

# Arts-Based Research and Visual Approaches to Urban Studies

## Performative Drawing and Modernology

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**Abstract** *In recent years, arts-based research approaches have gained prominence among the research community, allowing a broadening of perspectives for knowledge creation in urban studies and beyond. Among arts-based research methods, different visual research techniques, including sketching and drawing, provide a handy and multifaceted toolkit to help scholars from multiple disciplines explore urban phenomena. The generated visual outputs are often easily understood, communicating rich emotional and affective meanings, and reformulating complex data in graphic form. In addition, the inherent spatiality of visual media makes them ideal for documenting and exploring urban environments. Based on Xian Zheng's method of Performative Drawing as a technique for studying everyday life worlds in cities and villages in Austria and China, we will describe different steps in an arts-based research process. Providing insights into everyday practices and spatial structures, the Performative Drawing process creates a space of interaction that affects both the researcher and the people/spaces to be researched. Consequently, Performative Drawings not only establish a visual language, translating spatial environments and spatial practice into graphic form, but also trace the process of knowledge creation of an arts-based researcher, while intervening in socio-spatial relations at the basis of everyday spatial realities.*

**Keywords** *Arts-based Research; Visual Arts-based Research; Urban Studies; Interdisciplinary Research Methods; Performative Drawing*

### Introduction: Arts-based and artistic research

In the field of urban studies and beyond, arts-based and artistic approaches to exploring urban spaces have gained prominence in recent years: From Artographies investigating different aspects of human environments with artistic strategies (Singer et al. 2023), to creative forms of urban protest (Friesinger et al. 2023) and imaginary visions of the urban (Lindner/Meissner 2019), arts-based and artistic strategies

seem apt for discovering multiple dimensions of human lifeworlds. In addition, a rich research stream dedicated to interdisciplinary methods (Kogler/Wintzer 2021) shows how different aspects of urban spaces can be addressed in spatial research. In urban studies, arts-based research (ABR) methods can bring together multiple disciplines and research approaches to address various aspects of the human condition reflected in urban environments (Trafi-Prats/Castro-Varela 2022). Hence, ABR approaches can help overcome traditional methodological divides, e.g., between qualitative and quantitative research, and can create new pathways for addressing salient issues and problems tied to contemporary urbanity (Schreier 2017).

From medieval city views (Opl 2023) to urban cinema (Castro-Varela 2022), punk rock zines (Küttel/Peterson 2023), and even comics (Davies 2019), visual media have always played an important role in weaving stories of urban existence and documenting urban life. Naturally, visual media are also frequently used in contemporary research on urban spaces for documenting, (re-)imagining, or (re-)framing urban realities (Estévez 2022; Lin 2019). In the context of arts-based visual research (ABVR), images convey multilayered, multifaceted visual statements that add to a comprehensive understanding of what existing in today's urban spaces means or where it could lead (Weber 2008). Visual media, therefore, help to create new perspectives on urban spaces by visualizing neglected aspects, structuring knowledge, adding new layers of meaning, or commenting on pressing issues (Rose 2013).

Among ABVR techniques, drawing and sketching constitute valuable items in the toolkit of the urban researcher, planner, architect, or artist. They are cost-effective, easily applicable, and can visually capture various aspects of urban spaces in simple pencil strokes, giving room to imaginary aspects of urban realities (Fish 2018; Schnell 2021). From an ABVR perspective, drawing and sketching can provide welcome tools for participation (Kogler 2022), intercultural communication (Fox et al. 2022), and the documentation of urban environments (Zheng 2023). Historically, they have also played a fundamental role in urban planning and architecture, communicating and transforming collective visions of the urban (Lampugnani 2011).

Against this background, this article aims at highlighting the role of drawing as an ABVR approach for documenting and researching urban spaces. Therefore, this text will 1) give a general introduction to arts-based research, 2) describe its sub-field arts-based visual research with a special focus on drawing, 3) provide examples for the use of drawing as a method for interdisciplinary research on urban spaces, 4) give insight into one particular research approach with Xian Zheng's spectacular Performative Drawings of urban and rural environments, and 5) discuss the potentials and limitations of drawing as an arts-based visual research method in the conclusion.

## Arts-based research (ABR)

ABR can be described as the use of artistic practices, methods, and perspectives in different stages of the research process by the researcher or other participants as a central part of an inquiry into aspects of human experience (McNiff 2008). According to Patricia Leavy (2018: 11), arts-based researchers aim at “carving new tools, forging new pathways to knowledge, and imagining new shapes of outcomes of research.” ABR methods are questioning dogmatic systems of knowledge, providing alternatives to the orthodoxy of traditional research approaches and broadening the scope of academic reasoning (Barone/Eisner 2012). As a potential third research paradigm, besides qualitative and quantitative research, ABR aims at generating non-discursive knowledge and expanding the scope of potential research outcomes, while communicating in novel and engaging ways (Schreier 2017). ABR as “an examination of the forms of communication employed in the culture at large reveals a level of diversity of forms that is enough to dazzle the eye, delight the ear, and tempt the tongue” (Barone/Eisner 2012: 1). Accordingly, it can impact audiences even after the research phase.

Arts-based researchers can address aesthetic aspects of research and transform social relationships and patterns of interaction, creating a comprehensive, non-discursive understanding of knowledge through “the use of art-making as a primary mode of enquiry by the primary researcher either alone or with others” (McNiff 2014: 259). Consequently, ABR provides rich potential for participation and the democratization of knowledge production. Artistic media and methods can be employed during the entire ABR process, including the conception of research aims and research questions, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the presentation and dissemination of results. Arts-based inquiry adopts a fluent, iterative approach, always open to new insights, remaining socially and paradigmatically integrative, and methodologically flexible (Gerber et al. 2020).

Generally, the purpose of ABR is to create, express, and represent sensorial, aesthetic, and emotive forms of knowledge, making human experience understood in novel ways and creating alternative perspectives on topics that cannot easily be addressed with other research approaches (Barone/Eisner 2012). Fostering participation, communicating research in engaging ways, and creating emotional reactions with the audience, ABR promotes new forms of social engagement and incites critical reflection (Cahnmann-Taylor/Siegesmund 2018). Also, the co-production of knowledge together with participants can spur imagination and highlight new pathways for future research (Mitchell et al. 2011). These qualities support a multidimensional, open-minded, aesthetic conception of knowledge “to reveal and capture the dynamic, sensory-embodied unconscious, or tacit dimensions of the collective human condition” (Gerber et al 2020: 2).

## Drawing as an arts-based visual research (ABVR) tool

ABVR techniques employ visual, image-based media, including (but not limited to) drawing, sketching, painting, or still and moving images. Holm et al. (2018) describe how images visually represent worldviews, spurring the imagination of recipients and sparking emotional responses. Image-based media can create insight into possible interpretations of human reality without (solely) using words, while framing complex issues in simple terms via multimodal techniques of communication (Rose 2013). During the entire research process, ABVR uses visual artistic media as tools for inspiration, collaboration, and critical reflection, foregrounding otherwise elusive or invisible aspects of research, while inciting emotional responses and provoking social action (Mitchell et al. 2011). Finally, they can “make effective and economical theoretic statements” (Holm et al. 2018: 313), e.g., when representing complex concepts in images, highlighting interrelations between multiple layers of reasoning.

Drawing as an ABVR technique has been established as a research practice since the 1930s and was initially predominantly used for research with children (Literat 2013). In ABVR, the term ›drawing‹ describes the use of pencils, pens, or other drawing tools on paper or other image carriers as a method to create visual data by the researcher or research participants. Additionally, drawings can be an inspiration for reflecting on worldviews, perceptions, experiences, or emotions in a research project. Drawings can make social relationships, spatial settings, abstract forms of reasoning, and imaginations visible with easily applicable and cost-effective means (Fish 2018). As an ABVR technique, drawing opens multiple possibilities for participation and artistic exploration, creating complex perspectives for reflection and data generation (Mitchell et al. 2011). The performative aspect of image creation highlights an (inter-)active process of spacing in a visual medium, providing insight into multiple layers of information and various aspects of lived realities (Wolfrum/Brandis 2015).

In urban studies, visual image creation in drawings constitutes an intervention in space and an expression of personal viewpoints by the person who is drawing, which can be the urban researcher him- or herself or persons taking part in a research project. As an inherently spatial medium, drawings produce a new form of spatiality on the drawing page that documents, complements, supersedes, or references physical spatial realities (Davies 2019; Schnell 2021). As human spatiality is tied to multiple dimensions of sensemaking, frames of reference, and interacting elements of space, drawings constitute a readily available and easily applicable tool to highlight different aspects of urban spaces and their continuous socio-spatial transformation (Schnell/Spiegelfeld 2020). As a tool for multi-generational, multi-cultural, and multi-contextual communication, paired with relative ease of use and cost effectiveness, drawing constitutes a highly adaptable research method

that serves multiple purposes at different stages of the research process (Mitchell et al. 2011).

## Drawing as a method for urban studies and beyond

In an urban studies context, drawing as a tool for reflection by the researcher or as a method to collect data in a research project has not been consequently discussed as an ABVR method, even though numerous examples for its use exist:

Cultural geographer Giada Peterle (2021) uses comics to research and transform meanings attached to urban spaces. By re-narrating, re-structuring, and re-contextualizing socio-spatial relations in her comics, she merges the comic's content with real-life spatial narratives, creating new visions of urban existence. Collaborating with scholars from sociology, urbanism, geography, or anthropology, she derives insights into the socio-spatial (trans-)formation of urban spaces, intervening into lived urban geographies.

Troiani/Ewing (2020) reunite authors from different fields to demonstrate how drawing, architecture, and urban planning can be interlinked to create and communicate collective visions of the urban across disciplines. Drawings by project collaborators from different disciplines can be understood as one element of an unfolding process of interdisciplinary communication, re-negotiating and re-framing socio-spatial structures of urban environments.

Kevin Lynch (1960) used drawing as a research tool to study the cognitive structure of urban environments. Mapping everyday surroundings, described by city residents in sketches and interviews, he generated a comprehensive account of individual spatial cognition and its influence on the collective structuring of spatial environments (Kogler 2024 in this book).

Visual artist Jan Rothuizen creates large-scale sketches of everyday spaces using vivid hand-drawn lines and text. His drawings cover a wide range of subjects ranging from macroscopic urban street views to microscopic interior installations. In his project ›Refugee Republic‹, he collaborated with artists from different disciplines and combined multiple (audio-)visual media in “an anatomical sketch of everyday life in the [refugee] camp, through a combination of drawing, film, photography, sound and text to create a sensory experience” (Rothuizen 2012: n.p.).

Multidisciplinary artist Larissa Fassler focuses on the relationship between urban spaces and their users. She adopts a comprehensive visual language including city planning maps, sketches, photo collages, and sculpture to research pressing issues of urban life. Fassler's long-term project “Kotti” (Kottbusser Tor) involves repeated collage drawings of the same urban neighborhood in 2008, 2010, and 2014, reflecting the gaps and differences between conceptual urban planning and actual lived realities.

The above-mentioned examples present just a tiny slice of possible applications of drawing as a method for urban research at the intersection of urban planning, social research, policy making, and artistic production. By interlinking different disciplines and perspectives, providing a visual language for communicating pressing issues and problems, and by translating them into spatial environments, drawing can be seen as a vivid and ready-made tool for making urban realities understood in a context of continuous co-production of urban environments.

## Performative Drawing as an arts-based visual research technique

In this chapter, Xian Zheng's approach of Performative Drawing (2020, 2023) will be explained as an ABVR technique for investigating urban and rural environments.

Performative Drawing is an artistic research form proposed by artist Xian Zheng (2020) during her doctoral studies in art at the University of Art, Linz. In this context, she used drawing as an ABVR technique, depicting a great number of spatial elements observed in spaces of everyday life. Hence, her drawings of urban and rural spaces can be used to reflect about relationships between spatial objects, structures, and everyday practices.

Performative Drawing, first, treats on-site observation and the drawing process as both an artistic performance and as drawing-based field research. The practice of drawing constitutes the performative part of the research process, including spatial cognition, observation, analysis, and description via simple line drawings. Second, the outcomes in the form of realistic and scaled images can be understood as a new form of research report based on graphic language. Third, from an ABVR perspective, Performative Drawing creates new layers of meaning and new insights into spaces of everyday life, which can be addressed in an over-arching ABR process.

Below, we will briefly introduce the conceptual basis of Performative Drawing, its evolution from Japanese Modernology to the work of Atelier Bow-wow, before describing the Performative Drawing process in six steps.

### The Performative in Performative Drawing

The performative aspect in Performative Drawing is derived from the following three interrelated concepts:

- Performative Utterance (Austin 1962): In the philosophy of language and speech-act theory, performative utterances are sentences that describe a given reality, while transforming it at the same time. This applies to, e.g., “[s]ome cases and senses in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something” (Austin 1962: 18). As a visual per-

formative utterance, Performative Drawings perform the spaces they observe through drawing. They can be understood as a detailed research report using visual language.

- Performative Urbanism (Wolfrum/Brandis 2015): In their conception of Performative Urbanism, the authors expand on the notion of performativity, applied to urban research and urban design, as an open-process, action-oriented, bottom-up strategy for the (co-)production of urban spaces with artistic media. “Performative Urbanism seeks to go beyond the mere interpretation or analysis of urban phenomena. The focus is not on perception or interpretation, rather on action, politics, design” (Wolfrum 2015: 5). In this context, Performative Drawing denotes a performative, creative process carried out on-site, not limited to predetermined goals or outcomes. By intervening in spaces of everyday life, the Performative Drawing process, when undertaken in public places, stimulates interaction with the surrounding environment and passers-by, which can result in unexpected outcomes.
- Performative Research (Haseman 2006): Due to the limitations of textual media in describing the diversity, dynamics, and visuality of human behavior and social life, Haseman (2006) proposed the practice-oriented, arts-based concept of Performative Research, which presents research outcomes (not only in the form of scientific texts but) as “symbolic forms”, e.g., different “forms of still and moving images” (Haseman 2006: 105). Hence, Performative Drawing not only produces still images, but performs urban spaces on paper, creating new layers of meaning and new aspects of urban exploration.

## From Modernology and Roadway Observation Society to Atelier Bow-wow

The emphasis in Performative Drawing on hand-drawing, the meticulous graphic description of spatial surroundings, and its integration into research projects in humanities and the social sciences can be traced back to Japan’s “Modernology” in the 1930s and the “Roadway Observation Society” in the 1980s.

Archeology = arche + ology  
Modernology = modern + ology

Modernology was founded as a complement to archeology, transferring the investigation of antiquities to the investigation of objects and spaces of modern life in drawings. Initially, Wajiro Kon (1883–1973), the founder of Modernology theory, and Kunio Yanagita (1875–1962) documented their findings on ancient Japanese folk customs by combining analytic texts with detailed line drawings (Yanagita 1986). Taking a keen interest in the observation and recording of modern urban life, Kon and Yoshida (1930) later explored the new “ordinary” of Tokyo after the Great

Kanto Earthquake and its following restoration. Their technique included not only sketches and descriptions, but also showed that the act of data collection can lead to new observations about social life and its circumstances.

Continuing the path of Modernology, avant-garde artist Genpei Akasegawa (1937–2014), architectural historian Terunobu Fujimori (1946–), and illustrator Shinbō Minami (1947–) established the “Rojou Kansatsu Gakkai” (Roadway Observation Society) in 1986 and emphasized the use of hand drawings as a tool for social and spatial observation. Positioning Modernology as a type of “natural history” or folklore study, they highlighted the role of “uselessness” to emphasize the pure meaning of drawings as an observational tool (Akasegawa et al. 2015).

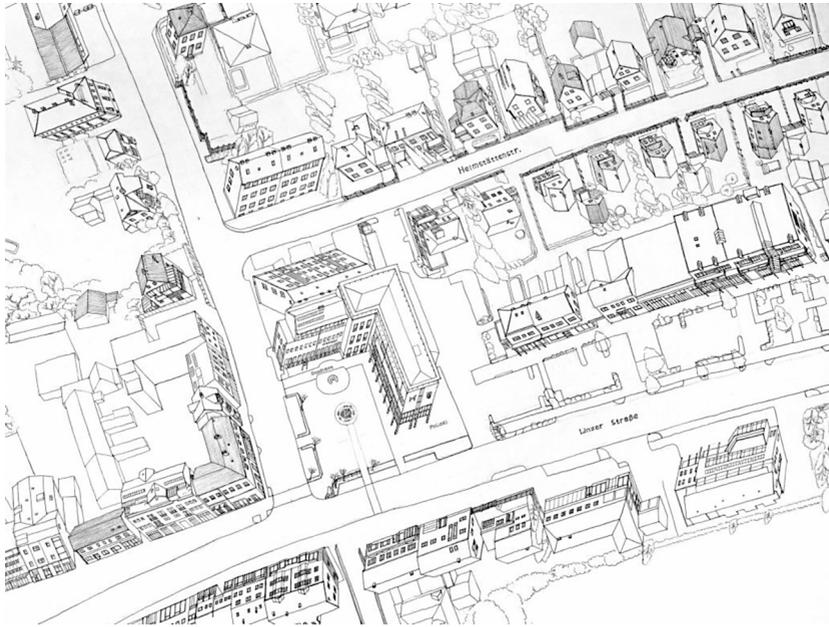
Inspired by Modernology and the Roadway Observation Society, the architecture collective Atelier Bow-wow continued the research approach of “observation + drawing” of urban spaces, especially concerning the relationship between architecture and human behavior. By walking the streets and documenting their observations in drawings, they found that the city was filled with plenty of “Da-me Architecture” (Atelier Bow-wow 2007: 11), which described functional complexes that were built without architectural planning and were the result of the long-term transformation of urban spaces according to daily needs. Collecting examples in “Made in Tokyo” (Kajima et al. 2001) and “Pet Architecture” (Tokyo Institute of Technology Tsukamoto Architectural Laboratory/Atelier Bow-wow 2002), they promoted the use of hand drawings to study people’s behavior in and structuring of public places.

## The process of Performative Drawing

In the line of this rich history centered around drawing as a spatial research method, Chinese-born artist Xian Zheng devised Performative Drawing as a method to study the structure of urban and rural places as well as spatial practices tied to them. In her Performative Drawing approach, Xian Zheng (2020, 2023) – when drawing outdoor spaces – adopted the method of multi-angle axonometric drawing, which allows the two front facades of each street to be presented at the same time, avoiding mutual occlusion of streets in different directions. Her drawing technique, a comprehensive collage of plane, vertical, section, axonometric, and perspective drawing, achieves a consistency of on-site viewing angles and drawing angles, representing three-dimensional spatial information as well as four-dimensional mobile-viewing information on two-dimensional paper.

The drawing process is based on multiple rounds of observation, multiple phases of spatial documentation, and spatial analysis in drawing and beyond. The final graphic work collages abstract planning space, large-scale architecture, places of everyday life, and small-scale elements to create a panoramic picture of urban and rural living environments with quasi-scientific image value.

Figure 1: Village Drawing Marchtrenk, detail



Source: Zheng 2020: 107

For the research project presented here, Xian Zheng chose two centuries-old villages in mountainous areas and two comparatively younger villages in the plains in Austria and China to compare village structure, everyday practices, and their influence on the (trans-)formation of village space. As a research approach, Performative Drawing can generally be applied to different research contexts and spatial surroundings.

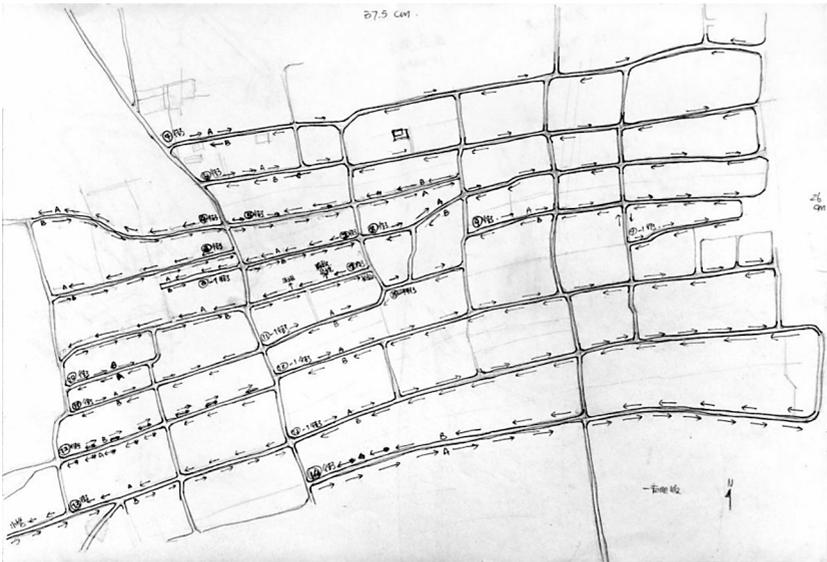
The process of Performative Drawing for studying urban or rural outdoor places can be described in six steps:

- 1) According to her research goals, Xian Zheng chooses a place for research and stays there for some time to live, work, and get in contact with locals. In this improvisational participation in local everyday life, she uses open, flexible, and interactive artistic practice, based on sketching, to discover perspectives and topics for research. Interaction with locals provides insight into the history of places, the meaning of everyday practices and worldviews, and how they structure space over time.
- 2) After participating in daily life of the local community for some time, Xian begins to sketch the overall layout of streets and buildings. Through repeated street

walks, she uses her bodily cognition to get familiar with the street layout and sketches it in free-hand drawings. Street discovery is established through individual on-site experience, which may bring unknown and unexpected elements to the research process.

- 3) Following the distribution of street patterns, Xian segments and numbers the buildings and streets, before systematically taking detailed photographs of buildings and places on both sides of each street section. The street photographs are stored in sequence according to streets and building numbers.

Figure 2: Street Layout Liu Jin Zi

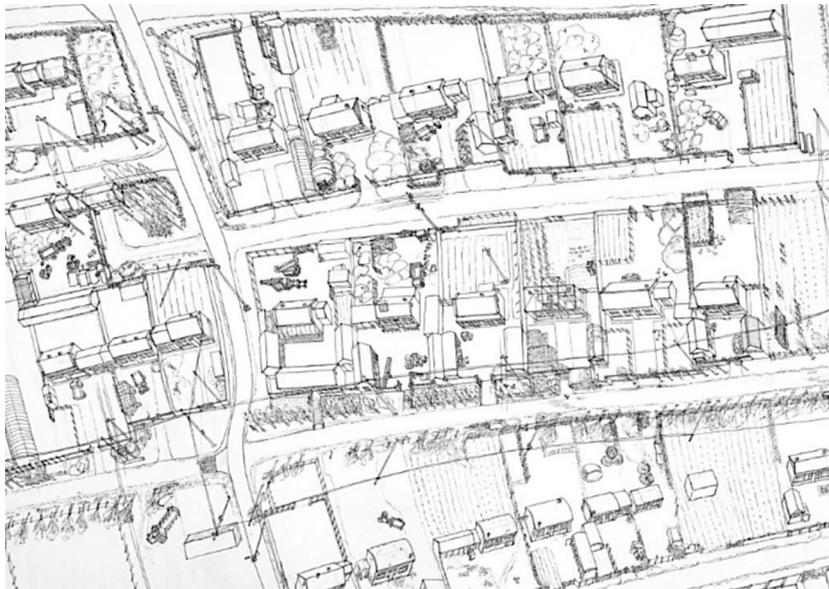


Source: Zheng 2020: 87

- 4) To enhance the integrity and comprehensiveness of spatial surroundings, Xian further investigates fuzzy, unclear, or secluded spaces and documents them with detailed on-site sketches.
- 5) From time to time, residents passing by stop to view the sketches, so that a conversation naturally occurs. These casual conversations complement the initial research objective and provide further information on streets, houses, or specific places.
- 6) In the last step – the drawing phase – Xian uses the sketches of the street layout as a basis, determines the drawing scale, and gently draws the outline of

the street including the location of the houses on a large piece of paper. After double-checking street photos, comparing spatial relationships, and considering details of each house, Xian chooses the final drawing angle and draws the houses on each side of the street as precisely as possible, resulting in a comprehensive, large-scale, multi-perspective representation of urban or rural spaces. A drawing size of up to seven square meters ensures a detailed documentation of spatial environments.

Figure 3: Village Drawing Liu Jin Zi, detail



Source: Zheng 2020: 149

For researchers, this long and meticulous drawing process involves an arts-based (re-)cognition of spaces of everyday life based on the traces of the pencil tip on paper, resulting in a visual documentation of urban or rural spaces in drawings. For viewers, this quasi-scientific image presents rich knowledge on spatial practices, the role and uses of space in everyday life, as well as spatial relationships between depicted elements. The drawings show the overall spatial layout of the community, houses on both sides of the street, and spaces involved in the everyday life of residents, hinting at interrelations between spatial practices, spatial structures, and elements of space.

## Conclusion: Implications for the use of (Performative) Drawing in urban studies

Among ABR practices, drawing and sketching have gained prominence in recent years as readily available tools for generating insights into the structure, emergence, and use of urban spaces. In addition, they appear particularly useful for unearthing hidden meanings, associations, and emotions tied to urban spaces.

As the examples above have shown, drawing and sketching can fulfil several functions in an urban research context:

First, they can provide insight into the interplay of spatial practices, spatial structures, and the overall layout of urban spaces. Interlinking the documentation of urban spaces with multiple research methods and media, and providing the basis for interdisciplinary communication, drawings reveal different aspects of urban environments, while examining the interplay between their forms, structures, and spatial elements.

Second, as a performative practice, drawings not only document spaces but create new spatial perspectives for expanding the inherent potentials of spatial analysis. Drawing becomes one element in a chain of analytical steps potentially involving multiple disciplines and project participants to unearth multifaceted meanings behind the socio-spatial (trans-)formation of urban spaces.

Third, connecting multiple disciplines and bridging methodological divides, drawing provides a helpful tool for collaboration in urban research, urban planning, architecture, and beyond, reflecting multiple meanings of urban spaces. In interdisciplinary communication, drawings can fuse aesthetic considerations with spatial thought and social implications of urban planning.

Accessible to people from different age groups and backgrounds, drawing presents an easily applicable and cost-effective research tool, providing a fruitful base for interdisciplinary research, participation, and the co-creation of knowledge, exploring multiple meanings and perspectives inherent to urban spaces.

Finally, we can derive that drawing is a) an activity undertaken by the arts-based researcher or research participants, b) a continuous process of observation and documentation, which contains the drawing phase among other phases, c) an outcome in the form of a physical work of art – the drawing itself on paper or other image carriers.

Drawing as an ABVR practice is also subject to several limitations: As a non-textual way of communication, drawings often require accompanying textual descriptions, to be understood in an urban research context. Also, the contextualization of drawings in research literature will be necessary to make methodological implications, research processes, and outcomes understood in the context of a larger scientific discourse. This, on the other hand, presents an opportunity to fuse arts-

based approaches with traditional research paradigms and expand the potentials of interdisciplinary approaches to urban studies.

Although drawing and sketching are overall deemed easily applicable research techniques, their application may be hindered by cultural or personal preconditions. For example, participants may not trust their own drawing skills or may be reluctant to reflect on the outcomes of the drawing process. In an interdisciplinary research project, this implies that the use of drawing as an ABVR technique must be carefully tailored to the research context, predispositions of participants, and intended outcomes.

Finally, technological advances can make drawing and sketching appear outdated for capturing a multiplicity of imaginations, feelings, and thoughts associated with urban spaces. Hence, the technological possibilities of modern research tools need to be weighed against the relative ease of use afforded by drawing as an ABVR method.

As a result, we recommend reflecting on the role of drawing and sketching as elements of an ABVR project, to specifically and purposefully apply them in academic research, particularly to integrate multiple disciplines and bridge methodological divides. Researchers need to decide how ABVR techniques can be tailored to a given research context to generate intended outcomes. The potentials of ABVR strategies to unearth hidden meanings, perspectives, affects, and emotions tied to urban spaces must be carefully calibrated with the complexity and depth of scientific insights to be derived. By integrating ABVR techniques, academic literature, research context, research process, and intended outcomes across disciplines, the inherent upsides can be maximized while avoiding the pitfalls of creating arbitrary results. To provide guidance to arts-based researchers, this article describes the conceptual basis for applying drawing and sketching as ABVR techniques, while benefiting from their potentials as tools for interdisciplinary research on the multi-faceted nature of urban spaces.

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