

Architectural ethnography has attracted increasing attention thanks to studies by Albena Yaneva and practices and research carried out by Momoyo Kaijima with her Atelier Bow Wow. Starting from these well-known examples, this essay reviews the literature on ethnography as used by architects, planners and researchers interested in forms, materiality, and uses of space in everyday life. This review is then used to define, through convergences and distances, a specific positioning we have been assuming while conducting research and teaching design-based courses. This path has led to further reflections on knowledge processes in architectural ethnography and to a tentative (and open) checklist to express our positioning in teaching. At the same time, the mainstream view on the innovative aspects of architectural ethnography is challenged by a reflection on the extent to which *tradition* (in a positive sense) is apparent in this recent stream of research, given that good architects (and planners) have always been, in a certain sense, *ethnographic*.

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Paola Briata
Gennaro Postiglione

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Design Driven Research in teaching refers to the thick research values embedded in academic design experiences that are at the core of all studio-based courses and diplomas but very often completely neglected as products of scientific and/or research value. Studio-based courses and diplomas are also the places where most of the design-based professors' time and energy are allocated.

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Teaching Interiors



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It was Henry Corbin's gift to enable us to experience in this room thoughts that come from another language and culture, as if they were of our own hearts. He spoke from within his speech; he was his words. This rhetorical imaginative power is himma of which Corbin writes in his study of Ibn 'Arabi. This power of the heart is what is specifically designated by the word himma, a word whose content is perhaps best suggested by the Greek word enthymesis, which signifies the act of meditating, conceiving. Imagining, projecting, ardently desiring – in other words, of having (something) present in the thymos, which is vital force, soul, heart, intention, thought, desire.

James Hillman, *The Captive Heart*

People Places Practices. The Architect's Filter in Using Ethnography
Paola Briata, Gennaro Postiglione

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People Places Practices

The Architect's Filter in Using Ethnography

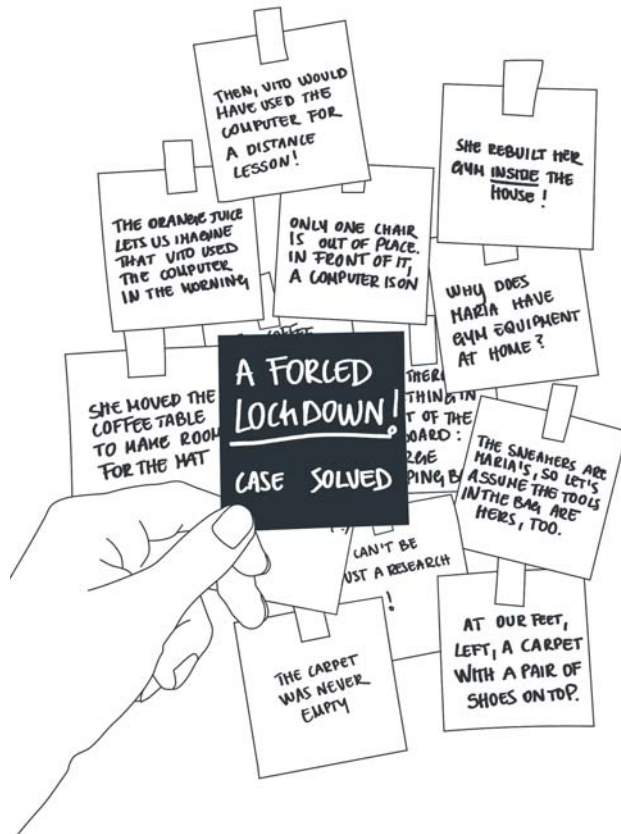
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Teaching Interiors

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QHL2020, Field Work Report, Virginia Capone.

Introduction

Architectural ethnography has increasingly been a focus of attention thanks to recent studies by Albena Yaneva¹ and practices and research carried out by Momoyo Kaijima² with her Atelier Bow Wow. Considering these well-known examples, we have started to interrogate these experiences by going back to the roots of the term ethnography. Ethnography comes from Greek and this is the meaning given in the Treccani online encyclopaedia: «written representation of forms of social and cultural lives of human groups»³. At the same time, ethnography refers both to a research *methodology* with some specific features and to the *textual product* of that knowledge path (Madden, 2017). Given this background, the main question that underpins this essay is: what happens when the observer in an ethnographical path is an architect or a person who has a specific spatial awareness – meaning attention to the space, its form, and design, its materiality as well as the way it is used?

In the last seven years, we have been reflecting on this question thanks also to joint work in a series of design-based studios at the School of Architecture, Urban Planning, and Construction Engineering at Politecnico di Milano⁴.

In using ethnography, as well as in proposing ethnographical approaches to students, personal stories play a core role in the way cognitive paths are framed and undertaken. This means that *our personal stories and dialogues* have played a core role in framing this essay. At this stage, we want to introduce ourselves as well as emphasise our view that the value of this work is shaped

by our different backgrounds: Paola is an expert in planning and urban policy who has been practicing and teaching ethnographical approaches for many years; Gennaro is an expert in interiors and domestic culture, who has coupled a theoretical reflection on dwelling with a significant orientation to design.

Our work is framed in a continuous tension between our similarities and distances. Our cooperation started from the shared conviction that a good architect or planner should own at least one pair of comfortable shoes for walking, observing the city, and *learning from* (not *about*) residents and users of a place. At the same time, in our experience, acquiring knowledge of the city and its architecture is also a bodily experience in the space. Knowledge comes from pleasant (and sometimes also unpleasant) experiences, as well as from a *deep love – philia* – (feelings matter!) for cities, places, and architecture.

Writings by ethnographers from a sociological or anthropological background, teach us that everyone brings their own background to the field⁵. If the background is in Architecture, Planning, or Urban Studies, this will also be reflected in *spatial awareness*. From our positioning, we are thus interested in the architect/designer's capacity to observe people's everyday life *in the space*. From now on, we will refer mainly to architects using ethnography, but it is our belief that the reflections that led to this essay are helpful also for planners, urban designers, and people dealing with urban studies in general.

Even if convergences do exist, also our distances should be underlined: in disciplinary terms, it is possible to say that urban ethnography could have a role even if limited to

an exploratory dimension; on the other hand, architecture intrinsically implies a transformative and design tension.

Our cooperation has been tested first of all in a series of teaching experiences where students were stimulated to understand the relevance for designers of in-depth observation of the intertwining between people, places, and practices in the use of spaces in everyday life. To this end, a series of exercises that could broadly be described as experiences of direct participant observation – the key methodology of research for an ethnographer – have been proposed. The potentialities of ethnographical methodologies of inquiry have been explored with reference to interiors (not necessarily domestic), and to urban public spaces, where *public* has a broader definition than that imposed by property regimes or by architects' and planners' envisaged uses and users. On the contrary, the public nature of a place has been tested and challenged through the intensity and variety of uses and users⁶.

During the seven years we have been working and teaching together, People, Places, and Practices have become three keywords through which we have stimulated students to observe the city, its inhabitants, and its users. At the same time, these keywords have been useful to clarify – first of all for ourselves – some common grounds of two apparently very distant disciplinary profiles.

People, as both (urban) ethnography and interiors, give a core role to human beings – on the one hand, by observing and trying to understand how people live and use places in their everyday life, on the other hand by designing places for people to live in.

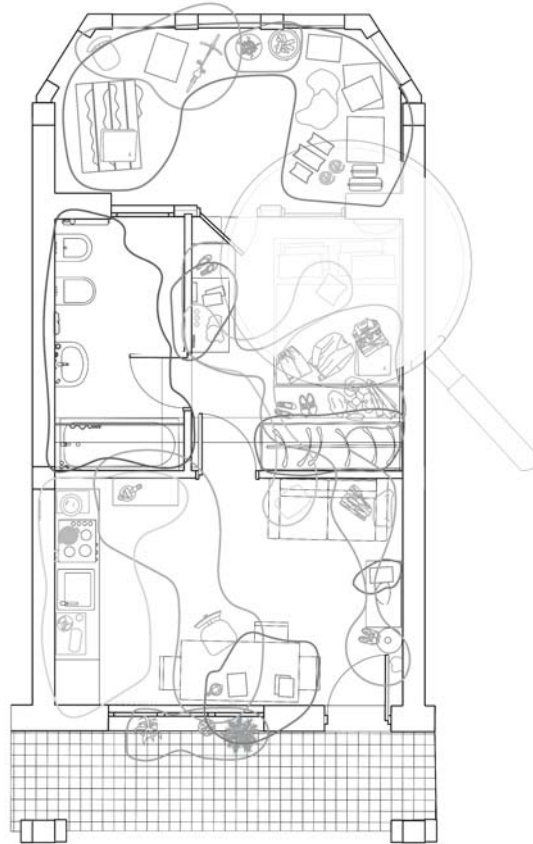


Places, because we share a specific focus on the spatial dimension, no matter if related to interiors, architecture, or the urban at smaller and bigger scales.

Practices, as an ethnographical approach for any discipline committed to developing comprehension or to transforming a place, should (from our point of view) be intrinsically interested in understanding how an articulated system composed of places/objects/people works in a specific location. We share a discomfort towards any form of design not sensitive to the everyday uses of the space. We give value to an exploration of *what is already there* in terms of places, in terms of how people use the space, and in terms of how people express and cope with their needs through spatial practices.

In these years, our teaching experiences, our readings, and some joint research paths⁷ have stimulated a reflection that starting from urban ethnography, has tried to develop an understanding of the specificities of ethnographical approaches for designers⁸, and of the so-called *architectural ethnography*⁹. This essay constitutes an attempt to take stock of the theoretical background that has fed our path, as well as to share thoughts and experiences as teachers and researchers in a school of Architecture and Planning.

ReStA2016, *Bonomelli*, Simone Bettoli,
Julia Eriksson, Monica Forte, Goksu
Kivilcim, Anna Loch, Sofia Peviani,
Uzi Ravia, Dafni Riga, Federica Varenna,
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 Marta Zilioli.

Starting Blocks

A starting point for us has been without any doubt *Ethnography for Designers* by Galen Cranz¹⁰. Since the first pages of her book, the author underlines that architecture is not only structure, form, or function. Cultural and social aspects are also relevant and should play a core role for a designer. Through her teaching experiences at the Harvard School of Design, Cranz outlines a path that, from her point of view, aims at training future designers to listen to the users. In her book, she takes stock of some previous writings to underline how ethnographic methodologies may support architectural practice¹¹. According to Pavlides and Cranz, the ultimate goal of teaching architecture should be related to improving the design, and learning from the users of the spaces is a way to improve their design. For them, getting trained to observe users and uses is a relevant skill, no matter if the final aim is realising a new building, or re-using an existing one. If ethnography is the description (*graph*) of people (*ethnos*), a part of the work could also be related to describing behaviours in the space and material expressions of culture—where *culture* has a broad meaning and includes of course also architecture.

Cranz's work focuses on some specificities of ethnography when practiced by designers, underlining the main aspects of developing *an ethnographical approach with a specific spatial awareness*. Making reference to studies on human territoriality, she investigates the role of space in power relationships, in facilitating encounters, and in separating uses and people. In her work, a quite clear distinction is established between *direct participant observation* (the key methodology of research for an ethnographer) and *participation* in architecture. If participation implies in a more or less

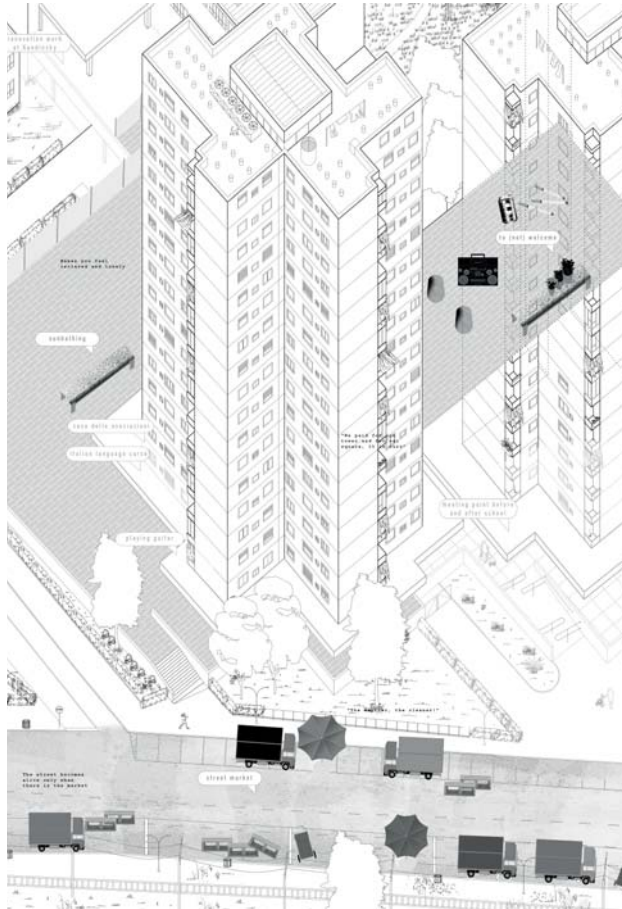
rhetorical way a devolution in choices on possible futures for a place from the architect to (a usually a limited number of) residents and users, direct participant observation implies a form of learning based on a whole-of-a-body experience where all the designer's senses are in use to understand a situation in the space. Observation is visual but happens also through touch – Pallasma's *Eyes of the Skin*¹² – smells, and sounds. Many aspects that could be explored through different sensorial direct experiences can contribute to rendering a place/architecture more or less comfortable, welcoming, and used. A designer may observe practices in the space and learn from the users. But, we argue with Cranz, this form of learning is not collected to devolve choices to the users. Observing users and uses of the space should not substitute design choices that come from expert knowledge that users do not possess. From our point of view, direct participant observation (by architects) and participation seem to stay even on two opposite sides: in the first case, the observer is also a *participant* in the places and their practices, and participating allows to develop a better understanding of the relation people-places-practices; in the second case the end-users are called to participate to the architect's work.

The less convincing aspect of Cranz's work is that it outlines a sort of toolkit on how to realise an ethnographic path –significantly coded in each step–in a compressed period of time (shortness of time is given e.g. by the academic semester or by competitions for professionals). Actually, ethnography is not so easy to be coded in a linear way. It is also being open to serendipity and surprise, discovering relevant issues through paths that lead to unexpected situations and practices¹³. A tension to outline a sort of toolkit¹⁴ could also be found in

Nova¹⁵, who defines architectural ethnography as a way of doing field research investigating forms, technologies, and building materials. At the same time, it deals with the sociocultural context of architecture. Field research includes surveys of the buildings, mapping places, direct participant observation, and interviews with different actors involved in building and dwelling as a part of material culture.

If Cranz integrates a more traditional vision of ethnography focused on people and social relationships with specific attention to forms and quality of the space, Nova's work calls for a focus also on *the materiality of the built environment seen as an expression of a situated culture*. These contributions constitute starting blocks for us but need further work to understand how ethnographic knowledge for design and for testing design could be produced and transmitted to the students.

Investigating a knowledge process is never simple, even more, if, as Nova underlines in his observation of the work of professionals using ethnographical approaches, not all the steps to understand the links between observation, representation, narration, and design are explicated. The actual unfolding of the learning process remains mysterious, and this should not be surprising given the fact that hidden forms of *tacit knowledge*¹⁶ are typical of artistic practices. However, through a review of the literature that relates ethnography, architecture, and design, it is possible at least to outline a map of what has been written and investigated and also to exclude some paths that seem far from what is proposed here. We deal with distances and commonalities with existing experiences and literature in the next two sections of this essay.



GRZO2018, *People Places Practices*, collective work.

Distances

A first stream of research, even if referred to as ethnography for design and architecture, focuses on the *methodological aspects of ethnographic research*. This is the case, to give an example, of the *Ethnography Field Guide* developed by Helsinki Design Lab¹⁷. These studies and practices seem focused on providing an overview of the work of an ethnographer and his/her methodological steps for inquiring about a place/situation. This positioning has not been assumed in our view, and in some way, it is a work that we prefer to leave to experts of ethnography *tout court*. At the same time, we are not interested in investigating how ethnographers and designers could actually work together and build up teams in architectural practice¹⁸. For us, the point is related to investigating the productive/performative tension that results from combining knowledge tools that come from architecture with methodological tools that come from ethnography to observe, understand, and describe places that will be designed.

Other studies have developed ethnographic research on the professional practice of architects. This is the case of a large collection of essays on ethnographic observations of *everyday work in architectural offices* edited by Albena Yaneva¹⁹. This is an interesting strand of studies that is once again far from our perspective, even if some aspects touch pivotal points also for us. For example, Van der Linden, Dong and Heylighen²⁰ have focused on the representation of users of spaces in architectural practice by observing how architects work in three renowned architectural firms in Belgium. Through this observation, they argue that *architects rarely have access to the users' point of view*.

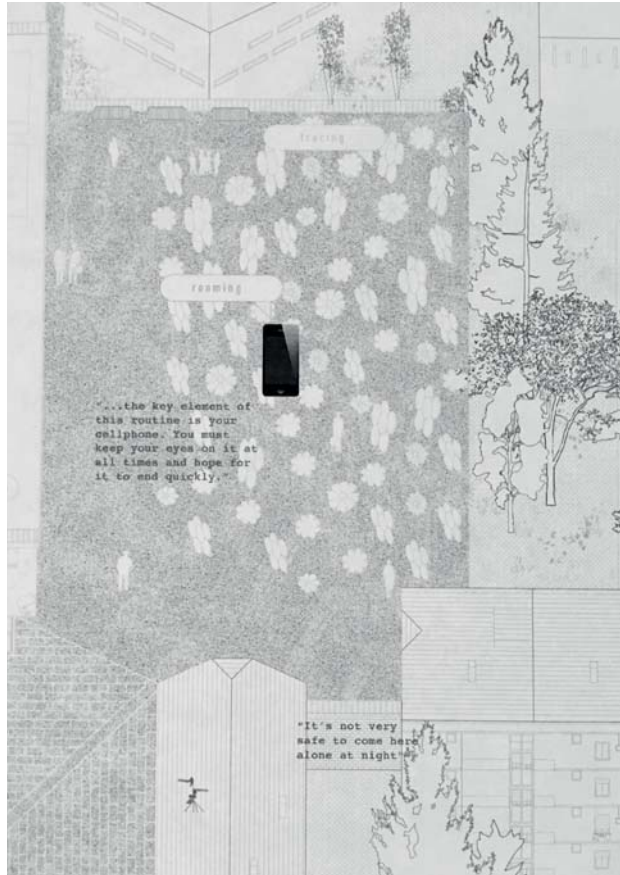
They often work – especially in public procurement – re-imagining the inhabitants to the point of *inventing* fictional users. The research explores the range of attitudes architects take to build profiles of the people they are designing for. The study, on the one hand, criticises the representations and narratives of the architects, in which the inhabitants are substantially absent; on the other, it emphasizes the imaginative process that is unfolded to build a fictional figure within a project. The authors show that even if people are rarely consulted, –and designers are generally aware that they do not control their perspective –in constructing these figures, personal experiences and imaginaries are mobilised to have reference models. Finally, they conclude by observing how the absence of the voice of the inhabitants and users hardly becomes the subject of discussion in doing an architectural project.

Our work takes stock of these ethnographical observations of architectural practice and underlines the relevance of observing the interweaving between people, places, and practices to unfold the users' needs in a less fictional way. This is our positioning in investigating ethnography for design, but also to create architecture as we like to think about it. Architecture should be rooted in the everyday life of people²¹.

Several researchers (for example Kingery-Page, et al.²²) are focused on the possibility of using ethnographic methods to activate participatory processes in architecture. On this point, as already mentioned, we agree with Cranz²³ in affirming the relevance of an ethnographic approach to the project, which is different from

participation, a quite common misunderstanding when referring to ethnography in architecture and planning.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, literature has also underlined an *ethnographical turn* in product design²⁴. Our work takes distance from a series of aspects of these experiences: e. g. *design ethnography* focused on the product and not on the knowledge process, thus conceived as a use of ethnography to design successful products; *ethnography through artifacts*, a proactive form of ethnography in which objects are introduced in some places to provoke reactions from the users; *mobile ethnography* in which, through digital tools, the researcher may not be physically present in a context, and the number of informants may be multiplied in an exponential way. In our work, we have investigated the interaction between the ethnographer-designer, people, and places. *Thickness* of descriptions²⁵ comes from an open direct participant process, from a bodily exposition of the observer in the space²⁶, from openness to surprise which cannot be finalised to a product, from a capacity to select the information that is not related to the quantity of gathered data.



GRZ02018, *People Places Practices*, collective work.

Horizons

Stender et al.²⁷ talk about *Architectural Anthropology* in questioning what architects can learn from anthropologists and vice versa²⁸. These authors underline how, in the last thirty years, social sciences, including anthropology, have renewed their interest in the organisation of space, in the places and forms of human habitation, in the relationship between the physical context and social life, in materiality and therefore in the interaction between the human and the non-human. They argue that contemporary anthropologists interested in architecture are more likely to contribute to theoretical discourses, while architects who also rely on anthropology seem to be interested above all in ethnographic methods. In this context, the authors point out some peculiarities of anthropologists and architects-ethnographers that help to outline their profiles. Among these, an important issue concerns the communicative aspect because architects, more than anthropologists, communicate graphically. Images are increasingly used as *tools of knowledge* and not only as a means for final representation.

In *Learning from Architectural Ethnography*, Kaijima²⁹ assumes that life exceeds architecture, yet at the same time, it is the basis and essence of architecture. Also for this reason, understanding life in its different forms, as ethnography does, is a precondition for *engaging with life*. The research questions that emerge in this volume are interesting also to us: what is the meaning of this engagement with life in architecture? How can the myriad of situations that nourish the design of a building and, at the same time, are the result of this design, be mapped?

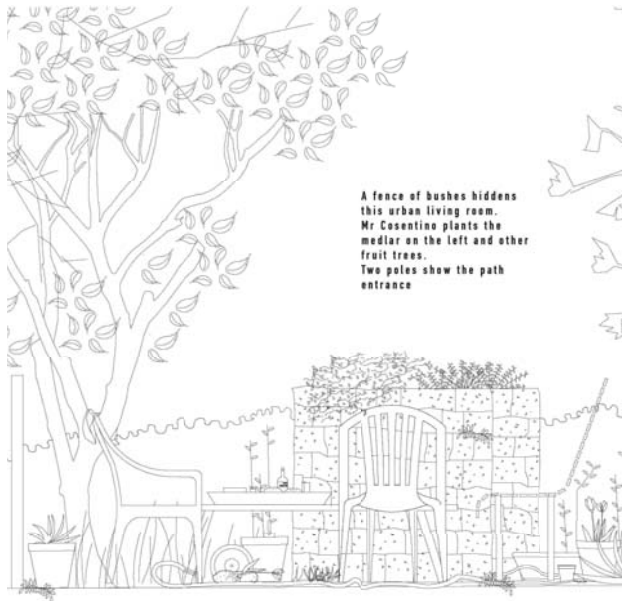
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GRZ02018, *Mapping Objects*, collective work.

How architectural drawings are produced to be not a simple *annotation system*, but also a tool to document, discuss and evaluate architecture? How drawings can work to explore people's uses, needs, and aspirations? The aim of the volume is to highlight the relationship between architecture and ethnography, with particular attention to the role of representation and the use of drawing. One of the conclusions is that drawings show, on the one hand, the relationship between architecture and society (and its transformations), and on the other hand, the role that architecture (and more generally space) plays in modifying and improving everyday life.

These issues are also unpacked in *ARCH+ Architecturethnografie* edited by Andreas Kalpakci, Momoyo Kaijima, and Laurent Stalder³⁰. Through a series of examples, this volume seeks to understand methods and practices of drawing when it is used as a tool to observe the world. And more, in an interview, edited once again by Kaijima, the anthropologist Tim Ingold³¹ talks about how drawing is a fundamental method to build a link between observation and transcription. In his writings, Ingold often insists on the relationship between drawing, observation, and architecture, underlining that from his point of view, architecture is not just a matter of form or construction, but a way of questioning the world that is characterised by a fascination for materials and structures, surfaces and atmospheres, the multi-sensorial experience that could be offered by a place when is transformed by the architect to host life for human beings and for life forms in general.



GRZ02018, *Field Work*, Sara El Aawar, Lilia Ivanova, Boris Penkov, Alice Rinetti, Ada Rosito.

Teaching Between Interiors and the Urban

The exercises that have been proposed to our students in the last seven years have helped to feed issues already explored by other scholars, to question ourselves on the cognitive processes implemented in practicing ethnography for architecture, but also to try to understand which steps make it possible to teach this positioning, beyond the logic of giving students a sort of toolkit.

In particular, we make reference to four teaching experiences in design studios that have been meaningful for us: *ReCoDe-Redesigning Contemporary Dwelling*³² (2017-2020), focused on the observation of the domestic dimension; *Gratosoglio Ground Zero*, focused on the observation of the ground floors of a stigmatised social housing estate in the outskirts of Milan (2019); *Quarantined Houselives* that has been carried out online during the early months of the 2020 lockdown, a situation in which the domestic dimension was observed in a self-ethnographical (Carsten, 2018) and introverted condition; *UAH!-Unconventional Affordable Housing* (2022-2023) focused on the transformation of a former office building, into dwellings.

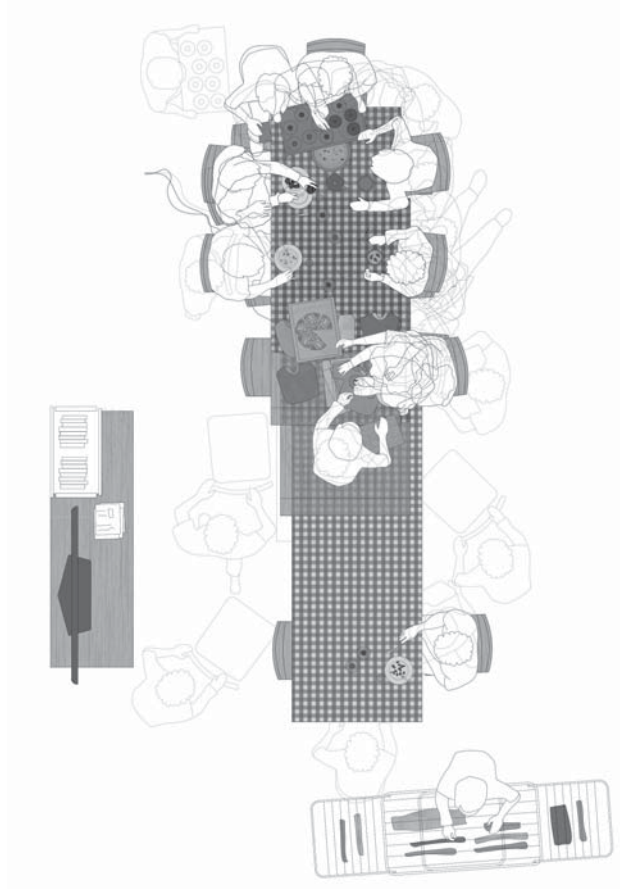
In all the design studios, fieldwork to observe people, places, and practices played a core role (also in terms of time reserved for direct participant observation in the schedule). Students were provided with a system of *instructions* to track and represent ethnographical observation where tools were defined (drawing, writing, photographing), while contents were completely open to discoveries in the field. This way of working has highlighted the productive character of a system of investi-

gation based on the subjective value of observation, but also the added value of a shared and normalised system of restitution and narration.

With *ReCoDe*, students have been asked to identify *unconventional* housing situations within their family or friend network. With *unconventional*, we referenced to situations not referable to the traditional family unit composed of a heterosexual couple and one or two natural children living together in a single home. All the situations were analysed through photographic essays and by making interviews with dwellers. This information converged into an *Atlas of Non-conventional Families* composed of over 300 cases that illustrate the different types of unconventional ways of living and their associated social profiles. For each case, a daily diary of domestic life was drawn up, focusing on the organisation and shared use of the space. This information was diagrammed with particular attention to the form of the space, the arrangement of the furnishings, and the general type of dwelling, as well as the distinction between private and collective spaces, and their degree of crowding. Particular attention was given to the representation of the architectural structure but also to furniture or objects capable of illustrating the way in which people occupy and live their spaces. Drawings and diagrams gave evidence on the places (spaces) and moments (time) of greatest conflict within the houses, showing all the limits of the modernist domestic project based on an idea of the family that found its reflection in the form and structure of dwellings. Dimensional and distributive inadequacies showed all the limits of a

univocal and no longer dominant culture of living. The findings of this ethnographic post-production work allowed the sketching of a manifesto for a new housing design strategy³³.

In *Gratosoglio Ground Zero*³⁴ students have been guided in understanding the role played by space in the organisation of social life. Far from any form of spatial determinism, the work has highlighted how spaces can bridge or separate people, reproduce a certain social order, or question it, as well as how objects can play a significant antagonistic role. All students interacted with residents and users, took note of what emerged from the exploration in the field, and transcribed the exploration through written texts, drawings, and photographs that were then organised to evoke encounters, atmospheres, perceptions, emotions, and multisensory experiences. All these materials were post-produced in A5 format and used to develop thick and spatialised descriptions of people, places, and practices of everyday life in Gratosoglio. This *micro-level of representation* of the observed practices focused on the physical description of the contexts and objects in which the most significant practices were recorded. Particular attention was given to the materiality of spaces. Coupled with this micro-level, students also worked on a *macro-level* of representation by collectively creating an object of co-design: a big isometry—12 meters long and 3 meters high—of the entire area of Gratosoglio. The isometry has then been used to report where the most significant practices occurred. This was a big map on which, as *post-its*, objects, backgrounds, and flooring, fragments of ethnographic descriptions, interviews,



QHL2020, *The File Around Objects*,
Marta Marinoni.

and forms of *listening* activated in the places during the fieldwork sessions could be reported. The map made it possible to put on the same level information on places (in their physical and experiential description), people (using or inhabiting those spaces), and practices (making those places alive and nourishing them with meaning). The twelve tables of Gratosoglio represent the spaces of the neighbourhood, and intersect the personal stories of people living there, as well as the stories of the students that have been observing those places for a semester. A dialogue between narratives was triggered and allowed to go beyond a prevailing stigmatizing gaze. Instead, a series of creative and design forces were captured.

*Quarantined Houselives*³⁵ represented a real challenge for a course that was conceived to draw information through fieldwork: the *field*, out from classrooms, had suddenly become a banned place to go, and this had happened a few days before starting. The decision was to confirm the combination of tracking tools already used in *Gratosoglio Ground Zero* – written texts, photographic narratives, and drawings – and to use them to represent the everyday uses inside the houses, the rooms, the common places, the terraces, and gardens. Each student's home became *the field*. In some way, this work brought back to some aspects of *ReCoDe* such as cohabitation, but also rendered more evident the competition on objects, the new *rhythm* inside the rooms, including conflict for their multiple uses. Transcriptions on the uses of the space in more traditional families were useful to understand how living rooms had been transformed into study rooms or offices during the day, movie theatres in the evening, and bedrooms for a



QHL2020, *Mapping Uses*, Virginia Capone.

family member at night. At the same time, within apartments shared with other students, an urgent requirement for privacy emerged, and each room could become a sort of *personal shell* to carry out every daily activity from dawn to dusk, paradoxically limiting to a minimum the contact in the common areas with other cohabitants.

A particularly useful exercise was the mapping of *life around objects*, which brought out a sort of catalogue of affordances³⁶ of tables, carpets, and beds, transformed into scenarios for the most diverse activities, sometimes far from those for which they were originally designed. Objects and space affordances proved to be an extremely valuable resource in improving the livability of rooms in quarantined houses. This observation produced a design knowledge beyond what has been observed in the personal dimension of our students' homes in a moment of emergency. This experience was, without any doubt, research into an introverted field, but allowed also a reflection on broader societal issues beyond the specificities of interiors, questioning all the limitations of Modern Movement codes and norms for housing.

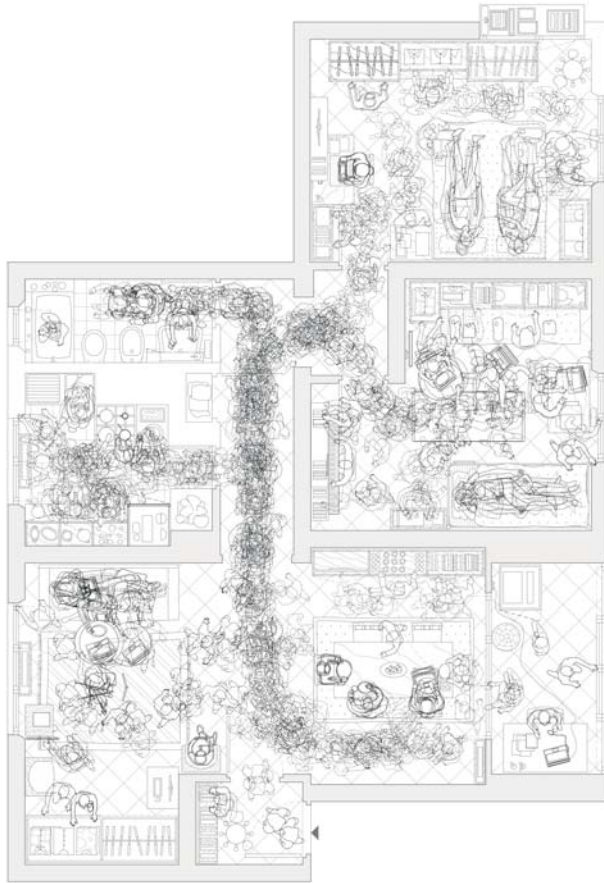
In *UAH! - Unconventional Affordable Housing*, students have been encouraged to work starting from some findings on the new ways of thinking at interiors and dwelling defined through *ReCoDe*. These findings were used to develop a project of transformation of the Palazzo Aiuto Materno located in the historical center of Bologna. The building is the target of a real design competition related to the European call *Reinventing Cities*. The request from the bid is to outline its transformation from an office building and residences into shared hous-



QHL2020, *Objects vs Space: The Living Room*, Marwan Afifi Afifi.

ing and services open to the city. The call requires that «The ground floor must be “active” and include sustainable community services and uses [...]. The more private domestic spaces can be integrated with more open common spaces for activities that connect the building to the city»³⁷.

In this case, the ethnographic path has been developed both to understand the specificities of everyday life in the area where the building is located and to activate critical thinking on the activities that can actually contribute to making the ground floor and domestic spaces *alive* and *integrated* with urban dynamics. The *Pilot Book*³⁸ Bologna – as the final product of the urban analysis has been named – has been the common ground on which students’ observations (textual, photographic, and visual) have found their manifestation and mutual interactions. An experience that has helped to understand how academical could be the distinction between *interior* and *urban* when attention is given mainly to the quality of everyday life.



QHL2020, *The Life of the House*,
Marwan Afifi Afifi.

On Knowledge Process in Architectural Ethnography

The research paths, as well as teaching practices, have led to a reflection on knowledge processes that, from our points of view, characterise Architectural Ethnography. To simplify our thoughts, this knowledge process has been divided into four interconnected and sometimes overlapping steps:

- (a) entering the field and defining it;
- (b) staying in the field and *absorbing* knowledge;
- (c) post-producing what has been observed and tracked in the field;
- (d) orienting the post-production also based on the final output.

Regarding the *entrance into the field*, this is, of course, a process as the field is not *out there* ready to be discovered. The definition of a field is a way to interrogate places and it could be defined and re-defined through discoveries and encounters. Through our experiences, we have understood that the architect enters the field carrying the filter that is given by his/her tacit knowledge. If it is possible, as suggested by Cranz³⁹, and as we usually ask ourselves and students, observing practices and uses of the space without imagining that space could work better if designed in a different way, some specificities related to the architects' tacit knowledge seem very difficult to be *suspended*. In particular *tacit knowledge* here is referred to the awareness of the role that could be played by the space in framing social relationships (beyond any deterministic temptation), the attention to materiality and construction, and the focus on people in the space. At the same time, the architects use specific tools—e.g. drawing—

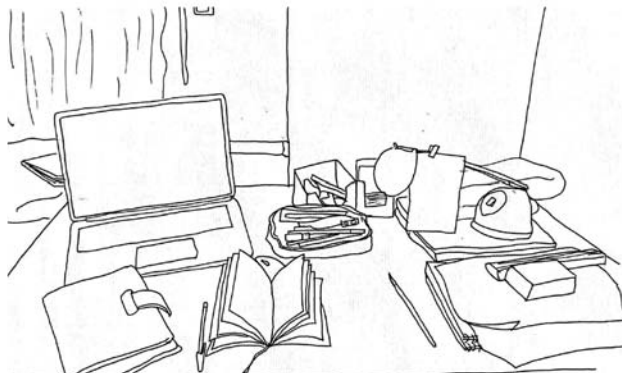
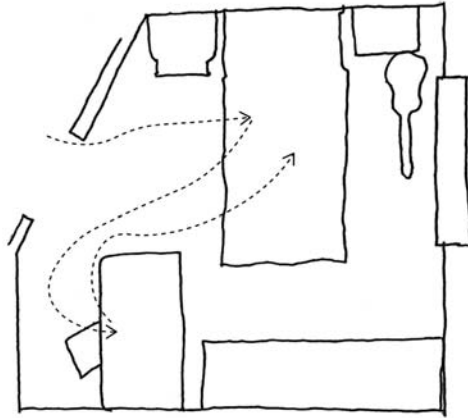
to visualise, interrogate and understand how places work and to frame a personal knowledge of them⁴⁰. We will call this mix of both tacit and explicit knowledge and tools *the architect's filter*.

The *fieldwork* phase exposes the architect to a multitude of information – a bodily experience in the space where the architect's filter is always on. What happens during fieldwork and how the experience is tracked and selected, as already underlined by Nova⁴¹, remains a mystery. This phase is mostly chaotic, disorganised, and hopefully open to serendipity and to take advantage of *the unexpected*. In fact, it plays a core role in producing thick and counterintuitive descriptions of places. It is in these precise moments that *the architects' filter* is in action, when all his/her (tacit and explicit) knowledge is engaged and immersed with people, places, and practices. Here bodily experience is not an option but the fundamental requirement to produce your own *knowing*⁴². If knowledge consists of elements and solutions, *knowing consists of processes*. Therefore architecture, and its manifestations, are not only understood as a repertoire of stories/people/buildings but also as living evidence of environments that, in their real physicality, can be personally experienced, explored, and understood. This is exactly where the personal tacit knowing is formed and where it needs to be nourished: on the evidence of the artifacts' complex manifestations and their multi-sensorial experiences, and the memories they produce.

In this view, *post-production* of what has been observed and tracked in the field is, first of all, a selection/organisation of information, as well as a performative act.

In this phase, the generative value of visualisations becomes very clear. Usually, the work with/on drawings, photos, and written texts is exhausted until they are able to tell/produce a story and to make visible issues that before entering the field were not visible. It is a real blue-sky research work that starts from *what is out there*, questioning the evidence and looking beyond stereotypes. A situated knowledge producing thick descriptions and imaginaries takes shape and is performed. Visualisation can be understood as both a special form of thick description with a synthetic and generative value and a personal *knowing*.

Regarding *outputs*, of course, for an architect, the type of performative act is not independent of the objective that stimulated the need to understand a place better. At the same time, the findings in the post-production phases suggest forms and format of communications as well as the final addresses of the work. Inputs-outputs relationships – meeting a client, making a project or an exhibition, writing a book, developing forms of knowledge-sharing with different stakeholders – have a clear impact on the choices for visualising the work.



QHL2020, *Field Work Report*, Cesare Procaccini.

An Open Checklist for Teaching

As said, from our point of view, using ethnography and teaching how to use ethnography should stimulate a reflection among scholars and teachers on how to go beyond the logic of producing a sort of toolkit that leaves few spaces to be surprised by people, places, and practices. We take distance from toolkits as a *categorical* form of knowledge, only apparently closer to operativity⁴³. The issue is not developing a *fast track* to perform an ethnographic path aimed at backing design but observing with an ethnographic gaze a more or less constrained context.

From our experiences, we argue that the use of an ethnographic approach for/in the project consists in understanding how an articulated system composed of space-objects-people works, far from any kind of deterministic functionalism. Ethnography is for us a form of knowledge and not technical knowledge: it is useful because it helps to learn and is, therefore, more a form of knowledge (*gnosis*) than a *téchne*.

Among teachers from different disciplines, we have learned that ethnography is also an *art of listening* to each other in a multidisciplinary context: being ethnographical in a school of architecture means being multidisciplinary in a way in which everyone (the architect, the sociologist, the ethnographer, the planner, the policy designer) gives value to his/her own skills, cooperating and learning from others, but not becoming a chameleon of others and others' skills. But not having a toolkit does not mean not having a methodology. The path outlined on the starting blocks was helpful in understanding how important it is to frame specific ethnographic paths focused

on spatial practices and the material culture of places. Here we try to conclude in an open way by framing a modest proposal to reflect on some points that have played a core role in our teaching experiences:

Give time to direct participant observation: time to stay in the field in our teaching experiences has the same value (also in the schedule) as time spent for lectures, fieldwork, or tutorials in class.

Observing practices and uses of the space without imagining that space could work better if designed in a different way. This is really the first *form of training* that we practice and offer, namely trying to grasp the way people, places, and practices of everyday life intertwine⁴⁴, by temporarily *suspending* the design tension that comes from our specific background.

Freedom in observation is a keyword. But suggesting particular attention to the intertwining between people, places, and practices of everyday life. Moreover, assigning specific formats for field work reports can help to structure the exploration: simple constraints such as the paper format, the use of photo-sequences and not of single pictures, and the request for hand drawings and micro-narrations have all been experienced as successful guidance.

Being open to serendipity/changing a path if it becomes a deadlock. Tracing and giving an account of changes in the fieldwork due to unexpected *encounters* or deadlocks is an important part of the ethnographical learning process.

Visualisation is a way of producing knowledge and not a mere representation of *reality*. Drawing, sketching,

writing, photographing: staying in the field is a creative practice where the *architect's filter* (tools and tacit/explicit knowledge) is always on and used to gather (consciously and not) the information that will be selected and organised in the post-production and performative part of the knowledge path.

Being able to teach that, whatever comes out from participant observation, ethnographic knowledge for architects is not a way to perform a users' centred design approach, transforming users' demands into direct design answers (this is what precisely happens in participative processes or ergonomic design, for instance). From our point of view, this is more likely a way to understand how a place works and reflect on how these understandings may support design choices.



TRASH2016, Aldo Dice, Eugenio Nuzzo.

Beyond/before architectural ethnography?

As highlighted, interest in architectural ethnography has been growing, on the one hand, thanks to the (ethnographic) studies of Albena Yaneva, on the other hand, to the works and research of Momoyo Kaijima, and her Atelier Bow-Wow. This seems a moment of particular glory for architectural ethnography. Architectural Ethnography stresses the relevance of the direct and bodily experience of architectural places for a thorough understanding of both their spatial quality and their uses. This is an understanding based upon the *individual knowing* resulting from the physical experience of places intertwined with their visual and textual knowledge.

Body, direct and participant observation are keywords for any ethnographer, as they were and should still be for any architect. We would like, therefore, to underline that something that was fundamental for architecture education (the bodily experience and the *individual knowing* of meaningful architectural places) has been completely lost to be, unexpectedly, re-discovered by other disciplines, namely Architectural Ethnography. This is why we like to stress that our exercises, even though they use an ethnographic approach, are inspired by a much more specific disciplinary tradition that goes further back in time, looking at some roots of architecture. Maybe we could, in fact, talk about *Architectural Ethnography* by referring to the glorious *Grand Tour*⁴⁵, a tradition set up by the end of the 18th Century as the final step to complete the education of any aristocrat, artist or intellectual. Or to the more modern *journeys* undertaken by most architects during the first half of the 20th Century.

These were considered foundational moments – of participant observations – in architects’ lives, a personal source of knowledge and *knowing*. Or, maybe, we could call *Architectural Ethnography* the multidisciplinary approach in *reading places* promoted by TEAM X⁴⁶ or IL&AUD⁴⁷. These are two significant experiences of *The Other Modernity*⁴⁸ aimed at establishing a different tradition of *doing architecture* that have also influenced most post-war radical architectural pedagogies⁴⁹.

Until a few years ago, as a simplified version of these traditions, there was a common practice of making study trips. A *prolonged* fieldwork was intended as the first real and essential moment of every studio-based course to learn about relevant architectural environments, make a bodily experience of meaningful spaces, and observe their inhabitants and users. This exercise of observation was intended as a foundational step in building up a personal *knowing* of architecture. Using all the specific skills and disciplinary knowledge that are part of the educational path⁵⁰, such as history and theory of architecture, construction techniques and materials, and attention to uses and forms, just to name a few. At the same time, this was also about learning the relationship between people, objects, places, and practices. And we could even consider the *site survey*, one or more prolonged visits to the working site arranged before and during any academic or professional project, as part of this long-lasting tradition.

In this inverted perspective, it is easy to recognise how much the architect – in history – has always had an archaeological and ethnographic positioning due to the specific needs related to the understanding of architec-

ture and the framing of a project. The current aridity of real spatial experiences – those involving the body and the real environment – together with the massification of building’s production, has reduced the architects’ capacities of spatial thinking, leaving the floor to other disciplines to take the field.

Nowadays, architecture seems to be deprived of its own identity, hostage, on the one hand, to architectural ethnography and, on the other, to the hegemony of performance. Awareness that Architecture is historically connected to uses and users but never utilitarian, to construction but never technical, and to materials but never materialistic has been lost. Because, Architecture always transcends the reasons that determine it⁵¹. This is why we can still learn from the past and from buildings that have lost their original functionality, and even from ruins.

Notes

1. Albena Yaneva, ed. *Nuove voci nell'etnografia dell'architettura*, «Ardeth», n° 2, Spring, 2018.
2. Momoyo Kaijima et al., eds., *Architectural Ethnography*, TOTO Publishing, Tokyo 2018.
3. *Etnografia*, in «Treccani», 26/06/2023, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/etnografia>.
4. Paola Briata, "Being Together as a Body Exercise. Ethnographic Perspectives", in *Conscious Dwelling*, ed. by A. Anzani Springer, Cham 2022, pp. 205-218; Paola Briata, Gennaro Postiglione, "Gratosoglio Ground Zero: persone, luoghi, pratiche", in *Costruire l'abitare contemporaneo. Nuovi temi e metodi del progetto* eds. by in G. Cafiero, N. Flora, P. Giardiello, il Poligrafo, Padova 2021, pp. 337-341; Id., "Reinvenzioni nel quotidiano. Didattica e ricerca sui conflitti tra forma e uso nello spazio domestico", in *Post Pandemic Cities. Le sfide dell'urbanistica dopo l'emergenza*, in «Urbanistica Dossier», n° 25, 2022, pp. 96-102.
5. Giovanni Semi, *L'osservazione partecipante. Una guida pratica*, il Mulino, Bologna 2010; Richard Ocejo, *Ethnography and the City: Readings on Doing Urban fieldwork*. Routledge, New York 2013.
6. Pier Luigi Crosta, *Pratiche. Il territorio è l'uso che se ne fa*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2010.
7. The essay is based on a shared reflection of the authors on teaching and research experiences. Anyway, the Introduction and sections 1-3 and 5 should be attributed to Paola Briata; sections 4-7 to Gennaro Postiglione. Many theoretical insights have been possible thanks to the project *Ethno-Graphs. The Transcription (textual, graphic, photographic) of Field Observation as a Specific Practice of Architectural Ethnography* funded by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at Politecnico di Milano in 2021-2023. We are grateful to Martina Bovo, Sara Trolese, and Rose Veitch for their suggestions on a draft version of this essay.
8. Galen Cranz, *Ethnography for Designers*, Routledge, London & New York 2016.
9. Momoyo Kaijima et al., op. cit.
10. Galen Cranz, op. cit.
11. Eleftherios Pavlides, Galen Cranz, "Ethnographic Methods in Support of Architectural Practice", in *Enhancing Building Performance*, eds. by Shauna Mallowry-Hill et al., Wiley, London 2016.
12. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*, Wiley, Durham 1996.
13. Daniel Cefaï, ¿Qué es la etnografía? *Debates contemporáneos Primera parte. Arraigamientos, operaciones y experiencias del trabajo de campo*, in «Persona y Sociedad», n° 271, January, 2013, pp. 101-119.
14. However, Nova seems aware of the challenge of establishing «a methodology» when he states that the design process can be described more as a series of loops than as a linear process. Nicolas Nova, *Beyond Design Ethnography. How Designers Practice Ethnographic Research*, HEAD, Genève 2016.
15. *Ibidem*.
16. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Garden City, New York 1966.

17. Aa. Vv., *Ethnography Fieldguide*, in «Helsinki Design Lab», 06/06/2023, <http://helsinki.designlab.rip/pages/ethnography-fieldguide.html>.
18. Nicolas Nova, op. cit.
19. Albená Yaneva, op. cit.
20. Valerie Van der Linden et al., eds., *Tracing architects' fragile knowing about users in the socio-material environment of design practice*, «Design Studies», n° 63, 2019, pp. 65-91.
21. Gennaro Postiglione, "Elogio della quotidianità", in *Lettere dall'architettura*, eds. by N. Flora, J. Mera, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2019, pp. 60-63.
22. Kingery-Page Katie et al., *Examples of Adapted Ethnographic Approaches for Participatory Design*, in «Landscape Research Record», n° 5, 2016, 06/06/23, <https://thecela.me/wp-content/uploads/KINGERY-PAGE-GLASTETTER-DEORSEY-FALCONE.pdf>.
23. Galen Cranz, op. cit.
24. Paul Dourish, "Design implications", in *Conference on Human factors in Computing Systems, CHI'06*, ACM Press, London 2016, pp. 541-550; Dave Randall et al., *Fieldwork for Design: Theory and Practice*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin 2017; Jeannette Blomberg, Mark Burrell, "An Ethnographic Approach to Design", in *The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook*, eds. by J. Jacko, A. Sears, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah 2012, pp. 964-986.
25. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York 1973; Tim Ingold, *Imagining for Real. Essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondence*, Routledge, London & New York 2021.
26. Paola Briata, op. cit.
27. Marie Stender et al., eds., *Architectural Anthropology. Exploring Lived Spaces*, Routledge, New York 2022.
28. Research work on references has been helpful to understand that there are plenty of expressions to refer to ethnographical approaches when practiced by architects: from Architectural Ethnography, to Architectural Anthropology, to Design Ethnography or Ethnography for Designers. We think that some reflection is needed on this multiplicity, but this reflection is not carried out here.
29. This essay was originally published in Momoyo Kaijima et al., eds., *Architectural Ethnography is The Official English guidebook to the Architectural Ethnography*, Japan Pavilion at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (May 26th-November 25th, 2018).
30. Andreas Kalpakci et al., eds., «ARCH+. Architecture ethnografie», n° 238, 2020.
31. Tim Ingold, op. cit.
32. The members of *ReCoDe* are Paola Briata, Massimo Bricocoli, Gennaro Postiglione, Stefania Sabatinelli.
33. All the materials produced for *ReCoDe* are available at «Lablog», 06/06/2023, <http://www.lablog.org.uk/2018/09/09/recode-2018-final-report/>.
34. Most of the materials produced for *Gratosoglio Ground Zero* are available at «Lablog», 06/06/2023, at <https://www.lablog.org.uk/2019/06/09/grz-0-final-seminar-exhibition/#more-8920>.
35. Most of the materials produced for *Quarantined House-lives* are available at «Lablog», 06/06/2023, <https://>

- quarantinedhouselive.wixsite.com/a-biography/about.
26. James Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Allen & Unwin, London 1996.
 37. *Reinventing Cities* website page for Palazzo Aiuto Materno site, visited on 23 June 2023, <https://www.c40reinventingcities.org/en/professionals/sites-in-competition/palazzo-aiuto-materno-1630.html>.
 38. The idea of producing a “Pilot Book”, in Italian *Portolano*, to build up a *common qualitative analysis* that could offer *orientation* on the city to all the students of the class in making the architectural project comes from the Ph. D. work of Martina Bovo, *Landing. How the Presence of Newly Arrived Migrants Challenges Cities. A Look Through Spaces and Practices Along the Central Mediterranean Route*, Ph. D. Thesis in Urban Planning, Design and Policy, Dastu, Politecnico di Milano, Milano 2022.
 39. Galen Cranz, op. cit.
 40. Per Olaf Fjeld, *The Power of Circumstance*, Architectural Publisher B, Copenhagen 2020.
 41. Nicolas Nova, op. cit.
 42. Per Olaf Fjeld, op. cit.
 43. Cristina Bianchetti, Pier Luigi Crosta, *Conversazioni sulla ricerca*, Donzelli, Roma 2021.
 44. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984.
 45. Andrew Wilton, Iaria Bignamini, ed. *The Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery Publishing, London 1996.
 46. Team X was a group formed in the fifties by Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo van Eyck, Jaap Bakema, Georges Candilis, Shadrack Woods, John Voelcker,

- William and Jill Howell. These young architects marked a distance from the functionalist perspectives of the Modern Movement, in particular from the CIAM, by proposing a gaze capable of giving relevance to the interaction between individuals and buildings. Gennaro Postiglione, ed., *A+P Smithson: una piccola antologia della critica*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2016.
47. ILA&UD – The International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design, is an association founded in 1976 by Giancarlo De Carlo that brings together universities, cultural institutions, and scholars interested in the human habitat and the environment. Over the years, the laboratory has taken on very different forms of work and methods of dissemination, but a crucial role is attributed to fieldwork with the inhabitants in places where relevant issues – social, environmental, related to the built environment – arise in contemporary societies. Drawing is used as a tool for exploring and reading places. Cfr. «ILA&UD – The International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design», 06/06/2023, <https://www.ilaud.org/category/about/>.
 48. Colin St. John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995.
 49. Beatriz Colomina, et. al., eds., *Radical Pedagogies*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2022.
 50. Gennaro Postiglione, “Artifacts in Reflexive Design”, in *Products of Reflexive Design*, ed. by M. Buchert, Jovis, Berlin 2023, pp. 52-67.
 51. Per Olaf Fjeld, op. cit., p. 30.

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