ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND DWELLING IN ADDIS ABABA

How architectural ethnography can give or not give a better understanding of dwelling in Addis Ababa

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I   INTRODUCTION

There are infinite ways of doing research to get a better understanding of people and the build environment. And there are infinite ways of how to interpret the research results. To be able to make well thought findings and conclusions it is crucial to have a good knowledge of existing research methods and to be able to form critical standing points towards it. Following the lecture series Research Methods I learned that there is no one 'perfect' research method. This gave me a critical view towards information I gain from existing research. The focus should not solely be on the findings and conclusions they provide, but also how these have been generated. The way information is harvested and how this is interpreted is highly influential on the results and conclusions. Moreover, the lecture series showed me there are many research methods to choose from. During my study so far, especially within my bachelor, the focus has mainly been a functionalist approach on analyzing urban plans, sections, typologies and so on. However, this course broadened my view towards doing research. Besides the functional analytical approach I am used to, there are many more research methods, analytical tools and heuristic techniques to choose from. It made me even more aware of how important it is to have a critical standpoint towards the choice of research method during my Global Housing Graduation Studio: Addis Ababa Living Lab.

The research method for the Global Housing Graduation Studio was already determined beforehand by the tutors, namely *architectural ethnography*. It was one of the reasons why I chose this graduation studio due to the lack of social perspectives in my study so far. The global housing studio opposes modernist and functional approaches like *Plan Voisin*, and aims for a more social and holistic approach, building on the ideology of persons like Jane Jacobs and based on participatory practices and community design. An ethnographical type of research therefore seems logical since ethnography is about people and their interaction with the environment (Lucas, 2016, 165). The studio's architectural ethnographic research focuses on finding out what life is in Addis Ababa, how people live and use space and what they need. The researcher will get a better understanding of dwelling and the complex worlds of the people in Addis Ababa, to subsequently know what intervention is necessary. However, it is good to create a critical standpoint towards architectural ethnography and its visual output, in this case a graphic novel. Knowing wat the potential flaws, risks and downsides are of this research method and analytical tool is important to be able to properly conduct the research and interpret its results. For these reasons, I will address the following research questions:

What added value can architectural ethnographic research have in the context of housing in Addis Ababa?

What should I pay attention to and be aware of when conducting an architectural ethnographic study in Addis Ababa?

And how can a graphic novel be representative for the conducted fieldwork?

II   ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND ITS VALUE

To find out what architectural ethnography actually entails one should first know what ethnography means and how it is influenced by the addition 'architectural'. Powell (2017) describes ethnography as '*a process of inquiry that involves the description and interpretation of the cultural and social practices of people, […] that emerges from a lengthy period of in-depth study and, often, residence in, a particular setting*'. It is, as described, a research method taking years to execute. Therefore, during the graduation studio, a *micro*-ethnographic research will be applied; A research method similar to ethnographic research but within a shorter timeframe (Ibid.). The 'architecture' component of this transdisciplinary form of research, refers to an assemblage of buildings and the environment that surrounds them. It has the unique characteristics due to its vastness and slow changeability (Kaijima, 2018). Moreover, the means of representation of ethnography becomes influenced by adding 'architecture' (Ibid.). The output of an ethnographic research, an ethnography, is a document that introduces questions at the perimeters between two cultures. It decodes one culture and recodes it for

another (Van Maanen, 2011). However, architecture specifically applies drawings as a medium for communicating complex information. With these drawings architects can easily jump between different scales, between the detail and the concept, between the empirical and the abstract. This gives a new layer for the representation, the ethnography, of ethnographic research (Kaijima, 2018).

For the graduation studio, the analytic research tool is a so called graphic novel (see figure 1). A novel containing drawings, protagonists and a storyline based on an emic research on site. The fieldwork is context led, allowing the context to take control over the research process (Lucas, 2016, 11). During the research period in Addis Ababa the form of context was influenced by the configuration of the neighborhood to be explored. A *pars pro toto*, a type form of context, became the research approach for the investigation of the condominium site (a site with apartment blocks comparable with post-war residential apartments) due to its repetitiveness. The investigated compound was the type and considered to be representative for the whole neighborhood. As output a storyline has been conducted based on the information gathered by interviewing the compounds' residents. The storyline will be communicated through a comic containing perspectives, axonometries and sections with textual support.

The responsible tutors of the global housing graduation studio argues that '*this methodology activates the students' awareness of the interdependence between design decisions and everyday patterns of inhabitation*' (Mota et al., 2019). This statement already implies that housing is much more than a shelter. It regulates everyday patterns of inhabitation originating from cultural norms and social practices of a society (Ronald, 2011). Buildings influence behavior, so it is crucial to design dwellings which resonate with cultural practices. Therefore, architects should have a good understanding of how people use and perceive their physical context (Cranz, 2016). Architectural ethnographic research, with its focus on people and their interaction with the build environment, can attain this understanding best in comparison to other research methods, especially in an unfamiliar context such as Addis Ababa. Moreover, ethnographic research differs itself from other qualitative research methods because it examines both what people do and what they say, giving insight in any discrepancies between thoughts and deeds (Herbert, 2000, 552). Therefore, I believe that of the discussed epistemic frameworks in the lecture series an ethnographic type of research works best to get in a short timeframe a deeper understanding of how people live and use space, especially in a for me unknown cultural and build environment.
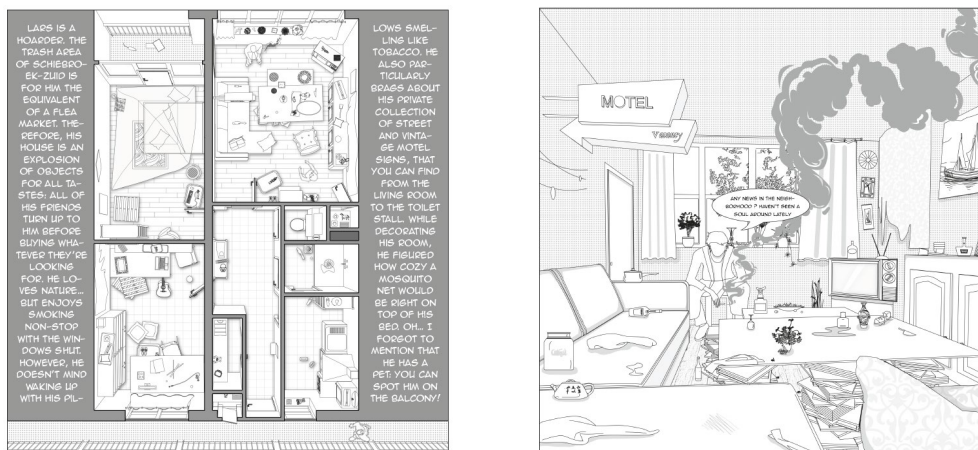

Figure 1. Two pages from a graphic novel. The analytical research tool for an architectural ethnographic research in Schiebroek-Zuid, Rotterdam. This was conducted to practice before doing it in Addis Ababa. Carried out by: Ludovica Cassina, Cristian Rancati and myself

III   CRITICAL REFLECTION TOWARDS ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND ITS GRAPHICAL OUTPUT

Ethnography evolved from anthropological studies in early 20th century. At that time several researchers differentiated themselves from the typical "desk" anthropologists, conducting research based on only secondary sources, by a method based on primary sources resulting in an 'objective' description of a culture (Groat & Wang, 2013). Over time, three genres of ethnographic research have

emerged; classical ethnography, critical ethnography and interpretive ethnography (Mantzoukas, 2012). Classical ethnography aims to reproduce the researched culture with high accuracy. The role of the researcher is limited to observing, trying to be as objective as possible (Ibid.). Critical ethnography does not only observe but also interprets and analyses the researched culture, trying to understand how specific world views are rooted in cultural background. Therefore, the researcher takes on a subjective role in relation to the topic/culture. Hereby it is critical that he/she reflects on this subjectivity and can separate 'the self from the other' (Ibid.). With interpretive ethnography the researcher highly engages with the participants in order to get a detailed, nuanced and emotional imagination of the participants' world (Ibid.). Therefore, the researcher, who gets a personal relation with the culture, can be seen as "storyteller" (Ibid.). From those three genres, the interpretive ethnography genre will be the most interesting for my project in Addis Ababa. My goal is to understand the complex lives of Addis Ababa's urban dwellers to know what dwelling environment they need. By engaging instead of observing, I can get to deeper layers to get a better understanding. However, as Lucas (2016, 164) describes, ethnographic research is a longitudinal study and is all about people. And for my research I have very limited time and I cannot speak the local language. Therefore, engaging will be difficult and being realistically, I believe that the research will tend towards a critical type of ethnography instead of interpretive. It is obvious that I will not do an ethnographic research thoroughly as it should be. However, being aware of these limitations and the fact that my project has an architectural discourse instead of being a study solely focused on generating a deeply understanding of a culture, makes that these complications can be transcended.

As discussed before, *architectural ethnography* differentiates itself from *ethnography* by its focus on the build environment and especially the visual methods of representation of the conducted fieldwork. The interest in visual methods like drawings and pictures within the realm of anthropology and ethnographic research has increased at the beginning of this millennium. However, using visual methods is not new: In addition to the written reports drafted by for example Christopher Columbus in the 16th century an abundance of drawings representing 'the others' has been produced (Soukup, 2014). During ethnographic studies in the 19th century it became even a tool to express the viewpoint of illiterate societies, since the declaration of an illiterate native was considered biased, incorrect and/or misleading. A drawing allows for the expression of the subjective viewpoint of an illiterate native without words (Ibid.). The rise of photography during the second half of the 19th century was followed closely by researchers since it had the potential to have the 'perfect' objective representation of reality. Moreover, well-known anthropological researchers claims it formed the foundation of anthropology as science (Ibid.).

However, there are also doubts about the objective quality of the use of graphic support in ethnographic research. Photography and drawings seem self-evident but are actually full of many meanings and interpretations which are not in control by the author. The spectator can interpret photographs and drawings in many different ways. Besides, photographing and drawing lies (especially in Europe) in an artistic cultural layer. It is insurmountable that an artistic motive is at the root of the composition of the photo or drawing. Moreover, photos and especially drawings are a result of many influences: the manual skills, the personality of the creator, their mentality and personal condition etc.. All together this makes that photographs and drawings are not that objective as it seems. Moreover, graphical representations by itself are not holistic enough to represent the research (Ibid.). Soukup (2014) concludes that text plays an important role and is the remedy for these shortcomings. Because it is the text that can connect and contextualize drawings and photos and diminish the subjectivity of a graphical representation. Therefore, I should be aware when processing the research that the perspectives, sections, axonometries and plans of the graphic novel by itself are likely to be too subjective and simply not enough representative for the conducted fieldwork. It is the text that can diminish its subjectivity and contextualize the drawings, giving it a meaning for the reading spectator.

IV   POSITONS TOWARDS ARCHITECTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND CONCLUSIONS
In the context of dwelling other (rather obvious) research methods than architectural ethnography could be considered. A typological research about dwelling units could easily be also a first pick.

However, a typological research lacks social aspects since it is based on (stereo)types with little or no variations and therefore conflicts with participation of users (Güney, 2007). Especially in the context of Addis Ababa, a place with a completely unfamiliar culture, I believe we should first understand the complex society of the city/neighborhood and secondly think about typologies serving the people's needs. Another possible research method could be phenomenology of perception, a method of observing and describing and not of participating, explaining or analyzing (Lucas, 2016, 158). But for getting a decent understanding of how people use and perceive their physical context, an critical type of ethnography is necessary (Mantzoukas, 2012). However, the classical interpretation of science and research is the study of an object by a completely separate investigative subject (Sparkes, 2000). Despite the shortcomings of a typological research and phenomenology of perception, these methods could be considered as less subjective then architectural ethnography and therefore, following this rhetoric, be more scientific. It makes me wondering how important objectivity is in science and research, especially within the qualitative methodologies.

As just mentioned, the classic interpretation of science has a (complete) focus on objectivity (Ibid.). However, this classical and rational position changed over time due to new insights, especially towards sociological studies as ethnography. At first, it is critical to note that it is inevitably ascertained that there is always a subjective interpretation of the objective empirical experience (Richardson, 1995); At each type of research there is a basis of subjectivity. Moreover, subjectivity is actually a powerful analytic asset (Herbert, 2000, 559). Obviously, subjectivity can spoil the objective understanding of a subject, but when this is recognized and considered one can reflect whether it serves or obstructs the objective understanding (Ratner, 2002). Based on these positions I believe that I should not aim for an objective research based on the classic interpretation of science. However, this does not mean I should not consider the subjective consequences of my research; I should at all-time be aware of it and clearly communicate it with the outside world.

The relevance of 'people orientated' research, especially in the dwelling landscape, has been increasing over time. In the 1960s the fields of urban design and architecture, as response on the modernist movements in 50s, became socially engaged and applied their profession for social and spatial justice (Avermaete, 2010). This developed in the 70s towards a movement that was focusing on citizen participation. In the context of housing, the dwelling is with this perspective not an end product but a process. It allows users to make decisions, based on their individual needs, within a framework composed by the architect (Ibid.). However, to make this framework and to socially engage with citizens as architects, it is crucial to understand the people and their complex worlds. I believe, based on my findings in this essay, that it is architectural ethnographic research that can give the architect that understanding. Especially in the industrialized societies we currently live in, where it is difficult to see the connections between architecture, environment and human life (Kajima, 2010). In these conditions architectural ethnography can as Kaijima (2010) aptly describes it, '*not only observe the existing situation but also reconnect pieces of our disconnected world*'.

In the case of dwelling in Addis Ababa architectural ethnography has the potential to be extremely useful. It bridges the gap between social sciences and design practices, giving the opportunity to give answers on social and design questions necessary to define everyday life in the homes of Addis Ababa (Pink et al., 2017). Being realistic, the research will be a critical type of architectural ethnography, enabling to not only observe but also interpret and analyse the researched culture (Mantzoukas, 2012) and subsequently get a better understanding of the everyday live and inhabitation patterns in Addis Ababa. This enables to design dwellings which resonate cultural practices (Cranz, 2016). The architectural layer makes that the output is a visual representation of the fieldwork, enabling to easily jump between different scales, between the detail and the concept, between the empirical and the abstract (Kaijima, 2018). However, in both the fieldwork itself and the visual representation I should be aware of my subjective input as a researcher. Subjectivity can spoil the objective understanding of a subject especially when it is ignored (Ratner, 2002). Therefore, it is highly important that I am aware of it and use it as an asset by textually contextualizing the graphic output of my research to diminish its subjectivity (Soukup, 2014); Giving it a meaning for the reading spectator.

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Figures
All figures in this essay are own work.