

Visual Literacy Research Programme

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The research programme is intended to examine what is meant by visual literacy, investigate the extent of public awareness in this field, and direct this knowledge towards an intensification of such awareness in order to deepen community understanding of, and involvement in, the process of design.

Relevance for planning knowledge.

The project seeks to contribute to the implementation of social and physical renewal strategies, by supporting the concepts of capacity building and empowerment.

Capacity building is linked to the ideas of:

- _ Education, as we believe, is the first step out of disadvantage1.
- _ Participation is relevant as "significant changes in human behaviour can be brought about rapidly and efficiently only if the persons who are expected to change participate in deciding what the change shall be and how it shall be made" (Sanoff 1992 iii).

By providing education we wish to stimulate the only significant form of participation, the one connected to awareness and redistribution of power. Unless participation is linked to power of decision making, "it turns into an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the power holders to claim that all sides were considered but makes it possible only for some of these to benefit and maintains the status quo" (Arnstein 1969).

Research methodology.

The research is organised into different phases:

– *Definition of Visual Literacy.*

Review of existing literature and discussions with those involved in the visual disciplines, with particular attention to the work done on the perception of urban environments.

– *Survey.*

To assess the relationships pertaining across a range of variables related both to people and places. It is structured on various stages of complexity, from peoples' perception of the city as a whole, to the attribution of significant meanings, to specific features to the comparison between groups evaluations on specific urban elements.

Part of this survey stage is currently on site, and will be included in the educational packages to be produced by the end of the research. The aim is to stimulate opinions among groups, which will be used as a training tool within the training process.

– *Analysis.*

To observe variations in the response of differing observers to different urban contexts. This stage is an ongoing process, as it includes 2 types of evaluation:

1. Carried out by the researcher and used to create the educational program and the workshops.
2. Carried out by the groups involved as a critical tool to learn to confront ideas, perspectives and to look for answers.

– *Development of an educational program aimed at heightening visual awareness in the city.*

To produce a series of workshops in different community context focusing-where possible- on design issues relevant to the city. The researcher has involved different community groups, from young children in schools to Community Based Housing Associations, to professionals as well as common laymen. From here stems the idea of creating educational packages for all the groups involved covering the visual perceptual world from the basic tools to ever more complex concepts dealing with human needs, the environment, architecture etc. (Sanoff 1992). The structure will include tools to:

- _ allow verbal and visual communication and discussion among groups;
- _ develop the decision making process capacity of individuals and groups;
- _ analyse and criticise given scenarios, and to modify them according to new sets of criteria;
- _ compare personal views to groups views;
- _ Discuss on relevant issues regarding the city.

The structure of the Visual Literacy Research Programme is based on the conviction that it should not just be restricted to the academic world. It involves and tests its findings on a range of social groups, and is based on direct contributions from the urban reality of Glasgow (Housing Associations, schools etc.). This contact is fundamental as it links theory to practice assuring for its progress a continuous feed back. The research is aimed to be of practical use to those groups with difficulties in having their urban-social needs satisfied, to reinforce a system which will enable them to have a say in formulating the best fitting solutions rather than being provided with a ready to use product.

Glasgow is a particularly interesting context for this Research, as for over 20 years has been carrying out urban renewal projects involving the local communities. Such communities, together with professionals, have matured as a result of their experience. Such development has been institutionalised, in the sense that some educational courses have been set up to improve the co-operation between local communities and professionals. The Visual Literacy Research Programme is developing such experience, under the advice and with the help of some of these experts. The Visual Literacy Research Programme understands the degree to which such educational programmes have contributed to the improvement of urban areas.

In three case studies (the so called neighbourhood case studies proposed by the social Housing Group) the impact of these programmes will be analysed in order to improve them and focus on more reproducible results.

The 3 case studies:

1. Reidvale Housing Association (Glasgow). A 25 years process of spontaneous learning and research of quality, through the development, by a small group of tenants, of both the physical and personal image of an inner city housing estate.

2. Castlemilk (Glasgow). How the previous experience is used to stimulate the interest for a life long learning process in shorter time and for extremely complex social and physical problems. This is one of the most deprived areas in the UK; can environmental education accelerate and improve the solution to such problems? The case study will examine an experimental project of co-operation between a local group of disadvantaged young people and the University of Strathclyde (Dr. Frey and his Design Unit) in the design of community facilities for the estate.
3. Torino, Grugliasco. Can the Glasgow example help guiding a newly formed group of residents to become responsible of the renovation of their housing estate? (The conditions are similar to the Castlemilk case study, where residents wish to acquire the public housing stock improving its management and allocation policies).

Stage of the research.

The time-sequence of the research, which leads to the degree of PhD, is:

1. Research theory & identification of urban issues with the involved (theory, survey, analysis);
2. Training programmes;
3. Physical changes.

The research is so far developing part 1 &2 (part 3 will require long term research dealing with community projects, so they are excluded from the PhD itself).

This Visual Literacy Programme is an action research which involves at any stage groups of people. It is, therefore, subject to a constant feed back and frequent changes and shifts of initial ideas.

Phase 1(Theory) is examining traditional literature on perception, environmental evaluation, theories on human needs, as well as more recent experiences and case studies.

Phases 2(Survey)-3(analysis)-4(educational programs) are carried out in parallel, since for practical reasons different groups are _so far- analysed separately through workshops, visits, interviews.

Major obstacles.

The major difficulties are due to the constant attempt of applying theoretical findings to real situations; this requires adaptations and flexibility.

This fact can anyway be considered as an optimisation process rather than an obstacle.

Preliminary results.

Investigation to date reveals a very large interest of the people/groups contacted to participate; they have become involved in every stage of the research. This suggests a good starting point for creating and assessing an effectively usable and extendable educational program.

From such responses new ideas have emerged, and the development of the educational program is modelled on all these imputes, which as a consequence are relevant and correspond to the users' interest, concerns and capacities.

Moreover there has been an extraordinarily good response from professionals and experts in this field, who are supporting and enriching this research with interesting discussions and sometimes a critical monitoring process.

Recent developments.

The Survey and Analysis stages have recently been organised on a temporal and methodological format including 3 main phases:

- _ Perception
- _ Cognition
- _ Use/ environmental behaviour.

A recent analysis on peoples cognitive maps of Glasgow has provided categories of relevant features; among them street & public spaces was selected as a direction of analysis. The survey will analyse _through peoples process of acquaintance, knowledge and use of such spaces- which physical characteristic and why affect human behaviour, and how to improve both.

The analysis process will be carried out using the following methodologies:

- _ Cognitive mapping + questionnaires;

- _ Multiple Sorting Task;
- _ Smallest Space Analysis as a base for Semantic Differentials;
- _ Visual Notation + Emotional Loading Profile.

The idea of using the research as part of a CD-ROM on making the planning process more transparent and user friendly is under discussion; the project will be carried out jointly by the Planning Department and Glasgow 1999 UK City of Architecture and Design.

In general the programme will relate to issues such as the visual-formal, economic and politic relevance of planning issues and will provide information on the planning tools. The Visual Literacy Research Programme is included in the visual-formal part.

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