

# Picturing Commutes: Informant Photography and Urban Design

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## ABSTRACT

In this work-in-progress report, I describe my developing dissertation project emphasizing the role of photography as a social research method. The project examines how the problems of and potential solutions to multimodal conflicts in urban transportation are understood differently by people of diverse social standpoints. After describing the project and a general approach to photography as a social research method, I explain my use of informant photography, photo-elicitation, and photo-stories in a pilot study. I use the concept of boundary object to explain the usefulness of photography in eliciting heterogeneous views on design problems and solutions and for defamiliarizing people's everyday experiences of the built environment.

## Keywords

Boundary objects, informant photography, research methods, standpoints, urban design, transportation

## PICTURING COMMUTES

Transportation infrastructures are paradoxically highly visible and taken-for-granted in everyday living. They provide backgrounds on which habituated living unfolds but are themselves generally not the focus of attention. In my developing dissertation project, I am proposing to study people's everyday experiences of transportation infrastructures and how urban design shapes their forms of life. In addition to participant/observation and semi-structured interviews, I am using photography as a research method. After briefly characterizing my dissertation project, I use the theoretical concepts of standpoints and boundary objects to connect my framing of urban transportation as a subject of study to photography as a research method. I describe my general approach to photographic research with the methodological concepts of sampling, reactivity, data collection, interpretation, and presentation. I then describe a pilot study I am conducting that uses informant photography, photo-elicitation, and photo-

stories. I emphasize the street as a strategic resource – as a public good that is close to home – for enfranchising people with respect to both governance and design in their own neighborhoods. For the dissertation, I plan to further develop photography as a research method that helps people understand how the urban built environment structures their lives and encourages them to participate in transportation planning and urban design.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

In my framing, urban transportation is metonymical for the task of living together in a technological world. It connects technological decision making, citizenship, and everyday living. As a material locus, the street provides a point from which to study wildly heterogeneous social, political, technical, cultural, and environmental phenomena. Funding decisions, public protest, urban design, neighborhood life, and air quality meet in the street. It is contested, negotiated, and appropriated in everyday living, by social movements, and through institutional practices.

Focusing on the city of Oakland, California as part of the regional San Francisco Bay Area, I plan to examine the following kinds of actor groups: planning departments in government, advocacy organizations for particular modes of transportation, social movements that use the street to contest the transportation status quo, and residents who do not formally participate in transportation planning or advocacy. My central research question is what are effective means for planners, activists, and residents to intervene in automobile-centered design to promote multimodal infrastructures that support diverse forms of life? By multimodal, I mean design that supports walking, bicycling, transit, motor vehicles, and the diverse lives of an urban population. Three secondary questions are, first, how is "better design" defined by different actor groups? Second, what are the obstacles to the better designs as defined by these different groups? And third, what is the effectiveness of interventions made to promote better design? I am particularly interested in the conflicts that arise over designing a single built environment to support multiple modes of transportation.

In *PDC 2000 Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference*. T. Cherkasky, J. Greenbaum, P. Mambrey, J. K. Pors (Eds.) New York, NY, USA, 28 November - 1 December 2000. CPSR, P.O. Box 717, Palo Alto, CA 94302 cpsr@cpsr.org ISBN 0-9667818-1-3

## STANDPOINTS AND BOUNDARY OBJECTS

The concepts of standpoints and boundary objects connect this framing of urban transportation to photography as a research method. The standpoint concept signifies how an individual's understanding of the world is shaped by her or his social positioning by race, class, gender, and other facets that compose who that person is in the social world (Harding 1998, Haraway 1991, Longino 1994). I am particularly interested by how people's habituated, material practices of moving about the city shape how they understand the problems of urban transportation. In conjunction with participant/observation and semi-structured interviews, I am using photography to elicit how the problems and potential solutions of urban transportation are understood from different standpoints: how social positionings and material practices shape problem recognition, solution formulation, and the negotiation (or lack thereof) between heterogeneous groups. Understanding what counts as "better" design requires identifying the frameworks by which different groups recognize problems and potential solutions differently. Photography provides a methodological resource for defamiliarization in engaging the mundane to elicit views from heterogeneous standpoints. In other words, different experiences of the street lead to heterogeneous understandings of urban transportation and different criteria by which "better" design is judged. Design problems and solutions will take different forms depending on the standpoints from which they are understood.

Photographs provide interview prompts that both focus discussion and support multiple interpretations. They serve as boundary objects by providing stable artifacts that resonate in different ways with different standpoints (Star and Griesemer 1989). The images serve as conversational prompts that may be passed around a circle of informants. People know how to interact with photographs - looking at pictures is a well practiced and generally enjoyable social pattern. However, the same photographs will mean different things to different people. The photograph bounds a scene but does not of itself identify the scene's salient features. In addition to serving as boundary objects between informants, the photographs also serve as boundary objects between the informants and the researcher. Photography can combine the conversational appeal of snapshots within the systematic structure of a method. Informants need not recognize the photographs as part of a research method to constructively interact with them. If the photographs are close to the informants lives, the dynamic of expertise is in fact reversed. The informants may take on the role of explaining the photographs to ensure that the researcher is understanding them correctly. The strength of photography as a method is that its methodological structure does not diminish the broad accessibility of talking about snapshots.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Sampling, reactivity, data collection, interpretation, and presentation are general elements to consider in formulating photographic research methods. By general elements, I mean that any single element could take on any number of forms in a research project. However, the elements provide guidelines for systematizing how photographs are generated, interpreted, and presented. By what sampling rationales will individual photographs be taken? Does the subject of study react to being photographed in ways that shape the resulting pictures? Will photographs be used to augment other data collection methods like interviews or surveys? What kinds of interpretations - by informants as well as the researcher - do the photographs support? How will the presentation of multiple photographs and their relations to the text offer answers to research questions? While these questions will be answered in any number of ways by different projects, their consideration provides a general approach for photographic research. They provide guidelines for how research is conducted, situating single photographs as part of a larger whole and disclosing the overall approach of the research project.

## INFORMANT PHOTOGRAPHY

In preparation for writing my dissertation proposal, I am conducting a pilot study that incorporates informant photography, photo-elicitation, and photo-stories. In the sampling technique of informant photography, the researcher supplies her or his informants with cameras, film, and general guidelines to generate open-ended photographic responses around a particular topic (Schratz and Steiner-Löffler 1998, Wang, Burris, and Ping 1996). I am asking my informants to provide open-ended responses to the following prompts on transportation in their lives:

- *What are the good and bad aspects of your commute?* Include pictures that will help you explain and help me understand what your commutes are like.
- *Where do you commute?* Include pictures of your trips to work, shopping, school - where ever you go regularly.
- *How do you commute?* Include pictures that illustrate how you get around, whether it's by walking, bicycling, public transit, driving, or other means.
- *How do other people's commutes affect your home and neighborhood?* Include pictures of how transportation shapes where you live.

I selected six informants that span a range of ages, both sexes, and multiple primary modes of transportation. Despite these differences, their common commutes largely overlap in a relatively small urban area.

In the data collection method of photo-elicitation, the informants' photographs are then used as prompts for focusing

semi-structured interviews (Suchar and Rotenberg 1994). Photographs may prompt informants to speak more readily than direct questions because the photograph – rather than the person – becomes the object of inquiry and the informant the expert in explanation. This kind of visual focus may be particularly useful for group interviewing where people can adopt the common pattern of passing photographs around a social circle, dialogically engaging the photographs, reminding and querying each other. I am conducting semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in length - one of which is a group interview. While informant photography encourages people to engage their everyday practices with a critical eye, photo-elicitation allows the informants to interpret their own pictures for the researcher. The interview format also allows the researcher to ask how issues of reactivity shaped what the informant photographed. The resulting data set thereby combines pictures and interviews that are mutually reinforcing.

The photo-story is a presentation format by which the researcher assembles pictures and text in narrative form (Barndt 1997). By combining the results of informant photography and photo-elicitation, I am assembling photo-stories for informants from different standpoints to depict how the problems and solutions of urban transportation are understood through different social positionings and material practices. The photo-stories depict the commuting patterns in the diverse yet overlapping lives of urban residents. The photo-story adds to the use of photography as a research method by combining image and text in a format that is engaging and re-interpretable by others. In addition to the researcher's audience, completed photo-stories can be used in a new round of photo-elicitation where informants can consider their own commuting practices in relation to their similarities and differences with the photo-stories of others. Importantly, the researcher can discuss completed photo-stories with those who initially generated the pictures and interview material. Returning the photo-story to the informant provides both a check on the researcher's work as well as a means of recognizing the contribution of the informant. For people in marginalized standpoints, the photo-story provides a forceful vehicle for confronting policy makers and designers with the lived experiences of those who might otherwise remain out of sight and out of mind.

#### CONCLUSION

Photography could enhance the study of any kind of design with significant spatial or visual components of material form or social interaction. I am using informant photography, photo-elicitation, and photo-stories to examine how people's

understandings of the problems and opportunities of urban transportation are mediated by their social standpoints and material practices. Informant photography and photo-elicitation are techniques for prompting people to engage how their habituated and everyday lives are structured by design. Assembling a collection of photo-stories will highlight the differences and defamiliarize the taken-for-grantedness of any single standpoint. As boundary objects, photographs provide a methodological resource for the researcher as well as prompts for informants and decision makers to critically engage how people's lives are shaped – for better and for worse – by design.

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