

TO LIVE AND DWELL IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

TO LIVE AND DWELL IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA
A Research by Architectural Ethnography and Typology
Approaches

Student

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Chair of Dwelling, "Graduation Studio Global Housing"

Thesis "Co-habitable Densification: Towards the collective welfare between original and new dwellers"

I INTRODUCTION

I had a discussion with my friend, about what is the necessity of conducting research in architecture field, and what does it do with the practice of actual project. We end up with a consensus that research could offer the basis when it come to decision making during the design process. Then I look back to my undergraduate study, I realized that research has already played a role back then, but in the names like site analysis or case study. I would now describe it as design-led research. However, in the master study, I feel it is more in the case of research-led design, where obviously the portion of research have increased. Then I encountered the question of how to carry on a research in a more logical and systematic way. And this course, as general introduction of different methodologies, has brought me some idea about what options I have. The course related literatures helped with the self-study part.

The theme for Global Housing Graduation Studio this year is about developing affordable housing scheme for the urban dwellers of Addis Ababa, the capital of the East African country Ethiopia. It is part of the joint Research Project called “Addis Ababa Living Lab: Creating Resilient Dwelling Clusters for Urban Resettlement”, from The Faculty of Architecture and Built Environment of Delft University of Technology and the Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development (EiABC).¹

This city of Addis Ababa is now in a phase of rapid urban expansion as well as population booming. To build a modern image of the city, and relieve housing pressure, urban renewal and redevelopment projects were introduced, where condominium projects play an important role. The old dwellers, as the ones moved away from redevelopment site, and the new dwellers, as the ones move into condominium housings, are the two group of people affected during this process. They both face different problems in the current housing system.

The general problem I would like to tackle is: Condominium housing, as the present-day most possible solution for urban densification, although succeed in alleviating the housing shortage, is found deficient in providing an integrated strategy for the housing needs of both original and new inhabitants, as well as improving their life qualities.

There brings in my thesis topic: “Co-habitable Densification: Towards the collective welfare between original and new dwellers”.

My research question is “How to achieve collective welfare between the locals and new inhabitants, by creating a co-habitable community under the context of urban densification and infrastructure construction?”.

Reflecting to the four keywords in this sentence: “collective welfare”; “locals and new inhabitants” “urban densification” and “insufficient infrastructure”, my sub-questions will be: What are the common and conflicting concerns of old and new inhabitants? To what extent the site should be densified? What are the essential infrastructures that are needed for a good quality of life, and how to build them?

By working on this research, I hope to find useful information for developing a possible housing solution in my graduation project, which offer both the possibility of urban densification for the city and a co-habitable community for the residents.

II A JOINT-METHOD OF ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND TYPOLOGY

Among the three fundamental elements of any research project: context, method, and theory,² context will drive my work. Thus, my research on developing a way of co-habitable densification in Addis Ababa will be a context led research. s

“Context” is used to describe what the subject of research is, how it is located (where the idea of “location” has an open meaning) and what its boundaries are. ³ In my research, the “context” is much about the housing (as well as the life inside) situations of Addis Ababa, which will address the housing shortage and solution of the city, and the lifestyle and aspiration of the people. I am looking for both the typical and unique situation, in particular around the area of my site “Gerji”.

When the “context” comes to the housing shortage, its boundary is of different scale, from city-wise to site-wise. The exact number of housing shortage among the whole city could be calculated with the help of several databases, which will give an idea of the pressing background. And the current housing capacity of “Gerji” could be roughly calculated through google earth satellite image (the informal extensions could cause confusion). Its future maximum and minimum capacity are also described in the Land Use Map and Building Height Map proposed by Addis Ababa City Planning Project Office in 2017. Yet, the question of to which extent “Gerji” should contribute to the overall housing blueprint, still leaves unsolved, as it is also affected by other social-economic factors that need further research.

The “context” of housing solution, has a time-wise boundary. It is about the self-initiated traditional housings back in the history, meanwhile the up to date government-led condominium solution. To understand the traditional houses, (in terms of spatial configuration, materialization or construction), and the lifestyle behind it, typology study could be included. It works also to learn from the current three generation of condominium housings. How architecturally they succeed in the cost and speed while failing the other goal of providing a better life for its dwellers.

As for the people-related “context”, in my case, the boundary will be limited in and around the site of “Gerji”. It is about observing and interviewing, to understand their lifestyle and aspirations, thereby to offer a guideline or direction of the design, where architectural ethnography could play a role.

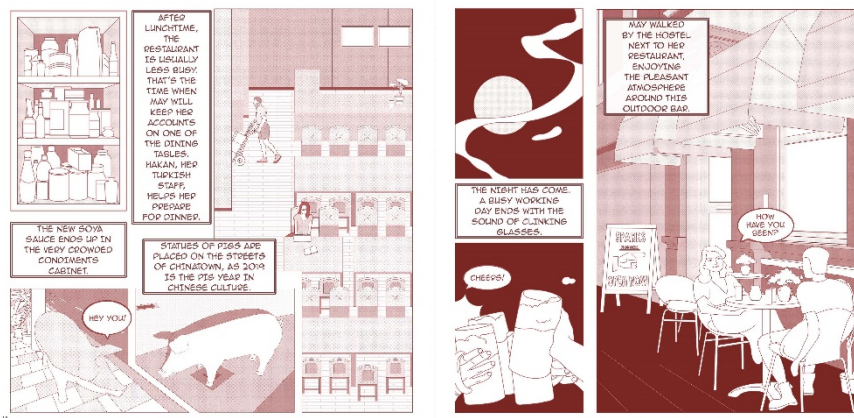


Figure 1, A Day of May, Graphic Novel Oude Western (research in group work, drawn by author)

This method was introduced during the studio-related Research Seminar, to understand the way of living for the people from Rotterdam and Addis Ababa, in the end, reinterpret it by graphic novel. In the practice we made in Rotterdam, our group included the method of typology as a complement to the architectural ethnography approach, trying to show how the life of the inhabitants are in relation to their dwellings.

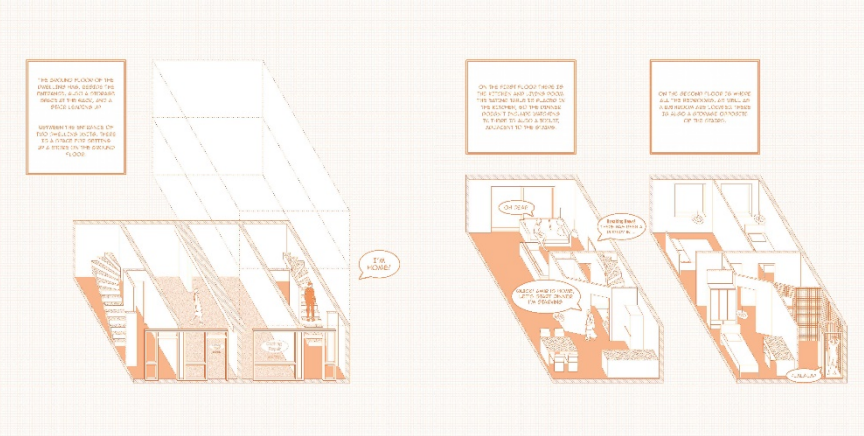


Figure 2, A Day of Amir, Graphic Novel Oude Western (research in group work, drawn by Sunny Sou)

My own research approach would be as well mainly based on these two methods, as they seem to work well within my three “sub-contexts”, and form a good combination of subjective (architectural ethnography) and objective (typology) approaches. The former is expected to help with understanding as well defining the problem and needs, while the latter could look back to the previous practices, therefore, giving a glimpse of the possible solutions.

The architectural ethnographic study had been practiced on Rotterdam, and again applied and improved on Addis Ababa during the excursion. We visited people’s house, interviewed them (mainly on the topic of their living and dwelling experience) with the help of local students. Participatory design was also conducted, and the means of mapping, sketching, recording, filming and photography were used to document our findings. We are as well working on a graphic novel (in comparison with the one we did for Rotterdam) to interpret that part of research output. Besides that, as a whole group, we did a general research on Addis Ababa before our excursion, including four aspects of hard data, soft data, spatial mapping and housing. My individual typology study over Ethiopian housings could be build on that previous research. I would like to include three topics: the traditional housing types representing the rural way of living, and the kebele housings with its extensions, as well as three generations of condominium housing types for the urban time.

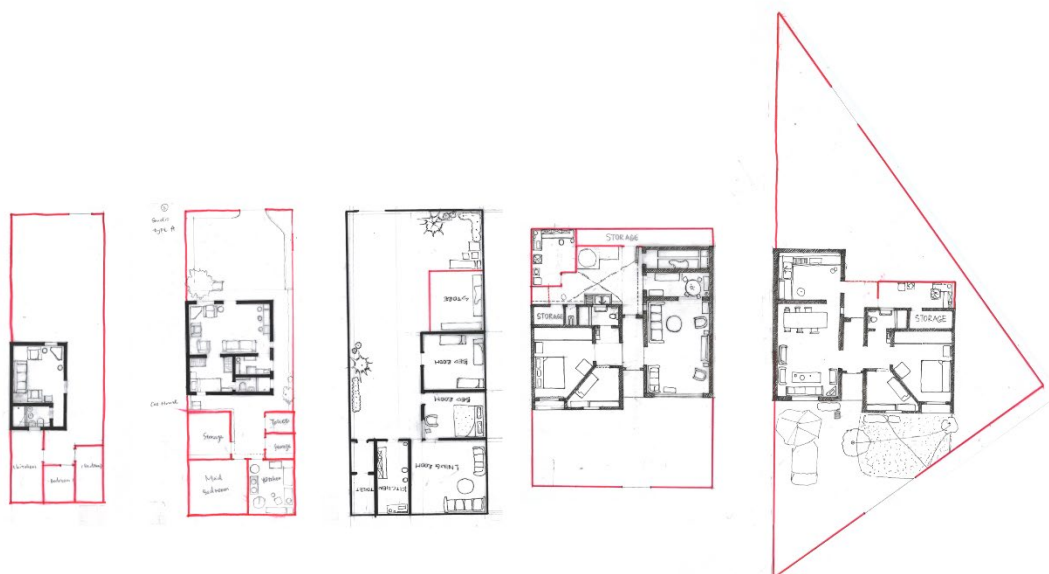


Figure 3, The Existing Housing Types in Gerji (group work)

III REFLECTION ON ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND TYPOLOGY

➤ Architectural ethnography (primary approach)

The term “Architectural ethnography” consists two words “architectural” and “ethnography”. In the dictionary, the noun “architecture” is defined as “a physical enclosure that protects and supports human life and activities”, while “ethnography” is about “representation of a society and culture of a specific ethnic group based on fieldwork”.⁴ Powell further explained “ethnography” in his article *Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers* as “a process of inquiry that involves the description and interpretation of the cultural and social practice of people, “the written representation of culture”⁵ that emerges from a lengthy period of in-depth study, and often, residence in, a particular setting.”⁶

Architecture ethnography, defined by Monoyo Kaijima, is about the traditional ethnography study with an add-on layer of drawings that are of, for, among and around architecture. The drawings are not typical architectural drawings, instead, always from the perspective of the people who use and transform the buildings.⁷ In 2017,

This new methodology is extended from many ethnographic studies carried on in Japan in the 20th century when the country is under rapid urbanization and modernization with the fear of the gradual extinction of the old livelihoods.⁸ From the end of 1990s, Kajima started a series of research regarding individuals in relation to buildings and cities, using similar ethnographical approach. Eventually, she defined her way of working (which is basically investigating architecture and human life by talking with people, and latter interpret this fragmented information it to drawings) as “Architectural Ethnography” during the survey of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami.⁹ In 2017, an exhibition named as “Architectural Ethnography: Atelier Bow-Wow” was hosted in Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

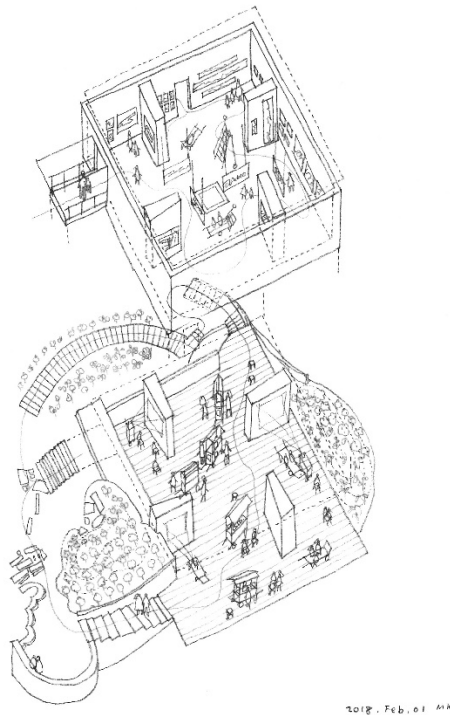


Figure 4, Japanese Pavilion (by Momoyo Kajima,

accessed from: <https://www.drawingmatter.org/sets/drawing-week/architectural-ethnography/>)

As outlined above, architecture ethnography is a combination of ethnography study with drawings as a way of expression.

An example of ethnographic study on the topic related to my graduation studio could be Alazar Ejigu’s research on the condominium housing of Addis Ababa. In 2019, he conducted a four-month participant observation of condominium living, in different times of the day, and on different representative locations. To document his findings, he often would take short notes several times during the daytime, and write down detailed diary in the evening. It had proved that this way of working brought the fragmented information together and then naturally revealed the form behind. Thus, most of the analysis was already made during the field study. There are a few strategies he made to improve his ethnographic study. First, he moved into the condominium unit with his family, which reduce the suspicions from the residents. Then he put himself in a position of “passive observation”, by sitting hours in the common yard. He was gradually recognized and trusted.¹⁰

An example of drawings in the field of architectural ethnography could be the book series: *A Little Bit of Beijing*, by Tongji University, which is the illustration of a research on three characteristic places in the city. There are four types of drawings involved correlating with a larger and a smaller scale. The urban surroundings are first shown in a panoramic axonometric

drawing, functioning as a 3d map. And then, a specific location will be elaborated by architectural sketches (are defined as axonometric drawings of a single building in this context), comics (inspired by the American artist Chris Ware) and full-page illustrations (in a way of artistic reprocessing of the scene atmosphere). Photographs are also interspersed among the book.

➤ Typology (secondary approach)

Again, by dictionary definition, typology is the investigation and interpretation of types. The architectural historian and critic, Anthony Vidler, believed that “typology is a problem of defining idea type-solutions”,¹¹ which implies that the study of type could be a means of solving problem.

When it comes to architectural field, there are two tendencies to understand a building. One is to see it as a unique object, while the other classify it into a category with repeated things, which is closely related to the concept of “type”. Rafael Moneo explains this term as “describing a group of objects characterized by the same formal structure”. It is about “Repetition” along with “Transformation”, in another word, “Frame within which change operates”.¹²

➤ Reflection

In my humble opinion, the researcher plays an observer’s role in an architectural ethnography study, who in the beginning stands outside the situation and remains neutral. However, the process of interpretation has turned this role to a subjective position, as the objective fact has been processed through someone’s perspective. Therefore, typology, where the researcher plays a role of documenter, could complement this research with its purely objective nature. The definition of typology constantly changes during the time, just as the type itself. And this continuous development, in a sense, builds a link from past to present, there extends to the future.

IV POSITIONING

For both of the ethnographic researches, we did in Rotterdam and Addis Ababa, unexpected information was found through talking with the residents. Oude Westen in Rotterdam appears to be a vivid community from the outside, locating in the city center, hosting people from multi-culture background. However, later we discovered that it is a double-side world, by the own words of its residents. The gentrification tendency applied from the city level is pushing away its original inhabitants. People are struggling with the poverty. The charming park in the daytime could turn to be a unsafe place crowded by drug dealers and alcoholics at night.

But in the case for Addis Ababa, things are completely reversed. We expected bad in the beginning, as the poor living situation (compared with our subconscious standard) we observed, in terms of environment, facilities, sanitary and many other. On the contrary, most of the interviewees have shown positive attitude toward their lives. They are satisfied with what they have and feeling gratitude for it. Besides that, they are also unwilling to move into the government-initiated condominium housings, which represents the modern lifestyle. This has revealed the importance of maintaining traditional lifestyle for them, which demonstrates itself again in our typological analysis of the existing houses in Gerji. Among the self-built extensions (shown in red lines), there are always a larger kitchen, which could cater the preparation of traditional food. And looking back into the spatial configuration of traditional housings in Ethiopia, there are also always a close relationship between human and nature, which is lost in the urban life.

I would like to adopt the role as an ethnographer for my research, however holding¹³ a critical position. Unlike the Japanese ethnographers aforementioned, whose targets are the old lifestyles, and share a similar goal of preserving what is on the way of extinction while bridging the past with present.¹⁴ My ethnographic study is with the residents living in Addis Ababa, specifically on my project site. As the city has a history of merely over a hundred years, the

urban lifestyle is also new, which makes it important to evaluate what is needed to preserve, and what could be upgraded.

After that, in the design process, my position would be a mediator between the overall densification needs and voices from the individuals, to develop a scheme that accommodates both the old and new urban dwellers, encourage them to build their new community, and seek for a balance among the aspirations for all.

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² Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).

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⁴ Momoyo Kaijima et al., *Architectural Ethnography* (Tokyo, Japan: TOTO Publishing, 2018).

⁵ John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁶ Kimberly Powell, "Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers," 63, no. 6 (2010).

⁷ Kaijima et al.

⁸ In the book *Architectural Ethnography*, five related studies in Japan are mentioned: Kunio Yanagita's documentation of folk tales and local customs of remote villages in the early 20th century; Wajiro Kon's *Minka of Japan* published in 1922, documenting vernacular houses; Her *Modernology* published in 1927, documenting street life of Tokyo; Yaichiro Yamaguchi's *Tsunami and the Villages* published in 1943, focusing on the fallout of the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake; And Tsuneichi Miyamoto's *The Forgotten Japanese: Encounters with Rural Life and Folklore* published in 1960.

⁹ Kaijima et al.

¹⁰ Alazar G Ejigu, "Socio-Spatial Tensions and Interactions: An Ethnography of the Condominium Housing of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia," 97 (2012).

¹¹ Sam Jacoby, "Typal and Typological Reasoning: A Diagrammatic Practice of Architecture," *The Journal of Architecture* 20, no. 6 (2015/11/02 2015). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2015.1116104>.

¹² José Rafael Moneo, "On Typology," *Oppositions / publ. by the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies*. (1978).

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¹⁴ Kaijima et al.

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