

# Acknowledging Voices in Architectural Ethnography

## Architectural Behaviorology / Ethnography of Design Practice

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Architectural Ethnography, as a method, has been present in architectural theory and discourse since at least 1980s according to different scholarship, both architectural and anthropological. Depending on the approach one might encounter the architect on one hand, acting as an ethnographer while conducting site analysis or archival research through historical documentation; or on the other, as a case study for *real* (anthropological background) ethnographers who use architects and their way of practicing while designing and building as their main source of knowledge. This text will try to explain and reflect on the literature produced on behalf of this two different approaches to Architectural Ethnography.

At first, if we pay attention to those architects who have reflected on ethnography as a descriptive tool to grasp and describe the built environment, one should acknowledge —as suggested by Yoshiharu Tsukamoto (Atelier Bow-Wow)— Kazunari Sakamoto's theory of architecture as an environment from the late 1980s. Atelier Bow-Wow deepened in that idea by understanding Tokyo's modern hybrid-building reality which they carefully drew and showed in *Made in Tokyo* (2001). By that time, Tsukamoto and Kaijima had probably read the 1998 Architectural Design article by Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till "The Everyday and Architecture" which includes the famous *Dining Table* Drawings. Accordingly they were all probably familiar with, of course De Certeau's 1984 *The Practice of Everyday* and Lefebvre's 1991 *Critique of Everyday Life*; but more importantly, with Hal Foster's essay on the dangers of considering *The Artist as Ethnographer* (1996) when adopting site-specific techniques as a form of ideological patronage and as only another *new* form of *flânerie* evading all institutional critique.

As a fundamentally *contextual* method, architectural ethnography came into design practice as the most useful technique to satisfy the obsession to fieldwork in the everyday. As a proof there is the publication of *The Architectures of Atelier Bow-Wow: Behaviorology* (2010) which, according to the authors, illustrated the emergence of the concept of architectural ethnography

from the theory and architectural practice of Architectural Behaviorology. Behaviour research of people and objects in the city through architectural ethnography (the drawing and description of the living and the built) has longly defined the Atelier way of practicing and consolidated them as one of the main voices in Architectural Ethnography. Consequently they designed the *The Japan Pavilion at the 16th Venice Biennale* (2018) and lead the Architectural Behaviorology Chair at ETH Zurich.

More recently, Momoyo Kaijima edited, along Andreas Kalpakci and Laurent Stalder, the Arch+ 238 Issue on *Architectural Ethnography* (2020) were they question *what does it mean when architects increasingly turn to the world of life in an ethnographically descriptive way*. They draw in the so-called Ethnographic Turn and on Okwui Enwezor's aim to "unlearn ethnography as necessarily 'bad', but just an example of power hierarchy." In their words, architectural ethnography is "a method with which we explore the world through drawing in order to uncover our own entanglements in the most diverse regimes and networks or the potentials and ambitions of a social situation." At the same time, even if they acknowledge the importance of anthropology (Latour 1990s thoughts on fieldwork drawing and its translation abilities) as the most contributing discipline in shifting architectural thought in this regard, most of the texts and projects compiled in the issue are reflections and examples of drawing fieldwork applied to the built through the lens of ethnography to take the world as it is while depicting it in detail. For example, Tim Ingold discusses on the speculative and experimental process of line-drawing as a descriptive tool and its value; Tom Avermaete traces back the descriptive tradition of colonial ethnography when depicting unexplored places; and Tom Emerson, Drawing Architecture Studio or Interboro Partners display powerful pseudo-ethnographic "intensive-proximity" drawings *à la Bow-Wow*.

The issue generally adopts a self-stated reflexive attitude that develops an awareness of the power imbalance between observer and observed. However, a way of making architectural ethnography more reflexive —to use the editors words— would be to focus the whole power awareness not only in that relationship, but fully on the observer (architect) and their tools and methods for such practice. In that vein, the editors mention how "ethnographers have recently rediscovered their interest in architecture and have particularly focused on current design process as exemplary black box that could be examined and opened in order to contribute to a better understanding of how implicit knowledge works in design processes" but little is shown in this regard except for Lukasz Stanek text on Polish Architecture after Socialist Globalization, where he approaches architectural ethnography as an analysis and description of architects actions rather than on the observed subjects of those architects.

Thus, rather than deploying intense drawing techniques to design sites, urban structures or

other sites of social knowledge, architectural ethnography interested in the design practice itself can bring new concerns on architects mediated and biased practice of designing realities while also looking at them.

Two particular publications from 2009 written by authors with an anthropological background are the most common entry point for architects to this alternative definition of architectural ethnography. On one hand, OMA's ethnography conducted by Albena Yaneva (*Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. An Ethnography of Design*) focused in understanding the relevance of particular modeling materials as important tools in shaping the design process and thus, the whole *ecology of practice* of the Rotterdam office. On the other, Houdart and Minato (*Kuma Kengo. An Unconventional Monograph*) researched and followed worldwide the different actors involved in the design and construction process of different projects of the office, both in Tokyo and Paris. But if one seeks to trace carefully how social research methods can be applied to architectural practices as ethnographic objects of study, one should start —as suggested by Albena Yaneva — with J.R. Blau's essay *Beautiful buildings and breaching the laws from 1976* or his later book on *Architects and Firms: A Sociological Perspective on Architectural Practices* (1984).

Yaneva also edited the 2018 second issue of *Ardeth Journal* under the title *Bottega*; which according to the editorial board, is interested in questioning "how can architects respond to this ecological, ethological and pragmatic study, while occupying the position of observed objects and simultaneously researchers themselves". The editorial text by Yaneva, *New Voices in Architectural Ethnography*, compiled the historically relevant texts and ethnographies that have consolidated this approach to Architectural Ethnography as an Ethnography of Design Practices. She traces its insertion in architectural theory since 1980s, "when architectural researchers moved their attention from the products - buildings and places - to the processes of design thinking and negotiations". In other words, to everything that came into light after the so-called *Practice Turn in Architecture* (Doucet 2015); or to everything Jeremy Till would call architecture depends on. Even if *Architecture Depends* (2013) is not an architectural ethnography as such, its anecdotes and description of contingent elements to architectural practice have also been in the eye of architectural theory and social studies since Yaneva's and Houdart's Ethnographies from 2009.

Chronologically, *Ardeth's Bottega* editorial acknowledges the importance of publications as Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983) or his subsequent *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987) where he delves in the insides of reflection-in-action as way of gaining knowledge while practicing. Schön's ethnographies were based in educational practice while the first specific ethnographies in architectural practices were conducted by Dana Cuff's in the US

built environment professional sector. Cuff's *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (1992), by locating the social dimension of architecture through collective action, came to complete J.R. Blau's former approach which, according to Yaneva, was based on a more traditional sociological perspective and contextual quantitative data methods. Further publications, such as *Practising architecture* (2011) by Jacobs and Merriman, contributed to this shift from quantitative to qualitative analysis and consolidated the analysis of architectural practice as a sort of network where design—and its cultural basis—emerges from complex interactions among interested parties. As Yaneva also reminds, these parties got expanded—when influenced by Science and Technology Studies (STS), Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and socio-material approaches—leading to the consideration of many other actors, human and non humans, in the design decision-making process and its negotiations. Eventually, this resulted in the so-called “Ethnographic Turn in Architecture” as stated by Yaneva in *Five Ways to Make Architecture Political. An Introduction to the Politics of Design Practice* (2017) where ethnographies of design are conducted extensively through direct contact with the design rituals, its software, model-making materials, construction sites, bureaucratic files and all the interrelated actors affecting this socio-material culture. As a matter of fact, exemplary research in this vein can be found in Yaneva's analysis of the social life of the Whitney Museum (OMA) as a design object in *The Making of a Building: A Pragmatist Approach to Architecture* (2009); *Co-Designers. Cultures of Computer Simulation in Architecture* (2012) by Loukissas, or the aforementioned ethnography by Houdart and Minato's.

As a consequence of the Journal Open Call, this issue accounted new (2018) experimental “contributions that test the limits of extant ethnographic knowledge practices in architecture studies pointing toward other possibilities”. However, rather than re-collecting those authors, their research and the values of each of their contributions to this area; this text aims to add to this assemblage of research a couple of recent publications after Ardet's number, that can be helpful in order to complete this genealogy of literature on architectural ethnography. Furthermore, the following reviews (if they can be called as such) of this couple of books, are based on the reading but also on interviewing the authors (2024) about their own insights on the application of architectural ethnography as a research method itself.

One is Thomas Yarrow's *Architects: Portrait of a Practice* (2019). Probably one of the most recent interesting ethnographies based on the fact that his research pays attention to, among others, a very particular part of design practice: the design meetings. Yarrow spent an extended period living and working with ten architects at MHW (Miller+Howard Workshop, Chalford, UK) while conducting a type of research embedded in a genealogy of theory unveiling tacit-nonverbal knowledge in architectural design process

and deciphering its confusing multiplicity of voices. Yarrow, while understanding *Ethnography as a Deep Hanging Out* (Renato Rosaldo), succeeds in episodically portraying architects not just as professional skilled workers but as people with other-than-architectural lives which get in and out of the office culture by influencing each other. The second chapter of the book, *Lives*, serves as an example of the latter when paying special attention to concepts as *Friendship*—the book is allegedly the outcome of an exploration of a friendship between the author and the director architect of the investigated office—, *Vocation* or *Working Lives*. In addition, Yarrow's ethnography is very precise at acknowledging the role of the researcher in the myriad of the fieldwork process by becoming his own informant and continuously reflecting on how he is perceived and how does his observation presence affect the working space.

Subsequently, Yarrow published other equally interesting ethnographies after this; for example, *The Object of Conservation: an ethnography of heritage practice* (2022). However, the last contribution of interest for this Literature is Brett Mommersteeg's publication *Variations of a Building* (2023). The book is the outcome of a PhD Dissertation conducted between 2016 and 2020, that used OMA's Aviva Studios (Factory International) in Manchester (2015-2023) as the main case study without having the author any specific architectural background. On a technical level, the research focuses in the mechanicals design of the building—often overseen in architectural theory—and more specifically in acoustic solutions and its calculation process in the sound labs. Mommersteeg's approach is specially interested in witnessing and grasping the exact moments where a building ‘moves’ (varies its design) while rethinking the concepts of *site*—what constitutes something as a site— and *public*—what are the actors and audiences of interest for a building— within the non-linear process of a *building-on-the-move*. While it is clearly aligned with other *multi-sited ethnographies* of the *ecology of practice* that have discussed and expanded the concept of *building-in-the-making*; according to the author, the research consists in “*ethnographic fieldwork with architects, engineers, politicians, acousticians and in sites of public engagement*”. As almost all the aforementioned literature and the yet-to-come in the future, it discusses “*techniques of sharing in the act of creation, the conditions of a building project, and its political effects*”.

At last, we have witnessed throughout the text how different literature have claimed their relevance in the appearance of Ethnography in Architectural Culture, be it through the emergence of *Architectural Behaviorology* or through the *Ethnography of Design*. Both the ethnographic methods in architecture or the anthropological approach to architecture, through intensive proximity; are oriented towards grasping the type of everyday knowledge lying in urban social sites of knowledge, or in the architectural office where design and building strategies

take place. The combination, rather than the discrimination of these approaches, might be the most useful way to understanding both, how to obtain architectural knowledge through urban ethnographies; but also how do these architects work in order to obtain such knowledge. Hopefully this text might help in configuring the big picture of it all.