

# Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers

BY KIMBERLY POWELL

## Micro-ethnography as a Viable Classroom Approach

Historically, *ethnography* is a process of inquiry that involves the description and interpretation of the cultural and social practices of people, “the written representation of culture” (Van Maanen, 1988) that emerges from a lengthy period of in-depth study and, often, residence in, a particular setting. But this time-intensive approach can be particularly challenging to meaningfully implement as part of a classroom curriculum. One approach is to have students engage in micro-ethnographic research projects, which share the same characteristics of long-term ethnographic practice (e.g., field research, participant observation, interviews) but focus on a site, community, or issue for a short period of time (Beach & Finders, 1999). For classroom purposes this might mean site visits during class time that occur often enough for students to conduct meaningful inquiry into a question or issue that is related to social and cultural practices or conventions pertaining to place.

Our study was a micro-ethnography that took place during a summer research course for six undergraduate and four graduate students majoring in the disciplines of architecture, art education, geography, landscape architecture and an integrative arts program. I co-taught this course with Peter Aeschbacher, Assistant Professor of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at The Pennsylvania State University. The audience for our work primarily included the *Oficina de Antigua*, a Panamanian government-sponsored office responsible for the urban renovation and development of El

Chorrillo, Panama. Situated between Panama City’s old town, Casco Viejo, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the Canal Zone, sites of urban renewal for commercialism and tourism, El Chorrillo (The Little Spring) has become an urban zone of interest for commercial redevelopment due to its location between these sites and its waterfront property.

We engaged in what is often called “critical ethnography,” (e.g., Madison, 2005) in that we sought to bring about change and awareness of El Chorrillo as a viable residential neighborhood that could continue to exist along-side continual urban development, and, most importantly, benefit from renewal efforts. Our research built on the work of architecture professor and program director Bret Peters and his students who had, in previous years, designed an overall urban plan for Panama City that acknowledged El Chorrillo’s role in maintaining a socially diverse and affordable community, including recommendations for public space and affordable housing types. During our research, we sought to implement ethnographic, visual methods as a means to investigate and depict urban spaces and places that would capture complex narratives of the lived experience of place that were not addressed through the program’s previous surveys and urban planning methods.<sup>1</sup> Another critical purpose of our research focused on the students themselves. We wanted to encourage our students to be public scholars; that is, to understand the social and political purposes to which academic knowledge could be applied.

Our stay in Panama comprised 4 weeks of field research. Prior to our trip we spent two weeks with the students engaging them in preliminary research and training in ethnographic and visual field methods (e.g. writing fieldnotes, interviews, cognitive mapping, photography). For the first 2 weeks, we teamed with 20 Panamanian students from an undergraduate architecture class (as part of an academic exchange) and conducted mapping surveys of buildings, public and private spaces, and social behaviors in relation to space and place to obtain some general information for the *Oficina de Antigua*. During the second 2 weeks, students developed individual research projects based on a question of interest that was generated from our initial fieldwork and spent studio time analyzing their data and developing visual modes of representation for our final public exhibit.<sup>2</sup> Some of these research questions are described in the following section.

## Choosing and Developing Visual Methods of Research

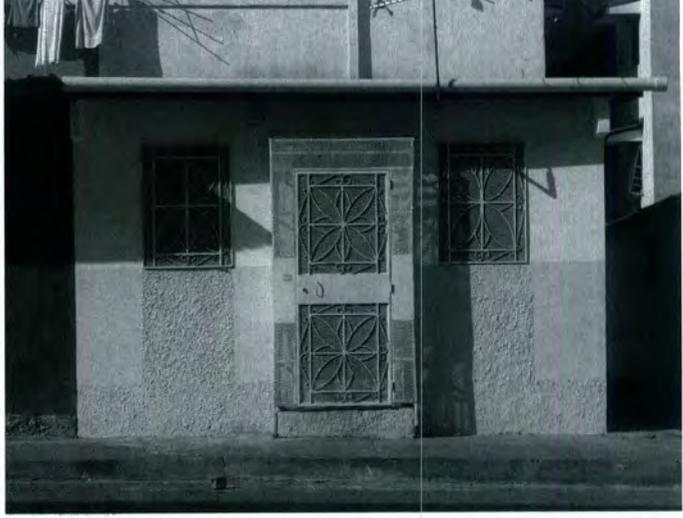
Certain methods mark ethnographic research: participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the context of those studied; detailed, daily written fieldnotes based on first-hand encounters and observations; the development of rapport and reciprocity with participants; interviews with participants; and the collection, recording, and analysis of documents, records, and artifacts. Visual ethnography is an extension of these principles and methods but takes as its premise the importance of visual representation of experience. While film and photography have historically constituted the

*Implications for student ethnographers include the consideration of the ethics of "capturing" someone's image, the violations of privacy that might occur in documentation or a public exhibition of the work, and the appropriateness of sites to study.*



**right**  
Students mapping an older section of El Chorrillo. Photo by Garrison Gunter.

**below**  
Garrison Gunter's "Two Stories." These are 4 of the 13 pictures from his photo essay. Photos by Garrison Gunter.



primary modes of research, art, drawing, video/film, and hypermedia now also constitute major categories of methods for visual documentation and representation (see Pink, 2009, for examples of these categories).

In our project, we built on students' and our own academic strengths to determine visual methods. These methods, and the corresponding visual displays of data, were not pre-planned; rather, they were **responsive** to and **emergent** from the context of our study. The student projects thus reflected the skills and expertise unique to our class context, which meant that our approach utilized design practices, studio art practices, mapping, and the use of tables or graphs. The following section depicts six major modes of visual documentation developed in our project and offers examples of how these methods were responsive to the research questions and context for study (they are by no means the only visual modes). These categories are fluid and highly interactive in terms of their uses and representations of data, as several student projects are mentioned *across* these categories.

One important consideration should be noted. Visual ethnography has paid increasing attention to reflexivity and subjectivity as part of the collection and interpretation of data (Banks, 2001; Rose, 2007; Ruby, 2000; Pink, 2007) in which the researcher attends to his or her biases, assumptions, and personal experiences and how these affect and interact with the research. These considerations reflect a concern for the ethics of conducting visual research with others. The implications for student ethnographers include the consideration of the ethics of "capturing" someone's image, the violations of privacy that might occur in documentation or a public exhibition of the work, and the appropriateness of sites to study.

### **Sketchbooks and Artist Journals**

As part of the documentation process, we encouraged students to keep sketchbooks/journals to log fieldnotes, personal journal entries, sketches, maps, and drawings, as well as materials and documents collected at sites. An organic part of many art classrooms, sketchbooks offer a powerful site for writing, noting, and sketching observations and reflections. Several of the students, trained either in landscape architecture, architecture,

or art, drew sites, maps, and other images that would either help them remember a particular experience or place or were interpretive of an experience or place. Trieste, an undergraduate majoring in interdisciplinary arts, routinely sketched what she was observing. During one class sharing of and reflection upon these journals, we commented on the expressive nature of these sketches and how they brought a unique, subjective quality to what she was seeing. Trieste later used some of the sketches in her final research project.

### **Photography**

Photography can be used as a tool for documenting events, places, and people that, in the final presentation of work, render contextual complexities that are difficult or elusive to depict through narrative text. Our students used photography in a variety of ways, but many of them chose to display their work organized into categories, often with narrative explanations. Mike, an undergraduate student in architecture, was interested in informal and formal recreational spaces in the adjacent neighborhoods of El Chorrillo and Casco Viejo. He organized his photos of these spaces into categories of informal spaces, formal spaces, usage, and more interpretive categories such as well-used space and poorly used spaces annotated with key features of how spaces were used.

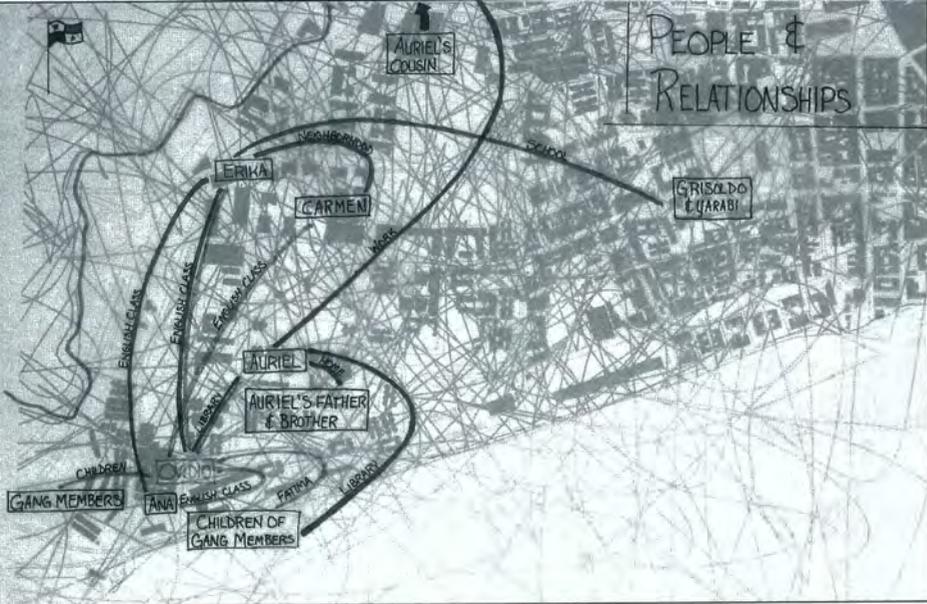
Photo essays are a particularly powerful mode of visual documentation of places and presentation of final work. A photo essay generally has a narrative intent and format. Garrison, a photographer and a graduate student in art education, became interested in a particular type of one-story structure that jutted out from very tall multi-story buildings known as the *barraza*. A research question that developed out of this interest concerned the multiple stories embedded in this one-story structure. Garrison aligned his photographs visually in ways that simultaneously highlighted similarities and differences across design features (windows, doors, ornamentation). Choosing 13 photos from a total of 50, his final project was an aesthetic exploration of place, structure, personalization, and difference that emerged from a single basic building design, thus highlighting the multiple personal stories within.

### **Maps**

Maps are a particularly powerful means for the representation of place and lived experience. As a visual method, maps convey a range of features related to physical landscapes as well as the psychological and social connections among people and places. Maps take a variety of forms; in fact, all of these student projects could be categorized as types of maps. Three students used cognitive mapping (Lynch, 1960), a technique that prompts participants to draw their own maps of communities and neighborhoods. Justin, an undergraduate major in geography, became interested in where and how informal social networks existed in El Chorrillo. To pursue this question, he asked three community members to map where they go during the day, the results of which were displayed in three maps: pathways between people, places, and relationships; locations and pathways; and a time-place continuum of people, place, and pathways. The notions of time and pathway in his project emphasize the fluid, active relationship between people and place, and the ways in which social networks transform places and spaces: "Is [public space] your traditional entity of a park or community center?" he later wrote in his research statement that accompanied his three visual maps (p. 48). "Absolutely not....[Church and home] transform as they become social nodes of activity" (Berkatek, 2006, 1-2).

### **Found Images and Artifacts**

Photographs, objects, billboards, and artwork that exist within and are created or owned by community members are frequently collected and analyzed in visual research (Prosser, 2008; Rose, 2007; Weber, 2008). Students can analyze the content of photos taken by community members, the aesthetics of objects, and/or discuss images within the context of visual culture theories. Marisa, an undergraduate majoring in art education, was interested in the visual culture of El Chorrillo and the adjacent neighborhood Casco Viejo, an increasingly gentrified area that serves as a major tourist attraction in the old part of Panama City. She developed a photo table display, organized categorically, that focused on art as it was found and situated within the community, some of which included signs, tourist art, and painted buses. The photographs served

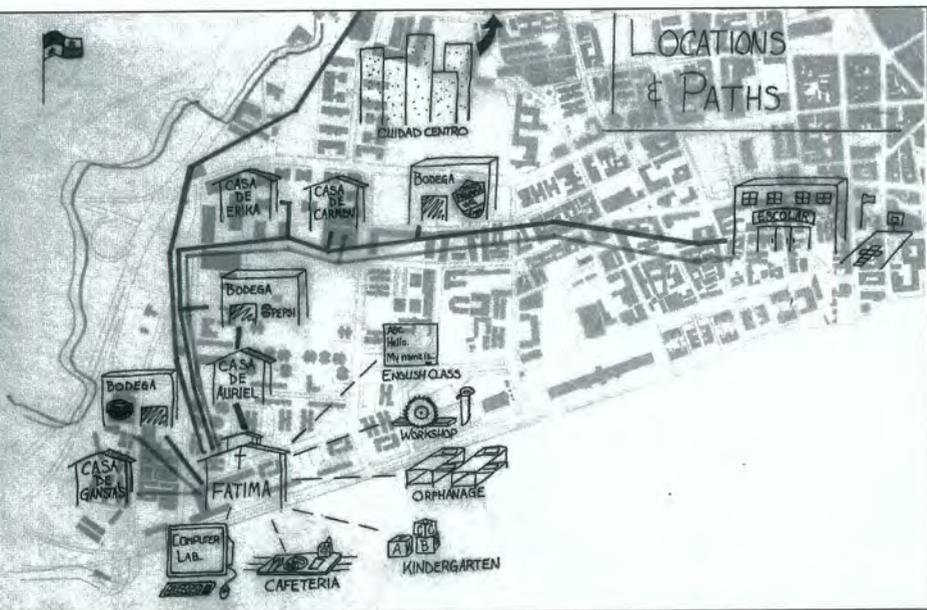


**from top**

Justin's map of people and relationships juxtaposed on top of a grid map. The grey lines were drawn by Justin to connote the many intersecting social networks present in El Chorrillo.

Justin's map of locations and paths. His hand-drawn map overlays a grid map of El Chorrillo.

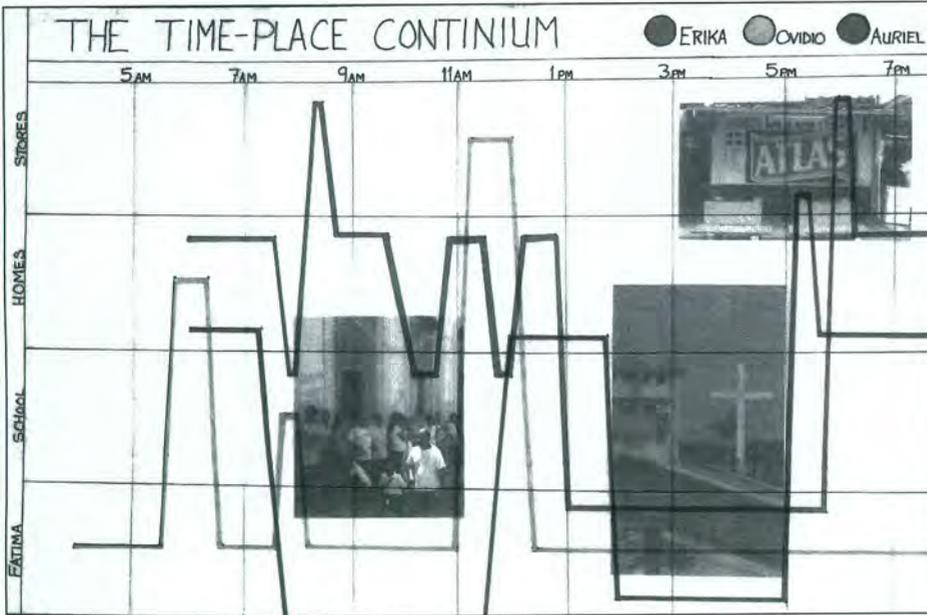
Justin's map of the time-place continuum depicting the routes of three residents throughout the day.



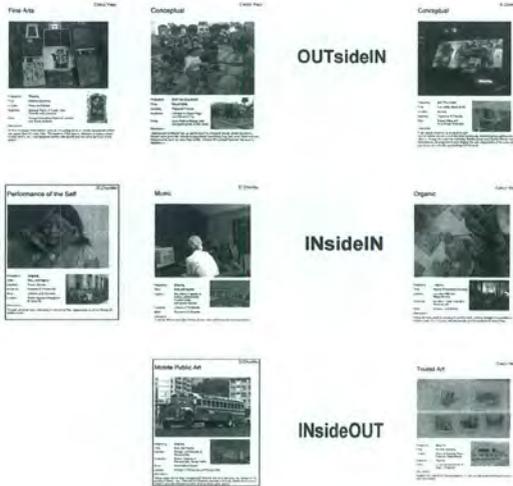
as a pragmatic means of documenting and representing both the type of art as well as its location in the city, since many of the art forms could not be collected or bought.

**Photo and Graphic Elicitation**

Elicitation is a participatory technique that uses photos, drawings, diagrams, artifacts, and other forms of visual or material data as the basis for gathering participant opinions and perspectives, often through semi-structured interviews (see Harper, 2002). Rather than mere documentation, these methods become tools for dialogical inquiry into the "lifeworlds" of participants (Prosser, 2008, p. 19). Elicitation techniques using photos and video/film are gaining popularity as a visual research method (e.g., Prosser, 1992; Weber, 2008; see Stokrocki 1984, 1985, and LaChapelle, 1999, for examples within art education) Participants can be asked to comment on existing photos, photos taken by the researcher, or photos that they take as part of the research study. Participants might also be asked to take photos or video for the purposes of social critique from an *emic* (insider) perspective (e.g., Hubbard, 1994; Wang, 1999).



Graphic forms of elicitation, such as drawing and mapping, are particularly effective for place-based research. Cognitive mapping (Lynch, 1960) is a mapping elicitation tool that is intended to represent how persons perceive the relationships between space, place, and social and physical features of the physical and built environment. As a method, it has been used to geographically record a person's memories and perspectives of a particular place and has been advocated within art education as a critical tool for understanding spatial literacy, sense of place, and the built and social environment (e.g. McFee & Degge, 1980; Langdon, 1999).



**Left top**  
Marisa's "Art Inside Out," a photo essay organized into three themes, depicting genres of art and visual culture found or located in different places in the neighborhoods of Casco Viejo and El Chorrillo.

**Lower right**  
Closeup of one of the panels that comprise Marisa's photo essay.

**Lower left**  
Marisa's table of art forms found in El Chorrillo, one of two tables. A similar compilation table was done for Casco Viejo.

## El Chorrillo

| Art Form  | Frequency | Time                   | Location                                | Audience  | Artist                                       |
|---|-----------|------------------------|---|---|--|
|  Music                 | Ongoing   | Daily and Nightly      | Public and Private Spaces               | Fellow performers and recording artists of El Chorrillo | Citizens of El Chorrillo                     |
|  Self Expression/Style | Ongoing   | Daily and Nightly      | Public Spaces                           | Citizens of El Chorrillo                                | Citizens of El Chorrillo                     |
|  Dance                 | Ongoing   | Daily and Nightly      | Various Public and Private              | Citizens of El Chorrillo                                | Citizens of El Chorrillo                     |
|  Commercial Signs     | Ongoing   | 24 Hours a Day         | Buildings throughout Chorrillo          | Citizens of Chorrillo                                   | Various throughout Chorrillo                 |
|  Conceptual          | Once      | 2 Nights<br>March 2003 | Barrazas of El Chorrillo                | Citizens of El Chorrillo                                | Brooke Alfaro and the Rival Gangs of Barraza |
|  Mobile Public       | Ongoing   | Daily and Nightly      | Streets of El Chorrillo and Panama City | Riders, Citizens of Panama City, Street Traffic         | Various Bus Drivers                          |

## Mobile Public Art

El Chorrillo



|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Frequency   | Ongoing   |
| Time        | Daily and Nightly                               |
| Location    | Streets of El Chorrillo & Panama City           |
| Audience    | Riders, Citizens of Panama City, Street Traffic |
| Artist      | Various Bus Drivers                             |
| Location    | Streets of El Chorrillo and Panama City.        |
| Description |   |

These buses can be seen throughout El Chorrillo and all of Panama City, except on the streets of Casco Viejo. They serve a utilitarian purpose of moving citizens in and out of Chorrillo while also displaying works of art by those same people.

Ken, a graduate student in landscape architecture who was interested in how community members might define and map El Chorrillo, collected and analyzed four cognitive maps drawn by a former gang member and resident who grew up in El Chorrillo, by the director of *Oficina de Antigua* who lived outside of the neighborhood, by a long-time female resident, and by a retired accountant who had recently moved into the neighborhood to assist with a vocational program. As they drew their maps, Ken asked them to comment on what they were drawing. He collected these maps and analyzed them for scope, scale, and particular hubs of activity, as well as each individual's approach to drawing the maps. Ken's final project visually enhanced the original drawings that show the sequence of

the drawings, a juxtaposition of the drawn maps on top of a traditional street grid map, and an overlay of all of the maps to view similarities and differences in perspectives. For example, the former gang member's map reveals an intimate scale and understanding of invisible borders and hubs of activity, while the director's map revealed a large-scale, formal depiction of existing buildings and public spaces that did not contain spaces and places viewed as important by residents.

### Arts-Based Approaches

An advantage to arts-based approaches is the ways in which they allow for ambiguity in both the rendering and representation of data, an approach that aligns with contemporary concerns with representation in both ethnography and art practice. Two students developed collage-based projects, an

important form of inquiry that can be effective in representing multiple narratives and interpretive spaces (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). Trieste, an undergraduate student majoring in interdisciplinary arts, became interested in the claiming of space through music. Through a series of interviews with local community members, she photographed and sketched the places and spaces in which residents engaged in music:

The subject of musical identity began as notes in my sketchbook and slowly rose out of the pages into color and sound... Through the photos, sketches, maps, interviews, and recordings, my understanding of how these people embody sound identity became evident. (Lockwood, 2006, p. 1)

## Guide - Former Resident of Chorrillo

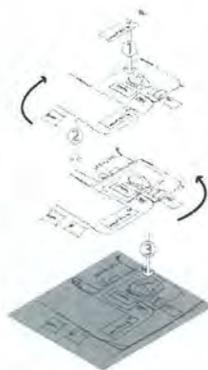


Male

20 - 30 Years Old

Lived in Chorrillo until age 16. Maintains friendships and ties to Chorrillo but no longer lives in Chorrillo

Subject began his map by identifying a sub-district defined by gang activity "territory". Although he did not identify specific buildings or spaces within this subdistrict he had a strong association with the bounds of this area. I later understood this area to be defined by streets in a block arrangement. He continued to structure his map based on streets identified with growing up in Chorrillo including where he went to school and the building in which he lived. The subject's spatial arrangement of Chorrillo was based largely on sub-districts he associated with gang activity and specific places he went to as a child. Although he had trouble accurately arranging these spaces on his cognitive map, the subject had strong associations with several places throughout Chorrillo. In conversations with the subject while walking through Chorrillo, it became evident that he was familiar with much of the area that he did not include on his map.

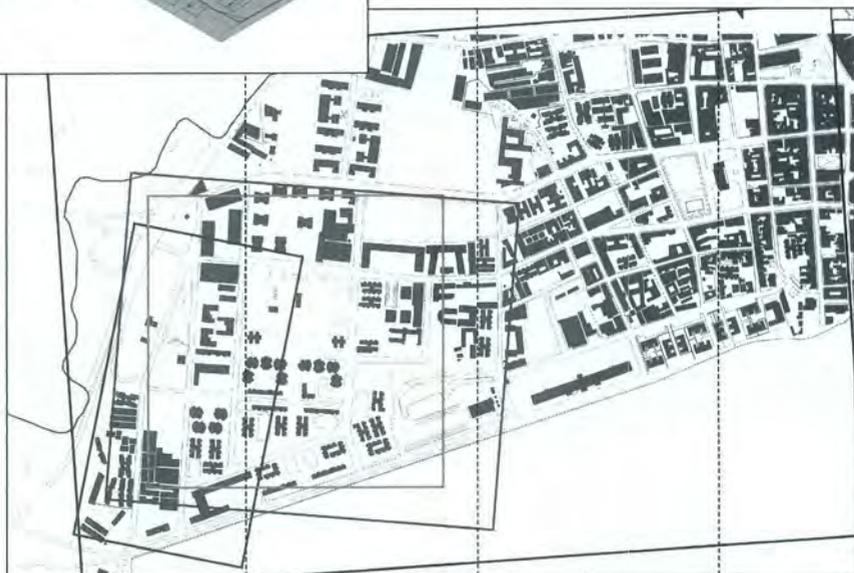


left

A section of Ken's poster display, depict an individual's map and sequencing, one of four individuals. Ken first scanned the pen-drawn maps, changed the black lines to white and set it against a background color-coded for each individual.

below

Colored lines from Ken's map series indicate the scope and range of each individual's cognitive map, juxtaposed on top of each other and over a street grid map of El Chorrillo in order to examine the relationships between people's perspectives and standard map perspective.



Her resulting composition was a collage of three places—a domestic landscape, a studio recording space, and a streetscape—juxtaposed with her own sketches that expressively mark people and the experience of sound in order to show the convolution and nonlinearity of space and place that occurs through human interaction with music.

Gillian, another undergraduate in integrative arts, became interested in residents' perspectives of architectural spaces, and how people define space in and around their homes. Gillian took photographic close-ups of buildings, floors, the street, and objects as a means to "zoom in" and document these textures. Her final project was a hybrid booklet that was part encyclopedia, personal journal, and maps. The collaged maps provided an index to the booklet and depict the subjective, lived sense of place that highlights the shifting, fluid nature of community identity with place across time and history, indexes to her documented accounts of areas within El Chorrillo.

## Analyzing, Interpreting, and Representing Place

The analysis and interpretation of data involves systematically searching, arranging, and categorizing all collected materials (e.g., fieldnotes, interviews, maps, and photographs) to understand patterns, themes, paradoxes, and issues in relation to the research questions that students have posed. Ethnographers also consider their own subjective experiences as part of their fieldwork (e.g., personal written reflections recorded in a journal). Interpretation involves explaining the social significance of findings, situating patterns, issues, themes

and/or stories within a broader context. There are a number of texts that are useful in the analysis of visual and ethnographic data (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Glesne, 2005; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Pink, 2007; Rose, 2007). What follows are some approaches to visual analysis and interpretation that we used in our study.

Marisa's photo display (see images on p. 49) was categorized into three major themes about the role of art as tied to place that emerged from her observations and photo collection: Outside-In (art with its origins outside the communities that made its way into the communities; Inside-In (art and images generated from within the communities); and Inside-Out (e.g., art that was created for non-residents, tourists, or outsiders, or moved in some way outside of its origins). The types, or genres, of art and their locations in El Chorrillo and Casco Viejo were further depicted in a single page that noted its genre, location, frequency, time, location, audience, and artist. This information was then collapsed into two

tables so that the viewer sees immediate comparisons and contrasts between the sites within each neighborhood and across each neighborhood.

An understanding of visual literacy, artistic skill, and/or design principles is important for the effective use and representation of visual material. Picture/graphic type; variables such as color, texture, angle; design principles such as consistency, repetition, contrast; and avoiding cliché, oversimplification, or too much ambiguity are just some of the aspects of visual literacy that can be discussed with and demonstrated for students (see [www.visual-literacy.org](http://www.visual-literacy.org) for examples). Ken's cognitive maps (see images above), for example, are color-coded, sequenced, scaled, and layered in order to assist the viewer in situating individual perspectives within a larger context, thus highlighting the relationality of his participants and their maps.

Visual ethnographers often mix images with text, as text supplies a narrative or descriptive context and thus becomes



## Observations



- Located on Calle 27, A.K.A. Calle Ocho.
- Calle Ocho is a nickname that originates in Miami. The people here saw Calle Ocho on television and that inspired them create their own version.
- A powerful gang lives on this street.
- Considered a block for partying, not safe, yet people still go on the weekends for fish and a beer drinking.
- The church reaches out to the community and those searching for education.
- The church is a landmark in Churrillito do to its size, location and purpose.
- It is located in the more modern area with more room for recreation.
- The closer to the water and wooden houses the older the buildings prove to be.
- Here concrete, bricks, and occasionally stone are used in the architecture.
- Calle 26 and 27 contain a large amount of extensions.
- In this area there is more room to use for such things and because of the symbol that the area has become people decorate accordingly.
- Walking down the street Friday, Saturday is said to be amazing while during the week its still interesting.



## Personal Experience

The Iglesia De Fatima really opened me up to the experience of Chorrillo. In this building I met Carmen, Erica and Anne who took Trieste and I to their homes throughout El Chorrillo. I first came to the church with Professor Peters who introduced the PSU class to the English class. Within the church there were many classes for adult learners as well as young children. Here a child could have a place to use a computer, to study and to escape from the neighborhood. Teens had software especially for creating music and adults could learn a trade or the English language. I was very interested in making connections with the English class because I knew that we would be able to communicate when we combined our language skills. To get to the church we had to take taxis, and in groups because we could not fit more than four people in one car. I was in the first car to go to the church and with others who had no idea where we were going. Once we arrived at the church we knew we had done something wrong. None of the doors were unlocked and all other entrances were gated off. As soon as we stepped out of the taxi the driver collected his money and left us to figure it out. After about ten minutes of searching for a way in a resident from the block came to our rescue. He told us that we needed to get inside the church as soon as possible and walked us through a back ally to get to the open entrance. We walked in and soon our fellow classmates arrived. When Carmen took us out on the town we left the police behind. This allowed us to go into homes, speak with anyone we wanted and walk down streets that before had been off limits to us. We traveled from the Salimones, just across from Parque Amelia, to the town houses on the other side of the street and all the way to the Barraza. In and out of buildings interviewing the people who lived there and seeing what life was like as a resident Chorrillano. After leaving Anne's, just outside the Barraza, we took a taxi back to the church to meet with a man who wanted to help us with our projects. Ovidio took us again over the church but this time introduced us to people our age. Before the majority of the residents I met were middle aged or older. Ovidio took us to the recording studio, which is

## 5. Iglesia De Fatima

Two pages from Gillian's booklet depicting index #5: Inglesia de Fatima.

### Students Viewing Places

Dipti Desai (2002) wrote about the ethnographic turn in contemporary site-specific art, or the "artist as ethnographer" (p. 307), suggesting that art educators broaden their conception of artistic process to include ethnography as a part of studio practice. While the study depicted in this article reflects an interdisciplinary expertise with design and art within a particular context, it serves as an example of how visual ethnography could be conducted as part of a place-based art education curriculum. Although this particular project was conducted with university students, the visual methods for place-based research discussed in this article are equally applicable to elementary and high school settings. The school in which students are situated, the neighborhoods in which students live, and the public art sites in a city or town, are viable, rich places for study.

Embedded in this article are suggestions for the conduct of visual ethnography in an art education classroom. Below is a summary of key points, a suggested framework for planning an ethnographic project in an art classroom:

1. Consider a micro-ethnographic approach, an approach based on a shorter time frame than most typical ethnographies.
2. Introduce students to visual ethnography by reading/viewing studies that have

been done, or examining artists who use ethnographic methods in their work and discuss the culturally responsive nature of ethnography with students.

3. Encourage students to brainstorm questions or issues they are interested in about places in their community, or a specific site they have in common (e.g., school). Once these topics have been established, discuss the ethical, social, and cultural dimensions of their topics. Students could work alone or in groups on a topic on which they reach agreement.
4. Discuss with students the ways in which they are participant observers; will become involved with, or at least implicated in, the social practices of people and places; and might consider including a study of themselves as part of the research.
5. Choose visual methods that adequately and appropriately address a research question. An art teacher might consider a particular focus in advance (e.g., photography) that she could then use as an opportunity to teach specific studio techniques, or let methods emerge in response to students' proclivities and the context of study. Some good references for working with children around visual methods (not limited to ethnography) include Ewald and Lightfoot's book (2002), *I Wanna Take a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*; Thompson's edited book (2008), *Doing Visual Research*

with *Children and Young People*, which includes methods such as video diaries and scrapbooking; and the photovoice method (see <http://www.youthvoices.ca/photovoice.html> for a particular focus on youth and photography). For visual work that includes mapping and drawing, see Emmison and Smith's book (2000), *Researching the Visual: Images, Objects, Contexts and Interactions in Social and Cultural Inquiry*.

6. Encourage students to develop reflexivity and subjectivity as part of the collection and interpretation of data in which the student ethnographer attends to his or her biases, assumptions, and personal experiences and how these affect and interact with the research.
7. Prepare students for the analysis, interpretation, and representation of their collected materials by examining the work of other visual ethnographers/researchers as well as visual artists who use ethnography as part of their artistic practice.
8. Analyze and interpret visual data, field-notes, interviews, and documents in terms of narratives, social and cultural practices, behaviors, and/or beliefs and consider visually representing these findings alongside a text such as a research abstract or artist's statement (or, perhaps, integrated into the visual work itself) in order to contextualize the visual displays. Consider and discuss with students how they might use their findings toward change and social advocacy.

A place-based, visual ethnographic approach to art encourages students to learn about the social and cultural dimensions of art and its connections to self, community, and the environment. Ethnographic methods can help us rethink sites of and for art exploration (Desai, 2002) as well as meaningfully connect artistic practice with local knowledge, history, uses, and narratives of places. In effect, sites for study can yield new sights and insights for students and, more broadly, for art education practice.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wish to acknowledge Peter Aeschbacher, who co-taught the research course and contributed significantly to the conception and visual design of student projects, and Bret Peters for his guidance, expertise, and consultation with Panama City's architecture. I especially wish to acknowledge and thank the students who were part of this course, and whose many works are featured in this article. Further inquiry into the nature of this experience should be directed to the author via e-mail at kap17@psu.edu

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed description of this research project, please see Powell (2008).

<sup>2</sup>A subsequent fall course in which most of the students enrolled compiled information across student projects to present in a final report to both our funders and the Oficina de Antigua. The end result yielded individual student projects but also an aggregated analysis of El Chorrillo through the study of all of these projects as well as our group data from the surveys.



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SOURCE: Art Educ 63 no6 N 2010

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