Drawing on Thick Descriptions in Architectural Pedagogy

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Introduction

Formal architectural education today has evolved from an apprenticeship model of learning. Prior to the formation of the first architecture school in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1819, the budding architect developed her craft through immersion in practice by working for and learning from a ‘master’ architect. The academy attempted to emulate this pedagogical experience with the creation of the ‘architecture design studio,’ a physical space where students develop architectural proposals, using drawing and model making, in response to a hypothetical brief that is set by the design tutor. The learning process in the design studio set-up simulated the apprenticeship model, with students playing the role of the architectural apprentices and the design tutor playing the role of the ‘master’ architect (Schön 1984; Webster 2005). As a representation of the architectural atelier, it provided a safe learning environment in which to experiment, where students did not have to contend with the multiple and competing demands of clients, planners and users, in combination with contractual, budgetary and regulatory issues.

However, the abstract nature of the learning experience that occurred in the design studio presented certain challenges and has been criticised as too theoretical and excessively concerned with form over social, political and cultural issues (Till 2009; Buchanan 2012). Learning in such a vacuum, its critics argued, could reduce the scope for developing creative architectural proposals, adding that its lack of consideration of real-world concerns – in particular the needs, wants and desires of the end user – held the design process back from achieving more innovative proposals. This sentiment has been espoused for many years by other design disciplines, such as product and service design, where user-centred approaches are viewed as the most likely generators of inventive and innovative solutions (Berger 2009; Brown 2009; Løvlie, Polaine et al. 2013; Kimbell 2014). However, such user-centred approaches are not commonly adopted in architectural design processes (Stender 2017).

As a way of addressing the detached nature of contemporary architectural education and leveraging the creative potential of a user-centred approach, the idea of the ‘live project’ was developed, where architecture students work with a real client, a real project and a real budget to deliver a project within a specific time period (Dodd, Harrisson 2012; Harriss, Widder 2014). In theory, both the client and the student benefit from this arrangement. The client is offered an opportunity to develop a project without paying a fee and the student learns how to deal with the multiple competing demands associated with professional architecture practice. However, this exchange assumes that the student has the established skillset required to deliver an architectural service. As a result, live projects are perhaps only appropriate for students in the later stages of their architectural education. In formative educational stages, where the architecture students do not yet have the capabilities or skills to deliver a project to a client, an alternative educational approach is needed to anchor the learning experience in real-world concerns. To this end, I developed an architecture project for first year architecture students that uses some of these real-world concerns – namely people’s socio-spatial practices – as the basis of the design development. The project tasked the students with using an architectural ethnographic study of an existing place as a design generator.
Architectural Ethnography is an emerging field of practice that was documented in the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018 (Kaijima, Stalder et al. 2018). That exhibition demonstrated that there are multiple ways to interpret Architectural Ethnography as a field of activity. In this article, I use the term to describe the research and graphic documentation of a place, noting the physical surroundings, the material context and the socio-spatial practices of the people that inhabit it. This paper will reflect both on the creative opportunities afforded by a design approach that is underpinned by Architectural Ethnography and on how the building of graphic narratives to describe a user’s everyday activities can unleash insights regarding their habits, mannerisms, peculiarities, likes, dislikes and obsessions. Finally, I will reflect on how this particular type of design studio brief can challenge the detached learning experience associated with a more traditional architectural design studio project.

Architectural Ethnography in Architectural Education: A Case Study

At the beginning of the design project, the students were tasked with carrying out an Architectural Ethnography informed study of a contemporary craftsperson, examining how they adapted their physical surrounding to optimally accommodate their wants, needs and desires. The project used Sennet’s definition of craftsmanship: ‘the desire to do a job well for its own sake’ and ‘a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking’ (Sennett 2008: 9). The students were required to examine not only the physical attributes of the workplace but also the work processes and social practices the craftsperson engaged in, noting the daily, weekly and seasonal routines and rituals of the craftsperson. This field work was carried out using a variety of research methods, including direct observation and interviews. The observations were documented using photography, film and sketches. A measured survey was also undertaken, where the fixed physical context (walls, floors, doors and windows) and the mobile material context (furniture, tools and utensils) were noted. These fieldnotes were then translated into a set of orthographic drawings (plans, sections and elevation) at a variety of scales and using a variety of media. These drawings formed the basis of a detailed visual description – the graphic equivalent of a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973: 3) – to communicate how the maker or craftsperson uses the spaces that they inhabit. This spatial biography aimed to communicate not only the physical context but also immaterial information such as the social and vocational practices that occurred in that space over time. Armed with this in-depth knowledge of the observed craftsperson, the students proceeded to design a hypothetical architectural proposal for a new live/work space in a different location for this craftsperson. The goal of this new design was to best accommodate the idiosyncrasies of the observed craftsperson’s social practices within a new architectural form. The pedagogical intention of this specific architectural ethnographic study was that it would provide a methodology for future user-centred and empathetic design tasks.

Reflections on Architectural Ethnography and the Pedagogical Experience

As planned, the architectural ethnographic research task detailed above required the students to engage with the world outside of the design studio and to use a ‘real-life’ scenario as inspiration for the design process. It therefore presented an alternative to a more traditional – and often critiqued – architectural design processes that are driven by abstract notions about form, conceptual thinking and references to the architectural canon. Architectural Ethnography, as a pedagogical tool, also revealed a series of further benefits, as explained below.
Through observation, notebook jottings, sketches and photographs, the students began to see the craftsperson and workshop they were observing in a new light. Making these records was not merely a pragmatic exercise, it was a vehicle for revealing information and new findings. This reflects what Berlardi noted about the measured survey, that it can move ‘beyond the narrow boundaries of technique and trespass into the artistic sphere, letting us see the things right under our noses but which, due to our insensitivity or our distraction, we haven’t seen or (worse yet) can’t see.’ (Berlardi 2014: 22). Furthermore, the documentation activity or the taking of fieldnotes became a way of analysing the existing situation. What was seen to be important was recorded and through the making of these records, the students began to develop new ways of interpreting the craftsperson’s practice, extracting potentially fruitful insights for the next stage of the design process (see Figure 1).

The fieldnotes and graphic documentation gathered on-site were then re-analysed through the making of the orthographic drawings back in the studio. This transposition of information provided the students with yet another opportunity to process, edit and organise their observations and emergent thoughts. This process can be compared to the act of ‘writing-up’ field notes as is practiced in traditional ethnographic study (Emerson, Fretz et al. 2011). Different elements of the aforementioned architectural ethnographic study were drawn at different scales, depending on what was of spatial interest to each student. For instance, the silversmith’s desk revealed intimate details about the soldering process associated with that craft and was drawn up by the student in detail and at a much smaller scale than the general arrangement plans. The orthographic drawing exercise thus provided a vehicle through which to hone conclusions about the craftsperson and socio-spatial practices.
associated with the craft. Furthermore, representing the physical context under study at a variety of scales allowed for more important and less important information to be linked up to form a comprehensive and readable spatial biography (see Figure 2 for an example of this).

Figure 2: Excerpts from a spatial biography of a silversmith. Image courtesy of Luca Garoli and Adam Doherty.
Figure 3: Excerpts from a spatial biography of a bicycle mechanic.
Image courtesy of James Stirrat and Kuchnatt Vachiratianchai.
Architectural ethnographic research exercises illustrate the reciprocal influence that buildings and people exert on one another. The ways in which those craftspeople who were under observation in the case study covered in this paper made physical adjustments to suit their needs, was apparent through their ad-hoc additions and customisations. For instance, the bicycle mechanic had attached a metal rack to the ceiling of his workshop, which he used to store repaired bicycles that were awaiting collection by customers. Conversely, the way in which the physical context influenced the bicycle mechanic’s practice was revealed through the student’s observations accumulated over time. The location of the wood-burning stove dictated where the bicycle mechanic spent most of his working day, because the heat radiating from the stove warmed him while he fixed wheels and punctures. Thus, the fixed layout of the space informed where particular tasks were carried out and as a result, told a story about what activities were happening and where they were happening in the space (see Figure 3).

Recording the serial locations of the mobile material context—the furniture, utensils and tools—became a way of registering activity over time. For instance, the violin maker had specific places to hang the violins at different times of the construction process. The record of these different locations illustrated the violin maker’s crafting process (see Figure 4).

The students’ starting point for the redesign of the craftsperson’s workshop for another, new location was neither conceptual nor theoretical. Rather, their design process emerged from the architectural ethnographic study of an everyday experience. Yet, the results were far from ordinary. The students presented intricate, well-considered and unconventional spatial propositions that built on the craftsperson’s tacit knowledge and incorporated the best of their ad-hoc spatial innovations. The architectural ethnographic study also challenged the students’ normative ideas about spaces and the
social practices supported by those spaces. For instance, one student observed that the kitchenette in the jewellery designer’s workshop was not only a place to make tea but that it also functioned as a social space for the designer to become casually acquainted with her clients. As a result of this kind of close observation, normative descriptions of spaces – a toilet, an office or a workstation – disappeared in the final design proposals. Instead, the students designed spaces that could accommodate a variety of social practices and that offered the necessary spatial qualities for the craftsperson to operate most joyfully. Examining the use of the space from a temporal perspective helped to further challenge the students to reconsider such normative descriptions. They began, therefore, to think more carefully about use, time, routine and ritual as a way of generating spatial propositions.

Conclusion

Architectural ethnographic studies offer many benefits for a design process. They can provide rich insights that can nourish an architectural design process. In architectural education, they serve as a way to both connect the students’ work to real-world concerns and highlight how the end-user and their socio-spatial practices can provide a wealth of inspiration for the making of design propositions. Thus, the architectural ethnographic driven design brief challenges more traditional, inward-looking, detached modes of architectural education. The professional architect can also use Architectural Ethnography as a generative tool for developing initial sketch designs and for igniting the early-stage design dialogue with a client. Architectural Ethnography is, therefore, a practice worthy of further development.

References


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