

# Methodological Fusion

## Hybridizing different approaches to architecture

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### **Introduction.**

*What are the problems?*

In the architectural profession it is important to have a high-level of critical thinking and self-awareness when approaching the design of the built environment. It is true that the modern architect can work in almost any location, on any type of building which technology that allows us to manifest our thoughts in almost any form imaginable. These fundamental variables highlight the fact that the heart of what we have to be research and knowledge driven in able to position ourselves as designers. Be it scientific, philosophical, geographical, technological, everything we do builds upon an existing body of research. Some is theory, some practice and we should be aware of how we approach this research and how we approach our work as architects.

This need to be self-aware is something I have really appreciated from studying different methodologies; it has opened my eyes to the idea of connecting and giving names to methods of thought and different approaches to projects. These methods and processes I was perhaps already subconsciously aware of and even using in my projects, but realizing these ideas had a bigger meaning, history. For example the concepts that define architectural thinking also impact in the larger political and economic context. Realizing ideas such as praxeology and ergonomics, which I was subconsciously conforming to and implementing in my designs, were also used in contexts such as the motor industry and the concepts of Fordism being linked so closely with this methodology really helps being a different light to my approach and think about new perspectives to observe the way I work from. It allows me to reflect on how I have and am approaching design and research.

This new found understanding of methodological knowledge really shows in my current graduation project. The project focuses on the suburban periphery of Mumbai called Nala Sopara. As part of the 'Global Housing' studio I my research focuses on ways to improve the economically weaker section of India. Nala Sopara is mainly composed of five story 'Chawls' (a common housing typology in Mumbai) which are positioned within one meter of each other providing no natural light, cramped conditions and poor ventilation. The other issue is infrastructure; or lack of it. Poor sanitation and irregular supply of water are the main issues that prevail in the neighborhood. Both of these issues have a huge impact on both physical and mental health in the area.

My research focuses on how a scalable approach can be taken to deal with these issues in the area, and other similar areas. Namely how to upgrade, on a significant scale, in both

architectural and infrastructural terms whilst maintaining the current level of openness, porosity and continuity in the qualities (both physical and social).

One of the hardest challenges of dealing with issues in the 'slum' areas is the idea of scale: there is a need for vast improvements but also a desire to build on the strong existing social structures and the complex economic systems which already exist. A tabula-rasa approach can destroy communities and continuity, whilst small scale, acupunctural approaches don't meet the vast needs for spatial and infrastructural changes.

The issue proposes two very questions that tackle the same problem but from two different perspectives. On one side it asks about infrastructural technology and how it can be gradually integrated on an architectural scale, bringing up topics such as decentralization. On the other hand it is about how to maintain a continuity in terms of physical, spatial qualities on the area to generate an understandable architecture, despite the evolving architecture.

## **Praxeology in Mumbai.**

*How to approach extreme conditions from the human perspective.*

Given the big-picture questions which I propose in my thesis topic, I encompass several methodologies in my research.

The first method is to use literature as a tool<sup>1</sup>, a considerable amount of the inspiration for my topic drew on a comparison between a series of readings and my own experiences. Writers such as Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup> and Richard Sennett<sup>3</sup> both speak about concepts of the 'Porous city' in their books 'One way Street' and 'Building and Dwelling' respectively which paralleled some of my thoughts on the site of my proposal.

Whilst the descriptions I read about cities such as Naples, Barcelona and Delhi were similar to the way I would describe Nalasopara there was a clear physical difference between the places. The idea of literature as a method of design really inspired me as I think it is a way of neutralizing and gaining a different way of reflecting upon experience of spaces and cultures.

This method of writing and comparing with analysis of other cities and pieces of architecture seemed to happen naturally but now I reflect on this process I have started to go in to more detail. Hopefully by using this approach I will be able to gain a better understanding of how I design and how it can relate to other places and other perspectives. Whilst I think this approach is useful for generating ideas in certain aspects it seems a little ungrounded as I think it can be dangerous to rely too heavily on language. My opinion on language is that it is, as Derrida would call it, 'synchronic' and that perhaps in writings people can often be interpreted differently by different readers, whilst this can often be very valuable I think it is too far to fully base research on<sup>4</sup>. I mention this method not anecdotally but because I think that the idea of language and architecture is critical in the process of architectural design and analysis, but in my opinion there are more layers needed to these thoughts and processes.

The second method adds another layer to this approach. It is the most significant in my work and is almost in conflict with the previous approach; Praxeological<sup>5</sup>. This is perhaps due to the influence of my studio's approach to the design of dwelling. Due to the structure and influence of my graduation studio I have been analyzing using a form of visual ethnography. This method of producing architecture I believe will help me create a more contextualized piece of architecture as it not only uses text and description but also analytical and observational imagery.

Ethnography and praxeology are both hugely relevant in the architectural profession today. As mentioned previously, Walter Benjamin had an impact on my thoughts for this project but he also influenced my approach to design. Whilst writings date back to the 1920's he is arguably still a very relevant writer as his works have grown in popularity among academics over the past few decades (P. Healy, 2017). His descriptions of cities such as Moscow, Naples and Marseilles are described from his own perspective; observing, analyzing and synthesizing thoughts relating to how people use space. He often jumps backwards and forwards in scales of thought; from specific instances of toothpaste salesmen in the streets of Naples, to the large scale patterns and cultures of these places:

*"Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theatres."* (W. Benjamin, 1928).

This approach to analysing the details of how people act in space and how, perhaps, space can influence or emphasise some of these characteristics is a thorough but perhaps more personal and less scientific way of thinking about ethnography.

Another prevalent writer is John C F Turner, in his book 'Housing by People' he approaches the theme of autonomy in housing by observing the more economical and political aspects of people's lives; drawing on patterns of examples about how people's lives are affected by the effects of centralization/heteronomy. Whilst the content of his writings may be becoming more out of date I think the fundamental method he uses is still relevant today<sup>7</sup>.

The ideas of ethnography are deeply rooted in the design of dwelling and housing. Books such as Michel De Certeau's 'The Practice of Everyday Life' contain concepts of 'place' as the 'practice' of 'space' which I have previously used in my architecture but the method has always been nebulous. Now that I have been made aware of ethnography research it is having a huge impact on my approach to architecture<sup>8</sup>.

In combination with these theoretical approaches I also want to focus on the visual element of ethnography. The Global Housing studio suggested a series of visual examples of ethnography from books such as; Octavio Lixa Filgueiras' 'Urban Surveys'<sup>9</sup>, McGill University's 'How the other half Builds'<sup>10</sup>, and Atelier Bow-Wow's 'Commonalities'<sup>11</sup>. These books critically visualize the patterns of inhabitation of spaces on a variety of scales and their methods of visualizing I think add an extra layer of analysis to the works of De Certeau and Benjamin.

## Visual Ethnography.

*Looking at visual ethnography in the context of praxeology.*

Whilst praxeology now has complex meanings, vast scope and a strong relevance, the theme of 'the practice of the human' has a significant history. Its origins start with anthropology and ergonomics through the study of the human form and its fundamental relation to the built environment<sup>5</sup>. These types of thoughts could be argued to date even to Leonardo Da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man', but this type of thinking was most present and had a direct influence on the modernist movement. Key and influential architects such as Le Corbusier also worked extensively the concept of the 'Modular man', the ideal human form. Modernism was the period for architecture which really saw praxeology start to become a point of departure for design, whilst this had a lot of positives it was also problematic<sup>12</sup>. The idea of analyzing humans was only used in terms of efficiency, not in terms of social or cultural ideals.

This theme of modernism developed through the industrial revolution in countries like America in the 1920's where terms like 'Fordism' were being coined to describe the efficient and mechanical methods of production being produced by Ford Motor Company meaning that this train of thought also starting to shape economic and political situations<sup>5</sup>.

During the 1950's, the renowned groups of architects going by the name of Team 10 made a shift in thinking away from the modernist model. They were revolutionary for their time and one of their big changes was to start including more social aspects to the architecture. The application of ethnographic investigation was one of these. A set of drawings done by a Portuguese architect Octavio Lixa Filgueiras (one of the members of team 10) shows the shift taking place within the group. It is visible that the use of space is seen as a less quantifiable property.

Later in the 60's the idea of praxeology was beginning to become more popular in other areas as writers like John Turner and Michel De Certeau started writing more about the observational aspects of studying practice. These kinds of approaches could be considered more as of a written ethnography which developed alongside the ideas of team 10.

In more current times the idea of 'visual ethnography' has become hugely common. Where praxeology defines the study of practice, ethnography is slightly more specific. Whilst both are scientific ethnography refers more specifically to the culture and the patterns and habitual ways people and societies work.

Whilst I found the ideas of praxeology very interesting, the most important aspect for me was the socio-economic observations. During our field trip in Mumbai I made a series of observations relating to the generation of income whilst others observed topics such as social spaces and borders.

To me it was important to build upon the works of Bow-Wow and Lixa Filgueiras in terms of how they graphically approach their work. I find the idea that these qualities which we observe should be described in a combination of text and image as together they can say more than when in solitude. The graphical element of this process seems important to use, not only gain an understanding and produce an analysis of the area, but also for generating designs. By observing patterns of inhabitation one is able to apply these aspects of how people dwell in space to their own design and by visually representing

them you are re-interpreting the fundamental spatial aspects of these observations in a pure sense. It almost starts to become a catalogue of (non-prescriptive) tools that are in reaction to the specifics of the place in which you research. These tools then act as a springboard to start developing designs from.

By using this method I believe I can create through my plan a continuity in how the user will read and use the urban and architectural qualities of my scheme. I think also it is important with this type of methods to also be critical in terms of analysis of existing examples of this kind of approach. When looking at the Smithson's concept of 'Streets in the sky' you can see how they observe the spatial qualities and social structures of the street and try to achieve a density by stacking this type of space. But as we now see by the buildings demolition the concept didn't function in the real world. I think this constant observation of the existing but in terms of the everyday and in terms of the more radical is crucial in terms of producing new answers to problems<sup>13</sup>.

## **A Complexity of Methods**

*Looking at Praxeology in the bigger picture.*

Whilst my research method will be predominantly centre on an ethnographic process, I will also draw on a series of other techniques and theories. As I mentioned previously I think developing idea's through reflection on literature can be highly fruitful and interesting but I see this method as part of a large package of tools which work together to develop architecture.

I already envision, from the start, my research will consider a lot of technical and statistical quantitative analysis in terms of the technological aspect of my project. These qualitative methods are perhaps primitive in terms of their complexity but they are still fundamental to making an impact when combined with other aspects of my approach. Ray Lucas mentions in his book 'research methods for architecture' that there is a basic divisions of research between qualitative and quantitative, I believe it is important to strike both.

Another method which strongly connects, I feel, with the ideas of ethnography is the types of process which Eireen Shreurs presented in her lecture on 'Material Culture'. It seems like an extended, and more detailed, branch of ethnography and could almost be seen ethnography through making. I think this type of thinking is also very useful in developing architecture in a phenomenological sense which is often overlooked in architectural theory<sup>14</sup>.

I think the approaches I have absorbed have been through a variety of influences over my architectural education. But the approaches of typology and visual ethnography definitely come from my current education in the Global Housing studio's ideals and approaches.

## Conclusion

In summary, these different methods should not be seen as autonomous but that they should rely on each other even if they might, at times, contradict each other. It is important to consistently be critical and take on new methodologies, to implement new methods which people teach you with the ones you already use and try to generate a very personal approach to architecture.

On reflection, I see this varied process of architectural approach actually reflects aspects of the architecture and urbanism which interest me. I am inspired significantly by the writings of Richard Sennett (2018) who discuss topic of the 'open city' in his book 'Building and Dwelling' in a similar, and more topical, way to which Walter Benjamin (1928) wrote about the 'Porous City' in 'One Way Street'. I think the topics they discuss are very all encompassing and very big topics in the architectural discourse as we try to keep moving away from the impacts of modernism and its standardization to move towards a more elastic and flexible form of built environment.

By using this diverse set of approaches I mentioned previously, which I believe really consider the real, dynamic, human relations with space and how people inhabit it, I can hopefully start to generate architecture which not only responds to a place but that are open and porous and people use in a way which feels natural.

By observing and reflecting on my own approach to research I have found that it is only possible to consider complex questions by using a complexity of approaches but that it is important, and helpful, to be aware of which methods you use and how to use them and why you should use them. For me the combination of visual written ethnography are the most crucial when it comes to tackling the issues related to my project in Mumbai, but this can be expanded and contracted in to many other methodologies for research and design.

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