

VIEWPOINT

LEARNING the City: Beyond the Urban Diary

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Figure 1. Personal and unique experiences of public spaces (Photo: Charles R. Wolfe).

My viewpoint towards understanding cities is ecumenical and immersive. We all experience urban life, and have associated expectations, however simple or complex. In democracies, informed representatives are said to advance the needs of their constituents. Basic human needs are similar, but how they are expressed and sorted in a chosen location are not, so places will vary based on blends and mixtures of expression. To understand the particulars of a city, we must understand associated and customized needs, as well as opportunities to provide them.

Achieving public health, safety and happiness will vary. Solutions may be similar, but not the same, and we need to understand—to see and feel—what these solutions, or ‘context keys’, look like from place to place. When considering customized ‘context keys’ for cities

today, we must understand how each city or urban place varies from broad stereotypes. We should avoid one-size-fits-all solutions without community input.

Although not conclusive in themselves, the initial stages of *looking* and *exploring* are particularly important, which I addressed many times through articles and my first two books on the importance of urban observation, *Urbanism Without Effort* (Wolfe, 2019) (UWE) and *Seeing the Better City* (Wolfe, 2017) (SBC). These stages jump-start discussions in a meaningful way, and they are necessary stepping-stones to further discussion and solution.

UWE set out the universal, naturally-occurring fundamental and historical relationships between people and cities and argued that these relationships should be better understood before undertaking planning and development. UWE introduced the “urban diary tool” as one approach to document these relationships. SBC expanded the urban diary tool and advanced the related “LENS Method” for urban observation and data-gathering (**L**ook, **E**xplore, **N**arrate, and **S**ummarize). SBC further advocated a more significant visual dialogue to supplement existing municipal land use and historic preservation processes. In June, 2018, I joined an initiative to apply my thinking to a public health and climate-based Fulbright Specialist residency in Far North Queensland, Australia. There, a team based at James Cook University’s Cairns campus convened a two-session UN-Habitat’s World Urban Campaign “Urban Thinkers Campus”¹ in Cairns and Townsville (Figure 2). The Campus was—to my delight—designed around the LENS Method (Look, Explore, Narrate and Summarize) and urban diary tool set forth in my initial books (2017, 2019), and stressed not only the contextual distinction of Cairns and Townsville from the settings of other Australian, European, and American cities, but also how planning and design to address public health issues must also vary within the tropical climate zone.



Figure 2. James Cook University ‘Urban Thinkers Campus’ in Cairns, Australia (Photo: Charles R. Wolfe).

¹ <https://www.worldurbancampaign.org/urban-thinkers-campus-city-we-need>

The Role of the Urban Diary

Between 2011 and 2018, I found the LENS Method and urban diary tool an easy sell, and it became a *de facto* testing ground for approaches to co-creation and alternatives to conventional public hearings and participation methods. I often touted the urban diary as a means to empower and allow many previously disaffected urban inhabitants to overcome the prescriptions of consultants and indiscriminately borrowed quick-fixes to perceived urban ills. It noted that many were already creating urban diaries through Instagram and Facebook postings, recording what they see, and what they like or dislike, about the cities they inhabit. I argued that we should take these postings a step further.

I suggested how urban diary information could be applied in a flexible fashion, to become more mindful about urban surroundings and better approaches to urban redevelopment. In setting the stage for the Cairns and Townsville campus sessions, I argued the urban diary as an inclusive alternative to abstract, top-down prescriptions by enabling diverse contributions to urban decision-making. I quoted Vancouver planner Yuri Artibise, who kindly argued the urban diary could “reintroduce the human experience into urban planning.” If applied in more than a single-instance session, I still believe in this sentiment, however, as discussed below, I have determined that this jump-start tool needs elaboration to be effective and is not always understood by those who could most benefit by its application.

What Happened in North Queensland

Our Urban Thinkers Campus team promoted the urban diary tool to enhance personal observation, increase individual awareness, and create positive urban change, which provided the fundamental basis for understanding the context of Cairns and Townsville through a local lens. Campus sessions enabled a broad range of local participants to first identify current behaviours, reflect on how planning and design impact public health in their cities, and to suggest locally relevant planning and design improvements through the urban diary tool, premised on the importance of local history, values, and knowledge.

Before the Urban Thinkers Campus took place, organizers provided written guidance and sought input through urban diary photography (and short narrative) from citizen, professional, governmental, and academic participants. Participants were asked to submit imagery that showed successful methods for offsetting the effects of heat and humidity in the urban environment. The provided guidance advised that participants take and caption photographs of their surroundings, noting how the urban environment in which they reside impacts public health and liveability in both a positive and negative sense. Many actively contributed and described their photographs to designated Facebook groups and email addresses.

The organizers were clear through promotional materials and post-event summaries to offset any stereotypical imagery or assumptions of tropical “paradise” settings, as the goal was not to brand or serve as touristic assumptions, but to focus on relevant public health solutions. While advance participation was not uniform among participants, many urban diary submittals were successful in showing relevant examples to be emulated, including shade trees, attention to canopied commercial frontage, walking paths shielded from the sun, and outdoor playground lighting and equipment that encouraged park use at night. These solutions suggested that urban diary photographs provided locally-sourced inspiration applicable to the affected culture and character of Cairns and Townsville. In

general, the urban diary tool helped participants frame context with photographs and short narrative, noting how urban design in Cairns and Townsville affects the health of residents within these tropical cities. Participants had the opportunity to experience the value of local and specific visual feedback about health impacts to urban planners, even among those who seemed more intent on presenting from their own professional perspectives. Another positive development came from parallel efforts that worked in tandem with the qualitative results from the Campus. In one example, consultants and James Cook University faculty monitored temperatures in various Cairns locations in search of heat islands. These areas were often coextensive with urban diary photographs showing an excess of pavement. They became candidates for urban greening, contextual application of new shade trees to offset the effects of high temperatures. Cities around the world, such as Paris, are adopting similar approaches aimed at reducing urban carbon footprints. However, local government representatives, consultants and interest groups sometimes confused what was a highly contextual climate and health-based agenda with more conventional statements of issues of equity, generic urbanism (e.g. nonspecific walkability and bicycle use), civic branding exercises, and professional promotion. Certain presentations by public health professionals and council staff seemed more motivated towards sharing their own data and initiatives without integrating them with the observation component that was intended to jump-start the Urban Thinkers Campus. Despite the framing effort around visual examples from each city, some participants seemed to ignore local context in favour of a one-size-fits-all, “feel good” urbanism. One generic presentation did not account for local climate conditions and emphasized walkability and bicycle transportation modes as universal solutions. While the presentation was inspirational, it was arguably inconsistent with the focus of the Campus: to find place-based solutions for the local tropical conditions of extreme heat and humidity. How might the urban diary tool have fulfilled a more complete role, consistent with my earlier writing and advocacy? Future applications of the urban diary tool might also consider even more detailed suggestions for each contributor to think about the visual aspect of current urban life and governance as they relate to more focused topics at hand, e.g., walkability principles relevant to even more hyperlocal locations and situations, such as particular street, park and block level definitions. Also, a more resounding acknowledgment may have resulted from a longer-term integrated approach less focused on one-day events, featuring the more patient immersion and sustained listening coupled with the use of the urban diary documentation as part of ongoing initiatives undertaken by Councils, staff and/or developers.

This revelation motivated me to develop the more expansive LEARN approach as a complement to the LENS Method. Stakeholders must **Look, Engage, Assess, Review and Negotiate** (LEARN), an immersive process that is the subject of my third book, *Sustaining a City's Culture and Character* (Wolfe, forthcoming). The LEARN process involves a coordinated inquiry beyond the physical observation emphasized in *Seeing the Better City*. LEARN frames the pending book's substantive chapters, which recommend first isolating the multifaceted look and feel of local context, understanding the differences between global and local forces that impact urban areas today, and only then developing customized approaches to sustaining the culture and character of a particular city or urban place. Each step in the LEARN process invites creative observation and listening, exchange, and respect. The process underscores the importance of compilation and analysis before

outcomes can be meaningfully “negotiated.” The elements of LEARN are as follows (see also Figure 3):

STEP 1—Look: Watch, see, view, roam, stroll, capture

STEP 2—Engage: Immerse, involve, participate, undertake

STEP 3—Assess: Amass, assemble, compile, gather, examine, consider, investigate

STEP 4—Review: Reflect, dissect, appraise, evaluate

STEP 5—Negotiate: Discuss, debate, decide, determine

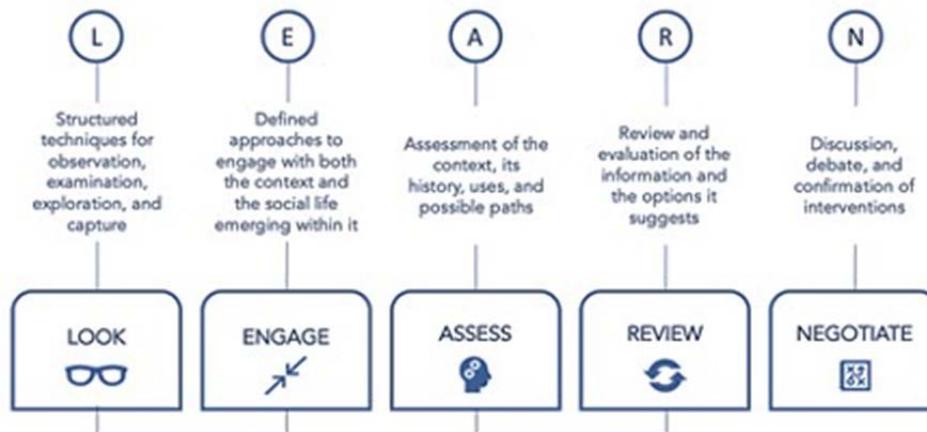


Figure 3. The LEARN process (Source: Charles R. Wolfe).

Undeterred by critics of a holistic view, LEARN offers an overarching approach to understanding urban culture and character, to highlight ways to figure out, explain, settle, decipher, decode, interpret, unravel, determine, clarify and/or define.

Perspective

In a tropical urban environment, liveability challenges are already considerable, and climate change drives concern with the most basic elements of habitation. The most basic issue for governments may be how to sustain the foundational element of liveability, to provide survivable conditions for those who live there. Neither living entirely underground or in conditions completely dependent on air-conditioned environments will prove sustainable, and the urban diary approach suggests that residents’ simple observation of a range of solutions may be the most foundational and helpful.

While urban diaries are a good starting point, as explained previously, they are not ends in themselves, and although the Urban Thinkers Campus in Cairns and Townsville may have shown their initial utility to envision, solutions, the Campus did not entirely integrate what I now term the “look and engage” stages with the “assess, review and negotiate” elements that are also necessary under LEARN to advance the context of a place (in this case two Australian tropical cities) to the next level of sustainable identity.

To do so will require a more well-considered identification of actors and constituents over time, in a more integrated way. Even though the Campus was a good start, a truly co-

created approach cannot be achieved by single-meeting input sessions. Input from those with a range of local life experiences must be balanced against professional motivation. In any process seeking to blend so many perspectives, there are words and concepts that matter. Words like “special,” “adaptable,” and “appropriate” suggest contextual thinking and analysis that must follow from initial urban diary observations. Words alone are not enough, but neither are urban diary photographs. They must be combined to result in specific plans and programs that achieve articulated goals.

References

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To cite this article:

Wolfe, C. R. (2020). LEARNING the City: Beyond the Urban Diary, *The Journal of Public Space*, 5(2), 155-160, DOI 10.32891/jps.v5i2.1288

This article has been reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



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