

Introduction: Urban Research Across Chicago

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With this third volume of *Perspectives on Civic Activism and City Life*, the periodic urban research journal of The Field Museum's Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC), we present the work of our student intern ethnographers from 2003 and 2004. The program that gave rise to the papers in this volume is the Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute (URCTI), which began in early 2003 thanks to generous support from the Ford Foundation. URCTI is the current expression of CCUC's long-standing dedication to urban issues, known formally as the Urban Research Initiative. The URCTI program, which includes both interns and faculty, seeks to increase academia's community engagement through the incorporation of community voices into the research and teaching processes. The six papers included here represent the six Chicago neighborhoods in which we have worked over the past two years: Austin, Near North, South Chicago, Englewood, North Kenwood-Oakland and Chicago Lawn.

Perspectives is a forum for our student intern ethnographers, community partners and faculty fellows to publish their research and discuss their views on issues such as healthcare, housing and neighborhood gentrification. This is the first edition to be available solely online, a format that is exciting due to its worldwide reach and the way it complements our departmental website. Like the first volume of *Perspectives*, this third publication includes only papers by our intern ethnographers, whose insightful research deserves public dissemination. In future volumes, we will return to including the voices of those with whom we work during the research process.

The papers that follow are the result of both an asset-based and participatory action approach to urban research. Following the work of Kretzman and McKnight (1993:2), we approach low-income neighborhoods with the view that residents have "capacities, skills and assets"

that can be built upon once identified as such. The "participatory action" component of our research stems in part from the work of William Foote Whyte, who describes participatory action research (PAR) as different from traditional social science in that members of the community being studied participate in the project's design, implementation and in the use of the information gathered for positive social change (Foote Whyte et al. 1991:20). Our approach to PAR differs from some of its other applications; though the planning and implementation of the projects are cooperative efforts, the research itself is carried out by intern ethnographers rather than community organizations themselves. This affords for more intensive research to be done in a shorter period of time. Within these parameters, our interns used the more traditional anthropological methods of participant obser-

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vation and informal, unstructured and semi-structured interviewing in their data collection.

The URCTI program's twin pillars of intern research and faculty development are innovative within the spheres of anthropology, museum studies, and indeed academia in general. During the summers of 2003 and 2004, selected faculty from colleges and universities around the Chicago area attended the eight-week institute at The Field Museum where they read about, discussed and observed PAR methods. The summer program concluded with faculty presentations of syllabi they have revised for the incorporation of these theoretical and methodological approaches. Their curricular innovation

is striking. Though the degree and form of the proposed classes vary, they all reflect a participatory ethos that derives its power from collaborating with and for research subjects, rather than relying upon methods that are merely extractive. The revised classes will be taught at their respective academic institutions in the coming semesters. This approach is part of an emerging trend in the academic and museum worlds, and specifically within The Field Museum, toward the inclusion of the thoughts and desires of the communities served (portrayed) in the process of creating programming.

The intern component of the URCTI program represents the practice of the theory discussed with faculty. Seven interns were selected each season from local and national colleges and universities, sharing backgrounds in social science research methods and an interest in social issues. Prior to the arrival of interns each June, URCTI staff meet with our community partners (see list, page 73) to discuss the research topics and related issues for the upcoming summer. In 2003, the research topic was decided with each organization independently, that is, there was no a priori unifying theme across the city. This is reflected in the diverse subject matter of the papers we are presenting from that year: a general overview of the social assets and cultural issues of the Austin neighborhood, an examination of how healthcare decisions are made in South Chicago and an inventory of community cohesiveness and arts-participation in the mixed-income development of North Town Village. Despite the different topics of the 2003 research, the neighborhoods described in these papers do face common issues. One of these is communication, which arises as a theme in South Chicago, North Town Village and Austin. Whether the issue is bringing together an untapped labor pool and local development and service projects, connecting people with essential information about their healthcare options or stimulating conversation and interaction across economic groups in mixed-income housing, the research from the 2003 field season illuminates ways for practical changes to be made in the neighborhoods in question.

During preparatory meetings with our community partners for the summer 2004 field season, consensus formed around the idea of having a common research theme across all the field sites. The broad topic of “land use” was chosen for summer 2004, with the specific focus

for each neighborhood determined by further conversations between the partner organization, the intern and URCTI staff. This topic’s importance is ongoing in Chicago, especially in light of the Chicago Housing Authority’s recent Plan for Transformation, which is altering the cultural geography of the city and the availability of low-income housing. Neighborhoods traditionally neglected by commercial interests are currently being redeveloped while the voices of those affected by these decisions are largely excluded from the planning process. Chicago is indeed being transformed as the perception, use and control of land is changing across the city. We at URCTI along with our community partners decided to investigate these issues in our neighborhoods, paying particular attention to the ways in which people see and organize the space around them, and to the ways decisions are made by people in power and by ordinary citizens. As part of our objective of more effectively placing community voices in the city’s official decision-making process, we interviewed several people throughout the city (elected officials, academicians, developers) who currently have decision-making power about these issues. Our goal is that the information gathered from ethnographic research will empower people to gain influence over the places where they live.

At the start of the field season, each intern in conversation with their community partner narrowed the focus of their research question to suit the organization and neighborhood. Englewood’s abundance of empty lots, long-standing environmental problems (including lead contamination) associated with illegal dumping and old house paint, and increasing development due to rising commercial interest near 63rd Street and the new Kennedy-King College led to an investigation into the uses and perception of vacant lots by the community. In contrast, Chicago Lawn (west of Englewood) has very little vacant land. Community planning processes are already in place in this neighborhood, and the researcher’s goal was to discover how the voices of those currently excluded from planning and civic action can be incorporated, thereby granting some measure of control over the way land is used to the constantly changing cultural mix of residents. Lake Park Crescent is another site that is currently affected by the relationship between land use planners and the surrounding neighborhood. This

mixed-income housing development replaced the CHA's demolished Lake Park Homes and is located on the border of the North-Kenwood and Oakland communities. Using the research presented here, the development can pursue cultural integration through attention to the findings about the role of art, social networks and history in the strength of the community.

Each of the six papersⁱ included here directly or implicitly suggest strategies for the organizations and neighborhoods they worked with to develop stronger communities. We expect the research to aid in the creation of awareness about and utilization of local assets such as the environmentally and socially beneficial gardens in Englewood and Austin and the oral and architectural history in North Kenwood-Oakland. More concrete uses of the research include its contribution to the content of grant proposals, letters to government officials and discussions at community meetings. Problems revealed through the research, such as the lack of multicultural community spaces in Chicago Lawn, can be better addressed now that the issues are clearly delineated. As we continue refining our research approach, execution and follow-through, we hope to stimulate positive social change in the city of Chicago in collaboration with our partners.

Bibliography

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1993 *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Chicago: ACTA Publications.
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1991 *Participatory Action Research: Through Practice to Science in Social Research*. In *Participatory Action Research*. William Foote Whyte, ed. Pp. 19-55. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, London, New Delhi.

i Due to restrictions on space, we were unable to include four other research reports in this volume. Please visit our website, www.fieldmuseum.org/urbanresearch/ for executive summaries and land use maps relating to all of the projects our interns completed.