

## BARCELONA URBAN PROJECT: SEEING, SOUNDING, AND SENSING AN URBAN SPACE

### Aims

The field trip provides training in skills that might be used in further individual research projects. This field activity draws on historical, cultural, urban, economic and political geographies. The context and diversity of Barcelona's city centre encourages students to use qualitative methodologies to explore one of the following themes:

1. Work
2. Movement
3. Identity
4. Infrastructure

**TASK: Complete a research field notebook.** Make sure to bring your fieldwork notebook with you on Wednesday and Thursday to make notes during field activities. Keeping a diary is an important research skill and methodology.

**Overall aim of field activity:** Working in a small research group, you will have the chance to consider the social, economic, cultural and political dimensions of your chosen theme. This field activity should provide an opportunity to experiment with a combination of ethnographic approaches including direct observation, participant observation, walk-about, short interviews, field sketches, and recording sound in the field. Each person can take on a particular role. You can change roles throughout the activity, but make sure you liaise with your team before doing so and compare notes.

### Key objectives:

- a) **Getting a sense of place:** spend time in the area with open eyes and ears ('taking in').
- b) **Plotting your route: using the Strava App,** record your travel through the area.
- c) **Identifying your field-site:** choose a specific location within the area that sparks your interest. Spend time there and make notes about why this area seems especially worthy of investigation.
- d) **Recording geo-tags: using Google Earth app** as you move around the area, geo-tag 'points of interest' that have a connection with your chosen theme
- e) **Making observations:** observing movements, situations, and relationships between people & the physical environment around this space
- Mapping:** surveying a particular space or route, making notes of notable landmarks, events, movements*
- Participant observation:** making notes of the mood of a situation or a place; observe social interactions, making note of moments, social encounters, rhythms, behaviours, and activities happening in the places you observe. Try whenever possible to 'take part' in the activities you are observing (e.g. street markets, or public transport)*
- Informal interviews:** embed yourself within a situation as an "observing participant". Take advantage of opportunities to engage different actors in conversation. Experiment with short interview techniques aiming to understand your respondents' point of view and experience.*
- f) **Writing the field:** writing your field observations in a reflective way, including some 'thick description' and 'ethnographic granularity'
- g) Present back your findings to staff and peers.** We will ask you to update the group after your small group research day, outlining your impressions and findings. We hope that you will use this opportunity to talk to us and to each other about the ideas and methodologies that you used. What worked? Where did you get stuck?*

## **1. PLANNING YOUR RESEARCH AND ROUTE**

**TASK:** When you first arrive in Barcelona, find a public space around Plaza Catalunya to sit for 20-30 minutes with your research team. Discuss your research strategy & in your notebook outline the following:

- a. Describe your research theme in as much detail as possible, and what aspect of this theme you and your group want to focus on during the 2 days you have in Barcelona.
- b. Describe where you plan to go, what you hope to see, and whom you might try to speak with. Plan out a route, but be open to adapting your route as you go.

## **2. DOING THE RESEARCH**

**DAY 1: 4 stages of research:**

1. **Walk, see & listen** - As you walk along your route, use your notebook and camera to document key observations, and **use your Strava app** to track your route and geo-tag any specific points along the route worth noting.
2. **Stop & Observe** - As a group, **choose 3 locations** along the route to stop and observe what is going related to your chosen theme. Decide on a meeting point, and spread yourselves out for 30-45 mins to make individual observations & sketches.
3. **'Deep listening'**- pay attention to the soundscape around you **for 4mins and 33 seconds**. [this is inspired by John Cage's 'silent piece' called 4mins and 33 seconds]. Listen with intent to what's happening, and what is filling the 'silence'.
4. **Discuss & share** – Come back together and share notes.

**In your notebooks, catalogue the following:**

1. **describe your 3 stops** along the route, and why you chose them.
2. **Describe the physical environment:** infrastructure, landmarks, objects...Using any kind of hand-drawn visualisation, how would you represent notable aspects of the physical environment in relation to your theme? Make sure to explain your sketch.
3. **Describe the social environment:** people, relationships, atmosphere. Using any kind of hand-drawn visualisation, how would you represent notable aspects of the physical environment in relation to your theme? Explain your sketch.
4. **Describe the soundscape:** Find a suitable place to sit down immediately after the 'deep listening' session, and take at least 15-20 minutes to write about your soundscape, and what you observed during those minutes of listening. What does the soundscape reveal about your site?

**DAY 2: go back to your key locations, and gather specific numerical and spatial data using Google Earth App. Aim to Geo-tag at least 30 'points of interest' relating to your theme. You will need these 30 geo-tags for the Data project (Note: these points of interest can be anything that you find interesting & worth including in your 'story-map', e.g. pictures, sound, & video)**

- a. What can you count? What do the numbers say about your topic? What do the numbers hide?
- b. What 'points of interest' can you geo-tag? What do these tell us?
- c. Map your chosen route and plot your 3 stops, plus specific 'points of interest'

**To accomplish these tasks, experiment with the use of ethnographic methods and interviewing techniques. General advice below (recapping points from lecture):**

**(i) Ethnographic methods – ‘deep hanging out’? (Clifford 1997, cited in Kuus 2013, 118)**

Attempting to compile a comprehensive guide to ethnographic methods would be a little like grasping smoke. As Merje Kuus (2013, 117) puts it, ‘The common denominator in ethnographic accounts is not the specific research technique but the focus on everyday lived experience, on finding in the little what eludes us in the large’.

The roots of ethnography lie firmly within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. The oft-quoted father of ethnography is the (in)famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, whose research focused on the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia. What set him apart from predecessors in the discipline was the depth and intensity of his approach to understanding the peoples of these islands, achieved through that most geographical of means: fieldwork. Malinowski’s aim was to understand the practices of everyday life, not just seek out exotic tradition. Context is the key to Malinowski’s understanding of meaning, belief and ritual. If you understand context, you can understand people.

Inevitably given the proliferation of critiques of functionalist approaches as a result of feminism, post-modernism and other critical schools, the idea that fieldwork, however intensive and scientific in method, can provide an objective understanding of individuals and societies different to one’s own has been rarely accepted in more recent anthropological work. Malinowski’s holistic approach and omniscient authorial voice have not sat comfortably with scholars wary of the researcher’s ability fully to know their objects of study. The distinction between the knowable and unknowable, and objective and subjective, is therefore cast into sharp relief in ethnographic methods. A focus on fieldwork, however defined, remains a cornerstone of the approach.

Ethnography is much more than the participant observation and visual analysis we will touch upon this week. The suite of methods that can combine to form ethnography is broad and often depends on the best fit for individual situations and projects. The framework of ethnography, then, can be a liberating one, but its flexibility should not be mistaken for ease. Karen O’Reilly (2005, p3) has sketched out what she described as a ‘critical minimum definition’ of ethnography. She says:

*Minimally, ethnography is iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design throughout the study), drawing on:*

- *a family of methods,*
- *involving direct and sustained contact with human agents,*
- *within the context of their daily lives (and cultures);*
- *watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and*
- *producing a richly written account*
- *that respects the irreducibility of human experience,*
- *that acknowledges the role of theory*
- *as well as the researcher’s own role,*
- *and that views humans as part object/part subject.*

**(ii) Interviews**

Asking people what they think or feel about something seems intuitively an easy way to gain information. However, not only are the questions asked subject to interpretation and circumstance, but also the answers can be refracted by the relationship with the interviewer, the nature of the material discussed, and the very process of giving words and structure to thoughts in their articulation. While interviews might be appealing, then, they are far from straightforward as a means of research.

Perhaps the most obvious wrinkle in using interviews is that the answers received depend upon the questions asked. There is more to this truism than simply choice of words, however. Interviews can touch upon sensitive topics. These can be clearly sensitive and deal with themes of a personal nature, such as sexuality, but it is wise to be aware that any topic might prove sensitive to an individual being interviewed. The choice of question, the tone in which it is asked, the circumstances in which the interview occurs and the informed consent of the interviewee prior to its start are therefore important considerations.

There are ethical dimensions to an interview too. As the Asker of Questions, it might be argued that an unequal power relationship is engendered at the commencement of an interview. Conversely, as the Needer of Information, the interviewer is beholden to his/her respondent for the success of the exercise. The scenarios can be diverse, but the position of the interviewer within each should be the object of reflection. This is important for the analysis of the myriad forms of information, only some of which is verbal, that comes from having done it. It is also vital so that the interviewer is aware that asking questions has the potential to alter the way in which a respondent thinks or feels about a situation, or perhaps even self. It would also be wrong to assume that ethical considerations can only fall firmly on the side of the researcher. The interview is a record of what was said, but within that, some things must remain unsaid. Silences or evasions can be just as revealing as effusive chatter, and the reasons behind them, although difficult to analyse, are interesting.

Complexity characterises interviews, as it does all social interactions, and there is no perfect solution to which questions to ask, how to ask them, and what to take away from an answer. There are, however, some practical things that you can do to make life easier during the interview, so your time afterwards can be spent thinking about how to interpret it rather than trying to recall what was said. Most important of all is preparation. It seems obvious, but knowing broadly which themes you intend to explore and thinking of which questions might help you talk about them is more easily done before an interview starts. Flexibility in some interviews can be an added bonus, but that too happens more seamlessly if you're prepared.

Not all information is verbal: body language and facial expressions can help you understand what your respondent means. Finally, don't put off sitting down to assess your interview experience afterwards. There will be things you wish you had done differently, and your evaluation of this is important too. Interviews are time-consuming, can be revealing as well as frustrating, and have a fraught relationship with truth and objective knowledge. However, they are perhaps unparalleled in their ability to begin to understand individual perception, identity and internalisation of wider social life.

## BARCELONA URBAN PROJECT WORKSHEET

(Please complete this sheet after DAY 1 & DAY 2 of the Urban project)

Your NAME:

NAME of your co-researchers:

Your chosen theme (Work, identity, movement, infrastructure):

Date:

**DRAW OUT YOUR ROUTE ON THE MAP BELOW**



0 0.25km Copyright © www.barcelona-tourist-guide.com

## **REFLECTING ON RESEARCH METHODS**

*(please limit your answers to the space provided below each point)*

**Describe the research methods you used and which you found most useful and why.**

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**Which research methods (e.g. walking, observing, talking to people, sketching, sounding, counting, geo-tagging...) did you most enjoy and why?**

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**Provide concrete examples of at least one moment in your individual and group research process that you felt worked well and why.**

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**Provide concrete examples of at least one moment in your individual and group research process that you felt didn't work as well as hoped.**

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**What could you have done differently in hindsight?**

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**What did you learn from this fieldwork experience overall?**

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