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Francisco Martínez

My Father-in-Law Knows better than Me

As the ballad goes\(^1\), a building is not a house, and a house is not a home. This essay is based on my building experience and a study of how mutuality has material resonances. For some people, a home can only be the place where one was born; for some others, it has to be something built with your own hands, a property that you own, or the place where all your plans to leave had failed. In a way, all of them apply to the apartment where I lived in Tallinn for over three years.

When my son was born, I found myself working with Silver Agu, my father-in-law, in the renovation of a small apartment in the neighborhood of Mustamäe. For five months (October 2016-February 2017), Silver did a kapital remont, a complete renovation of a 47 square meter apartment (in a Soviet panel house) that involved tearing down concrete walls, partitioning living spaces, building up drywalls, changing windows, re-installing electricity, sanitation, heating and parquet floorings, knocking holes in walls, measuring, cutting, drilling, painting walls, cleaning, dismantling, and, of course, getting dirty.

My contribution to this construction work was to help by providing tools, cleaning up, holding things, transporting materials, etc. At the beginning, Silver treated me as an apprentice, explaining things, trying to teach me the métier, but he gradually understood that my will to develop construction skills was limited, and my learning efforts were not projected towards the future but rather to get things done in the present. The relationship nonetheless remained cordial, and once the job was done, it was much closer.

My building experience was indeed impregnated with personal relationships, expectations about the future, and visions of what a good life could be. For Silver, however, construction was (is) simply a skilled job that he has done for over 40 years. Asked about the knowledge required to be a good builder, my father-in-law replied that anyone can become a good builder; what makes the difference is working experience. But what does a builder learn from each construction site? “What do you mean? We don’t think in these terms, we just do it.” As I insisted on this matter, Silver added that by partaking in construction, one can learn the intricacies of using particular tools, problem-solving tricks, and how materials react in relation to other materials. To be more precise, that sentence is how I translated and expanded his disjointed words as he was
not making much effort in verbally articulating the knowledge involved in construction.²

Otherwise, there were also disagreements and intense negotiations about, for instance, the selection and installation of bath tiles and curtains, the colour of the walls, or the need (or not) to build a drywall near a sofa. This process of negotiation transformed the construction site into an abstract zone of family encounter, sometimes performed in the form of a playground, and in some others, a (discursive) battlefield.

Building Ethnographies in/through Captions

During the construction process, my father-in-law habitually used pictures that he had taken of the site as documents of work progress. These pictures were also used as devices through which Silver was establishing relations with me and with the rest of the family. Hence, I present some of these pictures as ethnographic evidence. The exercise of introducing socio-material descriptions and field reflections (in the form of captions) is proposed as a multimodal methodology elicited by Silver’s photos yet allowing different analytical perspectives³. Pictures and captions are here used as devices to gain insights into construction work that we cannot get through observation but through knowing in practice (Lyon 2012). In this sense, the reflections on the photos and captions describe how I learned to appreciate the building of a home and the building of a relationship with my father-in-law.

Fig. 1. There is still dust floating in the air and tiredness in the way we sit and stand. We finished the work of the day and, before changing his clothes, I asked Silver to sit and to lend me his phone to take a photo. In a ritualistic manner, as if he were a doctor or a soldier wearing a uniform, Silver always changes his clothes on arrival and departure from the construction site.
Fig. 2. Cutting the concrete wall (in order to unite the kitchen with the living room) was the most epic challenge in our construction project. Challenges such as this one link each other together; it also generates an intense flow of materials and tools coming in, and of rubble to be disposed of.

Fig. 3. Insulation is a very important part of building. The process uses many different materials (cellular or fibrous) and is done for different purposes (e.g., thermal insulation, acoustic insulation, fire insulation, impact insulation, cross-section, etc.). Insulation helps isolation and comfort, and now confinement.
Fig. 4. For me, construction work is boring, tiring, dirty, and somehow banal, but Silver seems to truly enjoy it, even tedious work such as installing wires and pipelines. Silver has big hands and his body seems to be irreversibly shaped through the incorporation of tools and the construction work. Not only that, while looking at him working, I learn that holding a drill, the way he does, is already a form of thinking.

Fig. 5. Constructing entails carrying on from where you left off yesterday. It is a constant effort of adding, scaffolding and building up, combining work, hours, tools, and materials. This produces, in turn, a particular building epistemology and aesthetics. Yet, construction also requires abstract thinking, such as interpreting instructions, drawing sketches, understanding the distribution of electric wires, etc.
entanglements: A Home in the Building

Fig. 6. On the construction site, there are traces that endure and others that disappear. While helping Silver with the renovation works, a cockroach came out from a pipe; jokingly Silver told me “this is nothing; during the Russian time there were much more.” Once the work was done and I moved in with my family; I then forgot about the material scars and holes made visible during the construction process, which, back then, used to terrify me (i.e., in my inability to understand where and how deep they go, and also what could come out from them).

Fig. 7. Builders have to work with skills, tools, materials, and helpers that are not always the right ones. To install the parquet flooring, my partner and her brother came to help as I was rather useless in this task. In other cases, I did not know how to place the different pieces or how to cover the materials so as to avoid damage from other materials. For my amateur gaze, screws, cables, and tubes were an invitation to experimental tinkering, whereas for Silver, they were useful shapes, materials, and tools.
Mustamäe

Parallel to my home-making construction work with Silver, the whole building was also going through a complete surgery. The housing complex located in Friendship Boulevard 246 (Mustamäe, Tallinn) had already surpassed its expected life-span of 50 years and undergone a general renovation funded by local tenants but also supported by the Estonian state and the European Union. Accordingly, pipelines and the roof were changed, the façade was renovated, insulation was conveniently installed, and a walking promenade near the house was rebuilt.

Mustamäe is the first mass-produced panel housing district in Estonia. At the time of its construction (late 60s, early 70s), it was seen as an attractive location, offering many conveniences, such as warm water and central heating⁴. This was a site where Soviet visions of social, political, and moral transformation were materialized.

Nowadays, Mustamäe is the most densely populated district in Estonia (representing 16% of Tallinn’s total population). But here, the population is old, which means (in Estonia, where reform pensions are meager) that alone, they cannot afford to fully renovate the aging buildings. Adding to this, many of them are Russian-speaking Estonians, meaning that they are afraid of change and often suspicious of state institutions (Heidmets and Liik 2012; Viljasaar 2013), and hence, are not similarly at home as other members of the Estonian society.

In his novel entitled Autumn Ball (1985), local writer Mati Unt depicted Mustamäe as a copy without an original⁵. There are 365 prefabricated units in Mustamäe, many of them of the type 1-464, commonly called khrushchovkas (хрущёвка).⁶ These panel houses have certainly aged, but they are not yet beyond repair. In the face of this problem, the Estonian state designed the Credit and Export Guarantee Fund (KredEx) programme to finance the renovation of apartment houses (partly by making use of EU structural funds and selling CO2 emission quotas).⁷

One of the novelties introduced by the KredEx programme was its political temporality. The renovation was not simply a retrofit of the Soviet past, but rather a reaching into the future—based on principles of ecological sustainability and with a transnational strategy. This is materialised through regulations, standards, and funding, which implies certain types of ventilation, pipelines, façades, and heating systems. We can also call it a project of social engineering, not anymore to construct socialism, but of Europeanisation.

Anthropology of Architecture

Although the work of construction is central to any society, the knowledge applied in this activity and site has been understudied and peripherally valued. However, ethnographic research on construction work is increasing through studies on the diverse array of practices, relations, and kinds of knowledge present in the construction site (Pink et al. 2010; Thiel 2013; Sage and Vitry 2018). Traditional anthropological approaches have put more emphasis on the symbology of houses as a social entity related to kin-
ship and politics, as a material expression of ideologies, as a structure of habits and patterns, as a set of social relations, and as an artefact capable of resolving multiple conflicts (Bourdieu 1979; Lévi-Strauss 1982; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Buchli 2013). More recently, new approaches have emerged that reconsider the practice of construction as an important way to make aspirations concrete and allow us to see ourselves in house-images (Miller 2001).

Tim Ingold, for instance, argues that “a building is a condensation of skilled activity that undergoes continual formation” (2004: 240). Yet, there is also a body of work inspired by Rapoport (1969) and Bourdieu (1990) that takes dwellings as a process of socialisation and as an artefact in itself, analyzing the way architecture provides a means of organization and even governance. For instance, Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995) have proposed that a building must be regarded as a process rather than as a static, finished object. They also argue that a building has a life history of its own, just like the humans who inhabit it.

In this vein, Stewart Brand contends that buildings are meant to change and thus have “social lives,” even if they were “designed not to adapt; also budgeted and financed not to, constructed not to, administered not to, regulated and taxed not to” (1994: 1). Indeed, there is a great value in studying the aging and mutation of buildings, and not simply their design and birth. For instance, Ignaz Strebel (2011) proposes viewing architecture as “performative”; Neil Harris (1999) suggests employing the concept of “building surgery” to understand the reworkings that extend the life of dwellings; and Daniel Miller (2002) proposes pushing the interpolation of homes and social relations to the forefront and paying attention to the work of “accommodation” as “an agreement to compromise” that involves people, houses, and the things within them (2002: 23-24). Information, too, plays an important role in construction processes: in the form of typologies, technical procedures, and funding mechanisms (Barry 2001; Fariás 2011).

The Mutuality of Building

The nakedness of my apartment was manifested the day we moved in (February 20, 2017) and out (September 30, 2020) in its loud emptiness. As a side effect, my embodied engagement in the renovation of the apartment made the decision to sell it even more difficult, which finally happened in September 2020 while I was already preparing myself for the second wave of confinement.

A void of potentiality was likewise manifested in the photos that my own father sent me of the “renovation” of the house where I spent my childhood, in Fuente Librilla, Spain. In the beginning, I looked at the picture sent by my father with sadness, seeing my former home reduced to rubble. Later on, when I visited my parents and stayed overnight, I perceived the “renovated” house with coldness as my dwelling had been cleared from the house, reminding me that homes are but a provisional construction.
Homes mutate and mature in much the same way as people age. My key proposition is that comparisons can be drawn between the biographies of persons and home-making, highlighting the eventful discontinuation and change of states we all might go through together. This approach also helps us to understand the entanglements between homes, personal trajectories, and the social contexts within which buildings are shaped (Carsten 2018), as well as the analogies between human and non-human life-cycles.

In this vein, Harris (1999) also proposed studying homes as entities that follow life stages, such as birth, coming to age, and finally, death. However, such thought-provoking identification also shows analytical limitations since homes are not born but instead built. Likewise, they do not die; they are abandoned or neglected, following all-too-human decisions. Instead of symbolic life stages in buildings, we find the materialisation of biographical dualities and relations of mutuality. Therefore, we can correlate (but not equate) home making with our maturing, co-constituting each other while constructing attachment and responsibility.
Conclusion

As with life, home-making is an unfolding process. Homes are accomplished in complex temporal networks and agencies, accommodated and negotiated over time as an “ongoing process of holding together” (Jacobs and Merriman 2011: 212). Ethnographically, I addressed the specificities of construction time and the knowledge and affect based on my experience of home-making through physical work. Through a series of captions, I reflected on the subjective reactions and context of production of photos taken in the construction site, as if the captions were an augmented reality.

The described construction process was, however, not dedicated to enskillment but rather to reinforcing personal relations and, prosaically, to get a roof. Originally, I was not building to know more about the field of construction; rather, the act of building became part of the process of constructing a family and materializing a personal notion of a good life. This peripheral approach to building made me understand, however, my ignorance of how construction works. On the contrary, Silver was well aware of what he knows and doesn’t know about construction (even if he was not always able to translate this into words). And yet, Silver might know much more than me about building houses, but not how to make my home.

Home-making is a process of dwelling and maturing that echoes lived experiences, materiality and an interdependent existence, but not necessarily construction skills. Homes are made out of affect and socio-material duration. In other words, a home is the outcome of the work of bodies and of the work of time.

Notes

1 Dionne Warwick, “A House Is Not A Home” (Scepter Records 1964). I want to thank Silver for his patience, and Eeva Berglund for her generous feedback.
2 After a long-term ethnography with builders in Yemen, Trevor Marchand argues that expertise in this field is rather transferred in a mimetic way. Indeed, “much of the practical experience that constitutes the ‘know-how’ eludes being ‘fixed’ by language, and is therefore filtered out in descriptions” (2003: 43).
3 I’m aware that captions establish a parasitical relation to photos (Garner et al. 2003), unequivocally depending upon the images to which they are attached for their existence. Photographs can appear captionless, but captions, on their own, are no more than floating text. These captions set out to transform the original approach to the photos as anchorages (to fixate moments and meanings), into one of relays, positioning the verbal and the visual in a complementary relationship, as amplifications of each other (Barthes 1977).
4 Territory: 8,0 km2; Population: 68,000. Back then, Mustamäe was densely populated by intellectuals, who were part of a network of friends, who would visit each other and even organise art events in their apartments (Keskküla 2010; Kurg 2010).
5 A fictional space in which image and reality do not coincide. For literary scholar Epp Annus, the new district was part of a wider chain of simulacrum, the Soviet ‘new authenticity’, carrying “a certain sense of failure in the Soviet project of modernity. Mustamäe became a site of modern alienation, but also a turning point from modernity to postmodernity: a pastiche, a simulacrum, a copy without an original” (2015: 65). Another literary scholar, Piret Viires, has also described it as “a collapsing utopia… turned into a distorted and warped reality… a distorting mirror of former modernist aspirations” (2003: 400).
We are talking of panel houses, most often five-storey buildings. For instance, the specific construction type of my building was also developed in other parts of the Soviet empire, such as Ivanovo, Kazan, Chelyabinsk, and Novosibirsk (actual Russia).

Since the year 2000, KredEx has helped more than 30,300 households improve their living conditions, providing renovation grants and also financial support and expertise. Despite the success of the program in accomplishing renovations and receiving applications, KredEx was, however, put on hold for a couple of years, allegedly due to the lack of funding.

They were thus not written to condition the interpretation of photos, but instead, to extend their meaning by including analytical and empirical data from the site.

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