

Urban Songlines as Mediator

An analysis of the 'The Urban Songline Book' as a mediating tool for mapping the experienced space in the social housing neighborhood, Skovparken /Skovvejen

Anne Corlin
Design School Kolding
Denmark

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to present an investigation of the method The Urban Songlines Book and how it works as a mediator for mapping the experienced space.

The method contains a combination of aerial maps, photographs, and interviews as a way to understand the respondent's use, relations and experiences of their neighborhood and the city. Through a presentation of the origin of the method, a description of the conducted study, and an analysis of the process in relation to theories about participatory design, social design, ANT and architectural sociology, the paper reveals how this method empowers the illumination of the relationship between the social and the physical space. It also shows that the method is both times consuming and demanding.

Keywords: method, mediator, participatory design, Urban design, social design

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The paper stems from the Ph.D. project, *Place Making/Makers*, which is a collaboration between Design School Kolding and Kolding Municipality. The research focuses on identifying pivotal design parameters in the development of urban collective places, which support interaction between people and the social life. The project is based on the theoretical approach arguing that the social and the physical space are mutually interdependent

The Urban Songline Book is used to produce empirical data in the case Skovparken/Skovvejen – A social housing area in Kolding. The neighborhood suffers from various kinds of social challenges and a poor both physical and mental connection to the rest of the city. The study investigates how the inhabitants use, experience and relate to places in their neighborhood and the rest of the city, for the purpose of obtaining knowledge about potentials and constraints for interactions between people and places.

Introduction

The present study investigates the question: *How does the Urban Songline Book work as a mediator of the experienced space in the daily life in a Neighborhood?*

The reason for pronouncing The Urban Songline Book a *Mediator* is to embrace, both the tangible things, which the Book consist of like; the map, photos, drawings, and the process of talking together, taking photos, and pasting photos into the book together, into one concept,- a mediator. In this paper, *Mediator* is understood as a tool which *conveys* information from the respondents to the researcher.

The investigation of this method is relevant to other studies wishing to map how the experienced space is affecting how we act, move and relate and how the social and the physical space is entangled. The intention is that the reader should end up with an understanding, which enables them to assess whether The Urban Songline Book is an appropriate tool for their research.

In order to do so, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows; an introduction of the method, a description of how the empirical data is conducted through the use of the method, a presentation of the theoretical scaffolding, which the method is based on, an analysis of the method according to the research question, and finally a discussion of strengths and weaknesses.

METHOD

The method Urban Songlines is developed and presented in the book *Urban Songlines*, by Professor Gitte Marling (Marling, 2003), inspired by The Bruce Chatwin book, *The Songlines* (Chatwin, 1988). Marling uses an old term about aboriginals in the pre-colonised Australia to describe the modern city's different territories, places, connections, and meanings.

The term songline is used in a much more simple meaning than the Australian aboriginals.

“A songline is a line or track, which each of us follows in our daily movement in the city, from one place of meaning to the next (e.g. our home, work, union, or cultural place). It is through songlines, that we form attachments to our social being and our city pictures, our experiences of the city and its architecture. Songlines are both specific physical tracks and mental connections,”
(Marling 2003)

The reason for choosing *Urban Songlines* as a method for this project arises from an interest in the experienced space and a wish to use a method, which captures how the inhabitants; use, relate and experience their own housing area and the rest of the city. The selection of respondents for this survey is conducted in collaboration with Byliv Koldingⁱ

The group of respondents is representative for this neighborhood; a social housing area called Skovparken/ Skovvejen. They are connected by the neighborhood, and they are selected to differ in sex, age, ethnic background, relation to the labor market, and area of dwelling inside the neighborhood.

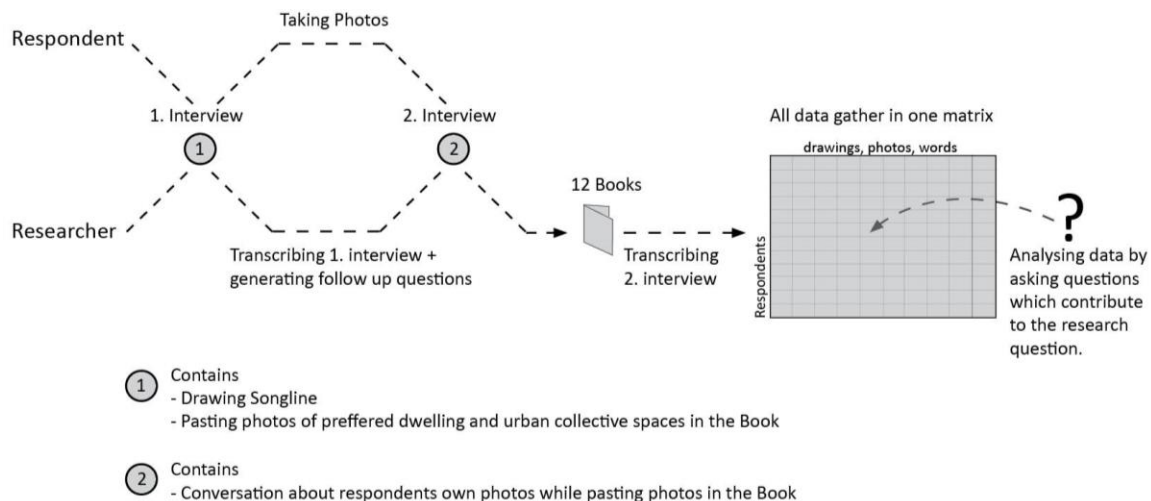
The Urban Songline Book differs a bit from the original Urban Songline method in two ways. Firstly, is it more defined, as the respondents are asked to take photographs in accordance to seven specific questions. Secondly, the material is collected in one tangible object, a Book, which the researcher and respondent create together by drawing on a map, picking photographs and pasting them into the Book during the conversation. This whole procedure is done to prevent misunderstandings, bring accuracy into the material and to bring out hidden knowledge and experiences about places, by using different mediums as opportunities to express the experienced space. The Book is system A, and the researcher is system B, according to Warrel’s definition (Warell, Anders, 1999), which gives the researcher a physical product, to visualize and support the spoken words.

How to use The Urban Songline Book

The Book contains 18 pages, two aerial photos in scale 1:10.000 and 1:2000 of the city and the neighborhood, eight photographs of different dwellings and 20 photographs of different urban collective places, and a task card with the seven questions the respondent must respond to with photos. When the Book is completed it contains aerial maps with drawings, and all pages are filled with photographs, sometimes combined with keywords.

The implementation of the method consists of several steps, which is visualized in the diagram below.

Diagram 1: Steps and activities of the process.



During the **first interview**, the respondent's movements and use of the city are drawn on an aerial map. While drawing the different routes, the conversation concerns reasons for different acts and movements. Both everyday movements and spare time movements are being mapped while discussing relations to the different things on their line. After the drawing on the map, the respondent chooses one or two preferred type of home from a selection of eight different kinds of dwellings and four pictures of their preferred urban collective space.

Picture 2. Drawing on the aerial photograph

Picture 3: 8 pictures of different dwellings brought by me.

Picture 4: 20 pictures of different kinds of Urban Places, brought by me.



The photographs for the first interview are brought by the researcher in accordance to discuss preferences in relation to home and to collective urban places. The selected photographs are placed in the book during conversation concerning preferences and values which underlie the choice of photos.

In the meantime between the two interviews, the respondent takes photos in relation to seven questions written on a 'Task card'. The questions are about likes and dislikes in the city and their neighborhood, what they use the most in their neighborhood? And what place they think, best describes their neighborhood? The respondents email the photographs to the researcher, who brings them to the **second interview**. The photographs are the foundation for the second interview, and the conversation concerns their reasons and thoughts behind the taken photos. The photos are pasted into the Book during conversation.

Both interviews are recorded on a smartphone and in the meantime between the two interviews, the first interview is transcribed, and possible questions are written down for clarification during the last interview.

All the interviews and the appertaining photographs have been collected in one assembled matrix. As a way of focusing on the relevant information, is the analysis of the material conducted by formulating questions to the material, according to the research question for the Ph.D. The overall experience with the method is that it gives the researcher a huge amount of information. The material in total consists of; 12 books with pictures, keywords, and aerial photos with drawings, plus 24 recorded interviews varying in length from 30 minutes to 120 minutes.

Picture 5: The picture shows a respondent looking at his own photos.



Picture 1. Photograph of the Book



THEORETICAL SCAFFOLDING

The Urban Songline Book is founded on the theoretical approach of the actor-network theory (ANT), where everything entangles and consist of both material and immaterial things (Latour, Yaneva, Lieto a.o).

The method is also based on Pierre Bourdieu (2010) and his main theoretical argumentation, saying there are homologies between the social positions that different participants occupy and the cognitive tendencies, perceptions and action orientations of which the participants are carriers. This means that the difference between social positions in the social space can rediscover and strengthen spatial differences, by which the physical space becomes a symbol of the social space.

Seeing the physical space and the social space as mutually interdependent is a central premise of this study and the reason for using a social design approach to gain knowledge about potentials and barriers for developing places for interaction.

In the development of the method, where it is transformed into a more tangible design tool as a visual foundation for discussion, it is guided by theories about participatory design, collaborative design, and social design.

The Scandinavian participatory design is based on the standpoint that those affected by a design should have a say in the design process (Ehn et al., 2014). The process of filling out the Book together with the respondents is based on ideas of a ‘collaborate design’ and participatory design, which has been driven by the ideas of democracy, heterogeneity, and co-creation.

The Book is developed as a design artifact, to bridge the gap between use and design and between present and future (Pedersen, 2007). Furthermore, is the integration of pictures and drawings a tool for bridging the gap due to differences in professions, social positions, and cultural differences. The Book is, therefore, designed to stage a shared platform for dialogue.

The social issues in solving a complex design challenge also prevail in the development of the Book, where the Book can be seen as a design artifact for setting up the frame for social innovation (Ehn et al., 2014), by supporting the accumulation of knowledge about the everyday life in this neighborhood.

Finally can The Urban Songline Book also be seen as a piece of Molecular Social design (Ilpo Koskinen and Gordon Hush, 2016), approaching the research question through a bottom-up methodology, trying to obtain a deeper understanding of the problem through an explorative approach.

ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK

The data provides new insights into everyday life in Skovparken/ Skovvejen. According to the focus of the constant entanglement of the material and immaterial (Lieto and Beauregard, 2016), the photographs and drawings contribute to a preciseness in the relationship between a physical place and an experience, emotion or act, which is valuable for this study. To compare the method with a ‘normal’ qualitative research interview, where the interview seeks to cover both the factual level and the opinion layer (Kvale, 1997), you might say that the photographs and the drawings visualize the factual layer and by doing that support the production of the opinion layer.

This process can be illuminated through one example, where the data enables to point at an agonistic physical space or an Edge Zone (Sennett, 1993). The place contains and entangles many of the social constraints both inside the housing area and in relation to the rest of the city to the point where it also manifests itself in the physical space or the physical space reinforces or maybe even creates social constraints. The agonistic place is the place around the local shopping center area. One respondent communicates his experience of the place through the use of drawing on a map.

*”It makes a big difference, where you live.....
There is an invisible boundary... And it runs right here (he draws a line on the map, with his finger) along the shopping center. The white people live on one side and on the other side do the black people live..”*

Respondent from Skovvejen

Others express their experience of the Center area through photographs. One respondent takes a photo of the Pub and says that it is the only place in the neighborhood she doesn't like. Other respondents take pictures which refer to stories of things they dislike about the area, for example, the mailbox, which is being blown up regularly and yet another has photographs the bad condition and poor appearance which is affecting him.

Picture 6,7,8: Photographs were taken by the respondents



The example illuminates how the Book works as a mediator by communicating through different mediums (words, drawings, photographs) and how it contributes to a more nuanced survey which provides a deeper insight of the actors (Latour, Yaneva) influencing the different experiences of the collective place around the Center area. The experience with merging the drawing, the photographs, and the spoken words, is that it contributes with precision to the answers. It enables to point very specifically at the problem, and the photos help to visualize and thus strengthen the point the respondents wish to make and enables the researcher to merge the experienced space with the physical space, which is of great value in this study.

When these different 'molecules' of experiences in the daily life are brought together, they enable to understand the connection and affection between this specific physical place and the daily life, and the gap between use and design (Pedersen, 2007).

The discussions about preferences and values (Bourdieu and Bennett, 2010) according to both home and collective places are valuable in accordance to potentials as well as constraints for interaction. Again the photographs seem to help the respondents to create opinions because they are not limited to pick from the repertoire of their own imaginary library, but the photographs brought to them expand the possibilities and thereby support and strength where they positioned themselves. By doing that the material helps to empower the respondents and support a frame setting for social innovation (Ehn et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION, STRENGTHS, AND WEAKNESSES

Analyzing how the Urban Songline Book works as a mediator, of the experienced space in the daily life, clarifies that the book is efficient for exploring; use, relationships, and experiences in a city and neighborhood. Letting several inhabitants tell their story, through; the drawing of their songline, words, and photographs, gives an insight into the lived life and how it is both affected by and affects the physical surroundings.

The aerial photo in front of the respondent and the drawings during conversation seem to work as a supporting tool for remembering the different daily acts. The photographs which the respondents take themselves and the process of finding and considering the different motives gives an experience of having obtained more carefully contemplated answers to different places, than would have been obtained, from asking the question during an interview.

On the other hand, is the method is very time-consuming and demanding, because of the long interviews and the 'homework.' This signifies that the method has "only" been conducted with some of the most advantage inhabitants in the neighborhood, which, in this case, must be considered a weakness. Furthermore, has none of the respondents taken ownership of the Book, even though, it was left it in their homes during the meantime between the two interviews. It could be interesting to improve the ownership, for instance by asking the respondents to complete a task in the Book themselves, between the two interviews, to see if that might reveal even more in-depth information.

On the other hand, all the respondents have been acting engaged and interested in the task. Everybody has participated in both interviews, and all respondents have been out walking and taking photographs. They have all been thinking carefully about the different reasons behind the photos. Some struggled, though, a bit with the most abstract question as: *What place do you think best describes your neighborhood?* But the overall result leads to the conclusion, that the task has been meaningful to the respondents and general on a sufficient level of complexity, but a higher layer of complexity or more independent engagement would have been difficult for some of the respondents to accomplish.

It is recommendable to be precis about the amount of pictures the researcher wants for each task and not to ask for too many. One respondent in this study took about 15-20 pictures for each question, which seems to add a weakness to the answers because it looses precisness of what affects him the most, and why that place is picked in relation to other places. The conversation becomes more a matter of listing, than a matter of finding the cause behind the pictures.

The method can be useful for studying use, experiences, and relations in other contexts as well where the social and the physical space are entangled, which could be in a workplace or a school. It might be less effective in mapping processes or lines which are unaffiliated with the physical surroundings, meaning a work process or a teaching situation, where you don't shift physical environment.

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All correspondence should be addressed to:

Anne Corlin
Falstersgade 5, 4. Th.
8000 Aarhus C
Email.anc@dskd.dk

ⁱ Byliv kolding is a collaboration between Kolding Municipality and the housing association. They are financed by Landsbyggefonden to attend to all the social work in the neighborhood. therefore they have aclose connection to the inhabitants and colud help me to collect a representative group of respondents.