11.234: Making Sense: Qualitative Methods for Planners and Designers

Units: 2-4-6
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Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11a.m.-12:30 p.m. in Room 10-401

This class surveys the use of qualitative methods in urban design and planning practice and research. It is intended chiefly for Ph.D. or 2nd-semester MCP students with an interest in improving their abilities to measure and understand the relationship between physical design and social change. Our aim is to help students develop methodological and analytical skills that will be useful in both research and professional practice.

While we will draw examples from a wide variety of research and practice situations, this year—as the major focus of the class—we will collectively attempt to “make sense” of the phenomenon of urban community gardens in the Boston area. These places, located in approximately 150 formerly vacant lots throughout the neighborhoods of the city, have frequently been celebrated for their positive contributions to inner-city community life. Many have argued that community gardens have been an important urban development phenomenon in a wide variety of ways: as sources of food production; as catalysts for community organization, self-help, and local empowerment; as tools for securing tenure over contested land; as sources of social and psychological support networks; as affirmations of ethnic solidarity and diversity; and as techniques for making cities more healthful and attractive places. Despite the clear appeal of such assertions, these claims have rarely been subjected to close critical scrutiny. Our goal is to identify, examine, and measure the variety of ways that community gardens do—or do not—contribute to a sense of community.

To ask the question: “How do community gardens contribute to community?” raises difficult questions about the meaning of “community” and its measurement. A wide variety of qualitative methods are needed to make sense of such a complex urban phenomenon. In this class, we will identify and discuss appropriate methods, and attempt to combine them into a coherent research design that can be carried out this spring.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

We will cover a long list of qualitative methods through readings and discussions based on the literature about good research practice. The forms of data collection that we will discuss include: observing environments and physical traces, observing environmental
behavior, asking questions, using focused interviews, administering standardized 
questionnaires, using written archival materials, and using visual materials including 
photographs, maps, and various other new media. In addition, we will consider the use of 
case studies and methods for analyzing data.

**Readings and Classroom Discussions**

There are three required texts for all students in the course. One is John Zeisel’s *Inquiry 
The second is Laura J. Lawson., *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in 
America* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2005). Finally, we will read 
substantial parts of Robert Weiss, *Learning From Strangers* (New York: The Free Press, 
1994). All three should be available at the MIT Coop. Other readings will be available on the class Stellar site.

The structure of the class is based on four elements: (1) reading and classroom discussions about the various qualitative methods, (2) study of the research methods used in selected classics from the community design research literature, (3) student fieldwork exercises that use the various methods to make sense of community garden environments, and (4) a final case study write-up describing and analyzing a particular community garden environment, drawing upon the variety of qualitative methods we have discussed and including a reflective account of your own experiences as an investigator.

**Classics in Environmental Design Research**

The class will be punctuated by a set of sessions called “Appendectomies.” How often have you read the results of a research project but skipped reading the technical appendix describing the methodology? We have selected several recent or classic books from the community design research literature, and we will focus on the appendices in order to appreciate better the use of the various qualitative methods and the way that various authors have made sense of communities. Each student (plus additional volunteers) will be responsible for reading *one or two* of the selected books in its entirety; all students will be responsible for reading the appendices. Students are encouraged to identify additional books with compelling methodological appendices for inclusion.

**Exercises and Case Study Write-Up**

Each student will complete a series of seven exercises plus the case study write-up described above. The exercises will be brief, intended to illustrate quickly and economically the use of the various methods. These exercises must be handed in on a regular basis at the beginning of the session at which they are to be discussed; they provide a “ticket of admission” to the class discussion. Regular participation is required.
SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

5 February

Introduction: Making Sense of the Elephant
   What are Qualitative Data? and What are Communities?

Handout: Rebecca Solnit, “Who am I Where?” (from Infinite City, 2010)

Distribution of Maps and Data about Community Gardens in Boston/Cambridge

7 February

Making Sense of “Garden Personalities”

Guest Speakers: Student teams from last year’s class

Laura J. Lawson., City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America
   (Berkeley: University of California Press 2005): Part III, Gardening for
   Community-1945-present, pp. 205-302.

Sam Bass Warner, Jr., To Dwell Is to Garden (Boston: Northeastern

12 February

Making Sense from Beginning to End: Selecting Cases

Robert K. Yin, Case Study Research: Design and Methods, 4th Edition (Beverly
   Hills: Sage, 2008), “Introduction” and “Conducting Case Studies: Collecting the
   Evidence,” pp. 2-23 and 98-125 (Please read if you did not read this in 11.233)

Barbara Geddes, “How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get:
   Selection Bias and Related Issues,” Paradigms and Sandcastles: Theory Building
   and Research Design in Comparative Politics (University of Michigan Press,
   2003), pp. 89-130. (Please read if you did not read this in 11.233)

   Single Case Research.” Journal of Planning Education and Research 29, 4
   (2010), 415-426.

For additional exploration of this topic, see:
   Gary King, Robert Keohane, Sidney Verba, “Determining What to Observe,”
   Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research,

Exercise #1 Assigned: “Seeing Without Visiting”
   Due: Tuesday, February 26, in class.

14 February

In-class field trip to Cambridge community gardens

   (optional) pp. 49-61 “Seattle’s Community Garden History”

19 February --No Class (Monday Classes meet instead)

21 February

Making Sense Through Archival Materials

Zeisel, Inquiry by Design, Chapter 13 “Archives.”


Optional:

For additional exploration of this topic, see:

26 February

Discussion of Exercise #1

Exercise #2 assigned: “Categorizing: Documenting a Neighborhood with a Thematic Map.”

Due: Tuesday, March 12, in class.

28 February

Making Sense of Visual Materials: Maps and Representations

Guest speaker: Annette Kim


Annette Kim, *Sidewalk City* (excerpts).

*For additional exploration of this topic, see:*

5 March

Making Sense of Physical Traces


Anne Whiston Spirn, “Restoring Mill Creek: Landscape Literacy, Environmental Justice and City Planning and Design,” *Landscape Research* 30, 3 (July 2005), 395-413.


7 March

Making Sense of Visual Materials: Photos

Guest speaker, Anne Whiston Spirn


Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Eye is a Door* (excerpts).

*Optional:*


Exercise #3 assigned: “Photographs as Judgments”:
Due: Tuesday, March 19, in class

12 March

Discussion of Exercise #2

14 March

Making Sense Through Interviews

*Zeisel, Inquiry By Design*, Chapter 10, “Focused Interviews.”

Optional:


DUSP Plaza conversation on recording phone interviews.

Exercise #4 Assigned: “Interviewing the Garden Coordinator”
Due: Tuesday, April 9, in class.

19 March
Discussion of Exercise #3

21 March
Making Sense Through Key Informants

Appendectomies: *Street Corner Society* and *There Are No Children Here*


26 and 28 March VACATION

2 April
What is a Community? (Laurie Zapalac)


*Optional:*

4 April

Making Sense Through Mixed Methods


Appendectomies: *There Goes the ‘Hood and Favela*


9 April

Discussion of Exercise #4

Making Sense By Observing: Professional Settings


Exercise #5 assigned: “What happened at the Gardeners’ Meeting?”
Due: Tuesday, April 30, in class.

11 April

Making Sense Through Questionnaires

Appendectomy: *Easter Hill Village*


*Optional:*


*For additional exploration of this topic, see:*


Exercise #6 Assigned: “Interview Protocol”
Due: Thursday, April 18, in class.

16 April  PATRIOTS’ DAY HOLIDAY—no class

18 April  Making Sense of Public Housing

Appendectomies: *The Hidden War* and *Reclaiming Public Housing*


Discussion of Exercise #6
Exercise #7 assigned: Observing Gardens and Gardeners
Due: Tuesday, May 9, in class

23 April  Making Sense by Participating

Appendectomies: *Tally’s Corner* and *Black on the Block*


25 April

Making Sense by Participating in Public Housing

Guest Speaker: Erin Graves

30 April

Discussion of Exercise #5

Making Sense by Observing: Environmental Behavior


2 May

Making Sense of Community Dynamics

Appendectomies: *The Urban Villagers* and *The Levittowners*.


and “Postscript to Appendix,” pp. 396-417.


7 May

Making Sense of Behavior in Public Space

Appendectomies: *City: Rediscovering the Center* and *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*


Video: “The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces” (excerpt)

9 May

Making Sense Right from the Start: From Data to Story

Discussion of Exercise #7


Discussion of final report

14 May

Discussion of Garden Cases I

16 May

Discussion of Garden Cases II

Final Case Write-ups due Thursday, May 16 (last day of classes).