

Architectural Uses of Ethnography (Delft/Rotterdam, 24-25 Nov 21)

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft and Het Nieuwe Instituut,
Rotterdam, Nov 24–25, 2021

Deadline: Jun 25, 2021

Vanessa Grossman

The Observers Observed: Architectural Uses of Ethnography

This year's Jaap Bakema Study Centre conference investigates the many ways in which architecture has taken an interest in ethnography in order to realign and expand its disciplinary scope and societal roles. Historically, ethnography is no innocent discipline: it is firmly embedded in colonial and capitalist logics and their Eurocentric knowledge production. At the same time, ethnography provided, and continues to offer, new insights and inspiration to help improve people's everyday lives, and to innovate in planning practice for the benefit of the greatest number. To paraphrase James Clifford: today, ethnography offers the conceptual tools to break up and redistribute colonial power, to expand communication and intercultural exchange, and to embrace ambiguity, diversity and multivocality. Between architecture and ethnography, what might be the lessons from the past and for today?

Ethnography, and its related fields of archaeology, anthropology and sociology, have consistently accompanied the development of modern architecture, its manifold re-conceptualisations and its innovations, from the days of the Grand Tour to Gottfried Semper's Caribbean Hut, to Alison and Peter Smithson's interest in street life, the playgrounds of Aldo van Eyck, and Lina Bo Bardi's enthusiasm for folk arts. Today, ethnography is part and parcel of architectural thinking, as we can witness in design and teaching approaches, in thematic books, journals, conferences, exhibitions and international architecture biennales, including, more recently, the São Paulo Biennale of 2019 dedicated to the theme of 'the everyday', and the 2021 Venice international architecture exhibition devoted to the question: 'How will we live together?'

The consistent interest of architects in ethnography comes with a taste for exploring new media and methods for visual communication and representation. The proliferation of new drawing methods is especially striking, as exemplified by the work of Atelier Bow-Wow and their proposition for an 'architectural behaviorology'. On the other hand, Andrés Jaque's Office for Political Innovation pioneers social media to understand the emergence of new sexual-social configurations and the coexistence with other living beings in different environments. In the meantime, photography of urban scenes and domestic interiors, and the deep mapping of territories, belong to the standard tool box used in architectural research and design.

Ethnography is deployed to understand emerging patterns of appropriation and use, and configu-

rations of social and symbolic meaning – to understand others and differences, while it simultaneously produces others and differences. The ethnographic methodology is also turned around, working as a mirror for self-reflection and transformation. As a reflective and exploitative practice, ethnography both disrupts and expands architecture.

Contributions:

For this conference, we seek contributions that highlight the transformative power of observational and participatory research in architectural design and its education. We are interested in contributions that look at new interdisciplinary methodologies building on ethnography and anthropology, which highlight such disruption and expansion in order to move beyond universalist abstraction and essentialisms, to make visible the polyphony of practices that make up the everyday fabric of our multiplicitous lives.

To open up our conversations on ethnography and architecture, and its potentials, we suggest that prospective conference participants explore the following directions:

- Ethnography and ecology: beyond the human, post-human, more-than-human
- Ethnography and multivocality: intersectional, feminist, queer, and crippling approaches
- Ethnographies of care
- Urban ethnographies, the festival and the everyday
- Relational ethnography and dynamic communities of change
- Migrants, colonial histories, Black criticism and interrogations of whiteness
- Ethnography and the impact of technology, especially social media
- Ethnography and the decolonisation of the architectural curriculum
- And in a Latourian turn, the ethnography of ethnography, the observers observed.

Where is architecture in this broad and multi-layered field? Is it a designed space or gesture, intervening, generating, interacting, regenerating, hybridising, conditioning, still accommodating? Or a discipline of othering, control and surveillance, a regime of hygiene, but also a gesture of care and repair, a tool for economic redistribution and opportunity and emancipation for the people, an environment for chance encounters and a playground or stage for socialising, a transformative practice creating communities that can thrive and grow? And most importantly, to once again reference Aldo van Eyck: for whom and by whom?

Practical information:

Abstracts of 300-500 words plus a short bio (300 words max) should be sent to jbsc@hetnieuweinstituut.nl. The aim is to have the conference proceedings published by the conference date.

Dates:

Deadline submissions of abstracts: 25 June 2021

Notification of selection: 19 July 2021

Submission of full draft papers (ca. 2000 words): 30 August 2021

Conference dates: 24-25 November 2021

Organising Committee:

Alejandro Campos Uribe

Vanessa Grossman
Dirk van den Heuvel
Nelson Mota

Advisory Board:

Tom Avermaete (ETH Zürich)
Hetty Berens (Het Nieuwe Instituut)
Maristella Casciato (Getty Research Institute)
Carola Hein (TU Delft)
Georg Vrachliotis (TU Delft)

Locations:

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft and Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.

Selection:

The selection is in the hands of the organising committee and advisory board of the Jaap Bakema Study Centre. Criteria are relevance and focus in relation to the call, state-of-the-art research, an innovative and challenging approach, and an eloquent and evocative articulation of the proposition. Academics and practitioners alike are invited to submit. We are aiming for a diverse group of speakers, in terms of nationality, seniority and academic and institutional background, among other categories, so as to assure a productive and lively exchange of knowledge.

Covid-19:

Covid-19 travel guidelines and restrictions of the Dutch government and the organising institutes TU Delft and HNI will apply. Even though we hope that all selected participants can be physically present, we expect that various Covid restrictions will still be in place. The conference will therefore follow a blended format with a mix of online and onsite presentations. Please note: selected participants wanting to join us in Delft and Rotterdam are requested to organise their own support for travel costs and hotel accommodation.

Reference:

CFP: Architectural Uses of Ethnography (Delft/Rotterdam, 24-25 Nov 21). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 4, 2021 (accessed Apr 4, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/34260>>.