11.234: Making Sense: Qualitative Methods for Planners and Designers

Units: 2-4-6
Prof. Lawrence Vale, Office: 10-497M, x3-0561
Instructor: John Arroyo, Office: 10-495M PhD Office, arroyojc@mit.edu

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. First priority is given to DUSP doctoral students needing to fulfill their Qualitative Methods requirement and enrollment is capped at 14.

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 By Design: Tools for Environment-Behavior Research (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006). 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**

2 February

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


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

4 February

Making Sense of “Garden Personalities”

Guest Speakers:  Student teams from last year’s class, plus Boston community garden activist Juliet Kepes Stone


Anne Whiston Spirn, “This Garden is a Town,” unpublished manuscript (2000).

9 February

Making Sense from Beginning to End: Selecting Cases


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)


For additional exploration of this topic, see:


Exercise #1 Assigned: “Seeing Without Visiting”
Due: Tuesday, February 23, in class.

11 February

[Workshop #1: “Field Notes” (optional) 10am, Room 9-455

In-class field trip to Cambridge community gardens (weather permitting)

Readings about Community Gardens:

On New York:
16 February --No Class (Monday Classes meet instead)

18 February

Making Sense Through Archival Materials


Optional:

For additional exploration of this topic, see:


23 February

Workshop #2: Content Analysis (optional) 10am, Room 9-455

Making Sense of Visual Materials: Maps and Representations


Annette Kim, *Sidewalk City* (excerpts).


25 February

Discussion of Exercise #1

Exercise #2 assigned: “Categorizing: Documenting a Neighborhood with a Thematic Map,”
Due: Tuesday, March 8, in class.

1 March

*Workshop #3: Coding (optional) 10am, Room 9-455*

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.


3 March

Making Sense of Visual Materials: Photos

Guest speaker, Anne Whiston Spirn.


*Optional:*


Exercise #3 assigned: “Photographs as Judgments”:
Due: Tuesday, March 15, in class

8 March

Discussion of Exercise #2

10 March

Making Sense Through Interviews


*Optional:*


DUSP Plaza conversation on recording phone interviews.

Exercise #4 Assigned: “Interviewing the Garden Coordinator”
Due: Tuesday, April 5, in class.

15 March

*Workshop #4: Grounded Theory* (optional) 10am, Room 9-455

Discussion of Exercise #3

17 March

What is a Community? (John Arroyo)


Watch TedTalks by Clay Shirky (~15min) and Sherry Turkle (~20min):
https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history#

Optional:


22 and 24 March NO CLASS-SPRING BREAK

29 March
Making Sense Through Key Informants

Appendectomies: Street Corner Society and There Are No Children Here


31 March
Making Sense Through Mixed Methods


Appendectomies: There Goes the ‘Hood and Favela


5 April

*Workshop #5: Process Tracing (optional) 10am, Room 9-455*

Discussion of Exercise #4

Making Sense By Observing: Professional Settings


Exercise #5 assigned: “What happened at the Gardeners’ Meeting?”
Due: Tuesday, April 26, in class.

7 April

Making Sense Through Questionnaires


Appendectomies: *Easter Hill Village* and *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*


*Optional:*


For additional exploration of this topic, see:
Exercise #6 Assigned: “Interview Protocol”
Due: Thursday, April 14, in class.

12 April

*Workshop #6: Narrativity (optional) 10am, Room 9-455*

Making Sense of Public Housing

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


14 April

Making Sense by Participating 1:

**Appendectomies: Tally’s Corner and On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City**


For further exploration on this topic, see:

On Goffman ethics controversies, see:

New Ramble Review

SLATE
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/06/alice_goffman_s_on_the_run_is_the_sociologist_to_blame_for_the_inconsistencies.html

Discussion of Exercise #6
Exercise #7 assigned: Observing Gardens and Gardeners
   Due: Thursday, May 5, in class

19 April  No Class Patriots Day Holiday

21 April

Making Sense by Participating 2:

Appendectomy: *Black on the Block* or *Villa Victoria*

*Read one of the following depending on presentation TBA:*

Other reading, TBA

26 April

Discussion of Exercise #5

Making Sense by Observing: Environmental Behavior


28 April

Making Sense of Community Dynamics

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


3 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)
5 May

Making Sense Right from the Start: From Data to Story

Discussion of Exercise #7


Discussion of final report

10 May

Discussion of Garden Cases I

12 May

Discussion of Garden Cases II

Final Case Write-ups due Thursday, May 12 (last day of classes).