

# The significance of sketching: Drawing a streetscape in a Nairobi neighbourhood

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## Abstract

This piece examines the value of sketching in ethnographic fieldwork. Thinking with a sketch drawn of a Nairobi streetscape one morning, I discuss how sketching can enable a particular engagement with our surroundings that serves both as a licence to lurk and a valuable mode of recording what we see. I also consider how the sketch becomes a meaningful artefact that can be shared in the moment or later on, as another way of conveying an argument or telling a story. I argue that both the sketch itself and the practice of sketching can help us pay really close attention to our surroundings while accepting the limits to what we can know about ‘the field’.

## KEYWORDS

ethnography, inside the notebook, Nairobi, opacity, sketching, streetscapes

## 1 | SKETCHING IN PLACE(S)

I have long carried a sketchbook in my bag. ‘Dead’ time can always be made more interesting with a sketchbook at hand, and a sketch helps mark a moment and a place. Throughout my undergraduate studies in Anthropology and Dance, and my later graduate studies in Geography, sketching became a way of taking notice of details that might otherwise be fleeting, go unnoticed, or seem too ordinary to matter. Though sketching has become an integral part of my research practice, it was never something that I reflected on greatly until now. As Hitchings and Latham (2020) have observed, although it is *de rigueur* for geographers to disclose what data they have gathered, they do not often say much about how they have done so. My reflection on the significance of sketching contributes to our special issue’s efforts to foster an honest conversation about the idiosyncrasies of fieldwork practice and the funky mechanics of how we record data. By focusing on a sketch (Figure 1) from a fieldwork trip in 2016 in a neighbourhood that holds particular meaning for my research, I reflect on what sketching does for us during fieldwork and later when we share our work with others. The aim is ultimately

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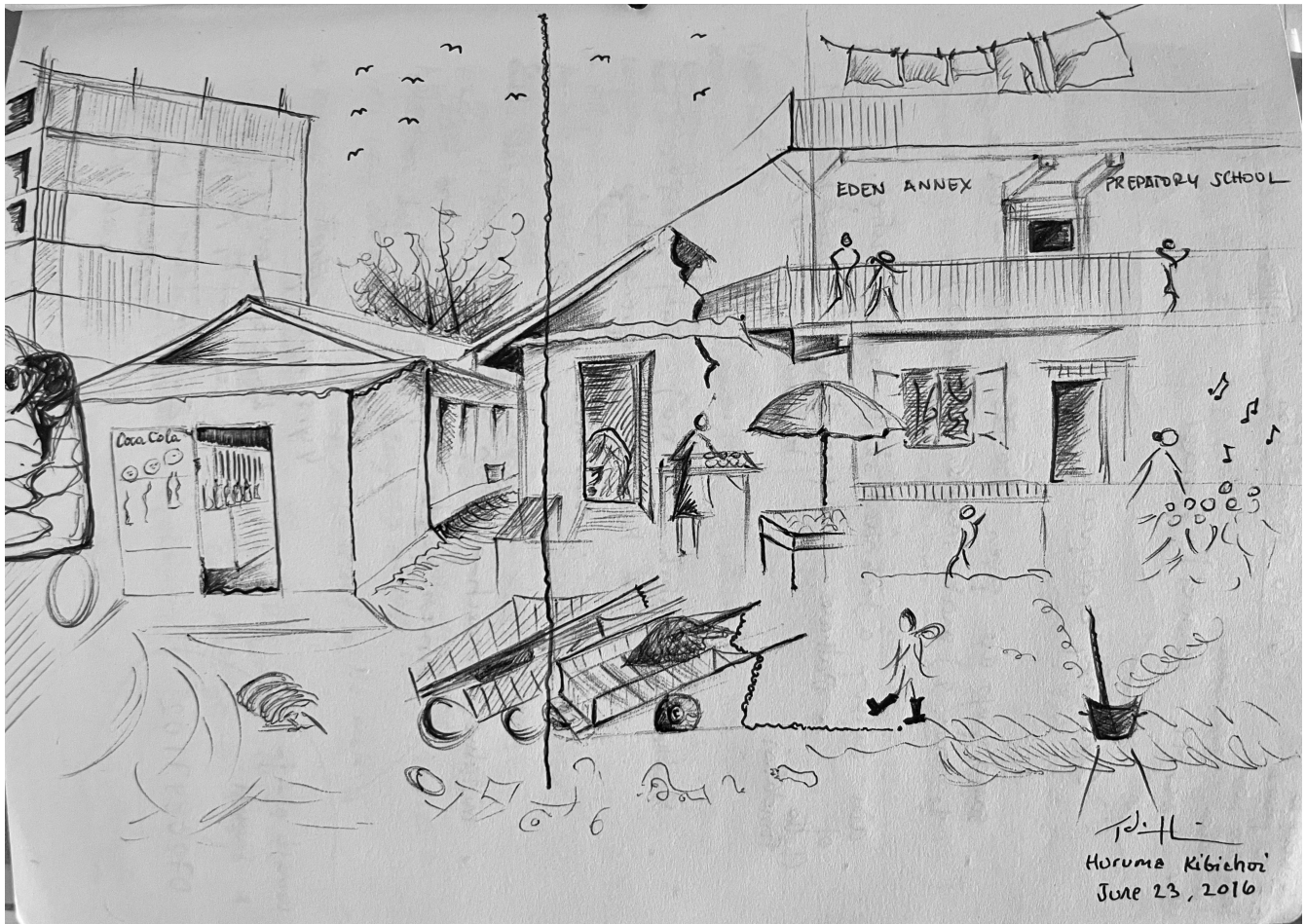


FIGURE 1 Sketch of Kibicho base in Huruma, Nairobi. 2016.

to encourage other starting and seasoned fieldworkers to value their own practices of sketching in all its forms—from the quick rough drawing to the more detailed rendition—in places seen for the first time, or those of continual return. Both the artefact of the sketch and the practice of sketching can reflect the commitment to paying really close attention to one's surroundings while accepting the limits to what we can know and understand about a place, accommodating and acknowledging what Glissant (1997) terms 'opacity'.

## 2 | INTRODUCING THE SKETCH

This sketch was drawn one Nairobi morning in June 2016 in Huruma, a densely populated neighbourhood combining both vertical tenement-like buildings and single story makeshift structures. A mix of small semi-permanent retail outlets and street vendors offer all manner of goods and services to those living and working around. Under-served in terms of public provision, Huruma is effectively its own self-help city within the city. You can access cyber-café and kiosks selling refrigerated drinks, you can get a haircut, buy and sell fresh produce, find a pharmacy and a mobile payment agent. Second-hand businesses sell everything from resoled shoes to used phones. Repair technicians extend the lives of more or less anything. Furniture makers work alongside mechanics, welders and shoe-shiners. This sketch represents the multiplicity of social and economic labours that make up the everyday choreographies of intersecting activities in one of Huruma's streetscapes.

The sketch shows a child rushing to school in their little gumboots during rainy season, crossing paths with Geoffrey's *mandazi* (fried dough) stand, featured in the middle of the sketch. Geoffrey, who once told me he had been making and selling *mandazi* for 28 years, strategically set up his business by the school entrance since the kids are some of his best morning customers. To the left of Geoffrey, Naomi appears in the shadows of the shack's doorway at her stall where she brews a large batch of *chai*. She is continuously bent over her brew, but also close enough to the edge of the stall to see what is happening

on the street, and within earshot of Geoffrey so they can chat as they work. To the left of Naomi's shack, a path leads to one of the only public toilets and water access points of the neighbourhood. These are not shown in the sketch, but the path reminds me of the times I would pass young teenage girls walking up and down to fill jerricans of water, taking care to place their flip-flops on the least muddy bits of the path. That June morning, the garbage truck finally arrived and the local youth group, which had collected residential garbage since 3 a.m. and brought the refuse by handcart to the transit dumpsite across from the primary school, were loading the truck as the children went to school. Their labour peaked when everyone else was just starting their day, and the handcart at the front of the sketch is its legacy. I remember the garbage fumes from the truck on the left competing with the tea and mandazi smells. The garbage was everyone's, but all wished it to be taken away as quickly as possible. The young men who had collected it throughout the night were also the loyal (and first) customers of Geoffrey and Naomi, and some were the uncles or brothers of the kids attending the primary school.

### 3 | SKETCHING AS A WAY TO STAY

Why was I there that morning? After a homestay in Huruma the day before, I had just finished a stint on the nocturnal garbage collection rounds with Kennedy and three other Kibichoi youth group members. This helped me better understand the rhythms and practices of youth-led waste labour in the neighbourhood where I had been conducting fieldwork, learning by doing rather than by just asking (Thieme et al., 2017). Once the truck had arrived, as shown on the left-hand side of the sketch, the guys involved needed to load it up. The work I had been able to shadow at night when not many people were around was now fully exposed, and it felt appropriate to step away from the group under the scrutiny of daylight. But I still wanted to stay around. Following nocturnal garbage collection, it felt important to witness the full cycle of 'garbage work' because every step—from night-time household collection to the moment when garbage was taken away—had required careful negotiation and planning in a neighbourhood often cut off from basic services. In that moment, sketching allowed me to linger and bought me some time to decompress too.

Sketching gave me the space and time to digest the happenings of the night-time work which had required a particular kind of embodied presence and alert engagement, trying both to keep up physically and make constant mental notes. Field notes would follow later that day, but in that moment, I did not feel compelled to describe in written form what was going on and what had just happened, or immediately test out preliminary academic ideas to make sense of the events that had transpired. Sketching permitted a form of unstructured witnessing at the tail end of a pretty exhausting night and early morning, and some time to reflect, literally and figuratively sitting with a scene in front of me and the scenes of the hours just passed. Sketching can provide a gentle accompaniment to fatigue, letting the mind and pen wander in improvised ways, detached from overt analysis, and yet the sketch itself has the potential to point to surprising features and ideas.

Sketching in full view on that streetscape was in part facilitated by the time I had spent earlier that morning with Kennedy and his crew. It would have felt and been perceived as invasive to rock up and start sketching without a clear indication to people around what and whom my connection to the neighbourhood was. Sketching extended my permission to stay on the street, and perhaps afforded me a certain licence to lurk, on the edges but still in full view. At one point, a young man came out from one of the kiosks on the street corner I was standing on to ask if I wanted a chair, a gesture of welcome and accommodation, perhaps giving me permission to temporarily 'domesticate' that public space *through* sketching (Koch & Latham, 2013).

### 4 | SKETCHING TO SEE THE CITY

The act of sketching was a comparatively idle undertaking at the time, but as Moloney (2022) notes, despite our worries in academic work, even 'bad' drawings can be valuable. Citing the work of Causey (2017), Taussig (2011), and Theron et al. (2011) who each insist on the value of drawing by hand and its contributions to scholarship, Moloney reminds us that drawing is a foundational mode of learning and expression in early education, and somehow gets eroded in supposed 'higher' levels of education. He argues that developing a drawing practice should be part of one's research repertoire, and included in our methodological and ethical considerations. In Nairobi, Arthur Adeya uses hand drawing as an integral part of his work as an urban designer hoping to more meaningfully describe urban life in its multitude. His 2022 talk, 'Finding the City, one sketchbook at a time'<sup>1</sup>, explains how sketching not only provides a creative visual representation

<sup>1</sup>Adeya gave a keynote lecture on May 24th, 2022, for the Rise Africa Action Festival. The lecture can be accessed online here: <https://youtu.be/AWLM3JjPTAU?si=OzgEKospnAHwVwi5>

of urban life, it also enables a more deliberate practice of what he calls ‘learning from life’ in the city. Sketching, he argues, can be a means to better understanding the city *kwa ground*, a popular Kenyan saying in *Sheng* vernacular which infers that you need to get to the ground level to understand what is going on in people’s lived realities.

Inspired by the works of Moloney, Causey, Taussig, Theron et al. and Adeya, I would argue that sketching can simultaneously defer the compulsion to analyse immediately, and encourages the eye and the mind to take notice of details that might not otherwise jump into view. These include the interstices and in-between spaces, the shadows, and the intersecting lines in the distance. Sketching forces you to linger with what is in front of you, whether it is a familiar scene or something completely new, and invites the mind to wander and wonder. In that mode of lingering, musing and *sitting with scenes*, sketching is deep noticing while deferring explanation—letting the explanation emerge over time.

Thinking with my sketch from that June morning, what did the sketch *do*? Over time, this sketch has become integral to my understanding and recollection of the individual and shared *hustles* (Thieme, 2021) that are entangled with diverse uses and ‘domestication’ (Koch & Latham, 2013) of public spaces at the intersection of household, educational and commercial practices in this neighbourhood. The sketch evokes food preparation and provision, children’s voices emanating from the school building, people coming in and out of their homes fetching water and doing domestic chores while kick-starting the day’s street banter. The sketch reminds me of the *chai* and *mandazi* we had after garbage collection, sat on stools outside the tea stall, turning that piece of pavement into a modular outdoor café. This streetscape was at once work station, living room, kitchen, delivery spot, and a transit dumping ground in waiting. Both the process of sketching and seeing the sketch later gave me a heightened appreciation of this constellation of coordinated activity, in all its mundanity and artful frugality.

It is important to emphasise that I would have not felt comfortable making this sketch at the earlier stages of my fieldwork. So while I have argued that sketching can facilitate a licence to hang out in a place, in some contexts acquiring the permission to do so unchallenged, and feeling comfortable enough to hang out there, may take time. That was the case in my experience at least, particularly in this neighbourhood. To do so in this part of Huruma felt meaningful because sketching allowed me to see certain details I had not noticed before—the texture of certain surfaces, angles between structures, the distances and scales of objects and spaces between them. This sketch has come to serve as a visualisation of neighbourhood life, labour and liveliness in one of my key Nairobi field sites. It now operates as a vital *aide-mémoire* for writing thick descriptions about this place, and *now* informs my analytical as well as descriptive writing. And when I see it and study it, I am transported back.

## 5 | SKETCHING IS SHARING

The sketch has also become a visual illustration I can share with others. First, the advantage of sketching is that it produces a visible, tangible output that can be shared with those curious about what you are doing in the moment. While I was sketching, children came by to ask what I was drawing, as did Geoffrey later on. Kennedy took a photo he later shared with me. Around the corner, there was a kiosk with a copy machine where I was able to make several copies of the sketch, to give to Geoffrey, one of the teachers in the school, Kennedy, Naomi, and the young man who had offered me a chair. This is not to suggest that it was a particularly good sketch, but I had sat there for about an hour, so it was appropriate to share the output of what I was doing. Sketching reflected my own practice, but in its performative dimension, the act itself was easily seen and became recognisable to those around. As an artefact that tried to mark the convergence of mundane moments, the sketch itself belonged to everyone around. So not only can a sketch validate the excuse to stay around, but it can also help build and strengthen social relations in a place, which then also provides a pretext for return.

Beyond Kibicho and Nairobi, the sketch became a presentational device for other audiences too. When I present or write about it now, the sketch serves to bring others along ‘into the field’ in some way. So using sketches can do two things: First, it can sharpen our own ethnographic writing and animate more granular analyses of a time spent in a place, reminding us why we might want to return to that place (or wonder what it is like now). Second, it allows us to ‘bring to life’ and explain our insights in a way that enhances (and differs from) photographs, interview quotes, or descriptive text. Crucially, a sketch is by definition an incomplete and partial rendering, so when it is shared with different audiences, it usually invites some explanation and context, which in turn, elicits (one hopes) a response from those viewing it, in the form of questions and conversations that continue to push our own thinking.

## 6 | CONCLUSION: SIGNIFICANCE OF SKETCHING FOR FIELDWORK

Sometimes we sketch in the field without fully knowing what it does for us as researchers. As I said at the start, I do it partly because I've always enjoyed it. But this paper reflects on what it does for me as a researcher. Using one of my Nairobi sketches, I have explored how it helped me at the time, what it has done for my analysis, and how it has allowed me to engage others with my work. Sketches animate fieldnotes and add an affective and relational register that is not just transmitted through written accounts alone. They 'thicken' the description in their own way (Geertz, 1973). The field sketch in itself might appear as a stand-alone visualisation, but, as I've considered here, it also has a life and evolving function in research that goes beyond being a 'nice (illustration) to have'. In my Nairobi example, I've shown how sketches in themselves have done three things for me.

First, sketching offers the chance to sit and observe and notice one's surroundings in close detail, which can neither happen when we are doing other things in that setting, and cannot be captured in the same way with other means of documentation. So the practice of sketching has methodological value. It takes time to sketch, and doing so affords a respectful licence to hang around, and perhaps feels less extractive than taking photos because it is not as easy, and less secretive than taking fieldnotes because ultimately sketches can be shared with others in a way that fieldnotes are usually not. Second, sketching allows you to take notice of things happening over the course of an hour, say. You think more intently about what you see as you sketch over the course of that hour, noticing the material composition of structures, the spaces in between them, the flow of people's movements, the in-between spaces, the sounds overlapping, the street conversations, the rhythms of local commerce, and the labours of those manning local businesses. These things stick with you for a while, and they become useful to write about later. They feed into your reflection as you transition between raw observational notes, and the beginnings of analytical writing—the process of trying to decipher what these ordinary scenes might show. Third, the actual sketch both triggers a potent memory about a place and a situation, and allows us to share it with others in a form that differs from, and complements, prose.

There is one more point: the sketch provides a kind of panorama, allowing for some wider context, in which a particular aspect of a study is situated. My focus that morning was on the garbage collection economy. We had been up since 2 a.m. to collect residential garbage from 15 buildings. But sketching later that morning allowed me to appreciate the wider setting in which my ethnographic focus was embedded, to reflect on the lifeworld of this streetscape, while sitting and sketching (Hall, 2012). Although I would only ever come to know a small part of the neighbourhood's inner-workings, it is important to find ways to *see* the wider whole—to *see* without expecting to *know* or grasp most of it, to allow for a kind of 'right to opacity' (Glissant, 1997). That is why sketching is an important method that can afford a meaningful moment in the field, one where the trail of our pencil marks is left unfinished. The sketch then becomes a metaphor for ethnographic practice—it is a glimpse of a moment and a place—that stays with us when we look back on that time in the field, when we return to it, write about it, continue to wonder about it. It is a reminder of the opacity inherent in all research, and the continuous challenge of writing up the field (Back, 2014; Geertz, 1988). Sketching provides a way of seeing the granular *and* wider picture, sitting with the enigmas in what we see. One of the most important steps when we decide to sketch is reading the space, and finding a spot to sit or stand still, where our presence does not disturb, but from where one can get a sense of converging urban sociality and spaces. In this way, sketching suspends other kinds of 'fieldworking' (taking part, interviewing etc.), while enabling the prolongation of *staying* a little while longer, to see what happens.

Does sketching enable us to *be* in the field and pay attention in such a way that suspends the act of *collecting* data (Navarro, 2020), or does it become an additional form of data collection with an alternative sensibility to one's surroundings? This piece suggests that it may be a bit of both. I argue that sketching can have methodological, analytical and emotional significance. Although the sketch discussed here was drawn in a place that has been and will continue to be a point of continual return, sketching can be just as important for making a memory, having an excuse to hang out, and leading to some analytical thinking when you find yourself in a place that you might never return to again. Either way, it operates as a visual and experiential archive of fieldwork in its more ephemeral mode. And sketching, as my final point argues, also gives us a way to be comfortable with not knowing exactly what is going on in our field site, at least not right away. So I would encourage others to just have a go, wherever they find 'the field', and to value any kind of sketch, because the process of doing it, and seeing it later, could lead to something interesting and even lasting. And if it does not, it has at least marked a moment.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author of this manuscript confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data.

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