

Place-based methodologies in transdisciplinary research

March 29, 2022

By Alexandra Crosby and Ilaria Vanni



1. Alexandra Crosby ([biography](#))

2. Ilaria Vanni ([biography](#))

How can place-based methodologies be integrated into transdisciplinary research?

Locating research in a real physical place is vital in building culture and making important insights more visible to diverse audiences. But for many researchers and community members, place is more than location. People have important attachments to place that change and influence the outcomes of transdisciplinary research, which is one reason to integrate some place-based methodologies into your projects. Our research studio ‘Mapping Edges’, for example, employs place-based methodologies to identify, analyse and amplify civic ecologies and to propose more sustainable ways to design and live in cities.

Place-based research engages with multiple methodological debates, reflecting humanities and social sciences’ increasing interest in space and place. Because of these debates there are multiple definitions of place and multiple ways to study place.



What is Place?

Place can have different meanings for different disciplines and cultures. The late feminist geographer Doreen Massey wrote about 'a global sense of place' meaning that place is not simply made by the local, bounded and static geographical aspects, histories, material cultures, but also by the flow of people, things, and ideas coming from other parts of the world, and by multiple relations among these elements. Massey explains that these flows, and access to them, are determined by power relations and are unevenly distributed. For instance, the type of mobility that an international student may enjoy in our city of Sydney is radically different from the enforced mobility experienced by a refugee.

Massey gives us a number of helpful concepts to make sense of the complexity of place. Trajectories are the ongoing processes of change that create place, and thrown-togetherness is the way different elements, social, cultural, material, human, non-human, come together and define a here and now. Place for Massey is the 'coexistence of multiple stories-so-far' (Massey 2005, p. 12).

To create your own example, try thinking about your own transdisciplinary project, lab or studio as a place – Which elements define it now? Where do they come from? What are their stories and trajectories? Will it be the same in one month, two months, one year, ten years? Think about the relations you have established every day with others through your research and how these relations shape the place where you work.

Ethnography

One of the ways to understand and study how place is constituted in a particular location is through ethnography, a range of qualitative methods characterised by periods of research 'in the field' (in a location or community). These methods can include interviews, participant observation, walking, documenting, mapping, and various types of analysis.

Our current research project, The Green Square Atlas of Civic Ecologies (Mapping Edges, 2021), takes place at the location of one of the largest urban renewal projects in Australian history. This place is also unceded Aboriginal land, shared D'harawal and Gadigal Country, and it is also a place rich in ^ ecologies. Our work engages ethnographic methods to amplify stewardship

practices that are obscured by urban renewal. Place is an important lens to be able to see into Green Square through the top down Placemaking (capital P) that comes with the creation of a new urban precinct.

Including critical concepts of place and integrating place-based methodologies into the design of projects can improve research on complex societal and environmental problems by ensuring that proposed solutions are fit for the intended context.



Researching place can involve walking in a neighbourhood, observing and recording. Here, Ilaria records a *Crinum pedunculatum* – Swamp Lily in Green Square, which indicates that this concrete-dominated urban place is in fact wetlands.

Considering place in your research: Practical tips

- In Australia, place always relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Country. When working in a colonized place, find out whose Country you are on before beginning any place-based research, and familiarise yourself with principles of working on Country, as laid out by Jan Chapman and colleagues in their blog post [Good practice in community-based participatory processes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research](#).
- Wherever you are, consider which people have lived on the land you are now on. Who did this land belong to? Who cared for it? Who made it a

place?

- Employ a place-based researcher in your team. This could be a geographer, a design researcher, an architect, an anthropologist, or someone from another discipline with training in place-based methodologies.
- Do your preliminary research using archival and other forms of published materials, including for instance available videos, newspaper and magazine articles, local histories and local media to formulate your questions and to understand the place you are working in.
- What maps are available to you of this place? What can these map teach you, aside from helping you find a destination? What do they make visible and amplify? What do they obscure and erase?
- What are the current relationships of people to this place? How are these relationships connected to histories and futures of this place?
- What terms do people use to describe this place: site, field, home, habitat, a neighbourhood, a landscape (as described by Brunckhorst and colleagues in their blog post [The integrative role of landscape](#))? What is the significance of these words?
- Can the place provide somewhere to meet and experiment, as occurs for real-world labs described by Niko Schöpke and colleagues in their blog post [Eleven success factors for transdisciplinary real-world labs](#)?
- What/who are the non-human actors in this place (water, soil, other species, weather, etc)?
- Be mindful of what is around you. Pay attention to smells, or flavours, or sounds and so on. Give yourself plenty of time, place-based methodologies can slow things down.

What role does place play in your research? Do you have other practical tips to share for considering place in research?

To find out more:

Mapping Edges. (n.d). *Place-based Methodologies: Overview*. (Online):

<https://www.mappingedges.org/place-based-methodologies-overview/>

Mapping Edges. (2021). *The Green Square Atlas of Civic Ecology (2021)*. (Online): .

<https://www.mappingedges.org/projects/the-green-square-atlas-of-civic-ecologies/>

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Vanni, I. and Crosby, A. (2020). Recombinant ecologies in the city. *Visual Communication*, **19**, 3: 323-330.

Vanni Accarigi, I. and Crosby, A. (2019). Remapping heritage and the garden suburb: Haberfield's civic ecologies. *Australian Geographer*, **50**, 4: 511-530.

Reference:

Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. Sage: London, United Kingdom.

Biography: Alexandra Crosby PhD is a design researcher at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Her research focuses on emerging forms of environmentalism and the role of creative practices in local forms of activism.

Biography: Ilaria Vanni PhD is a writer, researcher and educator and an Associate Professor in International Studies and Global Societies at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Her work combines feminist, creative and place-based methods and theories from social sciences, humanities and design studies, to research the social, political and cultural dimensions of design and material culture.

📁 Concepts, Context, Processes

📁 Place, Transdisciplinarity (general relevance)

📁 Alexandra Crosby, Ilaria Vanni

10 thoughts on “Place-based methodologies in transdisciplinary research”



alexandracroby

April 11, 2022 at 1:52 pm

Wonderful Stephen, thanks for all the info. Practice-based PhD can be very challenging, because writing is also a practice, so you have a lot to ^

manage. Best of wishes completing the degree!

[Reply](#)



Emma

April 10, 2022 at 7:21 pm

I wasn't sure that I could contribute a lot to this conversation as I thought I didn't really incorporate place-based methodologies in my own research. I'm a social scientist, sociologist (mostly), and I've studied worker co-operatives in Catalonia. Yet on further reflection, my thesis research methods aimed similarly to locating research, not so much in a real physical place but a real social place. I drew on many of those practical tips listed to carry out the research in a social place that was not familiar to me. I spent a million hours (it seems!) translating language and cultural nuances, both from interviews and other materials.

One of the points I can really relate to in this post is to 'give yourself plenty of time, place-based methodologies can slow things down'. I feel that the shift within Universities to set much stricter limits on thesis completion times does not fully value, first, the contribution that place-based methodologies make to knowledge production, and second, that such methodologies require plenty of time.

[Reply](#)



alexandracroby

April 11, 2022 at 9:39 am

Hi Emma, thank you for your insights. It is very interesting that you



didn't at first think of your methodologies as place-based. Different disciplines have different language for these approaches. Any research in multiple languages is definitely slower. I can imagine in Catalonia, this is amplified, as it is a very complex language landscape as I understand it. Totally agree!! Researchers need more time to do this research properly. There are also often many uncertainties with place based research, which creates a need for flexible planning! Thank you Emma.

[Reply](#)



Vladimir Mokiy

March 30, 2022 at 7:03 pm

Dear colleagues, you have touched upon one of the important elements of the self-organization of natural objects. It was in the concept of transdisciplinarity that a special attitude to space arose. In the transdisciplinary concept, space is not a vessel in which life takes place. Space is a special structure that supports life. For many years, we have also explored the space. We collected and generalized knowledge about space. The results of these transdisciplinary studies have been applied in architecture, ecology, urban planning, territorial planning, land use, etc. It may be interesting for you to get acquainted with general materials on this topic. Perhaps these will be able to strengthen your methodological tools. These materials are in the article: Mokiy, V.S. (2020). Information on the Space Systems Transdisciplinary Aspect. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 16(29), 26. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n29p26>

However, we found that space should be studied in interaction with information and time. It may be interesting for you to get acquainted with transdisciplinary research on this topic:

Mokiy, V. S. Information on the information. Systems transdisciplinary aspect // *Universum: общественные науки : электрон. научн. журн.* ^

2021. 1-2(71). <https://doi.org/10.32743/UniSoc.2021.71.1-2.40-48>
Mokiy, V. S. Information on the time. Systems transdisciplinary aspect
// Universum: общественные науки : электрон. научн. журн. 2021.
1-2(71). <https://doi.org/10.32743/UniSoc.2021.71.1-2.30-39>

[Reply](#)



Frans Ari Prasetyo

March 30, 2022 at 4:07 pm

Here resides the challenge of discerning the public area in the city in what concerns uses of place-spaces based. A bigger challenge is having the means or tools to figure them out in the beginning. Researches in urban studies offer a plethora of tools of investigation for assessment of the performance of urban space and in particular place-based to lead to revolutionizing theories on urban space's perception and the individual-environment interaction in bold ethnography, cognitive side, mind map, related to collective memory and urban history. Appearing as interlopers in the material world of urban-science, signatures of place-based methodologies being integrated into transdisciplinary research engender a complex movement between fact and value, thing and sign, or reference and meaning. This ethnography movement is instructive in explaining how discoveries are made in an experimental urban science, and also in the more provocative problem of how necessary consequences follow from contextual signs.

This illustrates ways to facilitate configuring historical place-based data with spatial tools featuring methodologies in transdisciplinary research point locations of ecology routes and place sites of the region linked to enriched spatial information. The results demonstrate the development of place-identity along the life-cycle and the stability of figurative nucleus of social-ecology representations of cities anchored into their prototypical and iconic-symbolic elements, as well as the role of direct experience and cultural belonging of first-visitors in ^

differentiating their imagined and experienced place-based. If something is lacking or doesn't match, you can improvise because this is transdisciplinary research but still refers to the methodology that binds it. Goodluck!

[Reply](#)



alexandracroby

March 30, 2022 at 5:25 pm

Dear Frans, thank you for your careful comments. Terima kasih. I agree we need to do bold ethnography (not light ethnography) especially in urban contexts where what is really happening is often obscured by general urban design. Combining all these tools can produce very exciting results.

[Reply](#)



Ilaria Vanni

March 29, 2022 at 8:19 am

Thank you Stephen! We find that in workshops participants' attention is directed towards particular elements, and to an extent we follow. We tend to think of this as 'drifting', so it will be inspiring for us to read about your work and gain a new perspective.

[Reply](#)



**Stephen Sillett**

March 29, 2022 at 6:45 am

This is very interesting, thanks for sharing. I facilitate group workshop that engage local Social Topographies. This connects to enactive-spatial-ecological approaches that help engagements by adapting how and where attention is taken during explorations.

[Reply](#)**alexandracrosby**

March 29, 2022 at 8:41 am

Hi Stephen, these workshops sound terrific, especially 'enactive-spatial-ecological approaches'. Is this a kind of counter mapping? Do you have a link or any more information?

[Reply](#)**Stephen Sillett**

April 8, 2022 at 6:57 pm

Hi Alexandra. many thanks for your reply. The processes that led to me exploring Social Topographies, came from site specific performances, and the large group process i co-developed called Socio-Drama Topography (SDT). SDT explores social themes in the local geographic areas of participants – initially rural South Africa; <https://www.tonnievanderzouwen.nl/socio-drama-topography/>. Many profound questions kept arising about the complex immersive

experiences of participants in the SDT process, particularly in the fabric maps which involved participants working in a flow state. Also, how the hidden dynamics of the broader socio-cultural context were revealed and could be used to inform strategic conversations and decision support. This led to developing a framework for integrating different scales and levels of learning into a trans-disciplinary approach called InFusion.Space (<https://infusion.space/>).

The enactive-ecological approaches tie into ways of knowing that are biologically grounded in the morphology of our body schema, and how humans engage as agents in ecological niches. I am part of <https://www.activeinference.org/> which integrates this into a bio-physics modelling approach called Active Inference, which offers profoundly unifying principles about how we act in the world. This can provide insights into perception, action and planning in participatory workshops, and give plausible explanations for what previously appeared unrelated phenomena in psychology. I have been using this to make sense of my participatory practices, which draw extensively on another emerging field, that of Mental Space Psychology. <https://congress2021.somsp.com/stephen-sillett/>.

I would be glad to speak to you more about this, as I am working on a practice-based PhD in relation to a research method i developed called Conceptual Action Sociometry (CAS). CAS can reveal the hidden dynamics in immersive workshops. So your work is very relevant.

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