Constructing Commonality: Autoethnography in Architectural Pedagogy and Practice

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Autoethnography challenges positivistic research methodologies and assumptions of researcher neutrality. It embraces uncertainty, messiness, and emotion, and has the potential to acknowledge the interconnectedness of architecture with social, economic, and political realities. Drawing from Elizabeth Ettorre's Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I", this paper suggests that through autoethnographic processes, architects can resist the urge to quantify and categorize, and instead embrace the narrative-building potential of personal revelations and vulnerability.

The paper acknowledges the safety and familiarity that static roles provide but argues that these roles hinder progress. It emphasizes the importance of dismantling the myth of the singular genius and instead advocates for an understanding of architecture as a collaborative endeavor. By being reflexive about their shifting status and relational positions, architects and architectural educators can create space for diverse voices and expertise to contribute to the design and production process.

Drawing on examples from contemporary architectural practices, and adjacent fields, such as product design and cultural geography, the paper demonstrates the potential power of autoethnography. It emphasizes the importance of situated perspectives, connecting personal experiences to larger social contexts. Prompted by Etorre, by occupying the space of the "in-between" and acknowledging the "personal is political," architects can foster connection, empathy, and collective meaning-making.

Autoethnography serves as a device for architects to occupy the space of an "inside-outsider," enabling the exploration of alternative practice and pedagogical models. By engaging in self-reflection, architects can cultivate mutual empathy and construct shared narratives, ultimately redefining the role of the architect in collaborative processes, unlocking new possibilities for collaboration, and transforming the understanding of authorship.

INTRO

Can autoethnography serve as a method to foster collaboration within contemporary design practice and pedagogy? Architects often limit their ability to meaningfully collaborate by continuously assuming the neutrality of their own position. However, contemporary collaboration requires mutuality and thoughtful situating of self within complex contexts, shifting roles, and decision-making. It follows then, that architects and architectural educators must embrace self-reflexivity and situational awareness within complex contexts to establish meaningful partnerships and informed decision-making processes. In this context, theorizing self is not to isolate individual experience, but to consciously connect ourselves across imagined boundaries in design. Elizabeth Ettorre's *Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I"* might serve as a guide for the necessary journey of self-reflexive work that must be taken up before architects can dispose of the sole genius myth.

Autoethnography, as a method, requires placing oneself within a cultural context, unraveling personal influences, and critically examining one's positionality.[1][2] By adopting autoethnographic practices, architects can bridge the gap between authorship and coauthorship, making their work more accessible, inclusive, and multivalent. This approach encourages a vulnerable and transparent design process, enabling a more honest understanding of the collective creation involved in architectural projects. Autoethnographic methods offer a way forward to both collaborate and acknowledge collective influence.

Ethnographic methods are not new to the history of architecture's relationship to participation and 'user research.' However, when we shift *user research* to the realm of self-exploration, architects can develop a more nuanced understanding of their own roles and their relational positions within the design process. This novel approach invites an expansion of disciplinary expertise not by acquiring the knowledge of adjacent disciplines; rather, by accessing the unexamined situated knowledge each collaborator already brings.
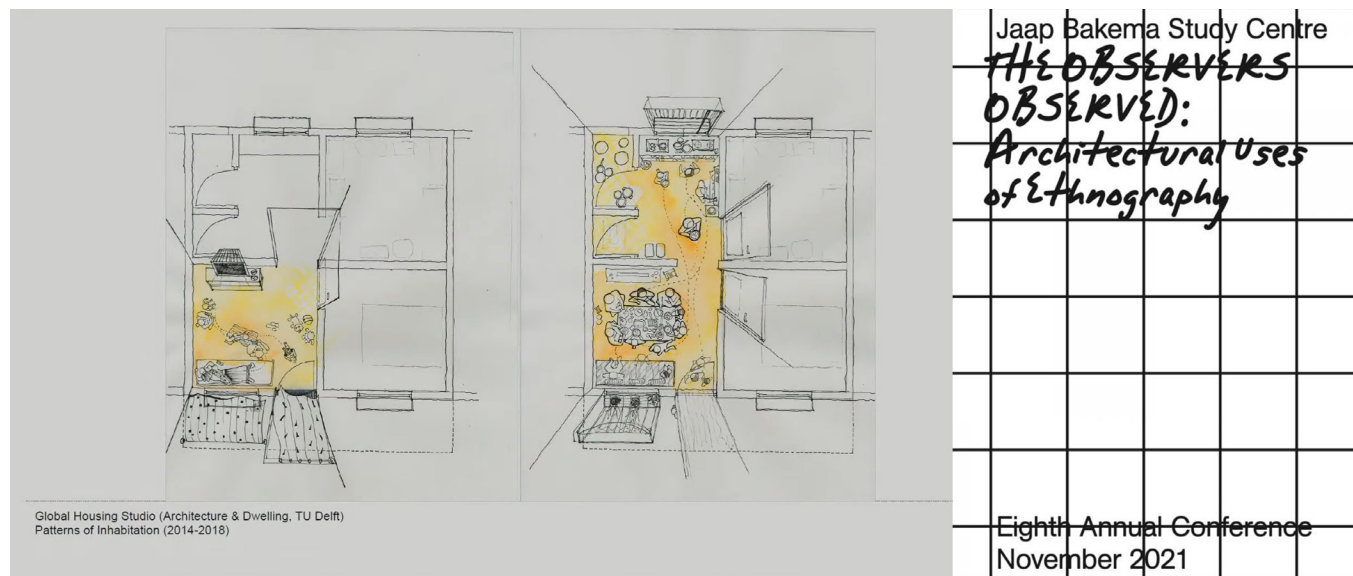
Figure 1.Observers Observed Jaap Bakema Study Centre Conference Presentation Image. Work of students of Vanessa Grossman and Nelson Mota.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Adjacent disciplines offer various models to incorporate autoethnographic methods. In the field of product design, Gabriel Mugar offers three shifts in the design process that foreground community-led design in the for-profit design space. He writes,

> "as designers, we need to shift from centering and interpreting what we think is important about the human experience to oscillating our focus between what is visible to us to accounting for invisible systems of power." [3]
>
> —Gabriel Mugar, *3 Common Assumptions That Lead to Bad Design*, Fast Company

These shifts each involve the reflexive practice of thoughtfully examining one's own participation as a designer and expert. The act of situating oneself in the process is key to the methodology. Through this work we can destabilize the static nature of our role as designers within perceived systems of power.

Static roles may feel safe (legally, formally, emotionally), but they are sticky. On the one hand, we have the self-aggrandizing myth of the singular genius, while on the other is the fear of being cast as the selfless conduit. Both interpretations of the role of the architect need to be disentangled from a conversation about collaboration. Being reflexive about these two extreme personas would significantly enhance the understanding of the architect's roles in the design and production process as well as in pedagogical models. The architect is neither sole author nor pure mediator, but instead must embody a host of roles between and around these poles. We must be self-reflexive about our shifting status and relational position throughout the process. In a *Madlibs* format, sometimes we are the _____ and sometimes we are the_____, _____, and _____ [*Mad Libs* style plural nouns].

If we consider autoethnography as a narrative device to occupy the space of an 'inside-outsider,' we might imagine a vast array of practice and pedagogical models, or exercises in the flexibility of our roles and expertise, not through invention, but through self-reflection.

Gaining the awareness required to practice reflexively is likely an incremental process. Consider the early education of the architect as a prime moment to begin this work. The recent Jaap Bakema Study Centre Conference 2021, "The Observers Observed", offered a number of perspectives on the use of ethnography in architecture. Organizers Vanessa Grossman and Nelson Mota presented the work of students asked to carefully consider, draw, and model their own spaces and belongings as an autoethnographic exercise.

The images of the work have a strange, compelling quality of both vulnerability and care. Vulnerability is found in the sharing of one's most intimate and personal spaces and belongings, and care is found in the specificity of the drawing. This work elevates one's own life to an intricate snapshot of individual and cultural identity. Presumably, the exercise encourages a situated perspective to which students might not otherwise have paid attention, and implies that similar care and consideration might next be afforded to the 'others' of architectural design subjectivity

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In order to use autoethnographic methods to question positivistic conclusions and claimed neutrality, one must first acknowledge a state of constant relational variability across the practice of architecture. It is a practice always engaged with the complexities of social, economic, and political realities. T.E. Adams et al remind us that

"[s]ocial life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If our desire is to research social life, then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion." [4]

—T.E. Adams et al, Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research

The process of reflexivity for the *architect-collaborator* can lead to deeper engagement in the complex social relationships substantiated in the making of architecture. When we understand the messiness of our own personal frame, can we come to collaboration with openness and without fear of having the wrong answer, or of losing control? Put another way, can collaboration combine the complexities of the built environment alongside other equally messy, but equally important, forms of expertise? Ettorre writes that

"autoethnographers are skeptical of positivistic research, they question 'grand narratives which claim objectivity, authority and researcher neutrality in the study of social and cultural life' and reject 'the assumed ubiquity of stable meanings, existing independently of culture, social context and researcher activity and interpretation' (Short et al., 2013:3)." [5]

—Elizabeth Ettorre, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I"

As Adams et al describe it, by meeting the unknown with an autoethnographic process, one can resist the disciplinary urge to quantify, categorize, and define uncertainty through perceived order; forms of control that might go hand in hand with the myth of the singular genius.

Ettorre clearly lays out four ways of reading autethnography as feminist method, noting that autoethnography "1) is the creation of transitional, intermediate spaces...; (2)[is]... an active demonstration of the 'personal is political'; (3) is feminist critical writing which is performative... (4) helps to raise oppositional consciousness by exposing precarity." [6] A productive exercise might be to attempt to graft this framework to architectural practice and teaching to find new ground for collaboration. The below examples and reflections give shape to some of the possibilities for this method through adjacent and analogous examples.

CROSSROADS VS. NEUTRAL GROUND
Though identity is inevitably embedded in architectural production, it has largely remained under the surface. The influence of individual and collective identity has not until recently been critically examined in practice and there is continued fear of bringing one's whole self to the role of architect. But this false neutral ground, one of perceived objectivity, is in itself positional; it is a story we tell.

In the context of feminist practice, Ettorre makes an important distinction between the autobiographical and the autoenthnographical, describing the former as "telling my story" and the latter as "theorizing my story." [7] In this way, the author is called to vulnerably consider their influences and cultural context in the creation of the narrative itself. Ettorre likens this to being in a transitional space, the "in-between," the "borderlands," where she must exist to do the work of connection. She writes,

"[a]ll of my interpretations are created in relationship, in between and on the borders of connections. To do this sort of work I need to be rigorously self-aware, to be meticulously humble and most importantly, to be cognizant strictly of the complex connections between the socially coded categories of race, gender, class and sex." [8]

—Elizabeth Ettorre, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I"

Architects might create greater connection and embrace the in between space of collaboration by more comfortably occupying the self-aware space of the "in between" - between identification within subcultures, personal geographies, and associative meaning.

PERSONAL IS POLITICAL
Ettorre references Ruth Behar's linking of "the feminist movement's assertion that 'the personal is political' " to the reevaluation of subjectivity in scholarly work. She notes that

Figure 2. Ursula K Le Guin childhood picture. Image National Endowment for the Humanitites, Estate of Ursula.K Le Guin
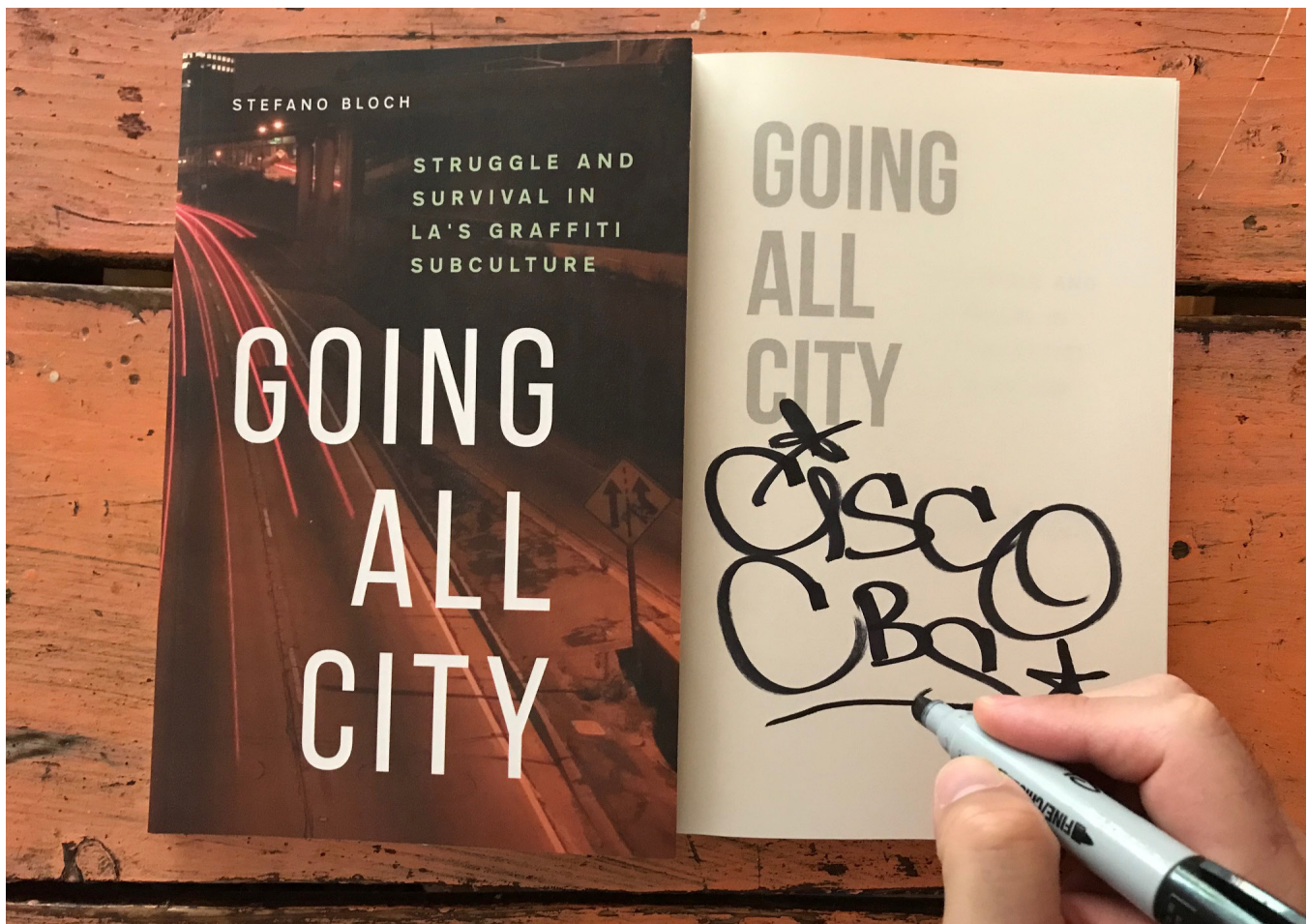
Figure 3. Stephano Bloch tagging his own book. UpMag.com

"[t]he implication is that personal revelation of vulnerability is acceptable in research writing." [9] Has the same been true in the discipline of architecture? Is knowledge building acceptable when it is based in personal revelations of vulnerability?

An autoethnographic approach would aim to situate personal experience in order to produce new narratives, and in doing so connect beyond the self. If science fiction offers a proxy for architecture's proclivity for narrative word-building, we might look to Ursula K Le Guin's understanding of the role of individual experience in its production. In an interview with Martti Kalliala for Harvard Design Magazine, Le Guin notes that

> "[a]nything about families in my writing is based far more on personal experience, personal relationships in the bodily/emotional sense, and on literary works, than on any intellectual concepts of family nuclear, extended, or metaphorical." [10]

—Ursula K Le Guin, Interview with Martii Kalliala,Harvard Design Magazine No. 41

It is science fiction, Le Guin notes, that provides the medium to spin this self-reflexive practice into new, fantastic ends.

A compelling example in an adjacent design research field might be found in the way that Stefano Bloch, a cultural geographer and autoethnographer, describes a turning point in his life. He recalls a collapsing of his own experience as an LA graffiti writer onto Henri Lefebvre's writings on political and spatial practice. In an interview with Kyle Green for the aptly named *Give Theory a Chance*, Bloch reflects on his early study of Lefebvre as stunted before making a revelatory link as an undergraduate. "I didn't have a…frame for what was being discussed in The Production of Space," he notes, until another student who knew Bloch from LA stopped him after class to say:

> it seems like Henri Lefebvre…is directly talking about you and what you did as a graffiti writer…it's as if he's talking about how graffiti writers inhabit and produce the city… in alternative ways that run contrary or against the mainstream. [11]

—Stefano Bloch, *Give Theory a Chance* Podcast Interview

From that moment on, Bloch describes "hanging each of [Lefebvre's] words on this view of the world...the perspective of the world as graffiti writer." [12] Bloch's own experience provided a transformational frame to examine the production of social space and, in doing so, cemented the significance of Lefebvre in his teaching and practice. Through the inclusion of the outsider self, Bloch bridges his work between academic insider and precarious outsider.

PERFORMAIVITY, PRECARITY, VULNERABILITY, EMPATHY

On performativity, Ettorre writes, "when sharing my stories, I want to expose new feminist meanings and new feminist subjectivities. I want to move beyond restating already existent views and ideas."[13] When architects engage autoethnographic methods in the authoring of their work, how might shared vulnerabilities expose precarity and in turn work to address societal issues in unknown collective ways? Could the letting in of one's whole self and the messy realities of cultural context allow architects to work across the boundaries of expertise? Could this allow them to find collaboration in the spaces in between?

An example of solidarity through acknowledging personal precarity can be found in Britt Wray's newsletter, "Gen Dread". Described as an "emotional angle on the climate and wider environmental crisis," Gen Dread builds on an awareness of the toll of climate emotions, and aims to reframe the care required to fuel collective action. Asks Gen Dread's website:"[h]ave you ever felt that a part of your identity is disappearing along with the stability of the climate?" [14] To this end the newsletter offers a "clearing house for new and emerging ideas to strengthen our emotional intelligence, psychological resilience, and mental health while we're in this planetary predicament." [15]

And certainly the predicament of the climate crisis is central to a contemporary practice of architecture. How, then, do
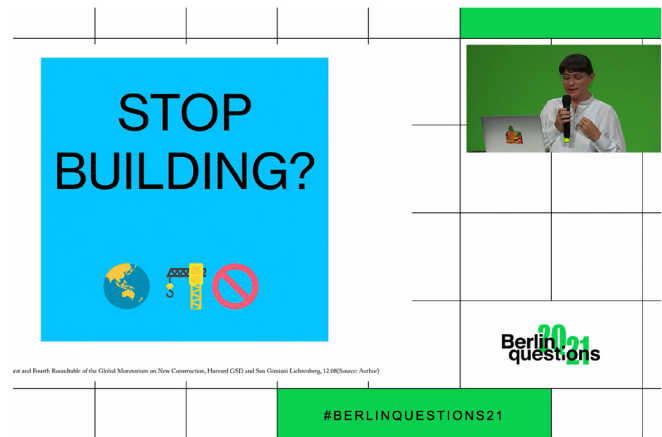

Figure 5. Berlin Questions 2021 Presentation Image, Charlotte Malterres-Barthes. q.berlin

we as architects shift from seemingly dispassionate technicians to acknowledge our complicity and entanglements? Autoethnography might offer that we can fundamentally shift our practices if we first reflect on our shared humanity and our situated perspectives while we seek to write a new story for our environment. One such provocative practice can be found in Charlotte Malterre-Barthes' call for a global moratorium on new construction. [16] As a trained architect, educator, and scholar, Malterre-Barthes' radical position is seemingly counterintuitive. However, this vulnerable questioning of the existential meaning of the profession allows for an entry point to entirely reframe what it means to operate as an architect.

Theorizing self is not to isolate individual experience but to consciously connect ourselves across imagined boundaries (even questioning, as Malterre Barthes does, whether architects build at all). These examples present collaboration defined not as a network of individually credited contributions, but instead a process of connections built through self-aware operators. In short, autoethnography offers mutual empathy, a key ingredient for collaboration. Autoethnography for architects and architectural educators might just be the radical proposal to bring your whole self to your practice.

Figure 4.Britt Wray Presenting. GenDread.substack.

ENDNOTES

1. According to Adams et al., autoethnography is: "a qualitative research method that: 1) uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences; 2) acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others; 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as "reflexivity"—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political; 4) Shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; 5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and 6) strives for social justice and to make life better." Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research (New York: Oxford University Press), 1-2.

2. Ettorre notes, autoethnography is "all about placing the 'I' firmly within a cultural context and all that that implies." Ettorre, Elizabeth Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I"(Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2019), 2.

3. Mugar, Gabriel, "3 Common Assumptions That Lead to Bad Design," Fast Company, October 12, 2021, https://www.fastcompany. com/90685137/3-common-assumptions-that-lead-to-bad-design.

4. Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research (New York: Oxford University Press), 9.

5. Ettore, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I", 4.

6. Ettore, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I", 3-4.

7. Ettore, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I", 8.

8. Ettore, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I", 5.

9. Ettore, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I", 6.

10. Ursula K. Le Guin, Martti Kalliala, "Dragons, Poets, and the Real World," Harvard Design Magazine, No. 41, (Fall/Winter 2015): http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/41/dragons-poets-and-the-real-world.

11. Stefano Bloch, "Stefano Bloch on Henri Lefebvre," interview by Kyle Green, Give Theory a Chance, Apple Podcasts, March 24, 2020, audio, 4:50-5:53, https://thesocietypages.org/theory/2020/03/24/stefano-bloch-on-henri-lefebvre/.

12. Bloch, interview.

13. Ettore, Autoethnography as Feminist Practice: Sensitizing the Feminist "I", 10.

14. "Gen Dread," Britt Wray, PhD website, accessed December 1, 2021, https://https://www.brittwray.com/gen-dread-newsletter.

15. "Gen Dread."

16. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes Research Practice: A Global Moratorium on New Construction, accessed October 10, 2023, https://www.charlottemalterrebarthes.com/practice/research-practice/a-global-moratorium-on-new-construction/