The Pedagogy and Practice of The Neighborhood Landscape

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Marcia McNally, Associate Adjunct Professor
Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning; University of California, Berkeley; USA
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There is considerable discussion today about teaching pedagogy which includes curriculum that addresses some facet of community design.[1] This paper discusses a pedagogy that is not theoretical so much as it is fundamental, namely it addresses the desire to reintroduce field work into the process of making good places. In this way I agree with David Orr in his call for a "unity between personhood, pedagogy, and place" (1992, 126). It is my belief that knowing what exists is foundational to good decision making about the future and that we must teach citizens and students how to establish this basis. Thus my preference is for place-making processes, where participants engage in place investigation as part of the making.

The neighborhood landscape method

Members of the Democratic Design network will recall from the 2002 conference in Hong Kong that I have been working on a method for place documentation at the neighborhood scale. It is because I think that the neighborhood is the place where citizens are most likely to learn about the power of the collective in the public realm. It is also because the neighborhood is our everyday landscape. It is a place that we are likely to know best, but it is not necessarily the place we see most clearly. And it is a scale that is often overlooked, whether it be in the academy or in government policy making.

The neighborhood landscape method I have developed is embodied in a field guide (McNally 2007). The decision to create such a tool was inspired by naturalist painter Roger Tory Peterson who developed field guides so amateurs could record birds observed in nature, which ultimately developed a constituency for these creatures, a concern for conservation, and a sense of stewardship (Scott 1982). The uniqueness of the guide is that it is organized around four primary investigations: of neighborhood structure, nature, networks, and settings. Each investigation is introduced with a qualitative narrative, followed by diagnostic tools and case studies to illustrate. The guide also offers short tutorials in field work and data collection. These are based on the standard procedures of a cross-section of disciplines, but infused with new ways of synthesizing information as it is gathered. In this manner the user is coached through the process of taking inventory of the neighborhood landscape, making assessment, and developing plans for change.

How has it been applied: "theory building"

At the time I devised this methodology it was my feeling that if a neighborhood's structure, nature, networks, and settings were in good working order, then the neighborhood itself would be functioning well. This I set out to test in a course called the

[1] For example please see Volume 24, Number 2 issue of *Landscape Journal* which featured articles on pedagogy by members of the Democratic Design network.

Neighborhood Landscape. I have taught it five times and 41 students have been involved. Over this period we have researched 34 neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, California. I have also conducted one neighborhood research exchange in Kyoto, Japan and one in Taipei, Taiwan and used the method on a planning project for the Los Angeles River. For the purposes of this conference, and particularly with our hosts in mind, this paper presents selected results from the neighborhood studies. The first findings should be of interest to those who study place and those who devise place-based policy at the local level. The second is a discussion of instances where the method was used in participatory action research and professional practice.[2]

Let me begin in the classroom. In 2002 nine students and I studied seven Berkeley neighborhoods. Each was defined by a ¼-mile radius. Several neighborhoods had significant parks or commercial areas within their boundaries, several noticeably did not. At the time of this work there was no client although staff from the City of Berkeley's Parks and Recreation Department and the newly-formed Neighborhood Services office participated. To guide the students' work I developed a handout with a few recommended methods for collecting social factors data and some suggestions about looking at Census data on line. Basically, the students were told to go outside with a camera and sketchbook and look around. They brought what they found to class and we would discuss how to diagram or map it.

The City's interest in the work was largely in terms of whether or not residents of these neighborhoods felt well-served by parks and open space. To that end we distributed a survey to randomly-selected households in each of the neighborhoods studied – 200 questionnaires per neighborhood, 1400 total. We received 448 responses. The simple answer to the City's question was "yes," regardless of whether there was a park within the neighborhood boundary or not. For example when asked, "Do you use the parks or other public open spaces in the neighborhood?" 71% responded "Yes". When asked to mark all the things on a checklist that described their neighborhood, 80% indicated there was a "park close by".

As a planner I was also interested in where Berkeley residents walked to. The ¼-mile is the preferred maximum distance to travel on foot to engage in daily life activities (with the exception of employment), going back to the days of Clarence Perry and the Regional Plan for New York (1929). So we also asked, "Are there places you walk to in your neighborhood?" Only 23% of the respondents to this open-ended question indicated they walked to parks or open space which muddied the picture of whether or not residents were well-served. We concluded that many park users drove outside of the neighborhood to use local parks, that people had favorite parks that weren't necessarily close to home, and that one's sense of the extent of "neighborhood" was elastic.

Over the past thirty years many American suburbs have been trying to redefine themselves as livable by urban measures, a trend that might seem odd to Asian planners.

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[2] A simple discussion of participatory action research can be found on line through Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_Action_Research.

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The poster child of this effort is the neighborhood commercial area that typically is home to a Starbucks, local café, or "third place" (Oldenburg 1991). Berkeley is known for its neighborhood commercial districts, something that was confirmed by survey participants. Indeed the most frequently marked neighborhood characteristic in the checklist was "shops or services close by" (93%). Even more interesting, 93% shopped in their neighborhood, mostly for food (79%), and 79% indicated they *walked* to shopping.[3]

As a community designer I was also curious to know if, how, and where neighbors neighbored. The most frequent answer to the question, "Which of the following are places where people in your neighborhood socialize, meet, hang out, gather, etc.?" was "the sidewalk" (72%). Similarly, the most frequent response to the question, "Do you participate in any of the following activities in your neighborhood?" was "say hi to my neighbors when I see them on the street" (98%). All other choices paled in comparison, such as "belong to a neighborhood association" (26%), "participate in an annual neighborhood event" (21%), or "participate in neighborhood watch" (20%). Thus the most social-capital-inducing activity was a relatively fleeting interaction that spatial intervention is not likely to improve. Putnam would be disappointed but not surprised (1995).

It was interesting to note, however, that the other place respondents most frequently indicated they socialized with neighbors was a coffee shop or café (63%). Combined with the finding of how many people walk to shopping in their neighborhood, this gives local government planners grist for the mill. Indeed language about pedestrian-friendly commercial areas can be found throughout the City's General Plan (City of Berkeley 2002). One on-going effort in the Neighborhood Services program is to work with struggling neighborhood shopping districts to develop a retail identity, hold events, and recruit businesses. The City's draft Pedestrian Master Plan emphasizes interventions to increase safety and improve public health, but also makes proposals for creating connectivity between everyday destinations (Space Syntax 2006).

One could justifiably conclude that Berkeley is a unique American suburb that functions in many ways like a city. So how do neighborhoods in other, lower density cities perform? For three years my students studied neighborhoods along the Los Angeles River, mostly in the San Fernando Valley. These studies included resident surveys that employed questionnaires very similar to those distributed in Berkeley. The results indicate that both Berkeley and Los Angeles respondents were likely to characterize their neighborhoods in somewhat the same terms, as shown in the table below:[4]

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[3] This information is corroborated by a recent study conducted to inform the Berkeley Pedestrian Master Plan process which is currently underway. A look at the maps show that most Berkeley residents are within a 15 minute walk of a major retail area, and for many the walk to shopping is less than 5 minutes, or the "Manhattan distance" (Space Syntax 2006).

[4] These results are interesting to compare to the research of Sidney Brower, who in reviewing 36 residential satisfaction studies found the three most important criteria were: that a neighborhood is clean and well maintained, it is a place where residents feel safe, and that it has a reputation as being a desirable place to live (1996).

	Berkeley N=448	San Fernando Valley N=261
Amenities		
Shops or services close by	93%	83%
Reliable public transportation	81%	55%
Parks or open space close by	80%	78%
Well connected by roads	76%	82%
School close by	75%	79%
There is a center to the neighborhood	32%	10%
"Goodness" Qualities		
Attractive	73%	67%
Owning a home in this neighborhood is a good investment	70%	71%
I know my neighbors	69%	70%
Safe	67%	72%
Quiet	59%	75%

Returning to the question of where did people neighbor, the students found that the local-café-as-container-of-social-capital-building did not hold up in Valley neighborhoods (only 19% indicated this was a place where they socialized) even though most described their neighborhoods as having shopping and services close by. A smart survey designer would have found a way to have the respondent define "close by" as I imagine the definition would vary significantly by city. One doesn't have the opportunity to run into a neighbor at a café in most of the Valley neighborhoods studied – most of them were entirely residential. And of course Los Angeles is much more of a car culture than Berkeley. It is interesting to note, however, that within the Berkeley survey respondents in two neighborhoods with different levels of access to shopping both believed they had shopping nearby even though the distance varied by a magnitude of two.

Why is all of this important? It provides local government officials with general information about what residents are looking for in their neighborhoods and therefore what residents will expect local government to help protect. It contributes to what is known about how city form can support pedestrianism and, as Perry sought to know, "the physical basis for that kind of face-to-face association which characterized the old village community and which the large city finds so difficult to recreate" (1929).[5] It also created

[5] Perry would be disappointed to learn, however, that only 8% of the Berkeley respondents and 9% in Los Angeles said they belonged to a parent-teacher association for a school in the neighborhood. His ideal neighborhood located an elementary school at the center that would also function as a center for civic engagement.

an opportunity for students to understand "place" through the eyes of neighbors as well as their own in-place investigations.

How has it been applied: problem solving
I have had a chance to use the neighborhood landscape field method on two projects, a piece of participatory action research in Taiwan and a professional project in Los Angeles. This section of the paper discusses the work and how the method was useful.

Shi-lin Night Market.[6] Thanks to the Democratic Design network Professor Huang Li-ling of Ming Chuan University and I have been collaborating on neighborhood-scale research for five years. In 2004 we had the opportunity to work together in Taipei, in the Shi-lin Night Market neighborhood. Here we set out to test our collective field methods to understand the spatial nuances of an historic, urban neighborhood in Taiwan and to document how development pressure and global forces affected a neighborhood's capacity to support daily life functions.

Our entrée into Shi-lin was through Taipei City's Neighborhood Improvement Program (NIP). With the help of veteran Mr. Chung-chieh Lin, Chief Engineer in the Bureau of Urban Development, we identified the night market area as a place where City involvement might curb the wholesale conversion of the neighborhood by outsiders. To date there had been no NIP project in the area and there was concern that the City's work in the neighborhood was serving big money interests only. Further, Shi-lin's residential community has been fairly quiet in the face of development pressures despite a boom in community-based action in many other Taipei neighborhoods. Lin hoped that by systematically documenting the forces at work the NIP could find ways to improve neighborhood daily life and hold the line on development.

Thus one of the goals of this collaboration was to provide the City with neighborhood level background information for decision making and for community outreach. To that end Huang and I brought together our students for a two-week research exchange. The work began with the students mapping the neighborhood using the field guide method and conducting interviews with local shopkeepers. They found that little attention had been paid to safeguard the community as a living space. The neighborhood was rapidly gentrifying and dramatically changing in scale, from 2-3 story buildings to 5-6 story buildings and now 10-12 story buildings. The old street network was being replaced with new, wide streets. Residential complexes were sprouting up behind gates. Disappearing were the traditional space and scale arrangements, such as barbershops, markets, and tailor shops, which used to double as community information centers, in other words informal civic space that maintained the social network within the neighborhood.

In the second week the students used their findings to generate a master plan of proposed changes that would enhance community life, protect historic resources, and hold the line

[6] For a full description of the research see McNally and Huang, *Shi-lin Neighborhood Landscape Exchange. Report to Taipei City's Neighborhood Improvement Program* (Taipei: City of Taipei Bureau of Urban Development, 2007).

on tourist takeover. As part of this plan the students proposed a system of neighborhood "spots" and paths that ultimately would connect to the larger, nearby natural landscape. These sites could have a big impact for little investment – they would create places where locals could garden, talk, exercise, drink tea, rest, play, dance, or even shop. The students became aware of this opportunity through their field work. With a steady hand they cut cross sections amidst the chaos of the market which allowed them to observe and record the myriad of ways that residents appropriated the street, the shophouse arcade, parks, the area under the MRT elevated track, and other unclaimed space.

Since the exchange Huang and I have attempted to use the students' data to articulate the essential spatial relationships that make the old night market neighborhood what it is using the students' maps and interview findings. We developed tables to characterize the daily life functions of the place, where they occurred, what these settings looked like and how they might be at risk, and what could be done to strengthen them. From that we abstracted our findings into a set of patterns that could be used by NIP planners when working in Shi-lin. This information will be used in June for a two-day charrette in the community during which we will tackle a first set of neighborhood spots.

Los Angeles River. In 2003 my firm was hired to prepare a 20-year agenda for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy along the Los Angeles River. The Conservancy is state agency charged with acquiring lands in Los Angeles for open space and ecosystem preservation. A successful, "big landscape" operation, the Conservancy's work has historically focused in the mountains surrounding the city rather than in the city itself. The challenge has been to figure out how to transfer the agency's successes to the river and connect the parts – mountains to river to mountains.

Reclaiming the river, a concrete flood control system in an 834-acre watershed, will require thousands of little moves to build momentum for the big ones. Thus another need was to break down the river to understand its place-specific impacts. The first step was to find a way that river revitalization would resonate with people. I quickly calculated that along the main stem, which is 51 miles long, there were hypothetically 204 neighborhoods. Over the course of three years my students studied 17 (Dryden et al 2006). The studies got us on the ground and familiar with what it would be like to live next the river, and how improvements to the river could improve neighborhood life.

In 2000 the Trust for Public Land found that there were only 352 neighborhood parks in all of Los Angeles, or one park every 853 acres, which meant about one in every five neighborhoods (Harnik 2000).[7] Further, 75% of the children in Los Angeles did not have access to a park within walking distance of their home. The Conservancy had its work cut out for it. But the agency also needed to think big so we were looking at ways to create habitat along the river. Finding a species to champion with scientific legitimacy was a challenge, however, and birds, rather than terrestrial or aquatic species, were the solution. Working with local ornithologists we selected a target list from the over 400 species of

[7] Perhaps it is not surprising then that our survey data for the Valley indicated that residents in these neighborhoods were much less likely than people in Berkeley to neighbor in parks (29% as opposed to 50%).

birds in the watershed, and examined their habitat needs as a way to prioritize action. Fortunately most of the target birds don't need a lot of contiguous space; in fact the red-winged blackbird on average travels 8.7 miles from the roost to a foraging location every day and only needs a 5450 sq ft wet spot with a few cattails (CDbyD 2005).

Thus we had to operate at various scales and establish a number of geometries and metrics – we needed a system for planning units large enough to have ecological integrity and small enough to be knowable to the people who lived within their boundaries. Our research indicated the large watershed units needed to be 20,000 acres each; or 125 neighborhoods per unit and 2,000 people per neighborhood. By applying park planning standards (6-10 acres per 1000 residents), we could also establish how many acres of open space was needed in a neighborhood (20 acres) and how the river could play a role.

The neighborhood landscape "vocabulary" was useful for identifying opportunities to intervene. For example by studying the neighborhoods in section and in plan it became clear that there were a number of points where networks merge – the channel meets a neighborhood street – creating leftover space that is prime for small habitat patches. By surveying neighbors we learned what the impact might be of simply opening up one section of the river to walking, sitting, or viewing. The City of Los Angeles had just completed a one-mile section of river trail in Studio City. When we surveyed these residents 78% described their neighborhood as being close to the river, as compared to 31% of all of the Los Angeles survey respondents (this is despite the fact that the river was adjacent to or ran through every neighborhood studied). When asked if they stopped to look at the river, 19% of all respondents said yes, whereas in Studio City the response was 52%.

The resulting plan is a vision for an urban wildlife refuge with the river as centerpiece. The refuge will connect existing, reclaimed, and new habitat from backyards, to neighborhoods, urban cores, connecting corridors, and eventually to the Pacific Flyway. The plan shows the Conservancy how to develop an acquisition and development strategy that addresses habitat needs, creates opportunities for "green" flood control, improves water quality, and establishes neighborhood nature (CDbyD 2005).

Discussion: sliding across scales

In this last discussion I have hinted at the need to understand things at a number of scales and operate using a range of tools, from concrete to rather abstract. In some sense this is what Randy Hester is talking about when he says we need to inhabit science (Hester 2006). I am reminded of a plan he and I did years ago for a neighborhood group in the Pacific Palisades that had employed us to convince the City of Los Angeles it was a bad idea to fill a canyon in order to build houses. The canyon was very unstable, something that they understood because there had been a number of landslides over the years. But they didn't have the slightest idea about the underlying causes or the landscape systems involved. We had to teach these people the abstract so they could understand the concrete.

The same has been true in the case of the Los Angeles River plan. It has impelled the Conservancy to secure several small neighborhood properties identified during this project and the agency intends to take the wildlife refuge proposal to Congress by the end of this year. With new park bond funds now in place the Conservancy is expected to step up its acquisition and development activities in the watershed. This is thrilling, but it also a challenge. There are over 950,000 properties in the watershed, each of which could potentially be desirable. So where to start, how to prioritize?

To answer these questions we will have to take a step back from the neighborhood scale and look at a larger context. In a dry run we created several maps of the west end of the watershed that projected the intersection of river characteristics, permeability, habitat, park accessibility, and demographics using GIS data. For example mapping gaps in neighborhood open space against concentrations of children provided a good starting point. We also had to show staff how addressing flooding and water pollution in wastershed management while using stormwater BMPs (best management practices) can create habitat.

We have employed the same zoom-in, zoom-out exercise in Shi-lin. The tip off was observing the two MRT stations at either end of the night market neighborhood. Rapid transit brought Shi-lin within easy reach of downtown, now only a 12-minute ride from Taipei Main Station. The southern stop, Jian-tan, receives 50,000 travelers per day, a number which increases to 60,000 or 70,000 on the weekends. Shi-lin is also seen as the gateway to Taipei's natural and cultural areas. Further reading of City planning documents reveal that as Taipei becomes a global city its land use pattern will become increasingly multi-nodal. Shi-lin will no longer be north of the city but rather in the middle of several employment hubs, made all the more central with the efficacy of transit. However Shi-lin's destiny is understood by few, and certainly not evident through neighborhood-only analysis.

Returning to the question of pedagogy and method, what I have learned over this seven year period is that the neighborhood can only be known in the context of the city or region, and vice versa. This requires a mental slide rule of abstraction, but as planners and designers we understand the inherent logarithms. There is a tension which makes the teaching a bit more complex, however – how to promote the benefits of close place looking while encouraging people to think about big systems. Perhaps Mumford's regional survey should be taught in design school, or be conducted as an annual right of community citizenship.[8] Maybe on the day after the Audubon Christmas count.

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[8] Mumford's idea was that bringing together scientists, students, and citizens to be trained in interdisciplinary thinking would enrich civic activity and imbue a love of region (1946). Social capital meets stewardship.

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