

# The Anthropology Reflection on Space and Place

Msc3 Global Housing Studio

Biling Yang

4736990

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This essay discusses how to take research methods as the theoretical guiding principle for design. The intention of the essay is to explain what methods I have opted for my graduation studio Global Housing, why I chose these methods and to what extent I can use these methods to solve the problems in the design process.

“The advancement of architecture is considered to be essentially linked to the acquirement of knowledge, which is achieved through research.”<sup>1</sup> The architecture research methodology is an important discipline that focuses on research methods. It provides us with a way to discover, analyze, and solve problems, so that we can understand architecture design and the nature of architecture from a higher position. Besides, we can also arrange the time of learning and designing purposefully. The architecture methodology can help us gradually improve the pre-conceived ability to solve design problems, and gradually form our own principles and even personal design concept. It is a kind of theory study, which does not provide a specific method for architecture design itself. Methodological research expands from concrete design procedures to deeper philosophical thinking. And its results are also theoretical rather than consequential. In my opinion, after the study of the design methodology, we can improve the understanding of the human behavior of architectural design instead of getting the specific methods to solve various problems.

My research is about solving affordable housing problems in Mumbai, India. Before starting the project, I have already made lots of preliminary researches about Mumbai so I knew the history development of the city, the situations about the housings now and the potential problems they may have and so on. But all of these come from statistics and some others' essays, these data and description seem like indifferent for me. I just had a general impression of the city Mumbai that some housing problems need to be solved there. But I had no ideas about how severe these problems are, how that could influence on people's life, what kind of ways can be used to solve these problems. I was confused about all these and there was no clear thought about the project. In this sense, I have to apply some specific methodologies to find out the most important problems and form my own research question.

For further understanding about Mumbai, I participated in the site excursion to Mumbai for almost three weeks. I visited different types of houses there and experienced the daily life the local have. We also worked as groups to interview a lots of people who live in slums, chawls, apartments or bangles. The interview topic focused on not only the architectural issues, but also about their daily life. I took photographs and drew sketches to make it visual and mapped what I saw to record every information I got. After three-week's working, I developed my own research question. It is about the income generation combined with their houses. I find people there have a variety of economic activities in every corner of the city, not only along the street, but also in the dwellings. I want to find out a way that on the premise of ensuring population density, can develop both affordable and sustainable housing without eradicating the economic network generated by the informal settlements.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gülsün Sağlamer and Fatma Erkök, *Doctoral Education in Architecture: Challenges and Opportunities* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

## II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

As Ray Locus said, “ Anthropology is essentially conducted by mixed methods, but the key activity is to live in a context for an extended period, fully participating in life there”.<sup>2</sup> I stayed in Mumbai for three weeks, although it is not a long period. With the observation and participation in local people’s living condition, I would like to regard my research methodology as anthropology. With application of anthropology, we can investigate the psychology of users, better understand their living habits, and make buildings or urban space meet the needs of the public and have better use. I think I need to have a new perspective on the current problems and their demand, which should be the basic knowledge I need to study before designing a real project.

Robert H. Lavenda and Emily A. Schultz argued that anthropology is “to explore the nexus of society, culture and human diversity, with an emphasis on how individuals and communities are shaped by social, political and economic forces.”<sup>3</sup> In the field of architecture, the practices and the spatial dimensions of cultural beliefs have always been of interest to architects. In *Anthropology of Place and Space* (2012), Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga and Setha M. Low put forward a further view, “The most significant change for anthropology is found not in the attention researchers increasingly pay to the material and spatial aspects of culture, but in the acknowledgment that space is an essential component of sociocultural theory. That is, anthropologists are rethinking and reconceptualizing their understandings of culture in spatialized ways.”<sup>4</sup> This shift illustrates the importance of space and place in anthropological research. The spatial dimensions of culture is more and more significant in both anthropological and architectural study.

Successful buildings can induce people entering and produce interesting behaviors. The actions of this behavior have the original occurrence, the content of the behavior has cultural anthropological characteristics, the process of behavior has memory-inducing characteristics. The architecture uses a kind of cultural expression and behaviors, as a medium to record and supplement cultural heritage. Architects can use behavioral observations to observe people's regional and folklore behaviors in their lives to extract translatable architectural materials and use them in architectural design. This makes the building no longer static but dynamic, no longer boring but interesting, no longer mandatory but natural, no longer intermittent but coherent, no longer momentary but eternal, no longer vulgar but brand new.

In the case of Mumbai, in order to make a better understanding of the low-income group people’s living, I applied quite a few approaches such as field research, interview, typology studies, mapping and so on. Because the housing problem has a strong relation with people’s daily lives. It's really significant for us to undergo the way that they think and behave. Apart from these, I took photographs and made videos, using photographing approach to document their movements and mapping what I have found throughout the trip so as to find out the issues. The visualized collection will communicate the vital contextual information to proceed in the building scale. It is another important tool to help me in the design propose.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Lavenda and Emily A. Schultz, *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga and Setha M. Low, *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 1.

### III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Anthropology is a research of human beings and human behaviour and communities in the present and past.<sup>5</sup> The abstract term anthropology first appeared in the works of Magnus Hundt and Otto Casmann during the Germany Renaissance. It was derived from the combining forms of the Greek words *ánthrōpos* (human) and *lógos* (study), which began to be used in English by the early 18th century.<sup>6</sup> With development, many disciplines are related to anthropology nowadays, such as sociocultural, biological, archaeological, linguistic fields.

Anthropological approaches to the study of architecture and the built environment dates back at least to Morgan's *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines* (1881), emphasizes building techniques and housing as "containers" of social units.<sup>7</sup> Another strategy is to explore the architectural environment as a source of social relationship metaphor assertions, just like Levi-Strauss's concept of house societies. Therefore, with architectural energetics, spatial syntax, spatial agency, controversial landscapes, monuments and memories and so on, every exploration of the human and its cultural construction places goes as so.<sup>8</sup> Amerlinck envisions architectural anthropology as bridging a wide array of topics, ranging from the sensory perception of space to issues such as "how space is culturally constructed, gendered, envisioned, and most decisively, physically built".<sup>9</sup> Architectural anthropology, according to Amerlinck, "is not the exploration of the whole spatial dimension of human behavior but just of the products of human constructive behavior, defined as a series of actions geared to transform natural and manufactured resources in tridimensional forms that define, delimit, and enclose space" Lawrence-Zlihiga argues that Amerlinck's emphasis on construction ignores the way in which "buildings are enmeshed in the complex of human relations".<sup>10</sup> Further, "an anthropology of architecture concerns not only the initial production of built forms ..., but also their appropriation and reproduction by the intended and unintended inhabitants of the past and present and unknown others in the future."<sup>11</sup>

The built environment and human behavior are worthy of anthropological research. Because human beings acquire information from multiple domains while shaping the environments, and the constructed environment may reflect and shape specific aspects of human behavior, an anthropological research requires a holistic perspective. However, in the behavioral study of anthropology, there are a variety of methods that can be used to interpret a space. This section discusses comparative, historical and ethnographic approaches to study the society, culture and space. By reflecting on different approaches, I can better define my approach.

The comparative method is adopted by anthropology to check over all societies, ancient and contemporary, elementary and complex. It offers a unique cross-cultural standpoint by comparing one society's traditions with those of others constantly. Comparative method relates to the approach of comparing varying societies, groups or associations within the same community or between communities to illustrate whether and why they are like or unlike in definite facets. Royhan Muhammad used a relatively advanced approach in his study in the Indian subcontinent in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> He did a elaborate study about a number of specific groups, joined in their

---

<sup>5</sup> "Anthropology," Wikipedia, November 26, 2018, , accessed November 26, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology#cite\\_note-oed-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology#cite_note-oed-1).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis H. Morgan, *Houses and House-life of the American Aborigines* (Washington: Gov. Print. Off., 1881).

<sup>8</sup> Jerry D. Moore, "COMBINED BOOK REVIEWS," *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 1 (March 2004): 173, doi:10.1111/aman.2014.116.issue-1.

<sup>9</sup> Mari-Jose Amerlinck, *Architectural Anthropology* (Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey, 2014), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>12</sup> Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Bin Wan Razali and Jaffary Awang, "A Preliminary Discourse on the Islamic Scientific Study of Religion with Reference to the Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft," *Ulūm Islāmiyyah Journal* 13 (2014): , doi:10.12816/0012637.

everyday lives and their conventions, acquired the language they use, read the articles they write, developed a cross-cultural comparison and objectively recorded the consequence, which is the cardinal methodology used by modern anthropologists.

Another dominant method is the historical study. History can be negated by nobody. Every cultural and social phenomenon owns its roots from the past times. historical approach is nothing but learning a phenomenon in historical succession and hence it makes comparison easier throughout time. In historical approach, the development, gradual evolution and origin of societies, cultures and institutions are biological evolution's studied. The principles have undoubtedly had an influence on the historical approach. These are helpful in studying the evolution and origin of cultures and societies through historical method and collecting historical data.

The most central method for anthropology is the ethnographic approach. Ethnography intends to write on a special culture. It stresses the standpoint of those being learnt. You could recall the informations of the early ethnographic researches and fieldwork custom you have learnt in the former year. The conventional ethnographic method presumes that cultures are entire units and can be understood as such. It attempts to interpret and depict the everyday practices' symbolic and contextual meanings in their innate setting. Any anthropological study is basically based on ethnographic fieldwork, including principally participant observation, genealogical method and case study. One of ethnographic research's most important aspects is to acquire the technique to document the field information systematically.<sup>13</sup>

To conduct the anthropological research, I used all the three approaches. Before going for the field trip, we collected various information in aspects of Hard Data (Demography, Economy, Climate), Soft Data (History, Religion, Arts and Craftsmanship), Spatial Mapping (Urban transformation, Infrastructure) and Housing (Policies and Typological Variations). We had different comparative analysis from large to small scale and had an preliminary understanding of the historical development of Mumbai. After arriving in Mumbai, we visited the whole city and had an overall realization of the city's planning and different typologies of dwellings. We learned about people's living conditions at all levels, from EWS, LIG to MIG AND HIG. After that, we spent three days going to the specific site. By choosing target groups, observing target people's daily activities, having an interview with the habitants, recording and mapping what we found and so on, I found out the severe problems and put forward my own research question. Further more, based to the investigation of different residential cases, We made a conclusion about patterns in the aspects of Income Generation, Social Space, Domestic Activities, Boundaries, and Building Techniques of Mumbai, which laid a foundation for the subsequent designs.

#### **IV POSITIONING**

In my own project related to Mumbai, the research study's purpose is to explore the influence of urban communities and housing on the relationship between income generation and activities of residents. The interaction will be led to by the spontaneous configuration of space that was caused by certain behavioural phenomena between space and society. To complete the research's target, an anthropological viewpoint will contribute to contextualize Mumbai's understanding, whereas the representation tools would turn the study into discursive substances and result in design process.

However, the ethnographic approach and the comparative observation method build a grand contribution to the research, while in some extent, it is not a rigid anthropological research. Because of the insufficient research time,

---

<sup>13</sup> ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS AND TECHNIQUES, 2015.

we are not able to experience the real life people have for one year, that is "the minimal requirement for a scientific, anthropological research."<sup>14</sup> Hindi is used among these people. We cannot struggle to acquire a brand-new language in such a inadequate time. The study is carried out with architecture students' help from KRVIA in Mumbai, performing the role of guides and translators. The information that was provided by the local people has been communicated and translated at least two times that indicates the information is biased and subjective inevitably before we get it. Furthermore, the anthropological research should consider every individual equally. We, however, just pick up a few target people who work at home, especially women, as well as the vendors along the streets and people who have their own micro-enterprises. The sample selection is too small for an anthropological research. But this is the only way we can adopt to acquire as much information as possible in a very limited time.

In short, the integration of architecture and anthropology stands for the universal tendency of cross-discipline study, that will advance both disciplines' evolution. The research method of anthropology lay the human research foundation for the architecture. Even though the required time for anthropological research is much longer than the architectural practices, which might lead to some obstacles in the process. What architecture designers could learn from the anthropologists is to rethink about the relation of the buildings and the people's daily life and everyday activities from a distinct perspective, like considering more about their income generation, social belongs or sense of community. This concept emphasize the importance of the habitants instead of just the division of the the space and place, or different housing typologies. Even if the methodology I followed could not be considered totally as a rigid anthropology, I also learnt a lot from the in-depth observation and the interviews in the past few weeks. I believe that would be a good start for my project in the following design process.

## **Bibliography**

Amerlinck, Mari-Jose. *Architectural Anthropology*. Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey, 2014.

"Anthropology." Wikipedia. November 26, 2018. Accessed November 26, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology#cite\\_note-oed-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology#cite_note-oed-1).

Bernard, H. Russell, and Clarence C. Gravlee. *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

Lavenda, Robert H., and Emily A. Schultz. *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Lawrence-Zúñiga, Denise, and Setha M. Low. *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2012.

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

Moore, Jerry D. "COMBINED BOOK REVIEWS." *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 1 (March 2004): 173-76. doi:10.1111/aman.2014.116.issue-1.

Morgan, Lewis H. *Houses and House-life of the American Aborigines*. Washington: Gov. Print. Off., 1881.

---

<sup>14</sup> H. Russell Bernard and Clarence C. Gravlee, *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1-17.

Sağlamer, Gülsün, and Fatma Erkök. Doctoral Education in Architecture: Challenges and Opportunities. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Bin Wan Razali, and Jaffary Awang. "A Preliminary Discourse on the Islamic Scientific Study of Religion with Reference to the Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft." *‘Ulūm Islāmiyyah Journal* 13 (2014): 197-208. doi:10.12816/0012637.