7.2 reflection

This research-and-design project addresses informality in the context of Mathare Valley, Nairobi, and uncovers its socio-economic structures and socio-spatial system. The project explores the potentials of local knowledge and seeks to catalyse the power of the community itself, to offer an alternative development perspective. The main aim of the project is to explore how local knowledge and a community-based approach, can provide a base for a locally embedded strategic framework towards sustainable development. In this reflection I will address several aspects: the used methods and outcomes, including recommendations for future research and the relation with the graduation lab; followed by the social and scientific relevance and the ethical considerations underlying the research.

7.2.1 methodology, outcomes & limitations

METHODOLOGICAL INQUIRY

The methodological framework (with the components of a theoretical and analytical framework, and the field research), has proven to satisfy the incorporation of the project’s approaches into the end products, as the research has provided the essential base of developing the design and strategy. These approaches were local knowledge, and community-based.

The analytical framework, based on a layered analysis approach (see figure 22 on next page) provided the needed understanding of the dynamics and functionalities of social and economic networks of Mathare Valley. The additional layers were of significant importance to complete this, and to be able to define interrelations. The historical literature research provided the insights on how postcolonial processes are of relevance for the current dynamics relating to: a) the urban structures of the city and socio-economic inequality; b) the evolution of the city’s planning framework; c) the evolution of policy and approaches towards informality, and the standard practices that determine current upgrading efforts; d) the impact of those on informal areas; e) the current dynamics of Mathare Valley, including its political-economic role in Nairobi, the internal socio-economic organisation, and its urban morphology. The layered method of the analytical framework, eventually has supported the development of the strategy in a layered approach as well. It has shown to provide a useful method that can integrate spatial and non-spatial interventions, and respond to the multidimensionality of urban design and planning.

The theoretical framework supported the research on community-based development, sustainable development, and local knowledge in development. In a later stage this was expanded by adding the research on co-operative organisations. The methods included literature research, a case study, and expert interviews. This component of the research supported the formulation of conclusions on the requirements of a community-based process and the development of the non-spatial dimension of the strategic framework, feeding into the planning strategy and its institutional framework.

Lastly, the field research, as empirical component, contributed largely to the spatial analysis (as well as the conduct of interviews). The field work has supported the development of the product of the Knowledge Framework, which has shown to be an important part of the methodology acting both as research and design tool.

Regarding the two approaches of local knowledge-based and community-based, following reflections can be made:

It can be concluded that the approach of local knowledge, by regarding it as an implicit knowledge that locally organises space and governance, has shown to provide a starting point of analysing the settlement and defining its features. The concrete meaning of the concept for the research’s approach and the chosen case in particular was something that evolved during the process, and since there were no precedents of such an approach for slum development, this process had an exploratory nature. Eventually the above described analytical framework allowed me to formulate a ‘diagnose’ on Mathare Valley, which can be considered as the definition of local knowledge for Mathare Valley. Seen as the local knowledge’s spatial outcome, the translation towards the Knowledge Framework provided concrete input for both the design and planning component of the strategic framework.
The approach of community-based development was researched by contributions from all the three components of the methodological framework. It resulted in the understanding of the meaning of sustainable development within the context of informality, the local political and socio-economic context, and the understanding of community’s (and community organisation’s) impediments. Also the angles of policy, program, and stakeholders were addressed in order to anchor the proposal in the existing institutional landscape. These actions supported the definition of the conclusions and strategic objectives, which came to be solidified into the end product through the concept of a co-operative organisation as a carrier for local development. Moreover, it resulted in the approach of the end proposal as an expression of a possible outcome of a process that could be locally derived from resident’s initiative. The elaboration of this possible narrative resulted in the development of the Community Action Plan.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS & TRANSFERABILITY

The approach of local knowledge for slum development leaves potential for future research.

• For the case of Mathare Valley, more extensive field observations could contribute to the soundness and representativeness of the empirical data expressed in this research through the Knowledge Framework.

• In a more general sense; considered the rather theoretical base on which this study is conducted, a future recommendation would be to develop research methods to analyse ‘subaltern urbanism’, such as observational field methods and perhaps forms of participatory analysis. Here, also innovative research methods could support translation and communication of the findings. Since the method used in this research, remains to have a subjective character. This is an important part for the following point.

• The approach could be interesting for practical implementation. In this case, recommendations would be to further research the requirements and potentialities of the concept as a base for local development processes. Being a less ‘standard’ approach with a less predefined process, further research could explore the needed methods for implementation and feasibility.

Also, the use of a co-operative organisation as a pivot in slum development can be further researched:

• Within the context and institutional framework of Kenya, further research could elaborate on the question how a co-operative organisation could operationalise a process of slum upgrading, addressing more specific its practical implementation.

Moreover, in terms of the transferability of the project, the results of this project as the proposal for Mathare Valley could not directly be transferred, since it was derived from the specific case. However a similar ‘local knowledge’ approach could be used to research subaltern urbanism within other informal areas by using similar methodological steps. The result of this project, the strategic framework up onto the level of the strategic principles and with an integrative layered-approach, including the co-operative organisation, might then be a starting point for developing upgrading projects in informal urban areas in Kenya (see figure 23).

RELATION WITH GRADUATION LAB

My initial interest has led me to dig deeper into the body of theory that concerns postcolonial processes and global development processes. These processes affect cities and regions in complex, hybrid ways. The connection with Africa and related urban issues of poverty, socio-economic inequality and the right to the city, forms the background of the issues at play in my project. The approach provided by the Complex Cities research group includes the combination of spatial, theoretical, and policy analysis, and supports a holistic view as an attempt to unravel the complexity of informal urban systems that I would need in order to understand those different interactions between dimensions and scales. Subsequently, my research aims to contribute to the knowledge on how these interactions form the physical environment and aims to combine both planning (including policy and governance) and design to intervene in these interactions. Using a trans-disciplinary approach, while addressing the societal-political debate within this particular context, this project seeks to define the concept of sustainability at the convergence of formal planning systems and informal methods.
deFining potentials and threats

deFining interventions

strategic principles: mitigating threats, using and strengthening potentials

5 strategic layers
The trends of massive urbanisation and its prospects for coming decades, shows that the increased growth will be concentrated in Asia and Africa, while many of its cities are not prepared to face this challenge. The population living in informal areas will increase, being the convergence of poverty, health issues, crime, chronic inequality. Inclusivity and sustainability are widely adopted goals (illustrated by the image below, showing UN’s Sustainable Development Goals), but practice needs a more specific interpretation of these concepts. By using the slum of Mathare Valley as case study, this project seeks to result in an urban planning and design framework for local development. This is meant as a guide for change, that aims to be an alternative within current planning systems, since it explores alternative sources of knowledge, both for urban design as for planning. The framework aims to guard the local values in the urban system, as a necessary consideration for any plan of change that aims to be a long term solution that works for the people. The translational step of the findings into the ‘Knowledge Framework’ is also an effort to bridge different understandings on urban concepts, and seeks to provide a starting point and communicative tool in future design processes of the area. Also, the project offers the community of Mathare Valley a practical action plan to instigate local development, possibly a source of inspiration and information. The project attempts to facilitate the tools for the urban poor at a more local level, that they have been excluded from on the larger level.

As a response to the course of contemporary urban planning and its prevailing approaches, the project’s relevance also derives from the appreciation of the depth of the issue of slums, attempting to encourage acknowledgement of its existing structures. It is a call for openness and broadened thinking of urban concepts and understandings in the search for sustainable and effective solutions, in order to strive towards social justice.

The project contributes to the work field of informal urbanism within the context of (Eastern) Africa. In essence, the elaboration of this work explores the potential of local knowledge of informal settlements, manifested in the complex informal system and its people, for improvement of informal settlements within the urban network and governance system in the context of Nairobi. This work explores different research methods to reveal the informal system as complex socio-morphological urban structure, and its community as central part in that.

The project’s result of a strategical framework (design and planning), could be used as a guidance for upgrading projects of the Mathare settlement. Because the analysis is based on patterns of inhabitation of human (informal) settlements and results in an inventory of characteristics of its spaces, it could provide a useful source of knowledge for other areas with similar characteristics in the city. The methodology and approach itself on assessing socio-spatial and socio-economic structures, could be applied in other similar areas for which the potential of alternative development is researched.

Further, the analytical framework of the project can be a valuable contribution to the provision of qualitative data from field work, linked with existing practice and theory, which expands the understanding regarding the shortcomings of current practices and the needs of the communities involved. It offers a perspective on how to deal with the issue of slum upgrading, by combining an exploration of local knowledge, a method on defining existing assets of the slum, and theories on sustainable and community-led development. The project’s local focus is an attempt to contribute to a more anchored practice of urbanism in Africa, relevant to the non-colonial discourse, such as ‘subaltern urbanism’.

**7.2.2 relevance**

**SOCIETAL RELEVANCE**

**SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE**
7.2.3 ethical considerations

1. In this work I attempt to discover patterns that are based on local knowledge and local processes. I am aware of my undeniable position as representative of Western knowledge and hold a certain world view and according thinking as well, imposing the risk of ‘appropriation of the culture instead of proliferation of the information about it’ (Escobar, 1995). Therefore I would like to express that my intention is not to transfer my knowledge and impose a certain change, but rather trying to understand the local conditions, needs, and aspirations. As the work includes certain steps of knowledge translation, my attempt is to be aware of personal bias throughout these processes and to attempt to ‘translate’ without harming or losing the essence. This consideration was further elaborated on by writing the theoretical paper (Chapter Theoretical Framework). Moreover, as I will capture my findings in this work, I do not suggest it provides a full depth of understanding and it should not be considered as a complete picture of Mathare Valley, since in the end, this would be only left to the people inhabiting Mathare Valley.

2. It is good to note that the distinction between hegemonic epistemologies and local knowledge is not strict. Prevalent epistemology becomes naturalised and a pure distinct is impossible because of the influences established through social and cultural processes of knowledge translation. However in this project I refer to local knowledge as the ‘subaltern urbanism’ that shapes and organises spaces and their uses, socially bound through the sustained existence in certain environments. It stems from the subaltern position of the people of informal settlements, which are in essence less impacted by external hegemonic knowledge because of the exclusion from the formal systems.

3. I would like to express the considerations concerning the field visit of this research. I hope with this work to not conduct research in an ‘extractive’ way but I hold the intention to give something back to the communities according to their suggestions and ideas on how to do so. Also, the gathering of visual material poses ethical questions. Therefore I would like to mention that retrieval of any of the material for this work has been in consultation and approval with the residents.

4. In this work I am aware of the use of the limiting dichotomy of formal and informal, which is derived from Western discourse and epistemology but does not show recognition of the complex and interrelated structures that it is simplifying. This also accounts for similar binaries such as global North and South.

5. To conclude, I would like to take away possible misconceptions on the intention of this work. By articulating the strategic framework as an eventual outcome in a design, it could be perceived as an rigid suggestion to change the area. Therefore, it must be considered that this project is not meant to imply that something is ‘bad’ which needs to be ‘upgraded’. Rather, it suggests how a process could trigger the local capacities to built a more strengthened and cohesive community. By translating that process to space, it is meant to show a possible outcome, of a process with an actual open outcome.