers, their ethnographic approach became more intellectual based, combining quantitative and qualitative data.¹¹

The combination of Park, Burgess and the Chicago scholars has led to a developed methodology of ethnography, which is now recognized by sociologists throughout the world. The ethnographers of The Chicago School were central figures in this development and generated a vision for the study of human behavior and its embeddedness in specific people and places.¹²

The general notion of ethnography as it was created in Chicago has not much changed over time. However, in the specific field of visual ethnography, an explicit evolution has occurred. The visual became to have a more settled role in social science research, including ethnography. New approaches effectuated a stronger connection between the examination of social experiences of people within their built environment and the representation of it.

The first few years of the twenty-first century can be interpreted as a key moment in the development of visual ethnography, as a series of texts about this methodology was published. These texts suggested and emphasized manners in which visual methods could possibly assist ethnographers in their work, and hereby publicly approved visual ethnography as a set methodology. Furthermore, the rapid developments in visual and digital technologies that now facilitate visual research and representation, represent a new context for visual ethnography.¹³ In other words, the production of new (affordable) media provided ethnographers new methods of visual research and new ways of representing this research, such as photography and videography. Although these methods had already been used for decades, it was now officially recognized that photographs and videos were a part of ethnography, as research methods themselves.

To conclude, ethnography has emerged from the more classical approach in which the ethnographer spent extended periods or time, from months to even years, with the people they were researching.¹⁴ Chicagoan procedure included observing behaviors, participating in activities, interviewing and writing notes in order to understand the way in which these people lived. These long-term engagements within the field of research have become too costly. Together with developments in visual technologies, it caused the emergence of a newer approach of ethnography. Ethnography now includes participatory and collaborative photographic, videographic and other techniques. Naturally, this new ethnographic approach does not produce the same system of knowledge that emerges from long-term fieldwork, but ethnographers should ensure that they take on board some of the lessons of the past.¹⁵ That is, to aim to fully understand the character of the life of people that they live within their own community, in their own living environment.

The traditional as well as the newer aspects of ethnography appeal to me. This is evident from the specific research I conducted during the field trip in Mumbai. For several days I studied the life of people in relation to their built environment, by means of observing, having conversations, sketching, photographing and making videos. These methods clearly match the research-methodological aspects of both the classical and the newer ethnography. However, after returning home, when I started processing the collected data, I realized that in my personal approach, both types of ethnography aimed to serve another purpose.

First, observing the life in the research area and having conversations with the people of its

population, has been intended to gain a deeper, more thoroughly understanding of how people experience living there. Only by direct contact with these people and through asking questions, it is possible to learn what cannot be seen from a picture: what do people think of their environment, and how do they feel living here? Secondly, making sketches and drawings whilst physically being present in the area being researched, provided me the opportunity to obtain a notion of the built environment and how people appropriate it. The transfer of what is seen by the eye to paper requires rigorous looking, which can be seen as in-situ analysis. Making photos and videos on the other hand, is just raw data.¹⁶ These research methods offer me the possibility to 'get back' to the area and see how it looks, as a memory to the fieldtrip, without being an analyzation itself. Although, an important exception of photography as visual ethnography is the tactic of using photographs as a means to engage with people. By showing the pictures and discussing them with local people, more background information was collected.

Summarizing, the conducted (visual) ethnography enabled me to expose the visible and underlying information of the research location, creating a frame of reference that will be the starting point for my design project.

Positioning

Considering my own position, Marieke Berkers' lecture on praxeology proved to be most valuable for me. Praxeology is explained as 'the study of human action and conduct', deriving from *praxis* as 'action' and *logia* as 'study of'. In her lecture, Berkers emphasized the built environment as a stage for the everyday practice of life. What I especially found interesting of this talk, was the discussed issue of Bruno Taut's 'Die Neue Wohnung'. Drawings of his design clearly shows his attention for the possible movements of people through this house. By thinking about how the actual users of the building would live in and use the spaces, Taut was able to design an appropriate house. In other words, he studied the praxis of architecture. This is closely related to the methodology of ethnography.

Debates about the role of visual ethnography in the practice of architecture are still current. In his literature, Francesco Marano states that 'only an ethnographic investigation can profoundly interpret the socio-cultural practices of residents and reveal the hidden significances that give meaning to their lives in urban space'.¹⁷ I do now, while writing this paper and working on my graduation project, more than ever agree on that. Without ethnography, I will never understand the difference between the social aspects of the living environment in the baithi chawls and the more formal mid-rise chawls, and neither its relationship with the built environment.

Writing this paper has led me to become more aware of my own position within the field of architecture. I position myself as an architecture student who seeks to find the best architectural solution that suits the needs of people. As I mentioned before, in my opinion, architecture should be perceived not only as the designing of the built environment, but most of all as the designing of the living environment of its population. Therefore, I believe that an in-depth understanding of the behavior of users and the contexts in which they live is necessary to improve the human and social aspects of a design process. As praxeology means the study of human action and conduct, I believe it does not work without using visual ethnography as a research methodology. In order to understand a human's behavior, one must examine how this behavior relates to the environment the human lives in. Doing ethnography requires to focus on the experiences of people we interview, our interpretation and the way that data is represented through visual media. It constructs a better understanding of the history, culture and the community people live in. By thinking about how to depict the experiences in a visual way, you are forced to make a synthesis of this gained information, which leads to the comprehension of what you have researched. After writing this position paper, I can conclude that I strongly believe that architecture and ethnography are, or should be, inextricably linked. Ethnography-architecture research on space then includes the socio-cultural life of the community, the real terms and elements of the space and the relation between this space and the life of the people that constructs the meaning of space.¹⁸ (Marano, p. 97).

Therefore, I strongly believe that the utilization of ethnography as the main methodology for my graduation project, is perfect. Only then I will be able to find a design solution that still provides a social sustainability in an increasing density built environment.

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⁵ Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (Sage, 2013), 1.

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⁸ Tim Ingold, *Anthropology contra ethnography* (HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 7(1) 2017), 23.

⁹ Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 64.

¹⁰ Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 64.

¹¹ Paul Atkinson, *Handbook of ethnography* (Sage, 2001), 14.

¹² Paul Atkinson, *Handbook of ethnography* (Sage, 2001), 22.

¹³ Ana Isabel Alfonso, *Working Images: Visual research and representation in ethnography* (Routledge, 2004), 2.

¹⁴ Sarah Pink, *Ethnographic research in the construction industry* (Routledge, 2012), 4.

¹⁵ Sarah Pink, *Ethnographic research in the construction industry* (Routledge, 2012), 5.

¹⁶ Sytse de Maat, *On the Symbiosis of People and Building* (Amsterdam, 2015), 94.

¹⁷ Francesco Marano, *Key Points for a visual Ethnography of Architectural Design and Urban Planning*. (The Journal of The Scientific Society Ludovico Quaroni 7(10) 2017), 89.

¹⁸ Francesco Marano, *Key Points for a visual Ethnography of Architectural Design and Urban Planning*. (The Journal of The Scientific Society Ludovico Quaroni 7(10) 2017), 97.