Overview and Methods Brief
Learning on the go: Experiences researching urban stewardship
practices through collaborative interview
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Dissertation background

My Solutions Scholars project supplements my ongoing dissertation seeking to increase recognition for the multiple ways in which urban greening and stewardship take place in cities, the diversity of actors involved, and the range of personal values enacted through this work. The work raises an essential question for the future of green cities: what might urban greening look like with an explicit orientation towards justice and equity? In this way, the project represents a paradigm shift away from common approaches to greening that frame its benefits in terms of neoliberal concerns — e.g., economic feasibility, human-centered livability — and instead heightens focus on the promotion of holistic biodiversity as well as environmental and social justice concerns. The approach followed in my research is rooted in an ethic of collaboration and co-creation, taking inspiration from place-based and action research methodologies. The project is being conducted across two cities — Medellín, Colombia, and Vancouver, Canada — informed by the previous and ongoing efforts of research collaborators and community partners and featuring a suite of methods intended to bring local stewards into conversation in the name of story sharing and solution-building. The insights produced through this work have the potential to influence novel approaches to urban greening that uplift justice-oriented, grassroots greening efforts and inspire greater collaboration across diverse knowledge holders and stewards.

Solutions Scholars project summary

Among early career researchers — especially PhD students — who are eager to center social transformation and change-making within their work, identifying research methods that align with and complement justice-oriented ideologies can be challenging. While there exist a number of resources that introduce the practice of qualitative data collection and analysis, these tend to emphasize research design and implementation as opposed to offering reflections on the process and experience of *doing* qualitative research. Although such guidance has been foundational to my growth as a scholar, it has often proven too rigid and made the implementation of a participatory action research project seem inaccessible. In response to a desire for more narrative-based reflections on how to apply flexible qualitative research methodologies that support action-oriented scholarship, I share my experience creating and adapting place-based research methods in support of a participatory action research project. First, I provide an overview of my approach to place-based walking interviews and ground my methodological decisions within broader theory. This is followed by two stories that offer insight on the process of conducting a walking interview as well as reflection on the form and depth of narratives elicited through the practice. By sharing detailed accounts of select interview moments, it is my intention to infuse transparency into how qualitative methods are discussed and show that challenges, curiosities, and discomforts experienced during the research process warrant equal attention to successes and discoveries.

Methods featured and relevant resources

In this work, I question the interview practices I had applied in the past — primarily static, semi-structured interview (Schensul et al., 1999) – and consider why they failed to access the nuance of respondent relationships to their local communities and ecologies. I take issue with the ways

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in which semi-structured interviews remove the respondent, physically and emotionally, from their environment. What interests me, however, is how interview can reveal people's experience in and connection to place. This paper catalogues my journey as I searched for different approaches to interview that emphasized the relationship between people and place and could offer insight into how and why people care for the natural world as well as the affective worlds accessed through their stewardship (Pearsall et al., 2024).

I give particular attention to walking and collaborative interview (King & Woodroffe, 2017; Riley & Holton, 2016). Both of these styles emphasize the value of spontaneous reflection and knowledge co-creation within the interview process. In doing so, they challenge the roles of *interviewer* and *respondent*, suggesting that an interview is an active negotiation between multiple ways of understanding and experiencing a place (Pearsall et al., 2024). This also emphasizes that place-based interviewing is an inherently collaborative activity. Although the subject of discussion is consented to in advance, the goal as an interviewer is not to control the form and flow of conversation. There is no predetermined destination, more important is the process of the interview and what its trajectory suggests about how the participant constructs their reality and creates meaning within it (Greenspan & Bolkosky, 2006). Gubrium & Holstein (2012) offer a theoretical explanation for this approach, writing that, "The interplay of narrative work and narrative environments—the constructive *hows* and substantive *whats* of the matter— provides interviews with a discernable range of possibilities for asking and responding to questions about what we are and what our worlds are like." As an interviewer, this pushes me to embrace a certain degree of unpredictability in order to attune to the complex factors that influence how people walk through and understand their worlds. An interview should not be replicable nor uniform — to the contrary, what is of interest are the ways in which respondent narratives resist these traits and reflect unique perspectives.

Another essential aspect of interviewing is the way in which those participating influence one another — the interviewer through a flexible practice of questioning and the respondent through their connection of that question to experience and story. Only through this process of mutual impact can we move towards a shared understanding of one another's realities and collectively create meaning (Evans & Jones, 2011). Related to this, a collaborative interview approach recognizes the gravity of context and place (King & Woodroffe, 2017; Riley & Holton, 2016). Embedding an interview in an environment meaningful to the participant invites greater depth and dimension in both the questions asked and responses given. While an interviewer feels emboldened to go 'off-script' and tailor their inquiry to place-specific elements, participants similarly can take ownership over the experience, guiding the interviewer through the space while integrating movement, memory, and story. As such, the interview touches on more than a participant's lived experience; it questions how that experience is mediated by a particular environment and practice. It is not just the participant being interviewed, but their relationship to the location (Pearsall et al., 2024). These departures from traditional semi-structured interview formats promote a more natural *flow*, inspiring an experience that is, "[…] unhurried, somehow both orderly and organic, with an evolving life of its own" (Greenspan & Bolkosky, 2006). To me, the theory of place-based interviewing presented an image of a comfortable and personal interview wherein inquiry melts into conversation. Achieving this in practice, however, has

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required a long process of refinement, reflection, and discomfort both within and outside the interview.

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