

RESEARCH YOU CAN USE**Observation as a research method (and the importance of public seating)**

This month's column is about observational methods of research, and about urban designers who have used such methods to discern what makes a street, plaza, or park lively. Back in December 2009, I wrote a column about "Top Thinkers vs. Top Academics." The top thinkers were identified by Planetizen in a poll of its members. A surprising number of the top thinkers were also great observers, and they were elegant writers to boot.

Topping the list was Jane Jacobs, the ultimate participant-observer, who analyzed the built environment from her apartment in Greenwich Village and wrote in almost poetic fashion. Also making the list were such keen observers of the urban scene as Allan Jacobs, who wrote the 1995 book *Great Streets* based on his direct observations of streets around the world, and Donald Appleyard, who wrote *Livable Streets* (1981) to define those places based on his observations of streets in San Francisco. (Appleyard's methodology was more quantitative than the others in that he actually counted things.) As these examples indicate, observational methods seem particularly well suited to urban design.

Number 9 on the top thinkers list was William H. Whyte, who used direct observational methods to determine why some plazas in New York City are pleasantly crowded, while others are nearly empty. Direct observation means studying phenomena of interest without becoming a part of them. The researcher does not attempt to manipulate the setting in any way, and no constraints are placed on the outcome of the investigation.

In the *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, published in 1980, Whyte counted the number of users of each of 16 plazas and three small parks, and then considered factors that might account for variations in occupancy. He arrived at his eventual findings through "a succession of busted hypotheses." He first considered and rejected sun as a factor in a plaza's popularity, then turned to aesthetics, then shape, then size, and found exceptions in each case that disproved his hypothesis. It finally mainly came down to comfortable places to sit. I quote, so you get a sense of his marvelous (nonacademic) writing style:

"People tend to sit most where there are places to sit. This may not strike you as an intellectual bombshell, and, now that I look back on our study, I wonder why it was not more apparent to us from the beginning.

Sitting space, to be sure, is only one of the many variables, and without a control situation as a measure, one cannot be sure of cause and effect. But sitting space is most certainly prerequisite. The most attractive fountains, the most striking designs, cannot induce people to come and sit if there is no place to sit."

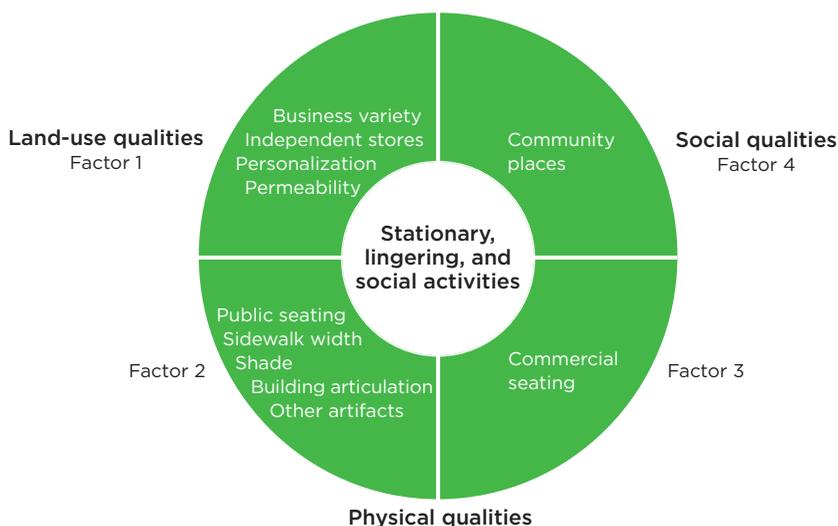
White's methodology probably would not pass muster in a top planning journal today. His sample of plazas was too small to permit statistical inference, and he did not use multivariate statistical methods to control for confounding variables. But it remains a compelling piece of research. It is also research that has had a practical impact, in that New York City subsequently revised its standards for plazas to require specific features such as adequate seating in order to qualify for density bonuses.

A fresh take

All this leads me to a recent study of street life in the tradition of William H. Whyte. Vikas Mehta, an assistant professor at the University of South Florida, sent me a copy of a recently published book based on his dissertation at the University of Maryland. I served on his dissertation committee, which may account for the free book. *The Street: A Quintessential Social Public Space*, published in 2013, required hundreds of hours of direct observation of 78 block segments on 19 blocks on three streets in the Boston area.

Mehta was interested not in pedestrians quickly passing by a given block face, with a destination elsewhere, but rather in those who were stationary for a period of time, lingering, gathering, and engaging in social behaviors on the street. He reasoned that the stationary users would be more affected by the quality of the environment than passersby would be. Walk-by observations were conducted to count street users on each block segment, more than 3,200 of whom were recorded. While all 19 blocks were concourses for pedestrians, over half of the lingering and stationary behaviors were observed on only four blocks, and 25 percent were observed on one block alone. Eight of 78 block segments accounted for

Important Street Characteristics



SOURCE: *The Street: A Quintessential Social Public Space*

38 percent of the users.

Fifteen-minute stationary observations from discreet vantage points were also conducted to determine the duration of stays. Again, eight block segments were the ones with the greatest number of people spending the maximum amount of time on the street. Consistent with Whyte's findings, all eight had places to sit—either benches installed by a public agency or chairs provided by stores.

Five block segments had large numbers of users, but they spent very little time on the street. None of these block segments had fixed or movable seating. Mehta ultimately ran correlations between an overall index of social activity and 11 characteristics of street frontage (articulated street fronts, shade from trees and canopies, variety of businesses, etc.), and found that commercial seating had the strongest correlation to his index. He also conducted user interviews and performed multiple regression analysis on his frontage variables to determine the relative contribution of each to social activity. I cannot do justice to this full-length book in a short column, but I can say from experience that the book goes well with a glass of merlot while seated at an outdoor cafe.

—Reid Ewing

Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah and an associate editor of JAPA. He is the author of Measuring Urban Design, recently published by Island Press. More than 30 of his past columns are available at www.plan.utah.edu/?page_id=509.

LETTERS

No politics, please

Paul Farmer's partisanship reached new heights in December ("Do what's right and solve important problems"). True to form, he took a swipe at George W. Bush, the tea party ("a nihilist faction"), and others who want federal spending controlled, but this time he added a charge of racism against those who oppose President Obama's policies, adding that they're "out to assure [his] failure." I can't help but wonder if he was similarly concerned that those who opposed President Bush's policies were out to assure that he failed; somehow, I

doubt it. I also wonder if he thought he was being clever when he ended his piece with "Yes, we can," the Obama-Biden campaign slogan.

Planning magazine belongs to the membership and should not be used as a forum by APA's chief executive officer to espouse his or her personal political opinions, no matter which way he or she may lean. I don't recall Israel Stollman or Frank So ever doing that in *Planning* and I don't understand why the Board of Directors has allowed Mr. Farmer to do it. Regardless, it's time for the board to put a stop to it.

—Robert H. Wilson, AICP
Executive Director
Whatcom Council of Governments
Bellingham, Washington

Paul Farmer responds

Readers of my Perspectives know that I have praised Republicans such as Theodore Roosevelt and Richard Nixon for their progressive, pro-planning leadership as often as I have praised Democrats such as Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. I did not suggest that the predominant opposition to President Obama was racist but *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow and others have shown that a portion of the opposition to President Obama is based on race. The meeting on inauguration day 2009 that I referenced was focused on assuring the newly elected president's failure, not opposition to his policies, and that's the distinction that I pointed out.

Letters may be edited before publication. Address them to Sylvia Lewis, Planning's Editor and Publisher, American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601; e-mail: slewis@planning.org.

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Demolishing public-housing myths

Edward G. Goetz (University of Minnesota) presents a thorough and data-driven indictment of the bipartisan rush to demolish public housing in *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, & Public Housing Policy* (2013; Cornell University Press; 239 pp.; \$23.95). He makes the case that government-provided housing did not fail and that the bipartisan demolition

frenzy was fueled by racism and development pressure, not the needs and desires of its inhabitants.

The book proceeds systematically from a brief history of public housing's "quiet successes and loud failures" to case studies of Chicago, New Orleans, and Atlanta, followed by analyses of individual projects, the experiences of the displaced, and neighborhood effects.

The author says that some public housing developments were nightmarish and unsalvageable, but he adds that "these highly publicized failures are now being used as pretext for a systematic dismantling of the public housing program" while residents are "largely shunted aside into other highly segregated and impoverished neighborhoods." Chicago's conspicuous failures, he argues, were largely brought about by systematic neglect once poor black people moved in in large numbers. The key 1992 congressional commission report that provoked what Goetz calls the "discourse of disaster" surrounding public housing noted that 94 percent of the developments were not "severely distressed" and in fact were providing "an important rental housing resource for many low income families and others."

Goetz's data, obtained from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, show that demolition proceeded faster in those cities where public housing was primarily black, and in those projects that were primarily black. As for the result, "The dispersal pattern in HOPE VI and other examples of forced relocation indicate that residents typically move from public housing to other segregated, higher-poverty neighborhoods."

The author proposes more discerning responses to the problem: Stop demolition (which has already affected three times the number of "severely distressed" units identified by the commission), phase in redevelopment, enforce a "right to remain," reinstate one-for-one replacement of lost units, preserve affordable housing in redevelopment areas, monitor the racial impact of public housing policies, and expand voluntary mobility programs.