Key Points for a visual Ethnography of Architectural Design and Urban Planning

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Abstract: This essay is intended above all for architects and urban planners. It describes the potentials in their respective fields of an ethnographic and, in particular, visual anthropological approach. In the first part of the text I will offer a summary description, useful above all to non-anthropologists, of the ethnographic method. I will also present a selection of keywords I consider particularly useful to establishing a dialogue between anthropology and the disciplines of architecture and urban planning. Finally, from among the growing number of experiments, I will propose a selection that may serve as models of diverse ethnographic approaches to the analysis and design of urban spaces.

Keywords: ethnography, urban anthropology, visual methods, city, place, design, urban regeneration

Born at the end of the nineteenth century, for many years anthropology focused its research on non-Western populations, on 'primitive' cultures and folk societies that, above all in the field of sociology, were juxtaposed against urban societies. Following an initial phase during which anthropology imitated the natural sciences and their measurement-based methods, the 1920s saw the beginnings of the method Bronisław Malinowski referred to as participatory observation. Nonetheless, from the 1970s anthropologists subjected their methods and rhetoric to harsh criticism, with led to modifications to ethnographic representation and methods of research. In sum, the relation between individuals and culture, initially ignored by functionalism and reduced to a cloning of individuals by culture, was reworked by re-evaluating the subjectivity as much of informers as the anthropologists studying them, deemed a determinant element in the production of knowledge and its representation. The subjectivity of the anthropologist, once removed in the name of an illusory objectivity to be preserved, has become a determinant resource

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for understanding the Other.

The contemporary anthropologist has abandoned the description of social structures or cultural models, to work with the significances given by people, even unconsciously, to their socio-cultural practices, without renouncing the search for more intricate connections between these significances and contexts which are not immediately visible. Significances emerge through dialogue with informers during fieldwork in order to arrive at a negotiated interpretation in which the anthropologist 'translates' the close concepts (of natives) into distant concepts (close to the anthropologist's culture), to use the terminology of Clifford Geertz[2].

So, just what is culture? To demonstrate the distance separating the early from the contemporary anthropologist, I mention the concept of culture formulated by Edward Burnett Tylor, found in all manuals of anthropology, and that of Anthony Paul Cohen. As Tylor wrote, culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871). According to Cohen, "Culture […] is the means by which we make meaning, and with which we make the world meaningful to ourselves, and ourselves meaningful to the world. Its vehicle is the symbol. Symbols are quite simply carriers of meaning. To be effective, therefore, they should be imprecise, in order that the largest possible number of people can modulate a shared symbol to their own wills, to their own interpretive requirements: a tightly defined symbol is pretty useless as anything other than a purely formal sign" (Cohen 1993: 196).

I believe there is an evident passage from a concept of culture as a list of elements forming the cultural identity of a society atop which individuals model their behaviour, to a concept of culture in which it is defined by practices of using symbols through which single social actors and groups give meaning to their individual and collective lives. Only if we adopt Cohen's concept of culture can we manage to see individuals as active producers of culture. At the same time, only by shifting attention to significances can we comprehend how people use space to satisfy needs and realise objectives.

2. Geertz 1973.

Space and place are terms of interest to anthropologists only since 1980[3], above all when questioning the relationship between space and power and continuing a tradition of urban anthropology born at the beginnings of the twentieth century among the sociologists of Chicago. The forms of what we build, and as a consequence the ways we live, have instead always interested anthropologists, since Morgan's studies of Native American dwellings. This is because the organisation of public and private space reflects the organisation and hierarchy of society, and architecture can be analysed from the perspective of the anthropology of material culture[4].

In recent decades, in the West, urban planning was affected by the culture of participation that began in the 1960s in the field of contemporary art, before extending into urban planning to involve local residents in urban regeneration projects. As Krivý and Kaminer wrote: "the participatory turn can also be identified in urban planning, urban design and architecture. In these fields, as in others, the 'turn' is necessarily also a 'return' of sorts to the ideas and ideologies of the 1960s, an era in which participatory demands were backed by influential and radical political movements. The origins of participatory planning can be thus traced back to concepts of advocacy (Paul Davidoff), equity (Norman Krumholz), and transactive (John Friedmann) planning. In various ways, the notion of public participation was central to ideas as diverse as the 'Non-Plan' of Reyner Banham et al, Giancarlo De Carlo's 'Urbino'[5], or Jane Jacobs's 'diverse city'"[6].

The principal critique of this approach, from an anthropological point of view, is the absence of ethnographic studies of areas to be renewed. It is not sufficient to ask residents what they desire to include them in a project, without the risk of slipping into "populism" that has little in common with participation, from the moment that only an ethnographic investigation can profoundly interpret the socio-cultural practices of residents and reveal the hidden significances that give meaning

3. Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003.

4. For a brief history of the interest of anthropology for architecture from a material culture perspective, see Victor Buchli, *Architecture and the Domestic Sphere*, in Buchli 2002, pp. 207-213.

5. As is well known, Giancarlo De Carlo is considered among the first theoreticians of the participatory approach in architectural design. For his participation theory, see Marini 2013.

6. Krivý, Kaminer 2013.

to their lives in urban space. This, on the other hand, is not something that anthropologists can undertake in solitude, nor can it be merely an introductory phase that ends with the presentation of results to clients; instead, their work must be a continuous collaboration, side by side with planners and architects throughout the entire design process.

The anthropology of the city is inherently interdisciplinary and recognises that ethnographic research in urban contexts is more successful when it is conducted in dialogue with architects, urbanists and geographers. Though it must also be said that the skills of anthropologists are tendentially ignored in favour, though increasingly less often, to those of quantitative sociology, as the neutral provider of statistical data. I believe not only that this collaboration between anthropologists and urbanists[7] may improve the human and social aspects of projects by introducing an in-depth understanding of end users and the contexts in which they live, but may also open up new horizons of intervention and new spaces of creativity for designers as well.

Now, without retracing the history of ethnographic methodologies, nor with the pretext of being exhaustive and within the limits habitually offered to an essay, I will propose a series of keypoints that can be considered a base for establishing a dialogue with architecture and urban planning, approached from a contemporary perspective.

Participatory Observation

Participatory observation is the principal method of ethnography, which specifically identifies it. In short, the method consists in living for a lengthy period of time in the area of research, participating in/observing the socio-cultural practices that occur within it, and dialoguing with natives. The aim of the research, according to contemporary anthropology, is the comprehension of the meanings that natives give to their social actions. During fieldwork, the anthropologist observes practices, converses with natives and produces documentation (written notes, photographs, videos, audio recordings, personal documents, auto-ethnographies) that may be useful to the production of a final text in the form of an essay, photographic reportage, video, web site, etc. 'The positioning'

7. From this moment onward, "urbanists" which includes both urban planners and architects.

of the ethnographer – gender, culture, social standing and subjectivity in general – will condition the final result, whose objectivity derives from the recognition that subjectivity cannot be eliminated by relation and that it must be considered a resource as opposed to an obstacle in achieving an illusory objectivity. Obviously, at the same time, informers are also 'positioned' subjects: hence different significances emerge if, to provide one example, we speak of a male or a female, a young or elderly person, etc. Thus, if we assume that subjectivity is an unavoidable and positive component of research, it becomes necessary to adopt a reflexive approach: the anthropologist's final text must consider and represent the effects of his/her positioning in the construction of meanings.

A fundamental element of participatory observation is the lengthy duration of the time spent by the researcher in the field. All the same, this may be incompatible with the time allowed to the other scholars involved in a work of interdisciplinary research focused on the production of a design. In this case, the ethnographer must in part renounce the rules imposed by the traditions of the discipline and move into the environment of what is now referred to as 'design anthropology': "As a contrast with classical ethnography, design anthropologists generally do not engage in long term fieldwork in one particular social and cultural setting, but rather carry out a series of shorter field studies and interventions, often in different social and cultural settings"[8].

Praxeology and Knowledge

This concept is derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It is opposed to both the idea of truth contained in reality and reproducible in the documents produced by the scholar (positivism), and to an understanding derived from the application of hypotheses and predefined categories that interpret reality from the scholar's point of view.

Knowledge based on praxeology is produced through the presence of the researcher in the context of study, interacting with social actors to negotiate the significances of practices together with them. In this sense, participatory observation proceeds by placing at its centre the connection of the mind-body systems of those human begins present,

8. Gunn, Otto, Smith 2013, p. 14.

without preconceptions and producing significances during the period of relation. This approach produces a greater complexity and avoids other-directed representations of the Other and the reality in which one acts; this complexity must be transferred into the ethnographic text in all of its density of different voices and points of view gathered in the field using diverse media, and in so doing adequately describing the sensory dimension of the context of research.

The concept of *habitus* is at the heart of Pierre Bourdieu's perspective. As Bourdieu writes: "the habitus of a determinate person – or of a group of persons occupying a similar or neighbouring position in social space – is in a certain sense very systematic: all the elements of his or her behaviour have something in common, a certain type of affinity of style, like the works of the same painter or, to take an example from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, like the handwriting of a person who keeps her style, immediately recognisable, when she writes with instruments as diverse as a pencil, a pen or a piece of chalk and on media as different as a sheet of paper and blackboard. These examples give a concrete intuition of this systematicity. It is not a logical systematicity; it is a practical systematicity"[9].

Thus the term *habitus* refers to the habitual practices of human beings: the paths they travel through the city, their usual actions and practices. All the same, the behaviour of people cannot be fully traced back to a 'system'. During their practices, they also think, dream, imagine, experience emotions and sensations that may or may not involve a relationship with the environment.

Praxeology must place the practices observed within a 'cultural system', but at the same time it must also capture the specific production in the particular situation observed, recognising the role of subjectivity and the encounter of bodies, minds, desires, common interests and empathies. Praxeology is produced in a specific place, not in space; up-close and not from afar; through relation, and not simply by observing others. In any case, these immaterial components of social life, when they are not immediately investigated in the cultural discourse[10] on urban life,

9. Pierre Bourdieu, *Habitus*, in Hillier, Roobsky 2002, p. 28.

10. The analysis of cultural discourse refers to the analysis of a specific theme as it is treated or as it implicitly emerges in written or audio-visual productions (film, literature, cartoons, publicity, institutional

must be grasped also using the experimental methods imagined and implemented in specific contexts. For example, by constructing a city of 'Lego' bricks with children, or asking them to design imaginary neighbourhoods, places or cities.

Incorporation and Sensoriality

As Thomas Csordas wrote, "the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture"[11]. Csordas introduced the concept of incorporation (embodiment) to understand how culture and power act in/on the body and how they modify it. Csordas's reference was Merleau-Ponty, who developed the notion of embodiment in relation to perception, and Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. "The problematic of both theorists is formulated in terms of troublesome dualities. For Merleau-Ponty in the domain of perception the principal duality is that of subject-object, while for Bourdieu in the domain of practice it is structure-practice. Both attempt not to mediate but to collapse these dualities, and embodiment is the methodological principle invoked by both. The collapsing of dualities in embodiment requires that the body as a methodological figure must itself be nondualistic, that is, not distinct from or interaction with an opposed principle of mind. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty the body is a setting in 'relation to the world', and consciousness is the body projecting itself into the world; for Bourdieu the socially informed body is the 'principle generating and unifying all practices', and consciousness is a form of strategic calculation fused with a system of objective potentialities"[12].

An ethnographic approach sensitive toward the question of incorporation comports the recognition that consciousness is always incorporating and, thus, that the stories of the narrator must be interpreted by seeking within them the sensoriality the express either directly or implicitly. Knowledge produced empathically during participatory observation, when the researcher and his or her interlocutors act up-close, must be integrated with the analysis of narratives with a particular attention

documents, etc.) in a given social context.

11. Csordas 1990, p. 5.

12. Csordas 1990, p. 8.

toward how sensations and emotions are translated into words.

The awareness of the practices embodied by the inhabitants of a neighbourhood, for example, may undoubtedly derive from an ethnographic investigation and may offer urban planners important elements for a design that is more sensitive toward the life of human beings. To provide one example, every path travelled on foot is embodied in a habitus produced by the repetition of bodily movements, imposed by 'structures' given by the built environment (buildings and streets) and embodied needs (the need for food, for relations during free time, to walk, etc.), but at the same time the acting subjectivities adapt 'structures' or modify them in relation to desires and needs not foreseen by planners.

Space and Place

Space and place are two concepts that cannot easily be considered separately, either theoretically or for the reciprocal overlap of practices. If 'space' is a numerical entity that can be represented at a scale or on a map, 'place' can be defined in relation to human activities: bodies and places are, in fact, interanimated, as Keith Basso wrote.

In 1982, Richardson proposed a vision of space from the point of view of material culture and symbolic interactionism, where the significance of objects is defined by the actions of social actors. The recent debate animated by the phenomenology of the body and postmodern geography has overcome the Cartesian opposition between the subject and object of knowledge, and between the individual and the environment, passing through an intersubjective perspective, where subject and object are co-implicated (Varela). This shift also comported a passage from participatory observation to emplacement, as an ethnographic method, and from the description of a reality outside the narrative of a situation in which the narrator is co-implied with the 'objects' of the description.

Underlying this passage are the ideas of Miles Richardson, even if the scholar remains in the domain of inter-subjectivity without moving beyond the dualism subject-object. Richardson wrote: "If material culture is the physical expression of the world in which we are, then defining the situation means how people incorporate material culture into the situation they are creating so that they bring about unity between the situation and the material setting. When this is accomplished, one may

say that the situation has been placed, it has achieved material existence. People are no longer simply there physically, they are also in-the-world. The process of incorporating material culture into the definition of situation, although probably not a strictly linear progression, can best be presented as three analytically distinct steps or components: the preliminary definition supplied by the material culture of a setting; the interaction occurring within that setting; and the situation's sense of place. The ethnographic data will be organized accordingly, but first it is necessary to report how those ethnographic data were collected"[13].

In other words, Richardson reproduces the positivist difference between data and interpretation superseded by postmodern anthropology, and the separation between context and subjects acting in it. In so doing Richardson remains trapped in a pre-enactive perspective. As he writes, "the objectification of the emerging sense upon the material setting is essentially the transfer of the 'what' of the on-going social experience onto the 'where' of the material setting. The 'what' is the sense, or the understanding, of the situation that is emerging out of people's interpretive responses to one another's actions. The situation becomes physically 'placed'. This, in turn, means that setting, which becomes a full exposition of what is occurring. The material image, in brief, is the implicit, preliminary definition made explicit and complete; with its formation the participants have moved from simply being there to being-in-the-world. From the ethnographer's view, the material image is what he sees upon the completion of his analysis. Having considered the setting and the interaction separately, he now brings them together for a statement on the overall meaning of the two places"[14].

In any case, it is true that when we arrive in a place we require a certain quantity of time before entering into a situation. Places have their own 'nature', which precedes our presence: stories, rules, attractions, material form, related customs. Initially we are simply there, as Richardson writes, and only later do we begin to enter into the situation. Hence, if subject and environment can be separated in theoretical terms,

13. Miles Richardson, *Being-in-the-Market Versus Being-in-the-Plaza: Material Culture and the Construction of Social Reality in Spanish America*, in Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, p.76.

14. Miles Richardson, *Being-in-the-Market Versus Being-in-the-Plaza: Material Culture and the Construction of Social Reality in Spanish America*, in Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, p. 85.

in practical terms they are a unique entity.

Are these considerations of some importance to urban planning inspired by an attention toward the sense of place? There is not precisely one context that serves as the backdrop to our actions, if human beings and objects in an environment are co-implicated: context, as a separate analytical principle, exists only in a vision in which reality and subject are two separate entities.

As the philosopher-geographer Edward Casey writes, "places not only are, they happen"[15]. Therefore, place should be inquired per se, as an entanglement of bodies, objects, memories, plants, animals, and human beings. Casey quotes Merleau-Ponty who "suggests that the anthropologist 'has a new organ of understanding at his disposal'. Is this organ not an understanding of place? After all, the ethnographer stands in the field and takes note of the places he or she is in, getting into what is going on in their midst. The ensuing understanding reflects the reciprocity of body and place – and of both with culture – that is as descriptive of the experience of the anthropologist as of the native. It also reflects both parties' grasp of a concrete universality, a generality immanent in place thanks to the lateral homologies and sidewise resemblances between things and peoples in places. The understanding of place activates universals that are as impure as they are singular"[16].

Urban planning and architecture must simultaneously manage 'space' and 'place' in their work. If working with space signifies planning relations between volumes and areas in relation to quantitative problems of function, traffic, density, networks; working with places signifies comprehending the meanings (at the same time their multiple significances and their sensoriality) and imagining ways of improving existing social practices – or generating new ones – where sensations, emotions and sentiments give meaning to human existence. The functionality of our actions in space, in other words, their movement toward the satisfaction of determinate aims, does not end with the reasons for our behaviour, not all of which are based on an economic motivation. In an extreme way, space and place evoke the opposition between function and serendipity, and between *homo oeconomicus* and *flaneur*. As at

15. Edward Casey, *How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time*, in Feld, Basso 1996, p. 27.
16. Edward Casey, *How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time*, in Feld, Basso 1996, p. 45.

the dawn of the twentieth century, the city can still become a surprising place, as it was for Charles Baudelaire or Robert Walser.

The ethnographic approach to architecture was named by Suprapti et Al. using the neologism 'ethnography-architecture' (English and italics author's own – TN). As they wrote, "the purpose of ethnography-architecture is to discover thought hidden behind the symbol (Geertz, 1973). Culture and architecture are inseparable in which learning both matters will deliver us to the science of symbol referring to certain thought. Thus, researcher should uphold great appreciation toward space as the product of culture built on the basis of social convention. Space here refers to the space having unique and specific pattern with certain structural system (Geertz, 1973). The researcher also tries to comprehend the philosophy of life of the society (Rapoport, 1977). Therefore, communication becomes an important medium upon the transfer of value (Rapoport, 2005). Ethnography-architecture research on space also limits social problem of single space and explores architectural space in detail. It includes sociocultural life of the community, the real terms of the space, the elements of space tools, the arrangement of space structure and the relation among elements of space that constructs the meaning of space"[17].

Emotional Maps

Emotional maps are a method for recording what happens in a given place. We have numerous examples of emotional maps produced by researchers and artists from different backgrounds. These maps gather together and represent the life of places. They are a useful store of information for social actors who intervene, under various titles and with different aims, in the city.

Examples of emotional maps include that of San Francisco created by Christian Nold[18] between March and May of 2007, available online at http://www.sf.biomapping.net/.

"The San Francisco Emotion Map is the culmination of Christian Nold's five-week residency and participatory art project that involved a total of 98 participants exploring San Francisco's Mission District neighbourhood using the Bio Mapping device he invented. During his residen-

17. Suprapti, Budihardjo, Kistanto, Tungka 2010, p. 577.

18. For a brief biography of Christian Nold, see http://www.softhook.com/resume.htm

cy at Southern Exposure, Christian Nold worked in the organization's Mission Street storefront gallery encouraging visitors to stop by and use the devices during the weekdays and on Saturdays when he conducted intensive workshops. The project invited the public to go for a walk using the device, which records the wearer's physiological response to their surroundings. The results of these walks are represented on this map using coloured dots and participant's personal annotations. The San Francisco Emotion Map is a collective attempt at creating an emotional portrait of a neighbourhood and envisions new tools that allow people to share and interpret their own bio data"[19].

In any case, some criticism of emotional maps can be raised. While they give voice to aspects ignored by the immaterial life of human beings, they appear to be founded on a cataloguing approach, which is reductive with respect to the complex overlap of significances embodied in places and which only more complex narratives can provide. These maps do however have the merit, using a simple and communicative interface, of offering a summary of the variegated flows of emotions crossing the spaces they represent.

Emplaced ethnography

Emplacement is a term utilised for the first time by Edward Casey to indicate the connection between bodies and the spaces in which they act, based on the theories of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu: "Far from being dumb or diffuse, the lived body is as intelligent about the cultural specificities of a place as it is aesthesiologically sensitive to the perceptual particularities of that same place. Such a body is at once encultured and emplaced and enculturating and emplacing-while being massively sentient all the while"[20]. And later: "as places gather bodies in their midst in deeply enculturated ways, so cultures conjoin bodies in concrete circumstances of 'emplacement'"[21].

Successively, David Howes clarified that "while the paradigm of 'embodiment' implies an integration of mind and body, the emergent

19. For more information about the project San Francisco Emotion Map of Christian Nold, see http://www.sf.biomapping.net/background.htm

20. Edward Casey, *How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time*, in Feld, Basso 1996, p. 34.

21. Edward Casey, *How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time*, in Feld, Basso 1996, p. 46.

paradigm of 'emplacement' suggests the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment. This environment is both physical and social, as well illustrated by the bundle of sensory and social values contained in the feeling of 'home'. The counterpart to 'emplacement' is dislocation, the feeling that one is homeless, disconnected from one's physical and social environment"[22]. As observed above, Pink notes that, as it is formulated by Howes, the idea of 'emplacement' "surpasses that of incorporation. Here I use the term 'emplacement' to foreground the idea of the 'emplaced ethnographer' in relation to theories of place discussed later in this chapter. Thus, whereas Coffey argued for an 'embodied ethnography', I propose an 'emplaced ethnography' that attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment. It is now frequently recognised that we need to investigate both the emplacement of the people who participate in our ethnographic research and the ethnographers' own emplacement as individuals in and as part of specific research contexts. The experiencing, knowing and 'emplaced' body is therefore central to the idea of a sensory ethnography. Ethnographic practice entails our multisensory embodied engagements with others (perhaps through participation in activities or exploring their understandings in part verbally) and with their social, material, discursive and sensory environments. It moreover requires us to reflect on these engagements, to conceptualise their meanings theoretically and to seek ways to communicate the relatedness of experiential and intellectual meanings to others"[23].

Narrating Places: Place-Telling and Place-Elicitation

'Place-telling' is a concept that arrives from sociology. It is meeting with a certain level of success in diverse fields of cultural design, primarily non-academic, often reduced to the mere presentation of contents rarely preceded by a reflection on how they were gathered and followed by a scientific analysis. In practical terms, it consists in gathering local knowledge about a place through the narratives offered by its inhabitants. This method is highly useful to the study of urban places. Moving in this

22. Howes 2005, p. 7.

23. Pink 2009, p. 25-26.

direction, scholars can gather narratives produced by the inhabitants of a neighbourhood and accompany their own point of view with that of those with direct experience. These narratives make space place: spaces are given by institutional borders, while places are zones of experience, stories, memory and desires, emotions and sensations, relations and moments of solitude.

As Federico Scarpelli writes, 'place-telling' is "a practice of non-direct interviewing belonging to a working method that programmatically attributes centrality to voices (though without in any way theorizing their self-sufficiency). Something focused on place (rather than a sociological group or category), as it is redefined by its inhabitants"[24]. This method may present a few problems in representing a limited sampling of narratives, as Scarpelli himself writes, "the possible representativity is not played out in statistical terms, but rather in relation to a stylistic and thematic convergence (some would say 'rhetorical') between the various discourses and testimonials, of the possibility to recognise important symbols, mental maps, recurring ways of constructing historic overlaps, of underlining certain continuities and discontinuities, of periodising. Something that resembles the coordinates of a debate in which to assume a position, to a pattern of references for conversation, and that at the same time reveals the presence of alterative patterns or sub-patterns, from opposing or simply non-overlapping points of view. A mixture of stories and explanations in part considered and in part improvised for the occasion, animated by sufferings, refusals, sentimental ties, nostalgias, which is knowledge, though not detached"[25].

The analysis of narratives permits us, for example, to recognise what is represented as cultural heritage and above all how it is *auto-patrimonializzato*: the stories told can represent in and of themselves actions of *auto-patrimonializzazione* and they speak to us, among other things, of what must be restored or regenerated, respecting the local sense of place, and its history, its relationship with those who inhabit/use it. The narration of a story connected to an urban location simultaneously represents a form of mapping: we can draw a personal map of a specific narrator

24. Scarpelli, Romano 2011, p. 113.
25. Scarpelli, Romano 2011, p. 114.

based on his or her story and overlap it with other narrators and stories, producing maps of communities that describe day to day practices and common sentiments and sensations, providing us with ideas and stimuli for projects at the micro-scale.

Visual Methods

While visual ethnography has a lengthy tradition, focused essentially on ethnographic cinema and ethnography, the integration of visual methods within the field of ethnography spread primarily during the 1990s. Its range of action was extended to the fields of multimedia and hypermedia, forms of representation that permit a polyvocal approach toward the concretisation of the representation of multiple points of view within a social context, and to describe the density of documents utilised in the form of a hypertext.

The central role of observation and the awareness not only that the ethnographer's body cannot be excluded from research, but that it constitutes a resource for knowledge, have led to the conceptualisation of fieldwork as performance and the consideration of the body in its movement through spaces as a receptor of sensations and a catalyst of reactions. The 'old' term observe, is thus to be intended, henceforward, as an experience of the body in its totality. It is a short step from this position to the imagination of the possibility of a 'walking ethnography' that recognises the mobility of the researcher's body and is sensitive toward the sensory dimension of place, people and relations. 'Walking ethnography' and 'emplacement' should be integrated in the ethnographic exploration of space: recognising the mobility of the body does not mean moving continuously, renouncing human relations and moments of stasis during which to attentively observe what is perceived and converse with those nearby.

In the chapter entitled "Lived Visual Data: the Built Environment and its Uses", Emmison and Smith, writing from a sociological perspective, offer a series of proposals for the analysis of the built environment, intended as three-dimensional visual objects. In synthesis, as they write: "visual research can be conducted in the study of what Giddens calls the locale, a socially constructed and socially relevant space within which human interactions take place; […] places and buildings tap into the cul-

tures, values and ideologies in which they are situated; […] the observable movements of people in time and space can be used as indicators to answer sociologically informed questions; [...] issues of visibility and invisibility, privacy and publicness are often central to the organization of people, objects and activities in particular locales; [Emmison e Smith present] a number of locales such as museums, the home and the park as places for conducting research projects"[26].

In parallel with the observation of place by the researcher, the contribution to research by informers (inhabitants) is fundamental to the correctness of the ethnographic method. Informers can, for example, be involved in the interpretation of place through the observation of photographs: this is the consolidated method of 'photo-elicitation'. Photographs can be produced by the researcher, by informers themselves, on particular occasions, or they may be the work of others. Regarding 'photo-elicitation', Pavlides and Cranz write: "Photographic elicitation is especially successful in examining the built environment when the photographs depict spaces familiar though everyday use and pre-tested to ensure that they evoke extensive comment (Pavlides, 1995). Respondents review photographs and respond to such general questions as: What takes place here? In what ways is this a good place? How would you change this place to make it better for what takes place here? During such interviews, inhabitants use their own terms (Pavlides, unpublished). If they use different terms, this is sometimes an indicator of membership in different micro-cultures. This kind of interview often elicits responses about qualities not visible in the photographs, such as, smells, sounds, views looking out from the space, and activities in adjacent spaces. Photographers sometimes see things they had not noticed prior to the interviews. 'Photo-elicitation' is distinctive for bringing visual experience together with verbal categories"[27].

The limit of the sociological approach, in general, is that of placing analyses within preconstituted categories established by the researcher – see the text by Emmison and Smith above – and this may also be applicable to the method of 'photo-elicitation' if it is utilised to acquire

26. Emmison, Smith 2000, p. 153.

27. Eleftherios Pavlides, Galen Cranz, *Ethnographic Methods in Support of Architectural Practice*, in Mallory-Hill, Preiser, Watson 2012, p. 302.

data or verify those already possessed by the researcher. The ethnographic method, instead, principally through conversations with informers, seeks to recognise the native categories that identify local culture and only successively to 'translate' the meanings 'close' to the informer into categories 'close' to the researcher, producing a dense description of the culture studied. A dense description is obtained when the meanings that emerge during the research are represented by connecting them on various levels: to the local and global context, to shared categories of local culture, to practices that differ from those observed, to the biography of those interviewed, to the particular situation in which the meanings were identified, as well as the positioning (see above) of the ethnographer.

When analysis is not only a preliminary phase in urban design, but must flow into an autonomous product, multimedia materials produced in the field – photographs, audio, video, maps – necessarily require a creative use of the various media and languages available, including those of contemporary art[28], to describe the synaesthesia of place. While the senses of vision and hearing can be recorded directly using a video camera, how are we to represent smell, touch and taste? Notwithstanding the fact that the city, with its shop fronts and invasive advertising, is prevalently a visual display of consumer culture, the other senses should not be ignored, beginning, for example, with the sense of touch, entrusted by merchants who allow or stimulate clients to touch products on sale[29]. Diversely, we rarely touch the materials of which the city is made, and tactility is perceived through the mediation of vision. Moving in this direction, the analyses made by Laura Marks of 'haptic vision'[30] offer fundamental suggestions for the communication of touch through film. "How does cinema achieve a haptic character? – Marks writes – Many prohaptic properties are common to video and film, such as changes in focus, graininess (achieved differently in each medium), and effects of

28. Marano 2013 (a).

29. On the sensory dimension of the city as a visual display of consumer culture, see David Howes, *HYPERESTHESIA, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism*, in Howes 2005, pp. 281-303.

30. "Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze", in Marks 2000, p. 162.

under- and overexposure. All these discourage the viewer from distinguishing objects and encourage a relationship to the screen as a whole"[31].

Examples of the Application of Ethno-Visual Methods to Urban Research

Theoretical and practical experiments in this field in which ethnography, architecture and urban planning intersect, are proliferating at a growing rate, despite often being realised at the margins of or within the academic world, using an experimental and seminary-based approach that places the final results along a line straddling anthropology, architecture and contemporary art. The video-experimentation with different overlapping languages, the sole means for making the invisible visible, the untouchable touchable and for evoking the concealed, renders these products autonomous by freeing them of the context of design and research in which they were born. It demonstrates their potential artistic value – 'potential' because generally their authors are extraneous to the system of contemporary art and do not wish to be recognised primarily as 'artists'. This is not a limit, but reveals the possibility to move beyond the rigidities of the academic world and to surpass disciplinary boundaries and, in particular, to break free of the separation between science and art, between scientific knowledge and artistic representation.

Numerous examples of the use of visual ethnography applied to urban research focused on architecture can be mentioned. As this approach remains experimental, it is often applied during workshops and laboratories during which participants push beyond the disciplinary boundaries within which they were trained or educated.

Of the ethnographic projects related to interactions between urban space and its inhabitants, I mention the research of Terence Wright entitled 'The Interactive Village'. The project was conducted for two years in Dolní Roveň, a small village in the Czech Republic[32]. The final result is represented in a multimedia product that allows for navigation between three levels of information: observational, didactic and journalistic. The observational level offers only a vision of documentary materials (interviews, videos from festive events, archival photographs and

31. Laura U. Marks, *Haptic Cinema*, in Howes 2005, p. 400.

32. Wright 2008, p. 141-154. See also http://archive.eurescom.eu/message/messageNov2007/Interactive_Village.asp

images); the didactic explains and contextualises from a particular point of view that which can be seen at the observational level; the journalistic level consents visitors to compose their own narrative based on a theme using material present on the website. 'The Interactive Village' is also an open structure to which members of the community can add their own self-produced material, such as video diaries, photographs, etc.

During the seminar 'CITY SETS – Visual Urban Identities' (Helsinki, 15–16 November 2010)[33], participants (students of architecture and digital media) produced a number of videos that combine fixed and moving images projected beside one another. They focused on the power of advertising images to modify the identity of a city, apparently fixed by its built elements, and to dialogue with its inhabitants. As the website dedicated to the project reads, "Advertising and signage in a city can be seen as sets, which also influence the appearance of a place. The signage is set to inform people, to direct traffic or to identify buildings and companies. Outdoor advertisements and posters are topical information but their purpose may also be to persuade, entertain and tell stories. These city sets together with the architecture, history and people create the identity and narrative of a city".

Another example is offered by 'Elderscapes'[34], a web documentary on the social lives of the elderly in the cities of Delhi and Kathmandu, realised by the anthropologists Annika Mayer, Riberta Mandoki and Jakob Gross as part of a vaster project at Heidelberg University. Navigation of the website begins with a map of the places where the elderly share moments of social encounter; by clicking on the available links, users can access interviews and videos showing the elderly involved in such social activities as pilgrimages or yoga sessions, or in the midst of private activities such as gardening. This type of research connects spaces to experiences lived by the subjects of the research. It may provide important suggestions for urban design that considers the emotional dimension of specific inhabitants.

A final example I consider worthy of mention here, and in which I was directly involved, is the 'Sen-Social Explorations of Public Spaces' workshop coordinated by Ina Macaione (architect), Han Lin Fei (urban-

33. See http://citysets.media.taik.fi/

34. See http://kjc-sv013.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/elderscapes/klynt/index.html

ist) and myself (anthropologist)[35]. The concept behind the workshop focused on the sensory and social exploration of public space. Following my introduction based on an anthropological approach and describing the interconnection between the social and sensory dimension of place, students from the University of Basilicata (future architects and anthropologists) and from Beijing Jiaotong University (future architects and urban planners) observed and represented the socio-sensory dimension of four public spaces in the city of Matera, interviewing inhabitants, taking pictures and videos and drawings maps in their sketchbooks. During the conversations, informers were stimulated to describe the transformations of space, the principal elements of which it is composed (a market, benches, children's games), the type of social relations for which a space is used, the state of these places and possible improvements, in addition to focusing attention on their sensory perception.

The workshop concluded with the production of four videos in which students experimented with the possibilities of combining different languages (photography, video, text, maps) to describe the spirit of places and the perception of residents/users. Each video was clearly marked by the type of university education received by those who created it – students of architecture produced more rational and analytical works, yet in the presence of interventions by 'anthropologists' these videos assumed an evocative character. In any case, the style of the video was determined also by the character of the site: spaces of passage, more open and welcoming of relations (Municipal Park, Serra Venerdì) or more 'hard-edged' spaces resistant to appropriation by the city's inhabitants (Piazza Mulino, Piazza degli Olmi).

The stories told revealed unexpected connections, which may offer suggestions for urban renewal projects. For example, in the video about the district of Serra Venerdì, an interview with a butcher and that with two elderly women overlapped, at a certain point, in relation to the theme of dancing: the butcher spoke about a dance school in the neighbourhood popular also with the elderly, while the two friends spoke about their long-standing passion for dancing. The women's story was set to images of a semi-abandoned public square; at the end the voices of

35. The workshop was among the activities of the Fare Strada laboratory at the University of Basilicata coordinated by Ina Macaione and Armando Sichenze.

the women slowly faded out as the sound of a 'mazurka' was gradually faded in, simultaneously evoking memory and longing, and suggesting the possibility of re-evaluating the square as a space for hosting evening dances for the elderly.

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