

## Chapter 8

# Unveiling Space by using Participatory Photo Interview

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### ABSTRACT

*Using visual material in a participatory interview process allows for broadening communication with users and developing a deeper understanding of residents' perspectives. Photographs taken by respondents as part of a research and future planning process provide the opportunity to see local spaces from users' perspectives, thus allowing them to contribute to urban planning in a meaningful way. This chapter introduces the method of participatory photo interview, its use in social science, and its potential for urban and planning studies. It reviews literature on the topic, discusses opportunities for applying the method to spatial questions, and reviews the method's strengths and weaknesses, illustrated by an example taken from urban studies. In conclusion, the author considers the feasibility of using the method online and highlights possible pitfalls and advantages.*

### INTRODUCTION

The architectural and planning disciplines are strongly linked to visual approaches and the ability to create and interpret visual representations. Architects and planners regularly use visuals, sketches and photographs as well as digital visualizations in order to show future designs, obtain

feedback from future residents and guide their expectations. During the planning phase, drawings, sketches and forms of digital visualization are valuable tools.

Similarly, the use of visuals in society is generally growing rapidly. Photos used in media and generated for personal use are available to nearly everyone, and can be used to observe and understand social life. Visual depictions in mass media and advertisements are ubiquitous. Thus,

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both professionals and prospective residents of spaces that are being planned or designed are accustomed to working with photographs and applying visual analysis approaches in their daily lives and work. Therefore, one might ask: why not already bring the capacity of residents into the visual communication processes in architecture and the planning phase? Why not ask residents to use disposable or digital cameras to engage in an explicit visual process intended to communicate their wishes and desires for future planning?

This chapter introduces a method of respondent engagement called participatory photo interview, a form of photo elicitation, in which respondents take photographs of their environment in order to answer a research question posed by architects and planners, and to verbalize the images' importance and meaning in an interview. Using the participatory photo interview method, scientists and participants discuss participant photographs, share their insights and perspectives and develop a common understanding of local structures, processes, and possible solutions. From a methodological perspective, using visual media can be helpful to understand a spatial context from the residents' perspectives.

Photographs taken by residents can express connections between a place and local expectations regarding its use, and visualize participants' ideas and expectations. Visual data in the form of participant-generated photographs can support communication processes with groups of respondents through on-site focus groups or through communication via new media – web 2 or social networks. Participants' visual and interview data involve a lot of information for analysis, including the spatial analyses that reveal local opinions – positive and negative – of a place and the analyses of the local social context, grounded on subjective perspectives, and nested in a wider social and historical context.

This chapter offers examples taken from an interdisciplinary study of traditional Islamic baths in five Islamic cities, using the photo interview

method for studying hammams and their neighborhoods. The examples provided demonstrate examples of visual data interpretation with relevance for urban and planning studies, including neglected neighborhoods, attachment to place and familiar places that would otherwise remain hidden from an outsider's view. Finally, the chapter presents some of the advantages and risks of applying this method at the community level and through social media.

## **THE PARTICIPATORY PHOTO INTERVIEW**

### **How to Characterize the Method of Photo Interview**

Photo interview, also known as photo elicitation, introduces visual data into the interview process in order to stimulate verbal expression by the interviewees (Rose, 2007) and understand the world as defined by them (Harper, 2002). The participatory photo interview requires respondents to take photographs in the context of a research or planning process that is seen as a common or collaborative endeavor (Kolb, 2008). Taking photographs can be considered as a participatory activity intended to respond to questions posed by research or planning partners. In doing so, the participatory photo interview is part of a participatory research design. Taking photos and participating in the subsequent interviews invites residents to deepen their participation in a collaborative research process, as they explain notions to researchers or planners. Once the photo interview is completed, the photos and interview text are available as data for further research and sociological interpretation using different methods of scientific analysis.

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