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ADAPTING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODS TO COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING

LESSONS FROM A DURHAM COMMUNITY PHOTO PROJECT

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Contents

Introduction	2
Participatory Research and Photovoice Methodology	2
Case Study: Durham Community Photo Project	4
INTRODUCTION	4
THEORETICAL CONTEXT	4
<i>The Social Environment</i>	4
<i>The Physical Environment</i>	5
<i>A Dialectic</i>	5
BUILT ENVIRONMENT & SOCIAL COHESION	6
SOCIAL COHESION AND PUBLIC HEALTH	6
METHODS.....	7
<i>Initial</i>	7
<i>Modified</i>	7
RESULTS.....	7
<i>Surface Topics</i>	9
<i>Structural Topics</i>	11
OVERARCHING THEMES	12
DISCUSSION	13
Strengths & Opportunities of the Photovoice Process.....	14
Challenges & Limitations of the Photovoice Process.....	14
Recommendations	15
Conclusion	15
Acknowledgements.....	16
References.....	17

Introduction

Effective planning must take a holistic perspective, a wide view of how systems interact. However, this approach can preclude an understanding of individual perspectives and lived experiences. Participatory research methods pioneered outside of the field of planning have been designed to document and address community needs and priorities at a localized level. Among these methods is photo elicitation, a mode of qualitative and visual data collection that involves having participants take photographs that portray a particular concern, and then using the images and a starting point for discussion around how to address those concerns. While photo elicitation and other CBPR methods are becoming increasingly common in fields such as sociology and public health, they are rare in the field of urban planning, despite their applicability and potential value.

This paper evaluates the utility and feasibility of using photo elicitation as a tool for community planning, based on a case study of a photo project in Durham, North Carolina. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the method's strengths and limitations in the context of community-based planning and a set of recommendations for how participatory research methods can be incorporated in future planning efforts.

Participatory Research and Photo Elicitation Methodology

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is an approach to research that allows for the members of a community to provide expert insight into their experiences and foster a partnership that results in community-identified change.¹ At the core of CBPR is the dissolution of the researcher-participant power dynamic in order to capitalize on strengths of all participants and engender mutual benefits.² The principles of CBPR include recognizing community as a unit of identity, viewing researchers and participants as co-investigators and contributors to the research, and equitably involving all partners in all phases of the research process.²

The parent of photo elicitation, photovoice, is a specific methodology within the CBPR paradigm, which involves meeting with participants to systematically review photos that they have each taken to represent concerns they have related to their community. In the conventional methodology, participants collectively decide on series of photo assignments that relate to a particular research questions. Participants then take photos for the first assignment independently and return to discuss the images as a group, selecting a "trigger" image from the photos, and analyzing that image using a series of questions collectively referred to as SHOWED:

What do you **S**ee in the photo?
What is really **H**appening?
How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
Why does this issue exist?
How can we be **E**mpowered by our new understanding?
What can we **D**o about it?

The discussion is recorded and transcribed by the research facilitator, who codes the transcripts thematically and presents the analysis to the group for validation. The process of taking photos,

discussing them using SHOWED, and transcribing is repeated multiple times, ideally until themes relevant to the research question have been saturated. The project concludes with a presentation of the results and the development plan of action.³

Photovoice was developed as a tool for engagement and empowerment within the field of health education. Though it is gaining increasing traction in other disciplines, photovoice research has for the most part, been confined to health education and related fields. According to one review of 37 photovoice studies, 17 directly related to health and health education, with research topics ranging from Latina women's access to family planning services, to the experiences of people living with HIV, to the provision of healthcare and other aging-related services for seniors. Other studies have focused on social issues such as homelessness and housing insecurity, school readiness among low-income earners, and strategies for youth engagement in social justice.⁴

Often used in formative research, the photovoice methodology has particular value in assessing the needs of underserved or underrepresented groups, as images often serve as a common language and a way for people to communicate experiences across disciplinary, education, income, or linguistic divides.

To some extent, photovoice has been used to explore community issues related to urban planning and the built environment. Krone, et al. used photovoice as tool for planning and measuring the impact of community-based economic development programs.⁵ Heidelberger and Smith used the method to explore food access in urban, low-income Midwestern households.⁶ Nowell assessed the meaning and significance to residents ascribe to the physical conditions of their neighborhoods and community.⁷ Other studies have used the method to explore issues related to housing quality and homelessness.^{8, 9}

While photovoice itself is a rigorous research methodology, it has also been adapted to accommodate shorter timelines, and for feasibility in non-research settings. Photo elicitation is a process that uses images to evoke discussion in a manner similar to SHOWED, though this may occur in group setting or as individual interviews, and discussions may vary in their depth of qualitative analysis.³ One particularly notable example of how the method has been adapted was a city-visioning project undertaking in Allentown, Pennsylvania. A coalition of nonprofit and municipal organizations asked community members to submit photographs that revealed their personal values and experiences of the city. The project was designed to identify and document the range of the community's needs, and to involve residents in a conversation about the future of the city amid economic and demographic transition.¹⁰

Though photovoice and other CBPR methods are becoming increasingly common in fields such as sociology and public health, they are overall less common in the field of urban planning, despite their applicability and potential value. The method also has a practical value to communities and grassroots organizations and can serve as bottom-up model for urban planning, broadening the understanding of planning issues and laying the groundwork for public participation in future

planning efforts. The following case study illustrates how the process may be applied to explore a topics related to urban planning.

Case Study: Durham Community Photo Project

INTRODUCTION

To assess the utility and feasibility of photo elicitation in urban planning, a participatory photography project in was conducted in Durham, North Carolina. Specifically, this project was designed to investigate which features of the built environment promote social cohesion, and which features prevent it, grounded in the understanding that social cohesion is strongly linked to positive health outcomes.

Broadly defined, social cohesion is the interplay and ongoing integration of individual behaviors in a particular setting.¹¹ A substantial body of research examines the relationship between social cohesion and physical and mental health outcomes, including improved diet,¹² increased physical activity,^{12, 13, 14} weight loss,^{12, 15} and decreased incidence of depression and anxiety.^{16, 17, 18} Conversely, the absence of cohesion has been linked to increased violence, incarceration, drug use and infectious disease.^{17, 19}

Research also demonstrates an association between the built environment and social cohesion. Characteristics of the built environment have the potential to foster or inhibit the creation of cohesive social environments and the generation of social capital.^{11, 20} Given the mediating role of social cohesion in the association between the built environment and public health, this topic is an appropriate case study for the application of a public health research method to the practice of community-based urban planning.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The following section examines three concepts used to characterize the social environment, particularly in the context of the built environment: social cohesion, social capital, and collective efficacy. Though these concepts are not new, they have yet to be universally or consistently defined. Operational definitions based on theoretical trends are posited here to anchor current research and to frame further participatory research in Durham.

The Social Environment

Social cohesion is commonly used to describe the quality of the social environment, entering the lexicon as early as the seventeenth century with Thomas Hobbes's *The Structure of Social Action*.²¹ In the late nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim discussed the concept in the context of the social regulations adhered to by the members of society; and the normless state of *anomie*, which prevails when social control breaks down.²² Today, it is perhaps best understood as an “umbrella term for related, but separate [social] constructs,” associated with a particular setting.²³ These constructs

Dimensions of social cohesion

- Social interaction
- Social networks
- Sense of community
- Participation in organized activities
- Trust and reciprocity
- Perceived safety
- Sense of place

can be organized into seven dimensions: social interaction; social networks; sense of community; participation in organized activities; trust and reciprocity; perceived safety; and sense of place.¹¹

Social capital refers to an individual's sacrifices made in an effort to cooperate with others, and while social cohesion described the character of an overall society or community, a community's cohesiveness depends on the accumulation of its members social capital.²⁴ Collective efficacy, the "perception of mutual trust and willingness to help each other," is both a measure of social capital, and a determinant of community wellbeing.¹⁵

The Physical Environment

There is a long-standing idea that the physical environment has the potential to shape, if not determine, the social environment. This theory of environmental determinism has prevailed throughout Planning's history, exemplified by Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities Movement²⁵ and Daniel Burnham's City Beautiful Movement, which saw "the physical prerequisite for harmonious social order."²⁶ The flaw in this way of thinking has since been exposed, with the understanding that this deterministic ideology ignores non-physical factors such as income, social networks, poverty, religion, and policy that may have an impact on social life.^{11, 27}

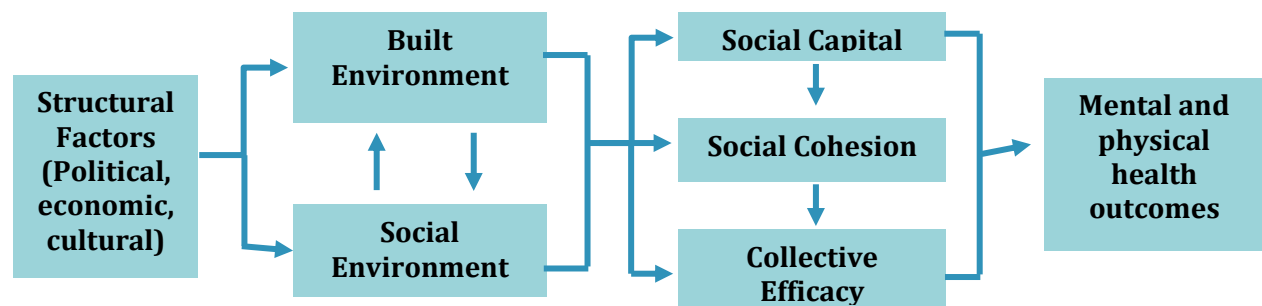
Nuanced alternatives have been proposed more recently, such as environmental probabilism, the idea that in a given physical setting, some choices are more likely than others - the worse the design of the environment, the more likely it is to adversely affect residents.²⁸ Similar research suggests that built environment professionals cannot "make" places; they can [only] create more place potential.²⁹

Built Environment Characteristics Studied in Association with Social Cohesion

- Residential density
- Land use mix
- Accessibility, connectedness and permeability,
- Open space
- Legibility, attractiveness, inclusiveness, maintenance, natural surveillance, and perceived quality
- Specific establishments and uses

A Dialectic

Given this history, it is important to ground urban planning research and practice in this dialectic between social environment: both shape and are shaped by the other and by broader contextual factors that undergird them both.



BUILT ENVIRONMENT & SOCIAL COHESION

Urban planners and designers have historically been interested in the interplay between characteristics of the urban landscape and various facets of social cohesion, the broad idea being that built characteristics may encourage or discourage residents to use local space, and as a result of using local space, may develop informal relationships with their neighbors, as well as a level of comfort in their community that contributes to their sense of cohesion.²⁰

Jane Jacobs's examination of how the nature of local commerce can encourage or discourage social resources, is perhaps the most famous example.³⁰ Based on observations in New York's West Village, she concludes that different types of businesses have the ability to draw people out for different reasons, affording more frequent opportunities to develop relationships than would be possible in a homogenous setting. During the same era, Jan Gehl explored the role of public spaces in creating social life, his work a precursor to principles of New Urbanist design.³¹

Continuing in this vein, recent research has explored the association between walkability and relationships among neighbors, finding that increased walkability promotes stronger relationships.^{32, 33} Relatedly, Kamruzzaman found certain facets of social cohesion to be associated with transit-oriented development.³⁴ Public spaces such as parks and community gardens have also been linked to collective efficacy.³⁵

Other studies have used regression analysis to examine the association between social cohesion and a range of built environment characteristics, including residential density, land use mix, accessibility, connectedness and permeability, open space, legibility, attractiveness, inclusiveness, maintenance, natural surveillance, and perceived quality^{16, 36, 37, 38, 39} as well as with specific types of establishments such as schools, fast food restaurants, and alcohol and tobacco outlets.¹⁵

The built environment also has the potential to shape residents' perceptions of danger, which is negatively associated with cohesion.²⁰ Two studies in Chicago also found concentrated disadvantage, measured by poverty, unemployment, use of public assistance, and the number female headed households, to be positively associated with perceived danger and lower levels of social organization.^{40, 41}

SOCIAL COHESION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Social cohesion in turn, is an established determinant of numerous public health outcomes. A growing body of literature examines the relationship between social cohesion and physical and mental health outcomes, including improved diet,¹² increased physical activity,^{12, 13, 14} weight loss,^{12, 15} and decreased incidence of depression and anxiety.^{16, 17, 18} Conversely, the absence of cohesion has been linked to increased violence, incarceration, drug use and infectious disease.^{19, 17, 42} None of these relationships occur in a vacuum, but despite the connections between the built environment and social cohesion, and social cohesion and health, there is limited work examining the holistic dynamic between all three.

METHODS

Initial

The Durham Community Photo Project was initially conceived as component of a Harm-Free Zone Book Study, an annual event facilitated by a community-based nonprofit called SpiritHouse, Inc., an organization focused on capacity building and restorative justice. The Book Study took place over the course of three months, during which participants read Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, discussed the novel in self-determined groups, and met three times over the course of the Book Study for city-wide events. A description of the photovoice process, along with photo prompts relating the book content to neighborhood planning issues, were included in the official Book Study toolkit, which was distributed to all groups via email and hard copy at the kick-off event. Participants were encouraged to incorporate a photovoice element into their groups' book discussions following the guide to enhance their reading of *Parable of the Sower*. Groups also had the option of participating in a series of three facilitated photo elicitation sessions following conventional methodology.

Modified

Given low attendance at city-wide project events and limited interest in a facilitated photo elicitation project, methods were adapted to broaden recruitment. Additional participants were recruited through Book Study participants, Durham neighborhood email listservs, and through other community groups, namely Communities in Partnership, a neighborhood organization in Old East Durham, and Project IFE, a collaborative health program affiliated with the University of North Carolina and the Durham Public Housing Authority.

Participants were given the opportunity to participate in one of two ways. They could email a photograph and a short description of its significance to the project coordinator, answering the research question "how does your neighborhood build community?" They could also participate in two sequential photo elicitation sessions for an orientation and a guided discussion of the same research question using the SHOWED process. All participants were required to be a Durham resident to participate. Additionally, following research ethics guidelines, participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and provide written informed consent to participate. Participants were discouraged of taking photographs of people for privacy reasons.

All photos and descriptions received via were coded thematically based on explicit content. Photo elicitation sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then coded thematically to identify common patterns and derive meaning from those patterns.

RESULTS

Three Durham residents submitted photographs via email, each from a different neighborhood or organization. Content was related to social support (image 1), daily social interaction, proximity to

neighborhood amenities (image 2), and mobilizing resources through community networks (image 3).

Image 1 *“After reading Parable, I couldn’t get started taking pictures. I couldn’t see community for all the fear the book brought up inside me. Finally...I was sitting with women friends and suddenly saw the community right there. This is the photo I took. That started a spark and I went back over photos from the last year. No longer in that place of fear, I see folks trying all around me. Imperfectly, not always connected, but trying.”*



Image 2 *“This [co-housing community] is our immediate neighborhood, within which we interact with each other on a daily basis. Of course we also are part of the larger community outside our building, including the Durham County Center for Senior Living, Durham Central Park, etc.:*

Image 3 *“We’ve been going for about four years now. We go out and collect donations from farms, stores, and then distribute it to the co-op members every month. And it’s not just a food pantry. It’s a space to share a meal, share news, have a conversation.”*



Additionally, four women currently residing in Durham Public Housing developments participated in a facilitated photo elicitation at a community center in downtown Durham. During the orientation session, participants narrowed the research question, selected two specific questions for photograph assignments:

1. What features of your neighborhood environment hinder the creation of community?
2. What features of your neighborhood environment help create a sense of community?

Image 4 was selected as a “trigger image” for the SHOWED process in answer to the first question, and was discussed in comparison to image 5. Image 6 was selected as a “trigger image” in answer to the second question. The issues brought up in relation to these images are grouped into surface topics and structural topics. While surface topics can be thought of as an answer to the question, “what features facilitate or inhibit social cohesion?” structural topics should be thought of as answering “why do these features facilitate or inhibit cohesion?”

Surface Topics

One function of participatory research methods such as photovoice and photo elicitation is to identify community needs and assets in response to a particular research question. Three issues that arose through the photo elicitation process that answered the research questions explicitly.

First, parks and other public open space for multi-generational use are seen as important spaces for fostering community. Participants highlighted a lack of “inviting” outdoor spaces in their own neighborhoods but noted their presence in other parts of the city, such as downtown. Well-maintained parks and squares with flowers and tree cover and places to sit were seen to facilitate social cohesion; conversely their absence was seen to inhibit it.

Image 4 *“There’s one bench, there’s a lot with a basketball court over here. But other than that, there’s nothing there. Just that one concrete slab. That’s uninviting.”*

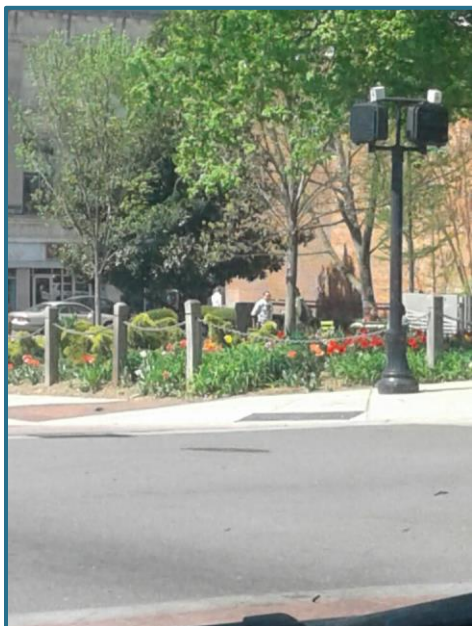
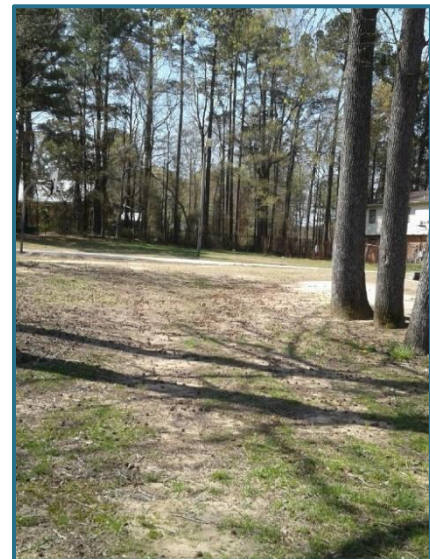


Image 5 *“To me, something like this would bring a community together. It would make people want to come and sit and mingle and talk and enjoy themselves.”*

“They got flowers everywhere and trees everywhere. It makes you want to go and sit. Like if I was walking downtown and I was tired of had a bad day, those flowers and trees – it makes you want to just sit and relax. It gives you a feeling of calmness.”

Participants understood these physical and emotional benefits of public open spaces to be important for the health and well-being of all generations. As one participant noted,

At my age, I really need to be outside and get the natural air, that vitamin D. And I still have kids, too, that are hooked into the thumb-toy nation and I need to get them outside, moving. So it relates to me in that if it's not appealing, it'd just be hard to get them out the bedroom, off the couch...It's a proven fact that hours in brightness – it brings happiness. It brings hope.

Additionally, the visibility and message framing of public signage has an impact on people's sense of community. Participants discussed message framing in the context of signage prohibiting smoking and littering, noting the importance of understanding the message audience. One participant explained, "some people, they see that no smoking sign and they're going to smoke right there. Just because you told them not to. Because it's like you're taking away their choice."

Instead, participants believe that positive message framing would encourage residents to take care of their neighborhoods and be considerate of other residents, improving the sense of community overall.

Thirdly, pedestrian infrastructure that is accessible to mobility and sight-impaired individuals is essential for fostering a sense of community. Photo elicitation participants saw sidewalks as facilitators of community, enabling neighbors to walk together, and encouraging residents to get outside and walk.

Image 6 *"It's inviting. It makes you want to walk down the street as opposed to saying, 'oh my god! I gotta walk down there?'"*



Participants expressed the importance of pedestrian safety and accessible infrastructure for disabled, sight-impaired, and older adults, noting that a cohesive community is also an inclusive community. The woman who took the photograph had recently become dependent on a motorized wheelchair and explained the importance of accessible sidewalks and crosswalks, which both determined her ability to get around, and her motivation to go outside. For another one woman, the photo evoked feelings she had about caring for her elderly father.

So my dad is an army vet and right now his mobility is very challenged. So it related to my head space now, helping him get around. And so it makes me feel good to see something clean and clear in the way of a ramp, for those of us with aging parents.

Structural Topics

Beyond the identification of surface-level needs and priorities, the photo elicitation process is designed to explore the structural determinants and systemic factors at the root of issues facing participants. In discussing the trigger images, participants revealed three additional issues that addressed why specific features promoted or inhibited social cohesion.

First, underscoring participants' perceptions of what makes a community inviting, were notions of safety from crime and violence, as well as from traffic. If people feel safe, they are more likely to use public amenities, and use of these amenities increases the opportunity to interact with their neighbors. Conversely, when resources such as parks, playgrounds, and accessible pedestrian infrastructure are lacking residents more isolated. Additionally, participants attributed the lack of parks and social programs to a rise in crimes perpetrated by youth. As one participant noted, in the past, "they always had something for teenagers to do. But they took everything away from us. Now, what you left with is crime. It's affecting everybody now."

Apart from the physical structure of neighborhoods, participants described an important, inherent social structure of communities, built upon a sense of neighborliness and an obligation to look out for one another. In the face of limited resources, and often because of it, neighbors tend help each other out.

Related to these issues, participants feel that community cohesion is related to a legacy of

"It's the systemic oppression. It's the systematic control, supremacy, other people determining what's good – what people can handle, deserve. It's a very systematic system that breaks down of communities and the structure of families. And it's been going on for years if you look at the history. This is what we're talking about, these communities. That same welcoming entrance to Durham? It's still there but once you get into Durham it's not just the physical space, it's that mental, emotion, that over time suppression of what you can't get."

historically oppressive policies and decisions which stripped residents of their autonomy. As the quote to the right illustrates, participants expressed the feeling that authorities have taken parks and community resources from communities without their consent, historically and recently. This pattern of control has engendered a lack of trust in officials, which discourages them from engaging in processes, such as public meetings that could facilitate cohesion.

Residents feel they understand community needs but are stripped of the autonomy to address those needs. As one participant explained regarding the removal of a playground in one of the Durham public housing communities, "they [DHA and city officials] won't give the residents the responsibility. They see a problem and they're like, "ok we're going to eradicate everything that relates to that problem."

The lack of choice and lack of power makes people feel disenfranchised, disempowered, and unlikely to advocate

for and maintain the types of public amenities that could contribute to a more cohesive community, such as parks and bus stops.

Lack of trust in city and community leadership can be exacerbated by unclear and time intensive procedures for approving and implementing community amenities. As one participant stated, “the thing is, if you go to the system with a complaint, and they don’t do anything about it the first time. So you go back and they don’t do anything about it. You’re not going back because you’re tired and it’s a waste of time. So it looks as if the system just wants you to give up.”

OVERARCHING THEMES

Though the content of images varied as did the neighborhoods and demographic backgrounds of the individuals who submitted them, a comparative analysis revealed three overarching common themes.

- ❖ **Every member of a community, residents as well as community leaders, have a responsibility to create and maintain healthy, cohesive spaces and facilities.** This responsibility pertains to physical structures, social structures, and participation in political processes. The majority of photos and related discussions highlighted how residents need to look out for and support each other. Residents also need to speak up when there is a problem and participate in the process by going to meetings. As one photo elicitation participant put it, “step up or step back with the criticism,” or as another participant re-phrased, “speak up or shut up.” Additionally, community leaders need to be accountable and responsive to resident needs.

It is essential that the two groups work together. As one participant noted, “it takes us to go out and pick it up. Little things. We can’t put bus stops up, unfortunately because it’s against that law. They’ll tear them down. So we take the little steps and let them see us doing the little steps, and let them take the big steps.

- ❖ **People will participate in public processes and take action to improve their community if they feel that their actions will make a difference.** Residents feel empowered and are more likely to contribute to future projects if they see evidence of change and see the fruits of their efforts. Additionally, residents are more likely to maintain community facilities, if they feel like that is the norm.
- ❖ **Physical infrastructure must accommodate the needs of all residents in order to facilitate social cohesion.**

“If you go to – Walmart and you drop something on the floor and it’s clean, what are you going to do? Nine times out of ten, you’re gonna pick it up and hang it back up. But if you go to the Walmart on – and you drop something on the floor? Nine times out of ten you’re going to look at it and just keep going. It’s because of what you’re seeing, whether it’s inviting or not. If you gave people things that’s clean and fresh and inviting, then people will want to keep it that way.”

This pertains to elderly residents, youth, and mobility-, hearing-, and sight-impaired individuals.

DISCUSSION

These results support existing research on the relationship between the built environment and social cohesion. Consistent with the literature on neighborhood characteristics and social cohesion, sidewalks and enhanced walkability, public open space for socialization, co-housing, mixed use zoning and proximity to community amenities were associated with greater cohesion and social connection among residents. Social infrastructure was found to be as important as physical infrastructure in fostering cohesive communities, a further caution against the trap of environmental determinism. As the photograph of the CIP Co-Op indicates, sometimes social capital is built in the absence of intentional urban design or other community resources. Nonetheless, both components are integral to community health and wellbeing and both are undergirded by structural factors, namely the political processes and economic systems that shape individual communities, like Durham public housing developments, and the city as a whole.

Overall strengths of this particular project include its capacity to address the research question at both the surface and structural level, and its adaptability and flexibility to accommodate multiple modes of participation, allowing for a greater cross section of resident perspectives. The biggest limitation of this project was a limited time frame, which confined the photo elicitation process to two sessions. Additionally, individuals self-selected to participate, potentially biasing the results toward the views of those who were already invested in community processes and committed to their neighborhoods. Finally, while allowing participants to submit photos via email rather than participate in a more time-intensive photo elicitation process allowed for greater participation, the qualitative analysis possible with emailed messages is much more limited, eliminating the opportunity to probe explore issues more deeply, as is possible with an in-person discussion.

Based on this analysis, recommendations for planning organizations include:

- ❖ Support the on-going efforts of community groups by increasing their visibility to community residents, facilitating communication between organizations, and providing physical spaces to meet, such as parks and community centers.
- ❖ Encourage mixed use zoning to allow proximity between residential neighborhoods and community resources in commercial or other zones.
- ❖ Encourage co-housing communities where appropriate through financial incentives or reduced regulations.
- ❖ Pay attention to informal community networks and how existing resources are allocated.
- ❖ Create and improve sidewalks in all residential neighborhoods; ensure that pedestrian infrastructure conforms to ADA standards.
- ❖ Frame messaging on public signage with positive language, with consideration given to the intended audience.

"...it makes people think different and it makes people want to change. Give people something positive and you might get a positive result."

- ❖ Increase visibility of partnership programs like Adopt a Stop, Reclaim it to Maintain It, and private funding strategies for community parks, which allow residents to be involved in community improvements.
- ❖ Be transparent about the amount of time specific changes will take and show incremental progress to keep residents invested.

Strengths & Opportunities of the Photovoice Process

As this case study illustrates, participatory research methods such as photovoice and photo elicitation can be well suited to address issues related to urban planning. Specific strengths include its

- **Enhancement of existing community engagement methods used in city planning.** The structure and aim of photovoice is comparable to a charrette or community visioning process. The photovoice process enhances existing methods by making space to address root causes of issues facing the community. This structural framing may address perceptions of city and city-sponsored programs, which, if officials are open to it, is potentially more valuable for creating sustainable and usable urban policies and infrastructure. Additionally, the method's oriented toward action allows for consideration of plan development as well as implementation.
- **Accessibility and relatability.** It is easy to communicate across language barriers and differences in education, cultural background, and life experience using photographs, making more equitable and inclusive planning processes possible. Through photographs, it is possible to literally see someone else's perspective.
- **Cost-effectiveness.** The process is relatively low-resource, particularly since many people are able to take pictures with their cell phones.
- **Motivational potential.** Not only does photovoice allows facilitators to understand community needs and priorities but the process itself motivates community to be active participants in community change, and potentially involved in other planning processes moving forward.
- **Adaptability.** The topic for this project was broad but the research question can be narrowed to suit research or community aims. A photovoice project could be part of a needs assessment or asset inventory for a community organization; it could identify community values for comprehensive or special area plans; or it could gauge perceptions of a specific planned development or public program.

Challenges & Limitations of the Photovoice Process

In addition to this potential, there are several limitation to the process:

- **A degree of technical expertise is required.** The process itself is straightforward though, the results are improved with a trained facilitator and qualitative data analyst.
- **Participant recruitment can be challenging.** - no incentives; without targeted recruitment and consideration for barriers to participation (transportation, childcare, work, competing priorities) will only hear from a self-selected group of people whose interests may not represent others' in the community.
- **The process can be time-intensive.** Multiple sessions are required, which may be challenging to coordinate and can be onerous for participants who have competing demands on their time.
- **Results are not always generalizable.** Due to the nature of qualitative research, results of the photovoice process are dependent on the context of the project and on project participants. The researcher or facilitator can identify patterns across projects, but responses are also specific to what is meaningful to individual communities. As such, researchers or practitioners who use this process should be cautious in applying the issues identified in one project to the needs and priorities of a larger group.

Recommendations

In light of these strengths and limitations, as well as additional lessons learned from the Durham Community Photo Project, I offer the following recommendations for use of photo elicitation in urban planning:

- Allow the work to be driven by community-interest. Planners may have a general issue in mind but participants should be allowed to select specific photo assignments relevant to their own concerns. The data will be richer when participants are authentically involved in the process.
- Recruit individuals who are already involved in the community to participate in the project.
- Consider hiring a trained facilitator with qualitative research experience.
- Allow a sufficient timeline for the project.
- Understand the work as formative research and follow through with the action plan.
- Take what you need from the process but do give attention to surface level and structure-level answers to your research question. It may not be necessary to undertake a thorough qualitative analysis of the data however it would be irresponsible to selectively only what is most convenient to address.

Conclusion

Overall, photo elicitation has immense potential in urban planning for identifying community needs and priorities, facilitating authentic engagement around community change, and empowering residents to be part of the process. Additionally, it has a practical value to communities and grassroots organizations and can serve as bottom-up rather than a top-down model for urban

planning, broadening the understanding of urban planning and laying the groundwork for public participation in future planning efforts.

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