

# OTHER STRUCTURAL MODELS OF ACTIVE LEARNING

## City as Text©

BERNICE BRAID

*The world is a book that demands to be read like a book.*

—Umberto Eco

City as Text© “walkabouts”— 4–5 hour structured explorations—are among the most compelling adaptations of structural elements in NCHC’s Honors Semesters and have become a regular feature of the organization’s national conferences. They are infinitely applicable to differing sites, and equally seductive to students and to faculty. They have proven to be catalysts for involvement in conference events and to have provoked long-term sensitivity and reflection about the human experience in the built environment.

The content of walkabouts emerges from some combination of site-specific elements (local economics, culture, and geography) and the conference theme (neighborhoods, honors learning, the uses of imagination). Shaping the precise assignments and linking them to the destinations proposed is much like drafting a syllabus. A clear sense of objectives, materials, and time is essential so that small exploratory teams can probe organizational patterns in goods and services observable on the surface and in public places.

To accomplish so much in so little time is a challenge, to be sure. The organizer needs to assign pre-readings, always of a highly general nature meant to frame the activity with an overall sense of context. In addition, participants need to receive a sheet of questions to consider while out on the streets. Then the larger group needs to be divided into working teams, preferably of no more than 4–5. These teams must set out on a journey—whether walking or going by bus, subway or el—that will take them into uncharted territory. In locations where a van or bus is required because of distances, the ride should be exceptionally short, and then the teams must leave the bus to do their detective work for the bulk of the time, only returning to their vehicles for the ride back to the hotel.

Included in the probe should be the purchase of a lunch (though not at a sit-down restaurant, which limits mobility), the purchase of local papers to scan hot news items and real estate ads, a visit to a real estate office to see what a newcomer will be dealing with, and conversations with local people about jobs, food, recreation, directions—all the kinds of things anyone who

lives in a place knows or would need to learn to survive. Often comparing what people say in these casual encounters with what the newspaper and real estate office assert is revelatory.

Underlying the entire activity is a desire to convey not only how much is normally missed in an ordinary day of one's life but also how much might be seen and heard. That is, the announced intent to "hone observational skills," to become aware of "how one's own lens works," is predicated on an understanding of how mutable even buildings can seem, depending on the angle of vision, angle of inquiry, kinds of questions, and context created by one's own presence in the scene.

There are questions here of impression and of 'fact' which participants are invited to mull over. A recent photography exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *PASSAGES* (1999), provides some stimulus to consider the issue of just how fixed are the givens a team assumes it is examining. "Photos often lend themselves more readily to conflicting interpretation than conclusive explanation" (Matthew S. Witkovsky, Curator). What participants in the NCHC walkabouts are undertaking is nothing less than an inquiry into not just the arrangement of streets or the behavior of people but the whole matter of how it is one sees.

Explorers who enter their walkabout open-minded and curious inevitably are startled to find themselves lost on familiar ground and anchored on foreign ground. They return with vivid impressions of how ample an activity interpretation really is; the shifting ground of solid stone seen as a stage set for human drama as it unfolds, for instance, suggests to them that all the solidity outside the hotel is less to be explained than questioned. The necessary element of being in strange surroundings produces a bonus: those who return with a perception of themselves as freshly 'sighted' then enter conference sessions with a newly assertive curiosity, a more frankly interactive posture.

One way to initiate an exploration is to set out consciously to record. The dominant figure of speech in NCHC's *City as Text*© projects has always been "mapping." Three small teams who visit the identical intersection usually return with at least three maps to show for their observations of the site. Not surprisingly, travelers astute enough to experience themselves as mappers, even while they are scanning the horizon for "fixed points of reference," in the end feel themselves to be discoverers.

*A good map lays bare the history and hence the soul of a place, like an x-ray.* —Cees Nooteboom

In his 'travel book' *Roads to Santiago*, Cees Nooteboom provides a perfect illustration of how far a good mapper can go with a field observation

methodology. The central activity—walking or driving over roads well traveled in the past—suggests how the activity works over time. Books read, images acquired, sounds heard, tastes and smells ingested, all become materials that over time allow a re-drawing of the maps. One short afternoon at a conference, or one orientation day on campus, is a modest start. But as conference participants move out into the local environment, away from the seclusion of their hotel rooms and into the maelstrom of new impressions, they are entering on a journey that need not end. Armed with a schematic drawing of intersections and streets, and with instructions on how to take public transportation, they fan out to ask questions (‘the interview’), to compile answers, to shop and bring back artifacts and anecdotes, and to take notes on what they see, when, how, and maybe even why.

Returning with their notes, they attempt a rough deconstruction of what they have read as the text of this city, refracted through the lens that each team uses to construct its report on explorations of this new world. They have, in this process, created an idiosyncratic map of a public place and have begun to muse about just how it might function as a place in which others live their lives.

If this exercise occurs at the beginning of a conference, it brings strangers together to work and become temporary partners. When participants feel attached to others who are strangers in this strange place, the entire conference changes dimension and dynamic to them. In acquiring a capacity to explore, in a somewhat systematic way but certainly in a conscious way, they have acquired as well an ability to engage with new or unfamiliar ideas as they appear throughout the meetings. It does seem, judging from conference behavior, that City as Text© has broken through the kind of isolation and awkwardness that is so common a phenomenon at professional meetings, which are often an alienating experience despite their disciplinary excitement.

Panelists discussing the methods of City as Text© walkabout designs commonly suggest the multiple applications of this approach to helping students regard the world as a book to be read and to see their journey through it as a mapper’s task of charting the personal paths they take to uncover and discover what’s out there. A simple adage is this: the discoveries students make by virtue of looking and seeing some slightly surprising thing are the ones they will never forget. Brilliant guides, whether on buses or in classrooms, flash brightly in their minds for a while but tend to fade. Enthusiasm about pursuing research projects, trying out new fields, and thinking odd thoughts, derives far more reliably from discoveries than from the occasionally flashing lights academics provide to lead their students through dense woods.