

## **THE WOVEN CITY: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME-SPACE IN RESIDENTIAL HABITATS FROM A VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH**

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The study of residential habitats in the cities mainly uses a spatial approach. However, in its conception, the idea of the passage of time has been left behind, focusing basically on physical-spatial issues. This has defined and encapsulated human existence into spatial containers. However, looking at residential habitat from an inhabitant's experience, it is possible to unveil how its production emerges as a continuous process of place making, in time and space, understanding both as an inseparable unit called "timespace".

This paper works with the trajectory and information gathering of the author's personal experience of timespace. The methodology encompasses autoethnography, using photographs as a means of memory extension that would allow capturing the becoming of the experience, and thus constructing a visual story that would be able to reveal it.

### **Introduction**

The experience of timespace, was constructed by using images obtained during two years in the author's life and three explorations were developed that would capture the experience as it was being produced through time. The photographs were used as text, exposing reality from a frontline position. Thus, this research is a visual auto-ethnography, seeking the experience of another, not from a distance but, in the vicinity of the everyday.

After a three-year investigation focused on my own experience of inhabiting, this paper partially presents the central discussion when studying contemporary habitat in cities under spatial transformations and changes the way people live in them.

This discussion explores the relationship between the notion of habitat and the notion of experience, fundamental question to understand the lives of people in cities and propose a particular methodological approach.

### ***The Problem: To Inhabit***

It is convenient then to start with the problem. When you set a point from where to explore inhabiting, the problem of boundaries and containers arises. In a way is the idea of trying to set inhabited places in spatial boundaries. The boundaries of the property are reduced to the construction of walls, from the street to the facades, and thus a substantial importance to the spatial conformation of space is assigned,

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leaving aside the way people and their bodies roam; and furthermore, how time passes and life unfolds, and as seasons change and how the ever-changing environment is perceived (Ingold, 2005)

Not only the space has suffered this fate, the time in which we inhabit has tried to be defined as well, appearing definitions like years, hours, or seconds (Harvey, 1994). Both situations bring with them the burden of instrumentalization for those operating in daily situations that develop woven into the familiar. Such instrumentalization as a means to conceive inhabiting, has abandoned the inherent continuity in the evolution of human existence.

However, when we inhabit, the associated experience connects these instrumental divisions, creating a process in which a number of places in time and space articulate, where the idea of a permanent interconnection underlies, as if the different experiences composing it were interwoven strands of a basket, where rather than considering the beginning and the end, the links become relevant (Giannini, 1987).

I think it is possible to find these links into what is hidden in the familiar, and that this can be found by looking and documenting the passage of time within the experience of inhabiting.

But what is inhabiting? According to Heidegger (2005), inhabiting is more than occupying a house or a specific space, likewise, inhabiting is more than just having a residence or home, inhabiting is a dynamic process which goal is humanizing a given spatial area in order to live in it (Zoido et al., 2000); in this sense, inhabiting “is the product of a forming process in which humans directly and actively intervene, being deeply related to all those areas in which they develop” (Sepulveda et. al., 2005). Inhabiting is positioned away from mere spatial location and confinement within a shelter.

Following this idea it is possible to discuss the way the territory has been divided into spatial areas, to determine how people inhabit in them, scales that are not neutral in their definition. In this respect, the different scales can be defined by the number of times that reality is reduced for its consideration (Valenzuela, 2004), this is how in order to adapt the idea of inhabiting at these scales, an instrumentalization has been required, an operational structure of domination, which allows the various sciences to distantly understand reality, to thereby analyze each of its methods (Lefebvre, 1974).

One way to conceptualize the habitat is proposed by the Housing Institute of the University of Chile (from Spanish, INVI), for them the residential habitat is the result of a process in continuous formation of places in different scales referring to the territory, which are distinguished by a particular form of ownership, given by a daily link with units of singular experiences, enhancing relations of identity and belonging, from which the inhabitant intervenes and configures. In these terms the residential habitat, rather than a pre-existing or “natural” reality, is a product of

social construction process in which humans directly intervene, actively and progressively by incorporating various forms of socio-cultural, territorial and political-economic organizations (INVI, 2005)

Therefore, it seems important stopping in this continuous process linked to the day-to-day experience, related to a territory rather than to a particular scale. This territory, according to Massey (2005), is a product of interrelations, enabler of the existence of multiplicities and always under construction, always happening due to human existence, which relates to the territory through the development of a particular experience.

### **The Notion of Experience**

Experience, as a developer of the dynamic, can be attributed to the fact that is anchored in the active side of human relationships. By considering this linkage it is possible to consider the notion of experience as the dynamic side of culture as it establishes the link between the horizons of knowledge and values – world views – and the dimension of social practices anchored in situational contexts (Duhau and Giglia, 2008).

As a dynamic element of human activities, experience, allows to deal with the different situations of existence and can provide significance, construct knowledge, and meaning to these successive situations, aspects that influence the behavior and way of interpreting reality. The experience, therefore, is not an isolated situation, but is the result of a series of events that occur over time.

It is not the goal of this paper to solve the conceptualization of the notion of experience, but rather, to approach it from a phenomenological methodology (ethnographic) and a series of empirical exercises that generate an autoethnography.

Then, what I intend to build below is an explanation of the autoethnographic process that took me three years, and briefly comment the way in which I worked methodically with this experience of inhabiting and thus, generate the discussion between habitat and experience from an autoethnographic method.

### ***Working with the Experience***

Having multiple ways to get involved in the experience, and understanding it as a phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 2008), I used ethnography as phenomenological method of documentation for its peculiarity of making visible the action of the subjects in the construction of their environment (Imilan, 2011), and because it involves the ways of making, watching, and writing as a whole, directly influencing the information that is collected (Jirón, 2008).

However, it must be stated that the term ethnography refers to a wide range of qualitative research practices, which may include active observation, ethnographic interviews, and other participatory research techniques that need to be adapted and developed in accordance to the context (Pink, 2009).

Thus, within these research practices, I propose an autoethnography, i.e. building a dense narrative describing my own experience of inhabiting (Lai, 2004, Russell, 1999). These narratives are built with information from my corporeal position in space and time, which is registered through photographs collected over the years that I have inhabited my home.

### **Autoethnography and Photography: The Reconstruction of Inhabiting**

The choice of autoethnography means two contrasting situations. On the one hand it is needed to find that particularity of my timespace experience that is possible to capture, record and describe; and on the other hand, faces the difficulty of finding in my day-to-day experience situations that become common and invisible due to the familiarity. This difficulty is circumvented by using as capture technique, photography, and thus establishing it as means of writing with light, the ethnographic narratives describing my experience.

The photographic technique as a means to reveal the experience of timespace, has the particularity of capturing the notion of time and the shape of space as if it were a “laminar object that cannot be separated in two sheets without destroying it” (Barthes, 2009: 31). According to Grady (2008), photography simultaneously delivers two types of information, one corresponds to a personal affective record with respect to the act/scene captured, and the second corresponds to an impersonal record of what happens.

In this sense, as a way of recording, photography allows to capture the experience in relation to my human existence, or as described by Barthes, the photograph reproduces to infinity an event that has occurred only once and is able to “mechanically repeat what will never be repeated existentially” (Barthes, 2009: 28), which has a personal connection and that would be relevant to collect and record, as reality captured in photography actually is built from my particular way of looking and thus weaving the notion of time and space, and unveiling the timespace.

In relation to time, photography was established as a tool of extension of my memory (Riego, 2001), becoming “interrupted time in the translation of what was” (Barthes, 2009: 20). In this sense, photography gave me the opportunity to collect these interruptions in time — the evidence that the events had happened, since photography always carries its reference with it. It is impossible for the photograph to exist without something or someone. For this reason in relation to time, photography becomes relevant in the disappearance of the photographed, the reference, it is the briefness of its presence what gives intensity to maintain that briefness eternally.

Photography meant to me, in this sense, what Barthes defined as the dimension of memory, in which not only was there evidence of how the referent was, but above all, there is evidence of what truly was. Therefore, it is there “but in a time that is not its own” (Barthes, 2009: 23).

In relation to space, by representing a real space, the photograph necessarily shows a selection of the represented space, a “flat and partial cut of a three-dimensional infinite space” (Meraz, 2008), thus establishing a relationship between a represented space, what can be seen of the reference space transferred to the photo, and a space of representation, which is the image as support – the photograph as a visual element. This is what Barthes (2003) calls an analogical reproduction of reality, where specific elements that are part of this photographic image can be found, highlighting those details and characteristics of life that are visible and that might have gone unnoticed. The space thus represented contains a number of objects that play various functional and symbolic functions (Riego, 2001).

The photograph then allowed me to access to infra-knowledge provided by a collection of partial objects (Barthes, 2009). Sontag (1979) relates to the implicit recognition that photography generally provides a unique set of revelations, and that photography shows us reality in a way that we had not seen before. This feature of photography, which fragments time and space, was the main basis to reveal my experience of timespace, and was one of the difficulties that this research had to overcome.

Understanding that the concept of timespace inhabits the conceptual world, but is manifested in the real world, it was hard to find at what point of my living space this notion was present in daily life, linked with my experience and allowing me to perceive my relationship with my habitat therefrom. The passage of time is then reconstructed, using photography as an extension mechanism of memory and, through that, to inquire into that relationship between the inhabiting and the experience that is hidden in the familiar. There is not a road map in this task that has been built at the same time as the research, thus, I propose a series of explorations, as a search of that continuity which is intended to reveal.

Certainly working with my own experience, I face the limitations of particularity and partiality, getting further in an area dominated by subjectivity (Rooney, 2005, Seale *et. al.*, 2004). However, that is where the particular experience of inhabiting, in contact with intimacy, can be described and known over an objective measure of the facts. Precisely at this point is where the expected results were located, which were not meant to be representative of the variety of processes related to the residential habitat or the way of inhabiting in cities, but from them, to develop ways to meet, explore, and reflect in the knowledge of these processes.

### ***Building the Object of Study***

So if researching from my experience transformed me into the subject of study, the experience recorded in the photographs – that were captured on a daily basis – would become the object of study. And like Barthes, by making my visual autoethnography, I “was neither subject nor object but rather a subject who feels becoming an object” (Barthes, 2009: 42).

Pictures captured from arrival to my home, were the first entrance to the definition of the object of study. Building of a photo album was established as an organized space in which images became coherent content (Riego, 2001). This task resulted in a series of classifications, among which and based on their characteristics I could find: people - objects - landscape, black and white - color, nighttime - daytime, outdoor – indoor, personal – labor; however, the most appropriate classification to start the construction of this object, corresponded to that particularity that allowed the camera to understand as an objective tool that became subjective due to my way of dealing with the experience, through my body.

So the daily log (through photographs) of my experience of timespace was formed with two different inputs representing the two forms of my relationship with the territory and the residential habitat, allowing me to skip the trouble of recording:

- (1) One corresponded to capturing space from my home, the fixed relation, and the documentation of changes in the landscape in relation to the different rhythms that was possible to visually perceive. This would bring the notion of the passage of time and its relationship with the modification of space and its presence in my human existence
- (2) The other was focused in what was not within the physical boundaries of my home. This included the daily life of the city, portrayed in my experience and mobility relating and extending to what was happening inside my residence. This would bring the notion of rhythms, and also that of the brevity of the unknown in the territory of others, appearing the idea of others and their relationship in my experience.

By inquiring in my own experience I was able to get closer to the familiar, to the hidden, what Perce (1992) mentioned as, documenting “what happens when nothing happens”, and to carry this out, I had to resort to an uncertain process I suggested as an exploration.

### ***The Explorations***

Each of these processes I used to inquire into the familiar and thus reveal the experience of timespace, I defined as explorations, of which three were developed: (1) My window, and two variations of the trip, (2) My trip A, and (3) My trip B.

The first “My Window”, corresponded to my position as an observer from high up. This was a process in visualizing in the passage of time and the becoming of its own existence, as the changes in landscape retained as memories. In this way I recorded the changes in the landscape from the window of my home, as a means to discuss its boundaries.

The second, “My trip A”, was constructed from diving into that landscape observed by a similar time destined to appreciate it from above. In it I collected photographs of my journeys from my home and around town.

The third, “My trip B”, corresponded to a variation of the above, and it collected information of that landscape in relation to the time allotted to do it, i.e. it occupied the time of displacement to construct the information.

These three explorations, needed to be arranged in such way that they, one after the other, would complement each other. This would lead to an observation of the blind spots of the others, arising out of a bias that photography has in relation to timespace. This resulted in a set of explorations open enough, to watch and record through it what lurks within the familiarity; and thus when combining them it was possible to assemble a coherent whole revealing the experience.

Each exploration as means to an end did not work in solitary or in isolation from the others. The three explorations had two specific objectives:

- (1) To unveil my experience in the timespace in the residential habitat, and
- (2) To achieve a methodological development leading to the capture of the experience directly. This was flexible enough to change over time, and that could accommodate the subjectivity required for research.

### *Timespace Revelations*

These explorations were able to unveil as partial conclusions that which was hidden in the familiar, and that was established as the main objective of this methodology. It was specifically intended to reveal the experience of timespace and to develop a methodology capturing directly the experience and that were flexible to changes.

In these explorations it was possible to find: the marked landscape, the visibility as an inhabited landscape, the notion of weaving, the visible and invisible city, the relation of the familiar and the visibility, the rhythms and the formation of timespace, the journey and markers, the parts of the continuum, and the disruptive and the others.

All of the above can be contained in three notions that can frame these revelations and establish the relationship between the experience of timespace and residential habitat, which can be set as intermediate conclusions; these are the notion of the markers, the notion of visibility, and the notion of journey.

### **Conclusion**

The ethnographic approach proposed to reveal the experience on timespace was autoethnographic in nature. This acquired the capability of generating a series of new questions as it unfolded in a dialogue between the reflective and the studied. In this sense, it evolved at the same time as the experience and with its same properties. It cannot be easily extrapolated, and cannot be representative; therefore, hardly becoming operative. However, in order to generate knowledge, and provide first-line information, without intermediaries, this line of approach was undertaken. For it is a continuous experience, which is critical in order to reveal the indivisibility of experience.

It is useful as a method to approximate the residential habitat by working from the experience of the inhabitant; therefore, it allows the bypassing of the strict analysis by operating in the territory, the scales, or traditional ways of understanding the habitat. In this sense, a commitment to visual methods is able to develop a series of explorations where the text is not dominant over the image but complement each other. For this, one must understand the visual as a way of experiencing the being in the world (Heidegger, 2005), and in this sense, subjective in nature. By assuming this subjectivity, it is possible to reveal the visual method as a method of capturing, analyzing, and unveiling certain phenomena related to residential habitat.

The journey as a notion arises, which can be understood from an ethnographic approach due to its relation to the experience, and without the need for representation in order to establish links with other disciplines. In the traditional case this has been solved with the ethnographic text, revealing experience and allowing its analysis. In the case of the journey this is not enough, and the visual methods contribute from other cognitive horizon.

The journey, when applied to the methodological approach offers the possibility of looking at relationships and connections between different and diverse elements happening in the time and space, and can be linked to a placemaking process not explained by traditional analyzes.

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