

METHODOLOGY TO ADDRESS THE MISSING MEDIUM GROUND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

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Problem's Context

Despite the scholarships of architects/planners who have long claimed that the process of rebuilding after a disaster could be done using the formal methodology of architectural/planning per se, I seek to ask a deeper question from a community perspective (Arkaraprasertkul 2009, 2010). The research on post-disaster building should be based on the study of the relationship of space and people, rather than being led by nostalgia or the limited understanding of foreign planners who might not have any clue what is going on within the community of which they will take part in the process of planning and re-planning. This approach is necessary to define how space is utilized, justified and re-justified by the resident users, themselves the mediating agency between the physical form of their micro-communities and the ever-changing culture of Haiti?

Ethnography ain't just a Myth

The suggested primary research methodology is *ethnography*. It is widely understood that anthropology is an established discipline. Employing its methodology requires the deep and comprehensive study of the 'other cultures'; hence, the use of ethnography here in a housing research could be a 'lighter version' of ethnography. In my 2008 paper "Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for LMRHD and Urban Design," I have presented some basic study methods by which architects and urban designers can understand the dynamic of communities, such as participant observation and semi-structure interview (Wampler and Arkaraprasertkul 2008). From the study of the community, I have proposed an idea of a 'community-oriented housing': mixed-use, mixed-tenure and mixed-housing type development, humanized and walkable neighborhood, high-density, integrated open space, and environmental morphology; all of which are represented through a series of experimental designs.

Familiarization

The process of familiarization is extremely crucial to architecture. In other words, 'the site visit' is a pathway to preliminarily understand the quality of space alongside the requirements of program. Yet, it would be uneconomical for an architect commissioned to study and design a housing project to be willing to spend a week or a month 'deep-hanging out' in the community like an anthropologist to understand how things work in order to design the palpable built environment inside. Hence, the lighter version of ethnography for housing research requires architects to pay attention to what they observe and to be very keen to ask questions about the rationality behind certain activities that take place in the community, rather than to just look at the characteristic of the existing architecture and physical condition.

That is, it is possible – and *feasible* – to conduct an ethnographic study of an urban community in order to derive the true understanding of the community for design. If we accept that ethnography

is a viable method, there are three proposed stages of the study: Pre-field work study, fieldwork, and analysis. Pre-field work-study consists of a short story gathering survey before beginning to look at how others have interpreted them. The first-hand information gathered would help buffer the researcher from direct influence of other scholars' interpretation. Central to the pre-fieldwork study is the use of integrated quantitative and qualitative data as background study, which includes: the extensive review of existing literature of history, theory, and criticism (this process involves a full delve into the critique of post-disaster housing in different contexts as well as in Haiti context if there is any); archival study (comparison of old photographs, historical artifacts); and the acquisition of quantitative data (i.e. demography, income/occupation, occupation, trend and affordability, and comparisons of population density).

How to do so?

The fieldwork stage aims at assessing the nature of the neighborhoods via: a) the organization of public space in such communities; b) the casual formation of semi-private space; c) the social networks (community networks including clubs, exercise groups, religious groups, chess clubs, and so on) which constitute spatial arrangement; and d) the personal experience of inhabitants actively creating and/or maintaining both. The methodology would principally be participant observation. While participant observation could be thought of as a "passive method," ethnographer could never really be passive in reality. In fact, passivity can be quite aggressive: people are going to expect contributions back from the field ethnographer and that is always a *negotiated process*. The main purpose is to get the enthusiastic ethnographer to be in the site to observe the activities of the participants. The use of technology, such as cell-phone which is ubiquitous even in many remote areas, is definitely going to bring the level of scrutiny of ethnography to different level. It would still be passive, I think, but the quantitative information as an output of the study using cell phone as agency could shed light on the intensity of communication within the community, i.e. telling us the level of need of the residents to get access to information and social interaction outside their (usually gated) community and so on. That is to say, Ethnography is passive but the methods of getting access into the community which the ethnographer wants to study cannot be passive. The ethnographer has to be very active in gaining trust so that he/she would be allowed to stay in the community to observe what is going on inside -- to make the participants feel that the ethnographer is more or less one of them.

Conclusion

Ethnography is unfortunately *not* the highest level of understanding (I wish it is) but it could apparently shed light on the different rationality under which different communities operate. Once we get this information from ethnography, in order to get to the highest level of thing, we need to come back to the very fundamental question to see if any of the information from the ethnographic research could fill in the gap. I think what is very useful here is to have a two-way research. That is, whatever the information from the cell phone research could tell us something important and interesting (quantitative, frequency-based?); then, ethnography – the view from within – could serve to validate whether or not that information is accurate, and whether or not there is/are any other factor(s) that might have a role in the manipulation of the number.

Work cited:

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