observation tools for urban spaces
How to use this toolkit.

Activity:
Each page of this booklet offers an activity as an entry point to exploring public space. Some are generative activities to get you thinking creatively about what public space might be; others are tools to understand public space -- and existing urban prototypes. All of them are exploratory, rough drafts. We will be refining and re-designing these tools together!

There is no sequence. Pick and choose. Try one many times or try them all once. Go at your own pace.

There is space for you to take notes, sketch, and diagram here. Feel free to use other notebooks or materials.

Goal:
Everyone will learn different things from engaging in these activities. The “Goal” for each activity is just one learning outcome we imagine. Take notes and let us know what else you discover!
Mapping the urban journey.

Goal:
Discover how people arrive at this location and understand why. [E.g., Is this simply the shortest route to work? Do they prefer a longer route so that they can catch a glimpse of a favorite view? Do they bike half-way with a friend?]

Activity:
Sketch a map of the local area.

Ask someone if you can speak with them for a few minutes. Find out about their day and how they arrived at the current location.

Map their pathway (and mode of transportation). Ask “why”: Why this route? Is this a typical route for you? Why here? Is this a typical location for you?
A trip down memory lane.

Goal:
Tap into your personal, emotional response to a space.

Activity:
Choose a site.

Engage. Depending on the space, you can choose to SIT, STAND, or WALKABOUT.

Remember. What kind of memory or emotion did this space evoke? When was the last time you remember having an experience like this? Tell us about that personal memory. What were the cues that brought you back to the past?
Rules of thumb.

Goal:
Put your user in context: consider how social and physical space cues them to behave.

Activity:
Observe. Choose a person and observe their behavior.

Note. What are the formal rules (laws, regulations, explicit signage) that govern this person’s behavior? What are the informal (social rules or norms) that guide what this person does?

Compare. Are other people abiding by these same rules? Is anyone skirting these rules?
Goal:
Understand who uses this prototype. Consider why the physical aspects of this prototype might invite some users - and potentially deter others.

Activity:
Observe the users of a prototype. Who is using the prototype? Who is not? Is there a particular user group in the space? How would you describe them?

Observe the physical attributes of the prototype and its surroundings. What might be some of the reasons a particular user group is attracted to this prototype? Why might other user groups not be as willing or interested in using the prototype?
Prototype, prototype

Goal:
Understand the personal experience and meaning of the prototype experience for one user.

Activity:
Observe someone interacting with a prototype. Keep your space. Take notes.

Ask questions:
- How would you describe this experience to a friend? [Further prompts, if you like: In a Tweet / In three adjectives / As a metaphor]
- Show me how you used this prototype and think aloud -- what do you think [this] is for? what do you wish would happen next?
What does your interviewee say?
What does your interviewee do?
How does your interviewee think?
How does your interviewee feel?
I sense ...

Goal:
Understand the full, sensory experience of a urban spaces.

Activity:
Choose a sense. Pick one of the senses, other than sight, that you will be a lens for your observations: sounds, smells, taste, textures.

Observe. Using only that sense, observe a scene and write down everything that you are able to understand about the space through that one, sensory lens.

Observe again. Choose another sense and observe the same space with this new lens.
“And then they said...”

**Goal:**
Listen to users’ native conversations to discover insights about a space.

**Activity:**
Listen. What are people saying in the space? Who are they talking to - friends, family, strangers? How would you describe their tone of voice, cadence, and volume?

Note. Write down phrases, words, and vocal details. Do you notice a pattern? Are they talking about similar things? Is their exchange consistent, or does it change as they move through the space? Do their voices have a certain emotional quality or tone? What might their conversations reveal about the space and its use?
Tick-tock

Goal:
Understand how spaces change over time.

Activity:
Observe. Create a map of the site and observe how people interact for 5-10 minutes. Take notes on what stands out or surprises you most (e.g., characteristics of the users, the ways they move through the space, elements of the physical space or climate).

Observe again. Come back every X minutes (e.g. every 30 minutes) during the course of the day.

Reflection. What changes and what stays the same? What seems to be influencing this change?
Invitations to participate

Goal:
Understand how elements of the physical space communicate how the user should interact/use it.

Activity:
Draw. Create a map of the physical elements of the space that seem to be communicating to the user how to interact or use the space (e.g., explicit signage, broken sidewalks, painted pathways, walls, sun/shade, seating elements)

Observe. Are users accepting these invitations to participate? Are they thwarting them? Are they noticing them?
What’s your stance?

Goal:
Observe how people are postured in the space, and consider how physical elements of the space might afford different types of postures.

Activity:
Observe. How are people postured in the space? Are they sitting, standing, walking, strolling, running? Are they facing each other, facing away from each other, sitting in circles, sitting alone? Are they leaning, perching, laying back, lounging?

Sketch. Draw the space and stick figures that illustrate the postures you observe.
#droundabouts