Stakeholder Research in Architecture and Urban Design: Assessing Emerging Methods for a Post-Pandemic World

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ABSTRACT: Architecture and urban design represent spatial conceptualizations at different, interlinked scales. Economic and social sustainability as part of the design concept requires user and community-based research to determine stakeholder habits and needs. One of the largest challenges in such research is collecting representative data, a challenge that was exacerbated by the lack of in-person research opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic forced research method adaptions for both qualitative and quantitative community-based research. Our paper examines these adaptations as examples of emerging methods more generally. We first summarize both analog and digital stakeholder-focused built-environment research over the past decade. Next, through a literature review, we focus on studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic to detail new methods and tools developed during this time. A special focus is on methods developed to access stakeholder groups often overlooked in built-environment research, such as low-income and other vulnerable populations.

We analyze emergent and newly developed methods to determine their applicability, benefits, and limitations for use in a post-pandemic world. In doing so, we contribute to developing methodologies and tools for built-environment stakeholder research where data has typically been harder to access.

KEYWORDS: Emerging Research Methods, Community Engagement, Digital Research Methods, Stakeholder Theory

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic, with its lockdowns and subsequent lifestyle implications, challenged researchers conducting community and urban research. Qualitative field studies that required access to specific sites and population groups became difficult. Researchers operating globally and across disciplines were especially challenged, as travel became impossible.

Research groups quickly organized to provide assistance. The Nippon Foundation Ocean Nexus Center at the University of Washington (Garcia and Barclay 2020) compiled resources on conducting social science-based research despite pandemic constraints, while academic organizations working on spatial research offered workshops on methods that lent themselves to conducting research during lockdowns and travel restrictions (Parikh and Henrique 2021).The *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* published a collection of essays in which scholars pursuing research on urban communities outlined their pandemic challenges and methodological adaptions (Weinstein 2021). One issue highlighted by these studies is that many methods relied on digital data collection, yet digital access is distributed unevenly across the world, with poorer communities less likely to have access to digital devices or platforms. Researchers became aware that increasing use of digital methods required rethinking the roles of research participants, and that digitalization presented both opportunities and challenges for the research process.

Although digital data collection and analysis methods were prevalent before the Covid-19 pandemic, the pandemic arguably led to an acceleration of such methods. Our assessment of this process will show that researchers creatively employed remote data collection methods using online services or the internet, and that while researchers were often challenged when working with populations without online access, remote data collection methods could also improve access to populations for whom in-person data collection methods had been unsurmountable.

1.0 ANALOG DATA COLLECTION METHODS

1.1 Urban planning and design: soliciting community input

Community engagement has been defined as dialogue and discussion between the general public and the decision-making body (Cavaye 2004). In this process, stakeholders discuss their needs and concerns and negotiate common goals. This engagement may occur at one or multiple stages, from early planning to post-occupancy evaluations. The level of engagement of stakeholders varies based on the methods and phase of engagement in a project.

While community engagement concepts were initially developed in the 1960s, western countries, including many European countries and the United States, accelerated use of such tools in the late 1990s (Lawson and Kearns 2010). Governments and NGOs have published a range of toolkits and guides on engaging communities for inclusive and sustainable development (cf. Futurewise et al. 2014; Sankofa, et al. 2021; Queensland Government 2017; Trans-Urban-EU-China 2020). Methods have included interviews, shared comment boards, in-person and online "walk along" or "ride along" tours to identify community needs, vision and design workshops, and dialogue about draft master plans to gain community recommendations and ideas (Canesi, et al. 2022).

Figure 1: Developing ideas for a community school project through a board-game exercise. Source: (© Baupiloten BDA 2023)

One of the most longstanding forms of community engagement at both the urban and architectural design level is participatory design, where experts (architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and those from related fields) solicit input from future users in the decision-making process (Figure 1). Sherry Arnstein defined the degree of citizen involvement through a seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation" in 1969. Arnstein's conceptual hierarchy ranged from "nonparticipation", where citizen-stakeholders have no means of participating in planning decisions, to "citizen control", where citizen stakeholders have extensive agency in the planning process (Arnstein 1969). While Arnstein did not define specific methods of citizen participation, her framework continues to provide an evaluative tool for such measures.

Urban development projects often make use of several rounds of citizen participation. As an example, the "Great Park" project in Orange County, California, used extensive citizen solicitation tools in a process that spanned decades. First, ballot measures were proposed to determine large-scale planning ideals. Community leaders and representatives of major area demographics were then invited to participate in focus group interviews as part of a "visioning" process. In a further step, the project planners organized a stakeholder conference, with names suggested by the focus group members. This conference included further visioning exercises based on specific themes such as sports, business interests, education, and so on. Conference participants also filled out two questionnaires and summarized information to develop what for them were the most salient features desired in the park. Information gained at the conference was then used to develop a countywide telephone survey to solicit ideas from a larger group of citizens. As a final step, all Orange County residents were invited to rank the competition proposals developed by the invited design firms. (Garde 2014) Because of the timeframe (the first stages of planning took place from 2002 to 2014), many of these measures were analog or in-person, although several (such as surveys) would likely be conducted online today.

Globally, planning bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have used community engagement, including participatory methods, as a tool in urban regeneration, city design, tourism planning, and urban planning processes (Bahaire and Elliott-White 1999; Howard and Gaborit 2007; Lawson and Kearns 2010; Canesi, et al. 2022). Lawson and Kearns have called public engagement a means of promoting democracy and empowering communities (Lawson and Kearns 2010). When the community voices are representative of community demographics, this is surely the case. In the Orange County example, an analysis found that representation was spotty: The majority of community members in the participation process were white and affluent; many were senior citizens. The community at large, however, was much younger and proportionately more Hispanic. Additionally, researchers found that business leaders were able to influence public opinion through advertising and other measures (Garde 2014). As we will see below, digital data collection measures can help solicit community input from a more representative cross section of the population, especially in areas where digital access is widespread.

1.2 Interviews, oral histories, and "go-along" methods

Both practitioners and scholars seek understanding about urban context and urban histories. Oral history has been used as a data-collection method to access historical and contextual information about communities where written records are scant. Here, researchers access individual and collective memories of historical events or phenomena

to develop or assess spatial transformations. Interviews are conducted with individuals or groups. Oral history has proven invaluable in indigenous research projects, neighborhood planning with stakeholders, and social justice projects (Thomas 2004; Maharawal and McElroy 2018; Ahrar 2018; Stead, et al. 2019; Selvi Ünlü 2019; Ramiller 2022). This fine-grained and accessible method has especially helped researchers gain information about how historical events have impacted minority communities (Thomas 2004; Virdee 2013; Maharawal and McElroy 2018; Ramiller 2022; Ahmad 2022).

A more extensive method that incorporates both oral history and interviewing is the go-along method, where the researcher accompanies a community member and informally interviews them during their everyday tasks (Kusenbach 2003; Ahrar 2018; Sun and Lau 2021; Veitch et al. 2022). This method has proven especially useful in gathering data from groups such as children or the elderly, where data collection methods such as surveys or focus groups may be challenging (Oliver et al. 2011; Sun and Lau 2021).

As in any in-person data collection, researchers must establish a rapport with participants before data collection begins. Participants must feel comfortable sharing information for data collection to be effective. Experienced researchers are adept at putting research participants at ease before commencing the data collection process itself.

2.0 DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AS DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

2.1 The move to digital methods in data collection

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, digital data collection methods were in development. Surveys were often administered online, with participants clicking on an emailed link to access survey questions on platforms such as Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, and Google forms, which in some cases could also perform basic data analysis. Video conferencing on a multitude of platforms such as WhatsApp, Skype, or (since the pandemic) Zoom allowed researchers to conduct interviews, either with individuals or with groups of people who do not need to share a location. Data processing also made use of digital tools. Software, either as part of or separate from the video- or audioconferencing tools, allows researchers to turn spoken interviews into text for analysis. Such features have revolutionized the laborious transcription process, which only recently had to be conducted by specialists. Even virtual-reality technology allowed researchers to present context-specific probes that allow researchers to formulate questions and lead discussions (Kostakos et al. 2019).

While camera and video recordings have provided additional sources of qualitative data, this has also led to ethical questions. Surveillance cameras have become more common in many societies, and their use as a data collection tool presents legitimate privacy concerns. Despite this, researchers seeking data about spatio-temporal changes in public space usage continue to use cameras as a data collection tool (Whyte 1980; Pink 2007).

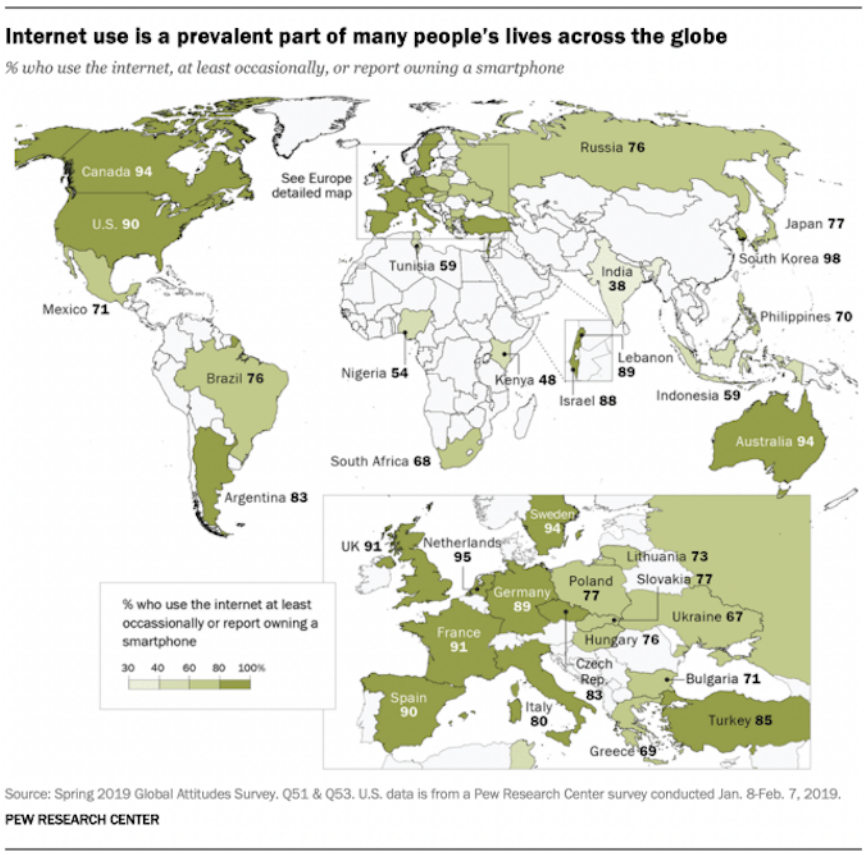

Figure 2: Internet penetration rates by country, 2019. Source: (Pew Research Center 2019)

2.2 Covid-19 research challenges: representation and building trust

The increased reliance on remote data collection during the Covid-19 pandemic brought to light several research challenges, both practical and ethical. One such challenge was finding representative groups of research participants. While this problem is not new, uneven digital access increased its scope, as researchers had to find ways to conduct research with participants who had little or no internet access. Researchers using ethnographic methods also worried about building trust and rapport with potential research participants (Kroese et al. 2021). Researchers working remotely with minority and other vulnerable populations paid special attention to building trust and motivating potential participants to take part in studies.

Representation remains one of the largest challenges in using digital technologies, especially when working in low-income contexts. The use of remote data collection tools to engage with a population of interest is contingent on that population's access, financial capacity, and knowledge of the technology. A lack of access to reliable internet and tools such as mobile phones or computer devices thus severely limits data collection (Kroese et al. 2021). On a global scale, citizens of countries with great power and income disparities, including many low-income countries, frequently do not have universal access to the internet, making digitally based data collection difficult. Figure 2 illustrates the problem: As of 2019, less than half of the population of India had access to the internet, while many African countries had virtually no access (Pew Research Center 2019).

The lack of digital access experienced by many vulnerable populations can ultimately affect a study's inclusivity and predictive accuracy (Kroese et al. 2021). When some participant groups are harder to reach, there is a risk of selection bias in data collection, a bias that can affect study outcomes. As researchers increasingly rely on digital data collection methods, the problem of collecting representative data from communities without universal internet access will have to be considered.

3.0 DIGITAL RESEARCH TOOLS: A SURVEY OF EMERGING METHODS

Digital surveillance and analysis methods have become more sophisticated in the past decades, allowing many data collection tools to incorporate digital technologies. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to calculate how much the Covid-19 pandemic might have further accelerated a move to digital data collection tools, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the pandemic and its lockdowns did encourage researchers to develop more sophisticated digital options as a replacement for in-person data collection. In the next section, we review and assess several digital methods that have emerged or been increasingly adapted since the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.1 Interviewing remotely

Remote interviewing methods have become more frequent since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Countering the findings of some earlier studies, Keen et al. (2022) note demonstrated advantages, such as better access to some marginalized communities, in part due to being able to conduct focus groups where participants can be united without having to travel to a shared physical space. This is advantageous for participants with restricted mobility, or where travel to a research location is difficult for any number of reasons, such as a lack of transportation. Keen et al. (2022) argue that far from being a simple coping strategy during a time of crisis, virtual qualitative research has become an emergent method in its own right, with advantages and disadvantages that are yet to be fully explored.

Part of the development towards remote interviews is arguably due to technological advances in general. Whereas a generation ago, synchronous remote contacts were largely conducted via telephone, the ubiquity of personal computers and smart phones in many parts of the world have made video calls an everyday phenomenon for many. Researchers have found that video interviewing platforms such as Zoom can emulate natural conversation and thus help researchers establish rapport with their interview partners (Archibald et al. 2019).

An example is a study by Roberts et al., (2021) who worked during the pandemic with homeless K-12 students in Houston affected by Hurricane Harvey (which hit Texas in 2017). The researchers initially planned to conduct in-person interviews with school personnel, community service providers, and affected families. This changed, as Covid-19 exacerbated the health and wellness problems of already vulnerable families, while drastically changing schooling experiences and making in-person interviews impossible to conduct. The researchers quickly realized that their participants' post-Harvey experiences had been fundamentally altered through the added impact of Covid-19, calling for a new research focus.

Roberts et al. (2021) thus turned to technology that would allow them to work remotely, researching several options. A literature review established that videoconferencing did allow researchers to establish rapport with their interview partners, and that technical problems such as dropped calls could even increase the bond between researcher and participants as they worked together to solve the problem. Roberts et al. found that the literature reported privacy and other ethical considerations to be similar in virtual and in-person research, and that virtual methods could even be superior, as participants could, for example, use virtual backgrounds to control the researcher's visual access to participants' homes (Roberts et al. 2021).

In their own study, Roberts et al. found recruiting participants affected by homelessness especially challenging. Their original study plan had called for recruiting families through physically visiting area homeless shelters to get to know the staff, who would then serve as a conduit to homeless families. With the pandemic, the researchers had to approach shelter staff through virtual events, while using analog means, such as flyers and posters put up in the shelters, to recruit participants. Working with shelter staff allowed the researchers to bring in necessary technology for interviews, such as computers with internet access, cameras, and microphones. This technology, which became especially important for serving vulnerable populations during the pandemic, also allowed the researchers to

conduct their interviews with participants served by the shelters. In this way, the researchers were able to address problems of the “digital divide”, where low-income study participants do not have access to technology that would allow them to participate in studies remotely.

The researchers did note that recruiting or even reaching potential participants who did not live in a homeless shelter with adequate technology would affect how representative the study would ultimately be. As the researchers put it, “[W]e still had to grapple with equity concerns over whose voices would be captured in our research,” (Roberts et al. 2021).

3.2 Digital-native methods

Digital native methods are methods that do not have an analog version, such as research with online social media accounts or other material that is located online. In a crowdsourced document provided on the internet and revised in July 2021, sociologist Deborah Lupton (2021) collected researchers’ experiences with “Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic.” Lupton’s list began with methods, such as videoconferencing, that were well established before the Covid-19 pandemic before turning to digital native research methods.

Many methods discussed involved the use of smartphones. For example, in a version of self-ethnography, study participants were asked to use their smartphone’s camera and voice recording features to provide visual or auditory data in response to real-time prompts issued by the researchers. A further version of this method involved participants keeping diaries or journals, with either written, drawn, or photo-based entries that could be sent to the researchers. If the diaries or journals were kept online, using the internet to transfer data to the researchers became straightforward, although larger document sizes (common for graphic data) did require a more robust internet connection.

In some cases, participants were described taking on roles the researchers had previously played. For example, in researcher-led re-enactment videos, researchers document people’s activities by filming them as they go about their everyday lives (often combined with interviews). During the pandemic, researchers reported asking participants to do the filming, either with their phones or with a wearable video camera, such as a GoPro (Figure 3). Shifting camera control to the participants also allowed researchers to conduct “walk along” or “ride along” interviews remotely. Previously, researchers had accompanied participants on such excursions in person.

Figure 3: “Go-along” ethnographic methods have shifted to using cameras participants control. Source: (Anastasia Zhukova 2024)

Several emerging “digital native” methods were discussed in the list compiled by Lupton (2021). Online discussion platforms, some of which have been developed by marketing research firms, allow researchers to upload their questions for participants to answer. Both researchers and additional participants can, with appropriate settings, see and respond to the answers typed by respondents in real time. This method, which combines survey methods with those typically used in one-on-one interviews or focus group interviews, takes advantage of the fluidity of online work to allow researchers to follow up on findings in real time.

In some cases, existing social media apps, such as Facebook Groups, were used to provide a discussion or other activity platform for the researcher and participants. The online and decentralized nature of such groups allows people who might have difficulties engaging in analog group activities due to mobility impairment, time constraints (for example, due to being responsible for young children or infirm family members), or lack of access to transportation to take part in a study. Researchers reported that group activities and study content were often similar to studies using in-person meetings. Respondents reported the online group meetings as more convenient than in-person meetings.

A further form of digital data collection involved using computational analysis, for example through using locational traces in online media or through analyzing material readily available on the internet, such as YouTube and other online videos. This type of research, which extracts data from existing material (even human-based material), is different from working with study participants, since the YouTube archive material does not need to be "recruited" and ethical constraints – including in many cases the need for IRB approval – are minimized (although not erased). With an ever-increasing amount of video material available on the internet, opportunities to make use of such data sources will certainly increase.

Relying on online material such as social media apps can exacerbate the problem with representation, since only data that is already online can be captured. One alternative is to use more conventional analog methods to recruit research participants. Participants can then be provided equipment for collecting digital data.

A fairly inexpensive method of collecting visual data from study participants with little or no internet access is to give them single-use cameras and ask them to use techniques of self-representation (self-portraiture and auto-ethnography) to collect data for the researcher. Although this requires the researcher to recruit and have at least indirect contact with the participant, no internet connection or digital equipment is required by the participant. An example is Anthony Luvera's 2020 photo exhibition about homelessness, an ongoing and collaborative project that is perhaps less scholarly than activist research (Warner 2020).

CONCLUSION

Although digital research methods have been part of the qualitative research arsenal for several decades, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated their development and use. Increased use of videoconferencing platforms for everyday communication during the pandemic meant that both researchers and their study participants became more familiar with and at ease with their use. Firms providing commonly used videoconferencing platforms developed new features, such as multi-user interfaces and advanced transcription services. Such features are typically more cost-effective than analog methods, thus helping researchers advance their work. Anecdotal evidence in the literature indicated that researchers had no more problems establishing rapport with participants than they had with in-person interview methods, and videoconferencing tools became a ubiquitous tool for carrying out qualitative research that had previously been done in person.

In some cases, researchers had participants take on roles they had once adopted. Participants became videographers where researchers had once held the camera, wrote journal entries, or made photos where researchers had once recorded activities. Arguably, this process gives participants more agency over the direction of the research. Even the control functions of many videoconferencing apps allow participants some say over what researchers can visually and acoustically access. More studies are needed to determine how increased participant agency affects the information participants are willing to share, and what kind of data researchers can thus access and process.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers increasingly turned to "digital native" research methods, expanding the ways in which research can be conducted. Mining existing apps, such as social media or video-sharing platforms, became a further research tool. In some cases, researchers used such apps with participants they had recruited, while in other cases, researchers mined existing data from the apps themselves.

Digitalization, indiscriminately used, can have its downsides. While digital tools became a technical response to pandemic-era research challenges, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated social inequities across much of the world and highlighted the need to better understand the lives of vulnerable populations. Some researchers focused on how to give voice to people who are underrepresented in qualitative research, such as the homeless and other marginalized communities who do not have ready access to smartphones or the internet. Although researchers used creative means to gain access to such communities – including working with intermediaries, such as staff at social services centers, working with online platforms to better reach those with a lack of time or mobility, or switching to technologies that do not require the internet, such as single-use cameras – it is clear that more work must be done to develop research methods that will reach the most vulnerable among us.

In assessing digital research methods, the advantages of being able to access study participants with mobility or time challenges must be weighed against the disadvantages of not being able to access populations lacking internet access. More work on these questions is needed. On a global level, the shift to digital research methods must still account for research demands in countries with poor internet saturation, such as India or much of the African continent.

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated both the race to develop remote research capacities and an awareness of the social limitations of such methods. Further work on emerging methods will help us better manage these social challenges. The emergent methods developed through the constraints of the pandemic are a good foundation for this work.

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