

AHRA Young Researchers Symposium April 2020

Research Encounters via Architecture's Methods

"The insider vs the outsider: architectural investigations of palliative care environments as both researcher and daughter"

Annie Bellamy, PhD Candidate, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University

Abstract

Architect Niall McLaughlin states successful design stems from an ability to "...imagine what it is to be someone else experiencing a place. This intuition is the cornerstone of an architect's role."¹ Through architectural education and practice, first-hand phenomenological reflection is encouraged to foster this intuition. By using the body as a device to record atmospheric and sensory phenomena's of our built environment, recollection of personal experience can help inform the creation of space.

Traditional academia, however, rejects this approach and instead encourages defined space between the 'researcher' and the 'field', asserting that the removal of the subjectivity of the researchers own positionality is evidence of rigour that protects against bias. In this paper, however, the author argues of the benefit that emotional practice and the reflexive 'self' can bring to architectural research by using auto-ethnography. This paper will present analytic auto-ethnography as used to explore the lived experience of the in-patient hospice, a building typology for palliative care, where the author acts as both 'insider' and 'outsider'. It will draw on the experience of the hospice as a daughter, recalling memories of the hospice the author stayed in during the last week of their Mother's life, and as a researcher, reflecting on the undertaking of ethnographic research at a hospice case study and the implications of these experiences on future architectural practice.

¹ Niall McLaughlin Architects, 'Alzheimer's Respite Centre', *Bartlett Design Research Folios* (2016), p.15

Described as being both “a doorway and a mirror”², auto-ethnography highlights the ‘self’ as an intrinsic part of the research field. This offers architectural research a method in which to critically synthesise spatial practice with social authenticity and human emotion in a way that is inaccessible to typical desktop research methods. The research uses annotated architectural drawings and models “...to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise go to...”³ enriching the understanding for other architectural practitioners of a building typology who few may have direct experience of.

Introduction

A paucity of architectural research exists on the typology of the in-patient hospice as a palliative care environment. The research that does exist however, is outdated for contemporary principles of care and is often focused on spatial efficiencies for medical equipment. The research methods employed, though qualitative, are more akin to desktop or remote studies that do not investigate the multiple subjective realities of the different inhabitants i.e. patients, staff and visitors. This paper seeks to discuss the narrative story-telling and first-hand phenomenological inquiry that occurs instinctively in the everyday work of architectural designers as auto-ethnographic methods used to explore lived experiences of the in-patient hospice. Crucially, the author, holds a dual positionality that is central to the research - she is both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ to the research field. It is this dichotomy that will be used to explore the potential benefits of a blurred relationship between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘field’. In this paper we will explore the nature of the ‘insider’ and the ‘outsider’ by examining auto-ethnography as an emerging methodology as a means to legitimise the methods that many architects and designers rely upon to respond to design briefs.

² Michael Schwalbe, 'The Mirrors in Mens Faces', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 25.1 (1996), 58-82, p.58

³ Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer : Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. ed. by Viet Nguyen-Gillham (Boston: Boston : Beacon Press, 1996), p.14

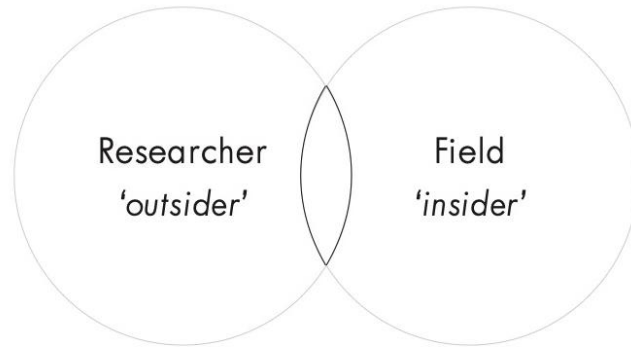


Figure 1- The field in between occupied by the author in her doctoral research

Practice as research

Contemporary architectural education and practice encourages designers to seek cues from first-hand experience in order to form contextual, responsive and sensitive creation of space that is fit for both function and users. This first-hand experience or tacit knowledge, as defined by Claudia Mareis as being “gained and applied via practical measures and that is, to a great extent, person- and situation-oriented”⁴ is relied upon by architects and designers to explore potential lived experience of spaces. When faced with new building type or brief, architect Niall McLaughlin states that the “...architect must strive to imagine what it is to be someone

⁴ Claudia Mareis, 'The Epistemology of the Unspoken: On the Concept of Tacit Knowledge in Contemporary Design Research',

Design Issues, 28.2 (2012), 61-71, p.64

else experiencing a place. This intuition is the cornerstone of an architect's role.”⁵ The tacit knowledge of the architect from their personal experience of a school or library may help inform their design process and highlight specific building requirements of the user from their subjective experience. Architects and designers in practice may be willing to informally draw on past and personal experiences to inform and provide context to a new design problem. But this is yet to be developed as an approach to academic architectural research to generate new knowledge of unique building types that many may not have previous experience of. We can observe that the intuition highlighted by McLaughlin begins to describe a blurring of the relationship between designer and brief, and subsequently researcher and field through the methodology of auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography and the self

Auto-ethnography is an emerging subcategory of traditional ethnography that puts the 'self' of the researcher as the specific research culture of interest. The researcher is provided a valid place in their research for reflexive practice between their personal and professional experiences. Analytic auto-ethnography – one of two approaches to the method – is described by Nicholas Holt as placing “emphasis on the ways in which [we] have interacted and been immersed with the culture being researched”⁶. Analytic auto-ethnography seeks to record not only what is going on around, but to further connect these experiences to wider theoretical positions and social theories relating to the research field. This is likened by sociologist Michael Schwalbe to being both “a doorway and a mirror”⁷ of experience that can be constantly moved between in order to reflect on the implications of research findings on future practice. We may consider Martin Cortazzi's description of the

⁵ Niall McLaughlin Architects, p.15

⁶ Nicholas L. Holt, 'Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2.1 (2003), 18-28, p.18

⁷ Schwalbe, p.58

academic implementation of “narrating [as] an interactive process of jointly constructing and interpreting experience with others,”⁸ as being similar to the narratives produced by designers to convey the concept, intentions, and intangible atmospheric qualities of a project.

Insider meanings

Often, in the design process we ask, or are asked to consider the question – “how does this space make you feel?” – with an emphasis on the consideration of an emotional experience of space that we are aspiring to evoke for the inhabitants. This reflexion serves to assist in the composition of architectural elements such as materiality, volume, light, shadow etc. to design an environment that can successfully express the intended phenomenological atmosphere. The author, however, in the context of their ongoing doctoral research is able to draw on what Leon Anderson describes as “complete member researcher status”⁹. The author has the direct lived experience and familiarity with their research field, the in-patient hospice, from their time spent in a hospice at the end of their Mother’s life. By engaging with their memories of the environment, the research draws upon what architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa describes as the “the minute situations of daily life”¹⁰ that their familiarity offers in order to unveil “insider meanings”¹¹ of feelings, attitudes or interactions that would be otherwise unattainable from a desktop or ‘imagined’ position.

⁸ Martin Cortazzi, 'Narrative Analysis in Ethnography', in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. by Paul Atkinson and others SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001), pp. 384-94, p.384

⁹ Leon Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35.4 (2006), 373-95, p.378

¹⁰ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin : Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Academy ; John Wiley & Sons, 2005), p.65

¹¹ Anderson, p.389

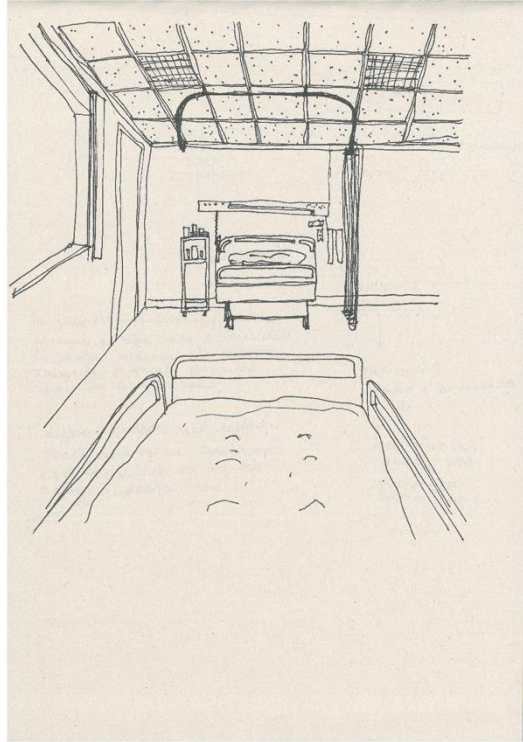


Figure 2 – Excerpt from diary exploring the memories of the hospice: I tried to imagine what it must be like, in her fleeting moments of lucidity and consciousness to see this world around her. Her bed faced the bed directly opposite, her view being either another dying person and their loved ones or the standard blue pleated disposable curtains that divide up the rooms. Why blue I thought to myself, in all other settings blue feels safe and serene, a calming colour - yet here without any other offer of warmth it felt austere and barren. They weren't pulled across at that moment, but I could trace them and follow them around the room, their metal tracks hanging low from the gridded ceiling panels pockmarked with holes. The ceiling was her last tableau.

In order to record their time as a daughter within the in-patient hospice - the 'insider' position - of the doctoral research is being explored through visual and written multi-sensory vignettes. The visual modes include free-hand sketches, orthographic and technical drawings, and models made from memory as a means to narrating what Ken Plummer describes as the act of "recollecting, re-remembering, re-discovering"¹² their memories of the

¹² Ken Plummer, 'The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research', in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. by Paul Atkinson and others SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001), pp. 395-406, p.401

hospice for an academic purpose. Following David Seamon's description of first-person phenomenological inquiry as "[using] her own first-hand experience of the phenomenon as a basis for examining its specific characteristics and qualities"¹³ the drawn explorations of the author's memory serve to emphasise certain architectural features, nuances and atmospheres that are then further analysed through written commentaries to the images that describe in further detail the phenomena and intangible qualities of the built environment.



Figure 3 - Excerpt from diary exploring the memories of the hospice: From the map I made in my head to give myself a sense of familiarity, the building was rectangular in plan with a small courtyard space in the middle. Offset from the central courtyard was the main corridor, with the bedrooms on the other side. At each end of the corridor spaces were wellbeing and therapy rooms. They were locked. They were the only rooms that looked directly out into the garden. It seemed to me sad that the garden was cordoned off; the window-sills were so high in the corridor that if you passed in a wheelchair or bed you wouldn't be able to see outside.

¹³ David Seamon, 'A Way of Seeing People and Place: Phenomenology in Environment-Behavior Research', in *Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research: Underlying Assumptions, Research Problems, and Methodologies*.

(Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), pp. 157-78, p.165

For example, a sketch drawn by hand from memory uses non-standard orthographic perspectives to stress the length and proportions of the hospices main corridor. By assuming their identity as a daughter in the hospice where their Mother died, the author offers to “take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise go to”¹⁴ when examining the spatial strategies and qualities of circulation. The sketch becomes a tool by which to examine the impact of the circulation and wayfinding of the hospice, and the subsequent emotions of loneliness and disorientation that occurred. Schwandt states that phenomenological inquiry allows others to enter and make sense of “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it”¹⁵. Reminiscent of day in the life studies used by designers to explore the narrative of a building’s or user’s ‘life’ these sketches, models and drawings bring to the fore the intangible elements of the architectural atmosphere as experienced by the author, as a daughter and user, and are able to be developed as a holistic part of the research into the multiple perspectives of the hospice building.

¹⁴ Behar, p.14

¹⁵ Thomas A. Schwandt, *Qualitative Inquiry : A Dictionary of Terms*, 1997) p.221

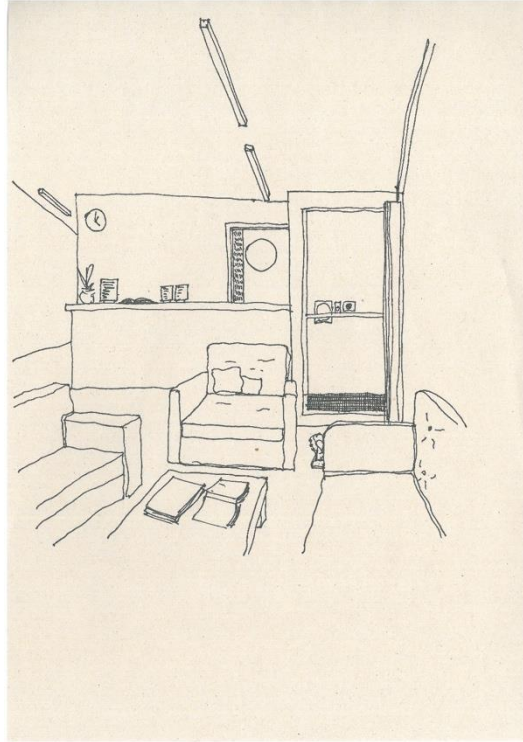


Figure 4 - Excerpt from diary exploring the memories of the hospice: I took refuge on the worn sofas and took a moments respite. Soon I was in the middle of a distraught family being led out of the 'family room' directly opposite the entrance. I was too close. I tried to slide out of the space, silently, I wondered if this was intentional? Rather than dwelling on what has happened, does proximity to the entrance make you feel sense of comfort that the world outside survives, and life goes on? Perhaps I thought, but in that moment, I felt uncomfortable, those moments of intense heart-wrenching grief are for a family. Not for me or anyone else to inadvertently intrude on.

The intent of the method is not, however, to write what Professor Norman Denzin describes as “messy vulnerable texts that make you cry”¹⁶ but rather to provide a framework by which to carefully translate personal experiences to academically sound data. Its very nature, using the ‘self’ as a subject of research and inquisition does, however, raise ethical concerns for the researcher themselves. Anthropologist Ruth Behar likens analytic auto-ethnography to be an “exposure of the self”¹⁷. The intense personal engagement required by this method has potential to impact upon the well-being and safety of the researcher if not appropriately managed. In the context

¹⁶ Norman K. Denzin, 'Analytic Autoethnography, or Déjà Vu All over Again', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35.4 (2006), 419-28, p.421

¹⁷ Behar, p.14

of the doctoral research of the author, the vignettes implement a degree of anonymity, the visual work does not provide identifying features of the hospice or the author; and the written commentaries are excerpts from wider diaries that are edited to only include architecturally relevant information. Putting in place such measures as the above mitigates not only the extent of the emotional labour undertaken by the researcher but re-enforces academic rigour.

Outside the field

The narrative analysis and phenomenological inquiry described above, captures the 'insider' identity of the author in relation to the academic field of research; as Cortazzi summarises, "narrating is, after all, a major means of making sense of past experience and sharing it with others."¹⁸ However, the author is simultaneously an 'insider' resulting from their personal context but also an 'outsider' – a formal researcher approaching the field from an academic perspective. The 'outsider' position engages with a separate hospice case study as an architectural artefact; investigating spatial qualities, strategies and lived experiences through a bricolage of ethnographic methods such as walking interviews, in-depth interviews and building observation. Despite, best interests to occupy and embed into the research field through ethnographic methods, researchers will always remain to a certain degree distinct 'visitors' to the day-to-day life and culture of those within the research field.

What has been observed however, within the scope of working within the dichotomy of the 'insider/outsider' position are the unexpected benefits to the position of the researcher from the author's experience of being a daughter in a hospice with their Mother at the end of their life. The in-patient hospice is a predominantly medical environment and the case study hospices' management were initially apprehensive to the concept of architectural research taking place on their site, suspicious of the ethnographic research methods proposed.

¹⁸ Cortazzi, p.384

It was observed on multiple occasions that by offering the story of their own experience of the hospice through the auto-ethnographic visual vignettes offered “a useful research tool to complement the use of other ethnographic research strategies”¹⁹ that broke down a number of barriers to the research.

It firstly, demonstrated the closeness that the author has with the hospice environment, thus helping to normalise the presence of an academic researcher in a highly sensitive environment. Furthermore, David Wang and Linda Groat write of the “critical differences between expert and lay experiences in a variety of settings and contexts”²⁰ that may lead to the language of architectural research appearing indecipherable to the lay research participants. Therefore, the vignettes serve as an important communication tool paving a shared ground between the researcher and the research participants for the ethnographic research methods, such as the in-depth interviews. It could be observed that the vignettes are similar in nature to the three-dimensional visualisations prepared by architecture students and practitioners in order to communicate architectural themes without the need to rely on technical drawings that lay people may not understand.

Conclusion

There are considerable ethical challenges faced by the study of sensitive environments, such as in-patients hospices, that make ethnographic methods that engage with patients, their families and friends largely inaccessible, particularly for those coming from non-medical disciplines. This paper has put forward an argument that within the appropriate contexts and method, the author, by drawing on their tacit knowledge of the hospice, can generate a powerful and insightful tool for which to provide reflexivity on the insider and outsider experiences of the in-patient hospice. As Emerald and Carpenter conclude “emotional vulnerability

¹⁹ Cortazzi, p.384

²⁰ Wang, p.229

can be confronting and uncomfortable to write and to read. Nonetheless it can be integral to exploring an issue and one more resource that can be used in the method of inquiry."²¹ By using an auto-ethnography that exploits the everyday tools of designers, such as drawing and description of atmospheric qualities, provides an opportunity for typology specific research in architecture to create a discourse on understanding the lived experience of a building, rather than merely knowing about it. The author here posits of the "theoretical illumination"²² that emotional practice and the reflexive 'self' can bring to architectural research for building types that sit outside common knowledge. Whilst specific outcomes will be identified in the context of this doctoral research for the future best practice of in-patient hospice design, this manner of architectural research could find potential for broader architectural practice in highlighting sensitive approaches to materialities of care that are gathered from multiple perspectives and lived experiences.

²¹ Elke Emerald and Lorelei Carpenter, 'Vulnerability and Emotions in Research: Risks, Dilemmas, and Doubts', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21.8 (2015), 741-50, p.746

²² David Allen Karp, *Speaking of Sadness : Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1996)

List of Figures

All images are drawn by, and are, copyright property of the author.

Bibliography

Anderson, Leon, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35.4 (2006), 373-95

Architects, Niall McLaughlin, 'Alzheimer's Respite Centre', *Bartlett Design Research Folios* (2016)

Behar, Ruth, *The Vulnerable Observer : Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. ed. by Nguyen-Gillham, Viet
(Boston: Boston : Beacon Press, 1996)

Cortazzi, Martin, 'Narrative Analysis in Ethnography', in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. by Atkinson, Paul and
others SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001), pp. 384-94

Denzin, Norman K., 'Analytic Autoethnography, or Déjà Vu All over Again', *Journal of Contemporary
Ethnography*, 35.4 (2006), 419-28

Emerald, Elke and Lorelei Carpenter, 'Vulnerability and Emotions in Research: Risks, Dilemmas, and Doubts',
Qualitative Inquiry, 21.8 (2015), 741-50

Holt, Nicholas L., 'Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story',
International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2.1 (2003), 18-28

Karp, David Allen, *Speaking of Sadness : Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness* (Oxford ;
New York: Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1996)

Mareis, Claudia, 'The Epistemology of the Unspoken: On the Concept of Tacit Knowledge in Contemporary

Design Research', *Design Issues*, 28.2 (2012), 61-71

Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin : Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-

Academy ; John Wiley & Sons, 2005)

Plummer, Ken, 'The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research', in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. by

Atkinson, Paul and others (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001), pp. 395-406

Schwalbe, Michael, 'The Mirrors in Mens Faces', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 25.1 (1996), 58-82

Schwandt, Thomas A., *Qualitative Inquiry : A Dictionary of Terms*, 1997)

Seamon, David, 'A Way of Seeing People and Place: Phenomenology in Environment-Behavior Research', in

Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research: Underlying Assumptions, Research

Problems, and Methodologies. (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), pp.

157-78