Urban Field Methods

Narrative Mapping Anchorage Essay

**Introduction, aim, and research objectives**

Anchorage, Alaska is the largest city in the largest state in the US. Since World War II, Anchorage has gone from a small outpost of less than 5,000 people to a major city of nearly 300,000. After the war, people from Asia, Latin America, Europe, and the continental United States began moving to Anchorage to work in canneries, the railroad, and mining. This change has completely altered the area’s built and natural environments. While a few decades ago residents could go hunting within the city limits, those areas are now the sites of shopping malls and high rises. This has led to changes in the city’s identity. To explore how development in Anchorage has led to environmental and identity changes from the 1950s to the present day, I have created a narrative map based on the lived experiences of a longtime Anchorage resident.

As part of this aim, I formulated several research questions. How has urban development changed life for Anchorage residents since the 1950s? What caused these changes? How have the city’s identity, culture, and its relationship with the rest of Alaska changed? To answer these questions, I reached out to my friend Rick, a lifelong Alaskan who spent nearly 40 years living in Anchorage. He has since moved away from the city, but he still visits Anchorage every year.

**Methods**

Rick and I sat down for a phone interview on May 13th, 2020. Because Rick lives in a remote, coastal area, I had to call him at low tide so the cell signal could bounce off the rocks in the intertidal zone. Even then, the connection sometimes made it difficult to hear, and the call dropped once. After getting Rick’s consent, I recorded the phone interview using an app called Cube ACR. Later, I transcribed the interview using the website otter.ai, followed by lengthy manual editing.

I chose to use the interview material to build a narrative map for several reasons. Firstly, this format allows me to convey to combine geographic, visual, written, and auditory information into a single user-friendly format. I used javascript, CSS, HTML, and Mapbox to build an interactive, web-based map. I chose to integrate audio clips from the interview into the map. My aim in doing so was to allow to reader to hear Rick’s own voice as they look at the places on the map which he describes. I believe that this provides a unique emotional impact. To cut the audio clips, I used audiotrimmer.com.

* + 1. Include citations from the narrative mapping article

**Analysis**

* 1. Coding the interview. Cite Aurbach and Silverstein.

I followed the analysis method described by Aurbach and Silverstein in their article “Coding 1: the Basic Ideas” (2003). First, I went through the raw text to highlight the text that was relevant to my aim and research objectives. From there, I identified repeating ideas, which I used to develop codes. I used the following codes in my analysis: childhood, central setting, railroad/mining/canning, trapping/hunting/fishing, Downtown/Turnagain, Spenard, Mountainview, East Anchorage, West Anchorage, development, forested, lights/buildings/roads, central outward, population growth, homestead subdivision, spacious, trails & green belt, skiing/snowshoeing, childhood story, proximity to nature, Any City America, diversity/multicultural, pollution, population explosion, arts/culture, and community. Next, I categorized these codes into themes. I then grouped the themes into theoretical constructs, which I will preset in the subheadings below.

Before delving into these theoretical constructs, it is first necessary to explain why Rick was an ideal interview candidate for this project. Rick has a unique perspective on Anchorage, largely because he lived in six distinct neighborhoods all over the city. As a child, he lived downtown and in Turnagain. As an adolescent, he lived in Mountain View and Spenard. As an adult, he lived in East Anchorage and West Anchorage. His experiences all over the city gave him insight into the city’s changing environment and identity. Over time, he watched as development transformed Anchorage into the major city it is today.

**Development has changed replaced much of Anchorage’s natural environment with a built environment.**

Rick shared many anecdotes and stories from his childhood. He emphasized repeatedly that Anchorage was “a wonderful place to grow up” and he was “so lucky to have been raised in Alaska, Anchorage in particular.” He believes that the city’s abundance of nature, central setting, and sense of community all made Anchorage an ideal place to grow up. In all of the neighborhoods he lived in, there was always easy access to forests and bodies of water where he and his friends could fish, hunt, trap, snowshoe, and ski. As an adolescent in the Mountain View neighborhood, Rick said,

“I would go after school and snow showing the paths, you know, on fresh snow, after fresh snowfalls, and add a little trap line there, and it was just another little wonderland for me. You know, luckily I lived a lot when I was growing up on the edge of Anchorage, and I literally would get lost in playing in the woods, not literally lost, but I'd go lose, you know, humanity…. I'd come home, and I grabbed my little knapsack, and I had little canteen of water, and I had tea bags and a little [tea]pot…. That was my solace, and I did that every day… The nice thing about Anchorage when it was younger and there was still this raw land, you know, that wasn't developed, and being fortunate as a child you know, to live on the edges in in several of our moves, I was able to take advantage of the undeveloped, but now it's developed everywhere.”

Rick’s childhood adventures in nature, and the solace he found in them, all took place within city limits. In the decades that followed, much of that forested land has been developed. The development of Anchorage entailed cutting down forests in order to construct new buildings. Rick observed this development over the course of his lifetime.

Wilderness recreation is a key component of Alaska’s history and identity. It is still very common for Alaskans to catch their own fish and hunt their own meat, both for recreation and subsistence. Due to urban development, most of these forested areas within Anchorage have been replaced by buildings. For example, Rick said, “There was places in Anchorage when I was a kid to go hunting, like where the Sears Mall is. And, and so then that was before there was even a road through that area. You know, there was some kinds of some trail, but yeah, it's wild the way that it has changed and gotten developed, you know, that whole basin, anchorage bowl basin, as they call it.” Now, residents must drive outside the city to access the wilderness. This means that children no longer have the opportunity to go play in the woods after school as Rick and his friends did as children. As a result, the experience of children growing up in Anchorage today is completely different than that of children in the 50s, 60s, and 70s.

**With urban expansion and population growth came increased pollution and loss of community.**

For Rick, it was obvious over the years that Anchorage was being developed rapidly. He watched as more lights, roads, and buildings appeared in what was once farmland and forest. said,

“It grew and leaps and bounds over the decades…. As the decades would come and go, you would just see bigger swaths of Anchorage being developed from the center outward in all directions…. then we saw where the land was becoming more expensive for people, [so] they were building their homes out in the valley and having to commute.” This led to widening of the highway and suburbanization of nearby towns, such as Wasilla and Palmer.

In the early 1990s, Rick was driving to Anchorage from a non-urban area. As the approached Anchorage, his young son commented, “I can smell the city.” Now that Anchorage is larger and more developed, it produces and suffers from air, water, noise, and light pollution.

As the city has become more populous, it has lost the sense of community that Rick grew up with. As he describes it, “When the city was smaller, you would go to the theater and see all these people that you knew. The city grows and you see less people that you know.” He said that because of this loss of community, many Alaskans (including Rick) moved to small towns where there are stronger community bonds.

**Development caused Anchorage’s identity to become less “Alaskan” and more “American.”**

Rick repeatedly described Anchorage as a hub. Anchorage’s status as a hub has not changed over the course of Rick’s life. Even before Rick was born, Anchorage was a common jumping off point for miners and fisherman all over the state. It is not uncommon for Alaskans who live five hours away or further to drive to Anchorage once or twice a year specifically to shop at these stores. While people still come to Anchorage for supplies, now that the city is more urbanized, Anchorage residents need to go further away from the city for wilderness recreation.

The loss of wilderness and a sense of community have given Anchorage an identity that is more similar to other American cities and less similar to the rest of Alaska. Rick said, “[Now] Anchorage is like anywhere else. Any City America. You have all of your typical amenities, you have your Sears, your Penny's, your Macy's, you have your McDonald's and Taco Bell. So it’s starting to look like any other American city… But they say, the good thing is that it only takes 15-20 minutes to just travel in any direction you'll be back in Alaska.”

Because Alaska’s identity is so deeply entwined with wilderness, the loss of wilderness in Anchorage is associated with loss of its Alaskan identity.

**Reflection**

In designing this interview, I had to take my own positionality into account. Rick and I are good friends; I’ve worked for him the past two summers at his kayak guiding company in Alaska. Because of this, I did not need to work on developing a rapport with him in the way that I would have with a stranger. I have worked in Alaska seasonally every year since I was 18 years old, so I am very familiar with the state’s culture, slang, and geography. I have not spent much time in Anchorage

I would have liked to ask Rick about the 1964 Good Friday Earthquake, an event which greatly impacted Anchorage. However, the interview was over an hour long, and out of respect for his time, I chose to leave it out of the interview.

* + 1. Cite the interviewing article.

This project was done in accordance with both McGill’s institutional ethics and my own moral ethics. The narrative map is mutually beneficial for me and Rick. Rick has been wanting to write a book on his experiences growing up in Anchorage, and I felt that this project would serve as a nice complement to that. The narrative map is something he can show his grandchildren, and he can use it as a jumping off point for starting his book.

As I transcribed the interview, I noticed an interesting pattern. Rick and I began to adopt each other’s speech habits. We both had our own “filler words” that we would use when trying to think of what to say or how to phrase something. For Rick, these were “you know” and “yeah.” For me, they were “like,” “just,” “man,” and “so.” Over the course of the interview, we began using each other’s filler words.

Transcribing the interview also showed me how I can improve at interviewing. At the start of the interview, I asked questions more hesitantly, and I used more filler words. By the end, I was asking my questions more confidently and clearly. This is very useful information for me, and I will use to improve my performance in future.

**Conclusion**

Life for Anchorage residents has changed in myriad ways due to development. These changed include reduced opportunities for wilderness recreation, decreased sense of community, development of suburbs, and increased pollution. Alaska’s identity is strongly tied to wilderness; the replacement of Anchorage’s wilderness with chain stores has shifted its identity to be less Alaskan and more American.

Readings:

Auerbach and Silverstein 2003 -Coding The basic ideas

Brown, M. and Knopp, L. (2008). Queering the Map: The Productive Tensions of Colliding Epistemologies. Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 98 (1), 40-58.

Kwan, M.-P. (2008). From oral histories to visual narratives: re-presenting the post-September 11 experiences of the Muslim women in the USA. Social & Cultural Geography, 9, 653-669.

Caquard and Cartwright 2014 Narrative Cartography