

## Place Analysis Introduction (from 2022 IDEC Conference Abstract)

William Whyte made the film *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* in the 1970s, observing and documenting interactions with an astute eye for moments that reveal the character of a place. He was most interested in identifying the features of places that support a diverse and robust social life. While his work looked mostly at exterior spaces, the intent, methods, and scale of his study are extremely applicable for all types of places, including interiors. I've shown Whyte's film and asked design students to document places for many years, leading to numerous insights.

One thing that stands out is how much portable devices have changed social spaces. Other researchers have made similar observations, and a team from SWA updated Whyte's work in 2019, noting, "Our analysis shows a huge surge of devices. People are in public space to be around other people, but not watching other people. The idea of street theater is less important. This kind of information allows us to reevaluate the dominant forms of new urban space." Students have noted similar effects in interior spaces, with occupancy patterns dictated by access to electrical outlets or wifi connections.

The Covid pandemic brought further changes to social interactions, and while much of this continues to evolve, students have made perceptive observations that give hints at the social and psychological needs that spaces can or need to support. These observations have revealed, in real places, differing attitudes about mask-wearing and ways in which social hierarchies are manifest. For students, these insights help understand both the complexity of situations they are designing for and the impact, positive or negative, of the designed environment.

One thing that makes doing place analysis relatively easy is that it simply formalizes something that is very common: people watching. Training students to look at spaces and interactions as designers—paying attention to details and being methodical in their documentation—shows them how they can gain insights from their experiences. Often the lessons come from spaces that aren't working well—by looking closely and recognizing flaws, students learn the consequences of design choices.

Over a number of years, students have looked at coffee shops, hotel lobbies, retail spaces, interior and exterior public spaces, and a wide range of other places. These studies show patterns of day-to-day life and offer clues to interior design students about furniture arrangements, thresholds, canopies, and the amenities that make a space comfortable and enjoyable. As a scholar, I seek to connect these practical lessons to larger theoretical perspectives. One fruitful linkage is the work of Henri Lefebvre. In particular his book *Rhythmanalysis* seeks to understand everyday patterns to both critique and re-imagine our social and spatial experience.

Taken in aggregate, the observations from this work offer a sense of the features and interactions typical of 21<sup>st</sup> century interior spaces. In that sense this research connects to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which can be considered an effort to "represent and to critique the bourgeois experience of nineteenth-century history" through studying the specific spatial experience of the Parisian arcades. Similarly, contemporary place analysis aims to document and consider the social implications of spatial interactions and the ways in which contemporary life is revealed in day-to-day places. I see the goal as twofold: 1) familiarize students with tools and methodologies of place analysis, suggesting that these skills are an important part of any designer's toolkit, and 2) characterize features and interactions of typical 21<sup>st</sup> century spaces, to gain insight into the social and spatial context in which we operate.

## References

- Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press.
- Gehl, Jan, and Birgitte Svarre. 2013. *How to Study Public Life*. Washington, D.C., DC: Island Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 2004. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*. London: Continuum.
- SWA Group. 2019. *Field Guide to Life in Urban Plazas A Study in New York City*. Available: [https://live-swa-2019.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Field-Guide-to-Life-in-Urban-Plazas\\_digital1.pdf](https://live-swa-2019.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Field-Guide-to-Life-in-Urban-Plazas_digital1.pdf)
- Whyte, William H. 1980. *The social life of small urban spaces*. Washington, D.C.: Conservation Foundation.

Zeisel, John. 2006. *Inquiry by design: environment/behavior/neuroscience in architecture, interiors, landscape, and planning*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

## **Place Analysis Frameworks**

### **Analysis of Site Features and Formal Design Qualities**

This mode of analysis investigates the formal, material, spatial, structural, and phenomenological qualities of the place, including both designed and natural features of the site. Photographs, plans and section drawings are commonly used in this type of analysis.

### **Analysis of Program, Purpose, and Use**

This mode of analysis often employs diagrams to understand the program of the project, including uses, adjacencies, and symbolic purposes. Program can indicate both a specific type of building (i.e. school, theater, church) as well as the specific functions, both practical and conceptual, that go on within that place (in the example of a church, the program might include worship, community gathering, offices, restrooms, as well as the idea of “sanctuary”).

### **Analysis of Social Activities and Psychological Experiences**

This mode of analysis observes and documents the activities and behaviors of people in places, including the ways people occupy, interact, and experience the place. This type of analysis may also investigate psychological experiences of places that may or may not be consciously expressed through behavior (i.e. prospect-refuge activity). Activity maps, time-lapse photography, interviews, and surveys are commonly used in this type of analysis.

### **Analysis of Project Background and History**

This mode of analysis investigates the story of how the project was financed, designed and built, or how it may relate to other projects by the same designer or built at the same time. It also looks at structures of ownership and how the place has changed over time.

### **Analysis of Culture, Belonging, and Meaning**

In many ways the hardest mode of analysis, this involves interpretation of activities to understand meaning and decipher customs or predispositions people have to places. It gives insight into the “why” of a place, including what the “rules” may be and who feels they belong. This mode may involve talking to people in structured or unstructured ways to understand their attitudes and choices.

## **Place Analysis Methodology**

Place analysis takes time and repeated observation. It requires visiting a place in person and looking closely at the physical features and human activity. It may require background research, talking with people, and various forms of documentation. It is important to visit the place at different times and on different days. It is helpful to form an impression of a place, but equally important to question that impression and observe and document the place rigorously. Below is a step-by-step guide to the process (intended as an assignment for students).

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Over the course of the term, each student will conduct ongoing research into a local site that they visit. Students will document the physical features, psychological effects, social interactions, cultural meanings, and other experiences, encounters, and impressions of the place. The goal of this assignment is to link lessons from environmental psychology with tools for observation and analysis to understand a place and, if possible, identify ways it could be improved through design.

### ***Part 1 – Site Selection***

From the list of interior typologies, selection one type of space that you plan to investigate. Identify one or two specific sites that you will have regular access to visit and document. For class, provide the address of the site(s) you have selected and at least 3 photos of the space.

### ***Part 2 – Site Observation and Documentation***

- A) Description of the place, min 200 words and 1 sketch view, including:
  - Physical features that define the place and give it a unique character
  - Phenomenological features of the places (sounds, smells, feelings, etc.)
  - Who is in the place and what are they doing?
  - Background history of the place
- B) Document activity at the place, including a map/plan, using at least one of the following methods:
  - Behavior mapping (freeze frame or movement over time) (Bakos)
  - Physical traces (observations and comments) (Zeisel)
  - Behavior setting effects (shapes, functional distance, setting size, etc.) (Zeisel)
- C) Be able to describe the use and behavior patterns of the site. Note any other characteristics, information or observations that you think are pertinent to the site. Be prepared to discuss how or what you plan to further investigate, and what methods you may use to develop an analysis of the place.

### ***Part 3 – Site Analysis and Findings***

Drawing upon the information (data) you have collected, analyze the place to discuss it using some of the terms and ideas we have discussed in class. Further observe and documentation of the site will likely be required. Utilize the theories and ideas from the course to evaluate the place. Is it good design? Present a comprehensive report on the site addressing its physical and spatial features as well as its social and psychological characteristics. Discuss what you observed and how you think the space supports or does not support the activity there. Identify and discuss at least one theory or idea from the course in relation to the place. The report should include narrative and visual description, analysis, and drawings, as necessary to communicate your ideas.

## **PLACE ANALYSIS – PART 1 – SITE SELECTION**

1) Identify a type of place you are interested in (from the list below)

2) Identify 2-3 options of that type of place that you can visit and spend time at on multiple occasions

List the addresses of the possible sites to visit

Choose one for an initial visit (your choice can be based on interest, intuition, convenience, etc.)

3) Visit the place, plan to spend more than 30 minutes

Walk around and get familiar with the place

Take photos

Look around the exterior and interior spaces

Identify 2-3 spaces that you could observe directly (all areas of the space should be visible to you)

CHECK: After your initial walk-around, does this place seem feasible for the Place Analysis project?

Is it safe? Will you have the access you need? Is it interesting?

If yes, proceed with #4; If no, go back to #2 and select another place

4) Pick one space that seems interesting for detailed observation

Briefly describe the space in words; note what makes the space interesting

5) For the space you pick, take photographs and/or video

Try to capture enough images that you can present the space in a comprehensive way

6) For the space you pick, make a plan drawing

It can be a sketch, but do your best to record the features and sizes accurately. If feasible measure the space (by walking off distances or with a tape measure).

If available, obtain architectural drawings or a map of the place.

NOTE: You will be using this plan drawing in Part 2 of the project to record your observations

7) Prepare documentation of the information you have collected

Documentation should include:

Site location (address), written description, plan (sketch or measured), photos

Discussion of why you picked this typology and site (What is interesting to you?)

Note anything that stands out to be observed or investigated further

## **PLACE ANALYSIS – PART 2 – SITE OBSERVATION AND DOCUMENTATION**

### 1) Research the history and background of the place

What is the story of the project? Who was the designer? Who was the client?

### 2) Make a plan to visit the place at least three times on different days and different times of day

What days/times make sense based on the rhythms of the site?

Bring multiple copies of the plan drawing that you prepared

### 3) Visit the place, walk around and make general observations

Note the day, time, weather, and any other preliminary observations

### 4) Position yourself in the space you identified for detailed observation

Take a few minutes to settle in and see what is happening in the space

Make notes on the plan drawing

### 5) Observe the space and activity

Make observations in appropriate increments, using appropriate methods (see resources)

### 6) Record your observations

Record your observations using appropriate methods and tools

### 7) Repeat steps 2-5 at least two more times (different days and different times)

### 8) Note preliminary findings

See list of questions related to theories of place

### 9) Identify patterns or features for further observation and analysis

What stands out or makes you curious?

### 10) Prepare documentation of the information you have collected

Documentation should include:

Previous descriptive information and background research to introduce the place

Observation notes, diagrams, photos, etc. (from at least 3 visits)

Notes on your preliminary findings

Indication of what is relevant for further observation and analysis

### PLACE ANALYSIS – PART 3 – SITE ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

1) Discuss your observations and preliminary findings with a colleague or mentor

What feedback or insights can they provide? What questions did they ask?

2) Identify at least one key finding or idea that emerges from your observations and discussions

It doesn't have to be groundbreaking, but it should reveal something about the place or activity

Note the key finding

3) Outline a plan to gather further information about the place, focusing on how to further explore what you've identified as a key finding

Consider whether you should extend or elaborate on the method(s) you've used (going additional days, times, etc.) or if another methodology (surveys, interviews, etc.) would be helpful.

CHECK: What is realistic in the time you have? Will you be able to complete the plan you've outlined?

If yes, proceed with gathering further information; if no, revise the plan to be realistic

4) Collect additional data about the place

Use the previous steps to observe and document the place, or develop new/additional methods

5) Sit with your observations and notes about the place

What insights do you have about the place? What stands out or is interesting?

Do your further observations support or contradict your preliminary observations?

Is there anything else you need to find out about the place?

6) Do you consider the place to be an example of good design?

Why or why not?

CHECK: Do you have enough information about the place and activities to share your findings?

If yes, proceed to #7; if not, go back in the process and figure out what steps you might take

Note: your findings don't have to be earth-shattering, but are there consistent patterns you can discuss

7) Prepare documentation / presentation of your findings

Documentation/Presentation should include:

Descriptive information and background research to introduce the place

Visual presentation and written discussion of key findings (include diagram(s) to present findings)

Observation notes, diagrams, photos, etc. that support your findings (can be in an appendix)

## Resources for Site Observation, Documentation, and Analysis

### Primary Resources

- Whyte, William H. 1980. *The social life of small urban spaces*. Washington, D.C.: Conservation Foundation.
- Zeisel, John. 2006. *Inquiry by design: Tools for Environment-Behavior Research*. Chapter 8: "Observing physical traces", pp. 89-110; and Chapter 9: "Observing environmental behavior", pp. 111-136.
- Bakos, et al 1980. "Evaluative Tools: Behavioral Mapping, Activity Analysis," in *Privacy, Territory, and Participation*. pp. 18-22.
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### Additional Resources

- Lang, Jon. 1987. "The Behavior Setting: A Unit for Environmental Analysis and Design," Ch 11 in *Creating Architectural Theory: The Role of the Behavioral Sciences in Environmental Design*. United Kingdom: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.
- Coffin, Christie Johnson, and Jenny Young. 2017. *Making Places for People: 12 Questions Every Designer Should Ask*. Taylor & Francis.
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Voordt, DJM van der, and HBR van Wegen. 2005. *Architecture In Use: An Introduction to the Programming, Design and Evaluation of Buildings*. Architectural Press.

Grafe, Christoph, and Franziska Bollerey, eds. 2007. *Cafes and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display*. 1st edition. New York ; London: Routledge.

Oldenburg, Ray. 1999. *Great Good Place*. 3rd edition. New York : Berkeley, Calif.: Marlowe & Company.

## **Suggested Place Types**

### Hospitality

- Hotel lobby
- Cafe / Coffee shop
- Restaurant
- Fast food

### Retail

- Big box retail
- Boutique retail
- Convenience store

### Health / Wellness

- Gym
- Doctor or dentist office
- Hospital waiting room

### Office / Commercial

- Corporate lobby
- Office spaces

### Institutional

- Religious space
- Library
- Classroom
- Museum gallery

### Public Space

- Transit station
- Bus or Subway Car
- Interior Public space
- Exterior public space



## Questions and Themes Related to Place

<b>Issue / Theme</b>	<b>Questions / Observations (these should be more than yes/no responses)</b>
Accessibility / ADA	To what degree is the place accessible?
Thresholds	What are the boundaries of the place? How are the boundaries defined?
Amenity / Affordance	What is the amount and quality of seating?
Amenity / Affordance	What amenities or affordances are available in the place?
Physical Traces	Are there things left behind that give clues about the space and how it is used?
Psychology / Experience	What mood does the place create?
Density	How dense is the occupancy? How dense does it feel?
Privacy	What degree of privacy does the space provide?
Color	Are there any significant color features? Is there meaning to these features?
Prospect-Refuge	Where do people like to be in the space? Do they occupy the edges?
Wayfinding	How is wayfinding facilitated?
Children	Is the space kid-friendly? Are there kids in the place?
Digital Devices	What digital device use can be observed? How does the space facilitate this?
Health/Wellness	Are there features of the space that promote health/wellness (besides Covid)? What adaptations have been made for Covid?
Design Responsibility	To what degree is the space sustainable? How is this evaluated? Are there other features that make the space responsible?
Identity/Belonging	Who belongs in the space? Who feels comfortable in the place? Why? Is anyone excluded from the place? Is it exclusive or inclusive to a specific group?
Culture	How is culture represented in the place?

## Questions by Analysis Framework

### Analysis of Site Features and Formal Design Qualities

This mode of analysis investigates the formal, material, spatial, structural, and phenomenological qualities of the place, including both designed and natural features of the site. Photographs, plans and section drawings are commonly used in this type of analysis.

Considerations:

Where is the project located; how is it oriented to the sun and address climate conditions?

How is the site accessed?

What is its relationship to the surrounding neighborhood or landscape?

What is the structural logic of the project?

What stylistic elements define the project?

What are the materials of the project?

How is the project detailed?

Would you consider the project “sustainable,” why or why not?

What are the qualities of light, sound, smell, etc. that you can sense?

How would you describe the space?

Does it relate to nature, how?

What are the spatial, material, structural, or phenomenological challenges that the project is exploring?

What is innovative?

Is it good design or bad design—why?

### **Analysis of Program, Purpose, and Use**

This mode of analysis often employs diagrams to understand the program of the project, including uses, adjacencies, and symbolic purposes. Program can indicate both a specific type of building (i.e. school, theater, church) as well as the specific functions, both practical and conceptual, that go on within that place (in the example of a church, the program might include worship, community gathering, offices, restrooms, as well as the idea of “sanctuary”).

Considerations:

What is the program of the project?

Diagram the uses and adjacencies of the place. How is the program manifested architecturally?

How is the program divided and communicated via walls, lighting, materials, etc?

How does the design facilitate the functions and uses of the space?

How does the architecture or design challenge or modify the way this type of place is typically used?

Does design meet all of the needs of the users—in what ways does it succeed or fail?

Is the program being affirmed, negated, or deformed by the inhabitants?

What are the interesting programmatic adjacencies, penetrations, overlaps?

What are the symbolic aspects of the program?

How do they work and what do they say about the place?

### **Analysis of Social and Psychological Experiences**

This mode of analysis observes and documents the activities and behaviors of people in places, including the ways people occupy, interact and experience the place. This type of analysis may also investigate the cultural or psychological experiences of places that may or may not be expressed through behavior. Activity maps, time-lapse photography, interviews, and surveys are commonly used in this type of analysis.

Considerations:

Who is, or is not, inhabiting this space?

Is the project public or private—to what degree and based on what factors?

Is it exclusive or inclusive to a specific group?

What are people doing in this space, how is the place used?

How do people circulate?

Describe the interactions.

How are people reacting to the spatial, programmatic, and material separations?

Are the intentions of the design fully achieved?

How do the users modify the design and program?

Does the project address any specific social or individual issues (i.e. low-income housing)?

Is the project successful in its solution?

Are the interests of the client and the users compatible?

Who has power in the place?

How do you know this, and how is power manifested architecturally?

Are people enjoying the place?

How do you know this, and what features facilitate enjoyment?

How does the design offer affordances for the activities of the occupants?

### **Analysis of Project Background and History**

This mode of analysis investigates the story of how the project was financed, designed and built, or how it may relate to other projects by the same designer or built at the same time. It also looks at structures of ownership and how the place has changed over time.

Considerations:

What is the story of the project?

Who is the designer and what is their background?

Who is the client and what is their background?

How was the project paid for?

What did the design iterations look like?

What projects are similar to this one?

How does the project reference or deviate from historical precedents?

Does the project fall within a style?

What historic events/issues were occurring simultaneous to this project?

How has this project aged or changed since its construction?

Were there any social pressures affecting this project?