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Drawing Points, Tracing Lines: Writing Social Sciences Through Ethnographic Drawing

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Correspondence: Dolorès Bertrais (dolores.bertrais@unige.ch)**Received:** 14 June 2025 | **Revised:** 16 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 22 January 2026**Keywords:** Cambodia | drawing ethnography | materiality of the City | sand | visual methods in social sciences

ABSTRACT

This paper explores ethnographic drawing as both a methodological tool and an epistemological approach in the social sciences and more specifically in urban research. Based on fieldwork conducted in Phnom Penh (Cambodia) which follows the journey of a grain of sand from the Mekong riverbed to skyscrapers in the city, it examines how drawing, as a practice of in situ observation, can open new ways of seeing and perceiving urban transformation. Beyond its aesthetic dimension, in the social sciences, drawing offers a mode of inquiry that combines observation with care. It invites slowness and attention, helping the researcher to engage bodily involvement with the field. By restoring balance between thought and embodiment, drawing transforms perception into a relational and reflective act. As a practice, drawn ethnography goes beyond representation: it reshapes the researcher's gaze and makes visible the sometimes-invisible textures, voices and so on, of everyday life. Ultimately, this paper argues that ethnographic drawing is not merely an illustration of research but a way of thinking, a means of organising understanding through lines, gestures and attention. It invites us to imagine research as a shared, sensorial and caring practice, capable of reconnecting knowledge with the worlds it seeks to grasp and describe.

1 | Drawing Ethnography

This reflection on ethnographic drawing emerges from a long-standing engagement with visual and spatial practices in and out of my academic practices. My early training in landscape architecture shaped drawing as a privileged tool for observation and design, a means to think through space rather than merely represent it. This practice was later extended and transformed through my doctoral research (2019–2024) in urban studies, which examined the production of space of the 'Green City' within neoliberal urbanisation processes in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Bertrais 2024).

Urban planning in Phnom Penh is deeply shaped by a colonial legacy established under the French Protectorate (1863–1953). During this period, the city's physical expansion became

possible through large-scale engineering interventions. Dy'kes, drainage systems and hydraulic infilling with sand were mobilised to progressively detach the city from the geomorphological conditions upon which it had historically been built. Water, which once structured everyday urban life within the city, was gradually displaced beneath it—buried, channelled and rendered invisible. Since the early 2000s, the instrumentalisation of nature in service of urban development has intensified through large-scale sand extraction, lake infilling, for the benefits of speculative real estate projects. Unlike land acquired through an existing market, land created through infilling emerges from previously non-fungible spaces, such as lakes, wetlands and even from the Mekong River. Because the cost of sand remains systematically undervalued, this mode of land production has become particularly attractive, offering substantial profit margins and enabling speculative accumulation.

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Sand dredged from the Mekong and its tributaries thus functions as a political and economic material, mobilised to support land capture, real estate speculation and accumulation by dispossession. These processes are deeply entangled with contemporary forms of symbolic and material violence, generating uneven socio-environmental impacts and exacerbating existing inequalities.

It is within this context that drawing progressively became a critical ethnographic method in my iterative fieldwork. Drawing allowed me to document the materialities that compose the so-called green city and to trace how materials such as sand circulate, accumulate and participate in both urban production and speculative urbanisation. This research followed two distinct itineraries of a grain of sand moving through the Mekong River in Cambodia (Figure 1). The first bifurcation, titled ‘Putting the Living to Work: Narrative of an Observed and Studied Reality’, followed the trajectory of a grain of sand extracted from the Mekong and unpacked how it contributes to the production of the city (through landfill or concrete). The grain of sand is forced from its natural course, diverted from its initial flow toward new destinations and orientations. To follow the life of a grain of sand is to enter the materiality of cities and the production of urban space, but also to explore the extractions that precede them, the relations they form (human and more than human) and the socio-political configurations they sustain. The second bifurcation proposed a deliberately ‘speculative’ narrative to consolidate the return to the ‘Terrestre’ (Latour 2017) by following what I have called the ‘mineral trail’ (Bertrais 2025).

From this empirical ground, the article explores the epistemological and methodological potential of drawing in social science research. It asks the following questions: How does drawing, beyond its aesthetic dimension, contribute to the construction of social knowledge? What does it allow us to perceive, to think or to share that other methods might overlook? As Roussel and Guitard (2021a) note [from within the francophone field], drawing still struggles to gain recognition as a legitimate research tool, on par with photography, mapping or ethnographic description. Their observation echoes the broader anglophone movement in a different disciplinary tradition that reconsiders drawing as a mode of inquiry rather than mere illustration. This movement views drawing as part of a wider performative and posthuman turn that values situated, sensory and generative methods over descriptive ones (Hendrickson 2008; Pink 2016). It is not a representational device but an embodied research practice engaging the corporeality of the researcher, the materiality of gesture and the temporality of encounter (Ingold 2013; Taussig 2016; Brice 2024). Each line becomes a relational space where seeing, being and knowing are reconfigured. By slowing down observation, drawing renders perceptible what Sage Brice (2024) calls the ‘vulnerability’ of knowledge, its partial and affective nature.

Following Sarah Pink (2016), I seek to move beyond the dichotomy that separates drawing from writing. Echoing Tim Ingold’s (Ingold 2013) notion of ‘line-making’, Pink invites us to conceive ethnography, whether written, drawn, filmed or walked, as a continuum of gestures through which attention and meaning emerge. In this sense, drawn ethnography does

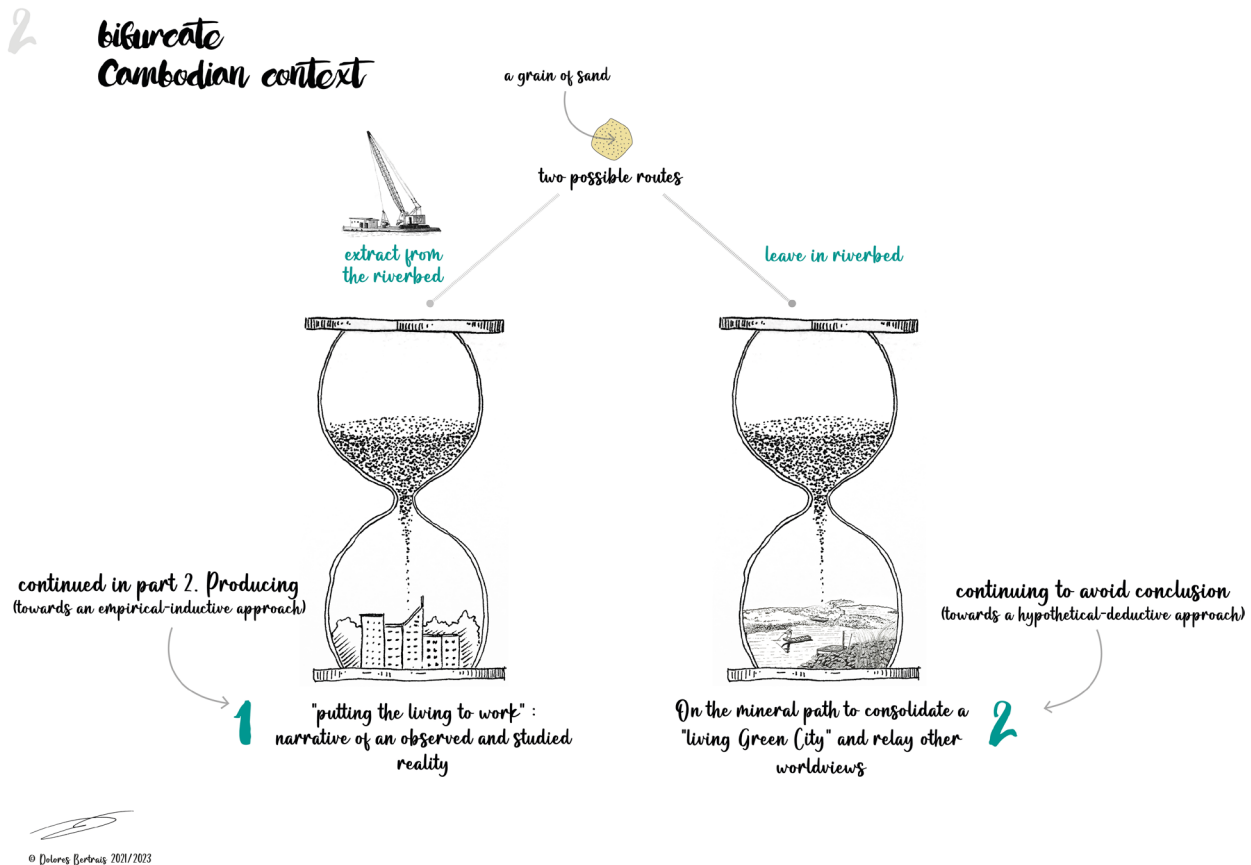


FIGURE 1 | Two possible paths for a grain of sand. 2021–2024 Dolorès Bertrais.

not illustrate the field but co-produces it, turning the act of tracing, by sketch or by word into a material, reflexive and open mode of thinking. This article also aims to initiate a dialogue between anglophone scholarship on graphic anthropology and francophone reflections on *dessin d'enquête* [ethnographic drawing], an effort that remains partial and modest: It cannot do full justice to both traditions, yet it hopes to open a few conceptual and methodological pathways for future conversations.

1.1 | A World Within Reach

When points..... are given force, they become lines.....

(Kandinsky 1991)

Lines that connect hand and thought.

Lines that traverse matter and meaning.

Lines of intersection between 'being' and 'doing'.¹

In collective imagination, drawing is often associated with childhood, a primordial, instinctive act, eventually abandoned. Before they write, children draw, geometrically, figuratively, hesitantly. Some of these drawings are later analysed in psychological studies (Picard and Baldy 2012). Betty Edwards (2012) describes an 'artistic crisis' that children face around the age of 9 or 10, when their hand can no longer keep pace with the complexity of what they perceive. Unable to reproduce what they see, they set the pencil aside. A gesture once so familiar gradually slips away. Yet the hand is capable of much more than grasping.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2017) urges us to reconsider the hand not as merely instrumental, but as thoughtful, as an agent in its own right. The separation between 'being' and 'doing' dissolves: all is encounter, convergence. Do we not say 'to get a grip on' something or 'to put one's finger on' it? The first implies physical grasp, the second intellectual insight. For Ingold, the hand is more than an extension of the mind; it is a connector, a thinker.

To draw is to see otherwise, with senses awakened—beyond the sometimes-misleading authority of the eye. This resonates with what Thieme (2025) calls *deep noticing*: sketching requires lingering with what is in front of us, suspending immediate interpretation and allowing understanding to emerge slowly through attentive presence. While Nocerino (2016, 172) reminds us that the position of the ethnographer's eye must be known to ensure valid transcription, I extend this notion of situatedness beyond visual accuracy. I advocate for a broader, multisensory attentiveness in which the hand becomes a medium of observation. Drawing is thus not only about seeing but about thinking with the hand, letting intuition guide the trace. The sketch unfolds as a form of speculative narration (Haraway 2013), a sensitive fiction through which vision is decentred and knowledge emerges in movement.

1.2 | Alternative Writing in the Social Sciences

The shelves of bookshops speak volumes: an increasing number of readers are turning to graphic novels and so-called

'non-fiction comics'. These illustrated narratives address pressing social, environmental or political issues, blending documentary rigour with artistic expression (Léraud and Van Hove 2019; Léraud et al. 2024; Davodeau 2021). At the intersection of art and anthropology, new collaborations are also emerging. See, in particular, *Illustrating Anthropology*, an online exhibition supported by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland or *Graphic Adventures in Anthropology* supported by the University of Toronto (Pigg et al. 2015; Royal Anthropological Institute 2020). In recent years, several anthropologists have also created in collaboration with visual artists or illustrators (Chevalme et al. 2022; Lesourd 2019).

Other social science researchers have chosen to illustrate their own findings (Hendrickson 2008; Pignocchi 2017, 2018, 2020; Nocerino 2020; Allagnat 2022). While these examples illustrate the rich dialogue between comics, art and the social sciences, it is crucial, here, to distinguish between drawing and comics. As Kuttner et al. (2021) remind us, comics rely on a specific grammar and narrative structure; they are often a finished product, a medium for storytelling (Kuttner et al. 2021, 196–197). Drawing, by contrast, functions as a process—a medium for thought and a form of visual memory.

In this article, I focus on drawing as practice rather than comics as outcome. Many of the arguments made in favour of drawing—its quasi pre-reflexive quality, its openness to uncertainty, its embodied and exploratory nature—do not necessarily apply to comics, which follow their own conventions to offer something unique as well (Forde 2022, 657). Drawing allows the researcher to think through the hand, to remain within the process of inquiry rather than its resolution. It is also important to distinguish between researchers who draw by themselves and researchers as collaborators with artists. The collaborations mentioned before are fruitful and deserving of attention, yet they differ from situations where researchers draw directly as part of their ethnographic practice. This resonates with Westmoreland's (2022) argument that 'multimodal methods cultivate ethnography as a practice-based approach to the way the researcher's body serves as the primary instrument of investigation'. (Westmoreland 2022, 177). Drawing is not merely a representational act; it is a bodily, affective and cognitive engagement with the field, one that blurs the boundaries between seeing, sensing and knowing. Some scholars believe drawing should be recognised as 'a research instrument in its own right within the fieldworker's methodological toolkit' (Roussel and Guitard 2021a, 2021b), while others describe how sketching is the only way they can find to sit and think with what they are seeing in a totally non-instrumental way (Middleton 2020, 3). Unlike written fieldnotes, which often feel like a 'distant dress rehearsal for the dissertation', drawing enables a suspension of interpretation and opens a space for more intuitive engagement. The in situ sketch, the field drawing, arises from the 'experience of being there' (Geismar 2014, 110). It gains force not as illustration, but as embodied visual writing. It claims its place within visual anthropology, coded with the rhythms of presence (Geismar 2014).

Middleton's discussion with three of his colleagues at Princeton also emphasises how sketching can render visible, or at least tangible, what is otherwise invisible, supernatural

or transcendent: ‘Perhaps the most valuable role of sketching in the field (...) was the inroads it offered into contending with the invisible, inexplicable, otherworldly, supernatural, and transcendent’ (Middleton 2020, 26). This is also what happened in my drawing practice, which allowed me to give voice to what often remains invisible or inaudible—to those, human and more than human, who cannot speak, like a grain of sand, which I explain in more detail in section 1.5.

1.3 | When Sketching Becomes a Way of Thinking

‘Today, I’ll draw.’

Rarely does a research endeavour begin like this.

More often, it’s the field itself that calls the pencil:

‘This scene, this encounter – perhaps I should sketch it?’

In my own research practice, drawing has always been a reflexive as much as an observational process. From the very moment sketching in situ begins, it becomes a way of thinking through gestures, materials and encounters—an embodied form of reasoning that unfolds alongside the field itself. My notebook and pencils frequently accompany me on walks, quietly waiting. This field journal serves as both memory and investigation—a space where observation and projection cohabit (Argod 2017). Most of my sketches are made on-site rather than others that come later, drawn from photographs or sensory recollection.

Reflection does not come after the drawing; it is already there, in the tracing of lines, in decisions of framing, selection and omission. Initially, these sketches took the form of fieldnote drawings—an attempt to observe, linger and think with the places, textures and movements I encountered. Over time, they evolved beyond documentation: they became analytical tools, mnemonic anchors and aesthetic experiments that shaped my understanding of the field.

When I draw, the concept of time disappears. Some sketches are made in five minutes, others require hours, but I can’t know until I’ve packed away my drawing tools. Yet the purpose is neither simplification nor precision—it is translation. As Andrew Causey reminds us, drawing is a way of learning to see (Wathelet 2018); or, as I mentioned earlier in Thieme’s (2025) terms, sketching is *deep noticing*. Such attentiveness is shaped not only by the researcher but by the material world itself: the climate, surfaces and the resistance of things.

One April morning in Phnom Penh, during the hottest month of the year, I sat near Koh Pich Island watching barges heave sand from the Mekong (Figure 2). My black pens stopped flowing; the thermosensitive ink surrendered to the heat. Graphite took over. The tropical climate thus inscribed itself into the sketch—tools obey the weather. Such moments recall what Sage Brice (2024) observes: ‘Field conditions such as weather become incorporated into this process, and chance interruptions affect what takes place on the page. The material qualities of specific media also inflect the attention of the observer, drawing out those qualities of the encounter—movement, structure, texture, atmosphere – which they are most suited to express. By all these means, the materiality of the drawing process speaks back to the process of

observation and orientates the researcher towards specific dimensions of the field observed’ (214).

Sarah Pink (2016) makes a similar point when describing her experience of drawing under intense heat: to draw is to slow down. The act of sketching prolongs one’s relation to the environment and the elements, cultivating an intimacy that is at once material, affective and aesthetic. Through these embodied temporalities, the field itself becomes a co-author of the image.

When I am in the field—physically and intellectually in motion—the act of drawing allows me to *be* in the world, to connect with the terrain and, above all, with the people I meet. Its performative agency unsettles conventional notions of what it means to ‘write’ science, offering a practice that complements rather than replaces written inquiry.

As Hendrickson (2008) puts it, ‘producing visual along with verbal field notes has allowed me a different sort of active engagement in the worlds of people and places “out there” as well as ideas “in my head”; the two are brought together – shown to be inseparable – as marks on the page trigger thoughts, which in turn push me to draw and look and converse and think more and in different ways’ (Hendrickson 2008, 129). Her words resonate deeply with my own experience: drawing generates a recursive movement between seeing, thinking and feeling, collapsing the distance between the field and the page. Particularly in a time when much academic writing circulates mainly among peers, this entanglement of visual and verbal practices opens up possibilities for more inclusive and affective modes of knowledge-making. In this sense, drawing aligns with broader efforts by researchers to explore alternative forms of writing, ones capable of engaging not only scholars, but also neophytes, concerned communities and publics beyond the academic world.

1.4 | Rethinking the Transmission of Research

Drawing is a tool for transposing a form of knowledge into a visual medium, much like other textual or visual modes of expression. Through sketching, the researcher engages in the constructed dimension of data. This process opens up a series of choices: I choose framing, setting the boundaries of the visible image, what we define as the field. I choose to draw from a particular point, using one technique over another. I may opt for black and white rather than colour. Although it is not chiaroscuro, drawing in black and white is conceived in a similar spirit: ‘[...]it confronts us with the temporal dimension of the journey: white contains all possibilities, the silence before birth, and black closes them, the silence after death’² (Kandinsky 1991, vi). With these words, the philosopher of art Philippe Sers, in his preface to Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane*, offers a theoretical justification for the use of black and white.

In my own practice, this process unfolds in several stages. I begin in the field, sketching in graphite within my notebook—a medium that allows for hesitation, correction and recomposition. Once the lines feel stable, I retrace them in black ink, fixing certain contours while leaving others open to

in the foreground, a barge full of sand with its waterline close to the free board. in the background, the sand embankments at Areiy Ksatr stand out

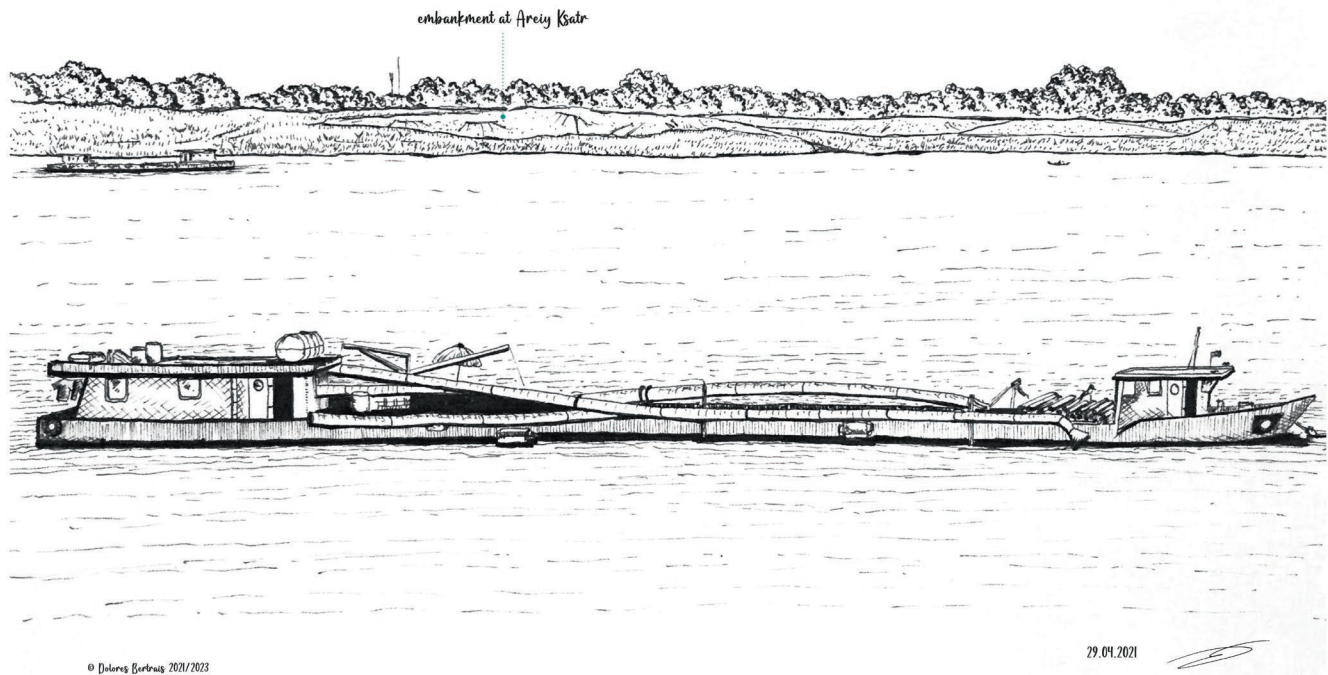


FIGURE 2 | A barge full of sand skims the surface of the water, 29/04/2021 Dolorès Bertrais.

change. While drawing in situ, reflection evolves through the slowness of observation, through the hand's dialogue with the landscape or scene. When the drawing is later digitised, this reflexivity re-emerges in another register. The screen offers a new surface for thought, where contrasts are adjusted, the drawing is cleaned up, and composition is reworked through desktop publishing software such as Photoshop and InDesign (Figure 3). These interventions are never neutral: each adjustment, addition or erasure carries interpretive weight, subtly shifting the message the image conveys. By interweaving field narratives with drawn fragments, I move toward what Dusan Kazic (2022) calls a 'speculative ethnography': an anthropological reworking capable of imagining 'other multispecific worlds, shaped by new ways of living with the more-than-human'³ (Kazic 2022, 364). In this phase, through layering, juxtaposition and reorganisation, the drawing acquires new meanings that were not necessarily visible at the moment of sketching. The digital environment thus does not simply finalise the image; it materialises an ongoing process of inquiry, one in which visual, conceptual and narrative decisions continue to interact. The final composition is not a fixed outcome but the temporary crystallisation of a sustained conversation between hand, eye and thought—a form of enduring reflexivity (Figure 4).

Although such practices remain underrecognised in academia, they offer a compelling complement to the observational exercises outlined by Nicolas Nova (2022). Shifting perspectives and drawing

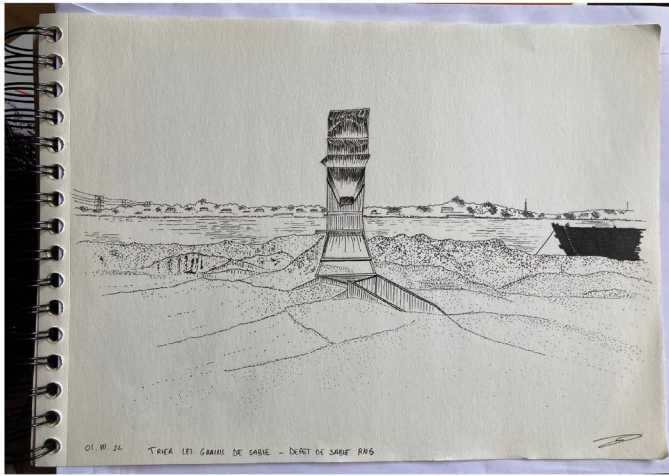
attention to overlooked dimensions of everyday life, graphic ethnography contributes to the 'arts of noticing' (Nova 2022, 151). The drawings that accompany my writings are never neutral. They carry political weight. They become sketches, maps, situated traces—linking the study of territory with its geographies of power and potential for situated storytelling (Ingold 2013). A researcher's choices of scale and perspective guide this process, lending certain elements a particular agency—a visual force that captures attention and makes meaning possible.

For the reader or viewer, these drawings invite another form of engagement—one of deciphering, imagining and projecting beyond what is shown. The act of viewing reopens the image, activating what lies beyond the frame: the off-stage, the unseen, the uncertain. This space becomes a site of imagination, where unsaid narratives and half-glimpsed connections emerge.

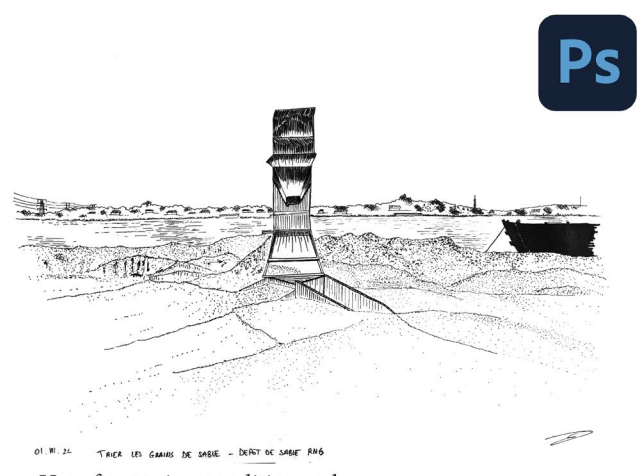
1.5 | No Line Without Sharing: Drawing the City Differently

In Phnom Penh, where urban growth unfolds through numerous hidden flows, the act of drawing becomes more than a mode of representation—it is a way of knowing. This practice operates across three intertwined dimensions: epistemological, methodological, aesthetic and critical. Together, these dimensions position drawing as both an inquiry and an ethics of attention—a different way of drawing the city.

The sketch in situ



Clean up the image



Use of raster image editing and processing software such as Photoshop



A notebook, a mechanical pencil, an eraser, black fine-tip markers (0.05 to 0.5 mm)



A white A4 sheet of paper
Two samples of sand
A phone (for the photo)

FIGURE 3 | The stages of drawn ethnography—from in situ's sketches to their editing using desktop publishing software. 2021–2025 Dolorès Bertrais.

1.5.1 | The Epistemological Dimension: Drawing as a Response to Opacity

The urban development of Phnom Penh advances through often invisible or deliberately obscured material and political processes: sand extraction from riverbeds, large-scale land reclamation and speculation. These processes operate within zones of uncertainty—both physical and institutional—where access to sites, data and decision-making is restricted. In this context, drawing becomes a mode of inquiry that restores visibility to what is otherwise unseen. It allows the researcher to attend to the material and affective dimensions of urban transformation that resist conventional documentation. Sand, in particular, is a fluid and elusive material—it slips through the tools of cartography, statistics and photography. Its trajectories are dispersed, its labour hidden, its effects deferred. Through drawing, these dispersed moments can be reassembled into a visual and conceptual continuum. The act of sketching—slow, situated and embodied—enables a form of knowledge that is attentive rather than extractive.

Thus, the need for this mode of representation arises precisely because the production of Phnom Penh's urban space is opaque,

fragmented and in flux. Drawing offers a way to think through the invisible thickness of urban materiality.

1.5.2 | The Methodological Dimension: Drawing as Translation Across Scales and Worlds

Drawing operates as a method of translation between different epistemic worlds: between technical plans and local narratives, between material flows and lived experiences, between the granular and the planetary. Unlike photography, which captures a moment, drawing is processual and iterative—it unfolds over time, integrating field encounters, memories and revisions. It allows the researcher to link multiple temporalities: the geological time of sedimentation, the seasonal rhythms of the Mekong, the political time of development projects. Through this method, the ethnographic and the cartographic converge: the sketchbook becomes both a site of observation and of synthesis. By moving between line, annotation and spatial abstraction, drawing makes it possible to represent continuities and discontinuities—how sand moves from river to truck, from truck to construction site, from soil to speculation (Figure 5). In this sense, drawing is not only a representational device but a way of reasoning about connections



Use desktop publishing (DTP) software such as InDesign. Choose fonts, colors, etc.

15 *from the barge to the depot:
sorting grains of sand*

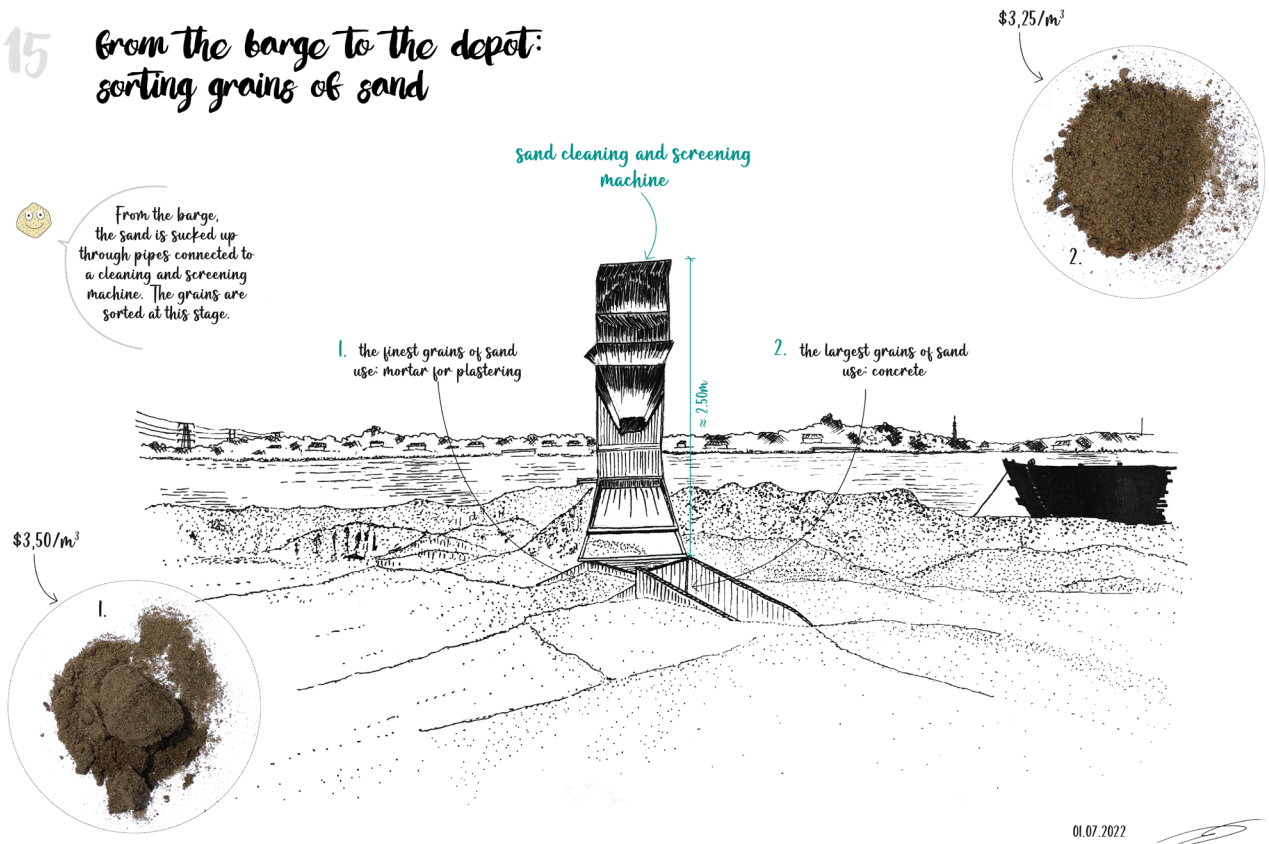


FIGURE 4 | The stages of drawn ethnography—from desktop publishing software to integration into the final manuscript of the doctoral thesis. 2021–2024 Dolorès Bertrais.

that remain invisible in official data or fragmented field notes. It translates the city’s metabolism into a form that is visual, relational and open-ended.

1.5.3 | The Aesthetic and Critical Dimension: Drawing as Counter-Visuality

Phnom Penh’s urban landscape is saturated with official images—architectural renderings, billboard projections and glossy masterplans that project a seamless narrative of modernisation. These visual regimes produce a futuristic, sanitised imaginary that erases the material and socio-environmental consequences of urban transformation. In contrast, drawing offers counter-visual practice, a way of unlearning the dominant aesthetics of development. By foregrounding the textures of sand, the gestures of labour and the unstable ecologies of the river, it reinstates what official images exclude: the ecological, social and affective undercurrents of urbanisation. This practice aligns with traditions of counter-mapping and critical visuality, reclaiming the act of representation as a political gesture. The line, here, is not a neutral trace—it resists the smoothness of finely edited showcase images via digital rendering, embodying the friction and uncertainty of urban life. As such, drawing becomes both an aesthetic and ethical stance: it visualises what power tends to

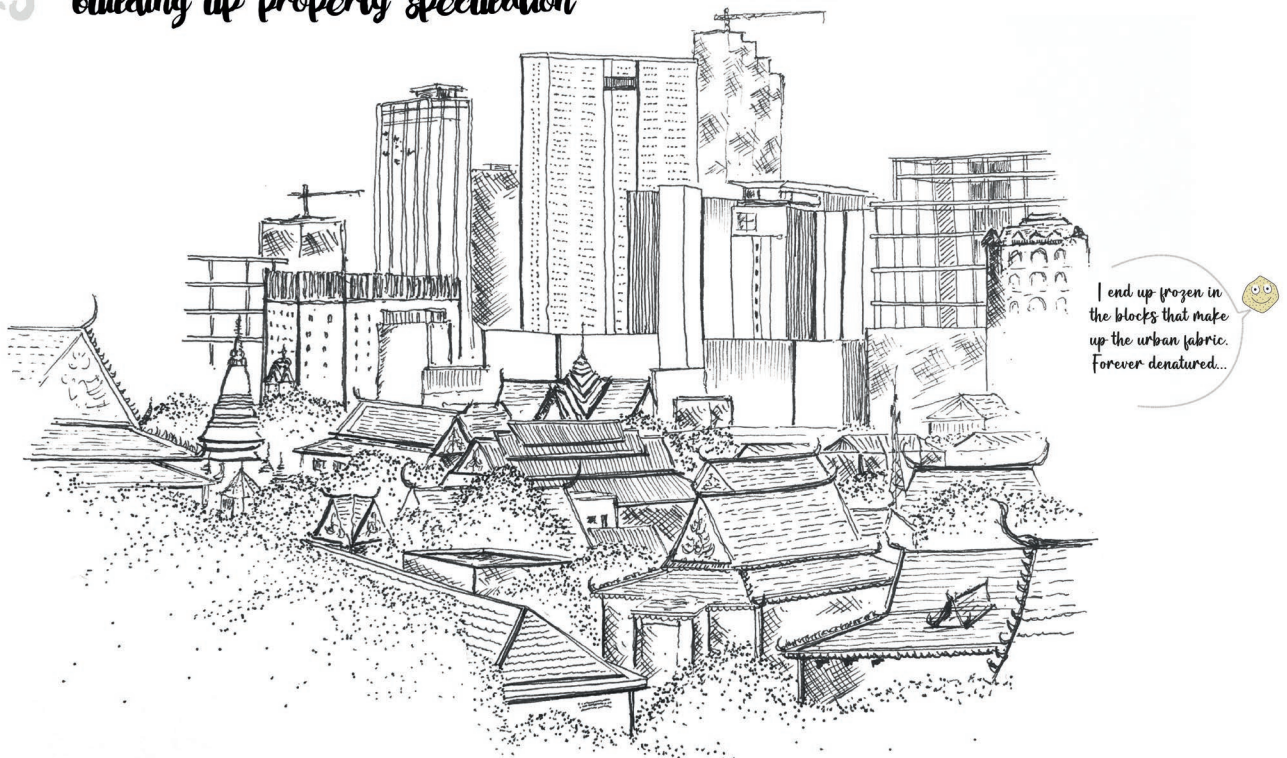
obscure, while opening a space for alternative narratives of the city to emerge.

1.6 | Drawing New Narratives

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, drawing offers a way of organising thought. It requires little—a pencil, a sheet of paper—yet opens vast possibilities. It invites slowness, attention and presence: the act of looking, listening and sensing the world. For the researcher, moving through the field, drawing becomes a pause—a moment of grounding and clarity that sharpens focus and sustains creative attention. As art therapy reminds us, drawing has a restorative capacity: it soothes, empowers and reconnects thought to the body. Following McNiff (2000, 252), this creative process activates an ‘energy of healing’ that transforms perception and allows uncertainty to be reframed through imagination. Within ethnographic practice, this restorative force becomes a form of care—for oneself, for the field, for the stories being told—countering the extractive tendencies of academic work and fostering a more attentive, life-affirming engagement with the world.

Ethnographic sketching is thus not a pastime but a mode of knowing, a way of seeing differently and cultivating sensitivity. What matters is less what is drawn than how the act

23 building up property speculation



*in the foreground, the Botum Vatey pagoda
in the background, the condominiums under construction on
the island of Koh Pich reach dizzying heights*

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09.05.2021

FIGURE 5 | Property speculation at work. 2021–2024 Dolorès Bertrais.

reshapes perception. As Thieme's (2025) notion of 'deep noticing' suggests, drawing nurtures sustained attentiveness to the textures of experience. Echoing Pink (2016) and Ingold (2013), it shows that drawing is not secondary to writing but another form of thinking through lines, gestures and relations—the line as an extension of thought. In this sense, drawn ethnography participates in a wider reconfiguration of sensory and visual research. It stands alongside photography, film and mapping as a legitimate method, while signalling a quiet epistemic shift toward more open and shareable forms of publication. By materialising the field through line and texture, it allows research to circulate beyond academic silos, reaching those who inhabit the worlds being studied. Such multimodal approaches challenge the 'textual monopoly' of scholarship, valuing affect, embodiment and relationality as knowledge in their own right.

More than a method, drawn ethnography is an epistemological proposition. It invites us to rethink how knowledge is produced, narrated and shared—particularly in urban studies, where dominant visual regimes often dictate what can be seen or said. Translating the field into lines becomes a form of counter-writing that reveals what language conceals. Drawing expands what it means to 'do science': not by rejecting writing, but by adding texture, rhythm and relation. It is a way of thinking, feeling and narrating the city differently—reconnecting research to its sources, to the people and materials that make knowledge possible.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ The sentences in italics reflect the desire to insert a more personal style complementary to academic writing.

²In the original French: « [...] nous confronte à la dimension temporelle du parcours: le blanc contient tous les possibles, silence d'avant la naissance, et le noir les referme, silence après la mort ».

³In the original French: « (...) imaginer d'autres mondes multispécifiques organisés autour de nouvelles manières de vivre avec le monde autre qu'humains ».

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