

DESIGN AND URBAN HISTORY LAB

Primary Source Reports

Welcome to the craft of interpretive analysis! It is a pretty fun place to work, but it requires a lot of practice. One of the key demands of interpretive research is the analysis of primary sources--documents, images, maps, films, buildings, landscapes, and so on. This document will get you started with the analysis of texts and images, and provides a guide for honing your craft.

Terms

What is a primary source? There is no clear-cut answer. Some argue that the difference lies in whether the source is published or unpublished, but published documents can just as readily serve as primary sources. Others have tried to differentiate primary from secondary sources based on the typology of the source--a letter or map (primary) versus a journal article or planning report (secondary). Still others suggest that a primary source must comprise a direct, first-hand account or creation. However, in practice nearly any document or artifact can be a primary source. The same planning report used by one author as a secondary source might be used by another as a primary source. *The difference lies in how you use the source.* Thus, the best way to think about what constitutes a primary versus secondary source is its relation to your work. A primary source is something you interpret directly, whereas a secondary source is somebody else's interpretation of a primary source. In other words, when you interpret a primary source and write up the results, you have created a secondary source!

Goals

The ability to read, critically analyze, and interpret primary sources is a key method in many disciplines. Primary source analysis is particularly useful for urbanists who want to ground theory and practice in empirical research. Perhaps you are developing a plan for waterfront revitalization, or conducting an anti-gentrification campaign, or preparing a service design manual for public housing residents. Maybe you are writing an essay for a journal critiquing the "drop-in expertise" mode of international development. In all of these cases, you will refer to other sources and materials to build your argument. Therefore, it is imperative that you bulk up your ability to analyze such sources critically, to interpret them in an organized and informed way, and to incorporate them sensitively into your work.

For this assignment, you will investigate primary sources in two distinct registers: textual and visual. Textual sources may be printed or hand-written, digital or analogue. Visual sources may be static or kinetic, available in object form or digitally. Because the world is messy, many primary sources will mix textual and visual elements. For the purposes of this exercise, select artifacts that are predominantly one or the other.

Each report is an opportunity to perform deep and rigorous analysis of an artifact in order to build an interpretive scheme around it. The goal is to develop analytic capacity by describing and interpreting artifacts, drawing as much out of each source as possible. In order to convey an interpretive scheme, it is imperative that you engage in direct, clear writing. This is an exercise in concision; you should use simple language free of verbosity and jargon. When using specialized terms, take care to define them, with reference to scholarly works where appropriate. The argument should be well-delineated and all claims supported by evidence. As with critical reflections, you should draw the reader's attention to what is most pertinent about the artifact.

Guidelines

In conducting your analysis, you will want to consider key questions, such as: Why was the artifact created? When and under what conditions? By and for whom, and for what purposes? What story or stories can be extracted from the source through careful consideration? What is your interest in the artifact, and how might it fit into your scholarly and practice fields?

Some elements to consider when analyzing a textual document:

- disposition--how did you come by the artifact; where does it live? If you are working with a digital version, where is the original, who digitized it, and why?
- materiality--what is the document's physical composition; is it handwritten or typed?
- context--date created (if known), historical period, contemporaneous events or processes
- voice--who is speaking and from what position do they speak?
- audience--what is the intended audience; who does the author imagine on the other end?
- language--grammar, style, metaphor, vocabulary / uses of terms
- narrative--how is the narrative being constructed? what is the logic? what are the implicit assumptions or knowledge structures on which it rests?
- references--indications of places, people, objects, events, or other elements in the text
- ideology--what discursive, ideological, or political positions emerge, explicit or implicit?

Some elements to consider when analyzing a visual document:

- disposition--how did you come by the artifact; where does it live? If you are working with a digital version, where is the original, who digitized it, and why?
- materiality--what is the object's physical state, condition, composition?
- function--what is the image's function, e.g. devotional object, zoning map, crime photo?
- form-- what are the formal qualities used in the image, such as color, texture, material, composition, media?
- visual language--symbolism, cultural signifiers, geometries, spatial relationships
- context--date created (if known), historical period, contemporaneous events or processes
- audience--what is the intended audience; who does the author imagine on the other end?
- voice--who created the piece; who is speaking and from what point of view?
- narrative--does the image convey a narrative? what implicit assumptions are embedded?
- references--political, cultural, religious, mythological
- depiction--what places, people, objects, events occupy the space within the frame?
- ideology--what discursive, ideological, or political positions emerge, explicit or implicit?

In crafting your report, take care to construct a readable narrative--do not simply list elements. Not all points above will be relevant for every document, and there may be important features that you encounter that are not covered above. **In terms of format, reports should be 3-5 double spaced pages, typed in 12-point Times (or similar) font, with 1.25" side margins.**