The application of precedent methodology to analyze homeless shelter service delivery

JOHN R GRAHAM  
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Calgary AB, Canada

CHRISTINE A WALSH  
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Calgary AB, Canada

MICHEAL L SHIER  
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Calgary AB, Canada

ABSTRACT  
The interdisciplinary nature of social work scholarship results in theoretical and methodological fusions between disciplines. Literature relating to social work research, though, minimally describes the unique research designs and rationale required to conduct interdisciplinary research. Presented here is the qualitative research methodology utilized in a program of research that sought to identify the spatial and social characteristics that lead to progressive programming for homeless shelters; an intersection of social work and environmental design scholarship. Site visits, qualitative interviews, photographic data analysis, and an audit of a wide spectrum of primary and secondary literature were utilized to conceptualize this precedent research methodology. Beyond presenting the methodology utilized, implications of the research and its applicability for human service research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Research methods; social work; environmental design; physical environment; homelessness; shelter services

INTRODUCTION  
The range and sophistication of methodologies utilized in social work continues to grow (Cheetham 1997). General textbooks on social work research methods, though, typically only identify general quantitative (e.g., surveys, descriptive studies, program evaluation) and qualitative methodologies (e.g., interviewing, participant observation, ethnographies) for data collection (e.g., Grinnell & Unrau 2005), along with conceptual research approaches like literature reviews or theory development (e.g., Thyer 2001). Social work scholars, in contrast, are always implementing innovative, tailored methods to address their research questions (Holosko & Leslie 1998), allowing for an expansion of perspective on social problems.

A primary tool in this enterprise is the utilization of mixed and eclectic research methodologies that provide opportunity for scholars to re-annotate social situations. The interdisciplinary nature of many research questions asked by social work
scholars also contributes to the formulation of novel approaches. The following research looked at a particular social problem through a unique lens. It combined social work and environmental design scholars in a distinct interdisciplinary approach combining 'People and Place' theories and methods (e.g. Schrider 2004). People and Place perspectives within social work theory allows for a consideration of factors within the physical environment that can impact a person's social situation. This research examined the physical environments of homeless shelters and their subsequent impact on people experiencing homelessness and the communities within which they live. We used one shelter in a particular Canadian city as a case study; and we critically evaluated it in light of relevant homeless shelter precedents of 60 shelters in 24 cities across 3 countries. Our work focused on understanding how the shelters were integrated with the urban setting, and from that analysis we proposed alternative models for the planning and architectural development of the initial case study shelter (as plans for its expansion were being considered). The design and planning principles can be used by planners, architects and social service personnel to determine how best to design and site shelters.

Homeless shelters are a permanent fixture within most urban landscapes throughout North America. Most research identifies programming (Delany & Fletcher 1994; Wong, Park, & Nemon 2006) or characteristics of the homeless population (Karabanow 2004; Lehmann et al. 2007) to provide insight into ways to improve service. This literature is still largely tied to a restricted definition of 'environment' which only includes social processes, such as shelter management practices and methods of interaction between shelter staff and shelter guests, or negative socially based experiences such as domestic violence and poverty. Some research looks at political and economic factors impacting a person’s social environment to illustrate the structural risk factors that result in homelessness (e.g. Blau 1992; Ji 2006). But little research has concerned increasing the understanding of the environment in a physical sense.

The intention of this article is to describe the rationale and the methodological approach utilized in this program of research to add to the limited literature describing interdisciplinary methodological approaches within social work scholarship; beyond collaborative work with other health professions and other social science disciplines. Applicability of the research to shelter service settings within urban contexts and to other social service settings is discussed. Furthermore, this research methodology provides insight for effective comparative research of social service organizations in differing local contexts.

Social work and environmental design
Social work theory and practice stress environmental factors that impact service delivery and clients who access services. But a growing scholarship contextualizes 'environment' beyond the simple understanding of 'social environment' that has long been engrained in teaching and practice settings for social workers. Berlin (1996), for example, draws attention to the social constructivism of the physical environment, but other factors need to also be considered. For one, characteristics of the physical environment have direct implications for people and for communities in general. Research has demonstrated the role of physical environments in controlling perceptions of people and places; which in turn can have significant impacts on marginalized populations (with regard to people experiencing homelessness see: Cresswell 1997; Hattnett & Harding 2005; Sibley 1995). A related example within the literature is the situation of social housing projects. Development initiatives of social housing have tended to pay little or no attention to the design and situation of the building (Gurney 1999). Research has highlighted that many social housing problems, as a result, become directly linked to how these physical areas are perceived both by residents and other communities (Dean & Hastings
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2000; Hastings 2000), essentially compounding the level of stigmatization for already marginalized people living in poverty. The research methodology in this study presented below began with the question: How do we conceptualize the interplay of factors from both the social and physical environments to understand how they are impacting marginalized people?

Environmental design scholars have long criticized the absence of a social conscience within city planning and other urban design activities (e.g., Fainstein & Campbell 2002; Gosling 2003; Jacobs 1961; Lynch 1960; Punter 1990). Much of this literature has been informed by the psychosocial (Brogen & James 1980) and socio-cultural (Pellow 1981) correlates of the built environment. However, this environmental design literature does not address these implications in relation to social service programs and delivery mechanisms. Even within social work literature, limited scholarship calls for an appraisal of the implications of the physical environment on populations receiving services (Weeks 2004). Some research has addressed elements of the physical environment that promote competency when providing social services to women experiencing homelessness (Breton 1984). For instance, Breton (1984) and others (e.g., Griffin, Mauritzen & Kasmer 1969; Gutheil 1992; Kahn & Scher 2002; Nicolera 2005; Resnick & Jaffee 1982; Walz, Willenbring & Demoll 1974), have called for a further appraisal of the implications of the physical environment in relation to individual behaviors and needs. Gutheil (1992), in this regard, called for a further appraisal of the physical make-up of office space and/or furniture in relation to the cultural, physical, and/or perceptual needs of clients. Missing from this literature and within social work scholarship in general, is an assessment of the physical environment in relation to macro-structural issues, such as homelessness. We believe this is a result of the absence of a methodological design that would establish a foundation from which to analyze the implications of the physical environment; and in particular, the implications on social service delivery. In developing this research design, in conjunction with the question above, we then asked the question: How do we better analyze the implications of the built environment in social service delivery and practice beyond simply providing individualized attentiveness to meet the immediate physical needs of clients receiving service?

A precedent methodology

This research utilized a pragmatic approach to data collection (Creswell 2007; Patton 2002). Researchers underwent site visits and conducted face-to-face qualitative interviews. The research protocol and design received ethics certification from the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Review Board (CFREB), and was conducted in alignment with the policies and procedures for human subject research outlined by the CFREB.

There were three fundamental components of this research design. The first was an extensive primary and secondary literature audit in conjunction with conducting qualitative interviews with 50 key informants in North America and Europe who are considered expert practitioners in homelessness service delivery or urban planning. Using a semi-structured open-ended interview guide respondents were asked about the characteristics (physical and social) of homeless shelters or social service agencies that might act as useful precedents that other cities or sites might follow. Also, and beyond the characteristics of successful shelters, participants were asked to identify specific shelters that would act as useful precedents to follow and to avoid and the reasons for providing such examples. Furthermore, respondents were asked if there was other criteria (besides the social and spatial dimensions being considered) that we should consider in an analysis of the current social and spatial context of the case study shelter in Calgary, Canada. A researcher or trained research assistant conducted the interviews with participants after their informed consent was obtained. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and lasted approxi-
mately 30 minutes. The interviewer took notes verbatim (as was possible) during the interview.

Data obtained from these key informant interviews (i.e. the researcher notes on responses from participants) was analyzed using qualitative methods of analytic induction and constant comparison strategies (Goetz & LeCompte 1984; Glasser & Strauss 1967). This data analysis method facilitated the detection of patterns within and between participant responses related to characteristics of successful and less successful shelter precedents. Specifically, the researchers read through all the field notes with the objective of identifying common themes; after which the themes were coded and data was searched for instances of the same/similar or different phenomenon. Finally, following this process, data was translated into working hypotheses that were refined until all instances of contradictions, similarities, and differences were explained (thus increasing the dependability and consistency of the findings). All members of the research team collaboratively worked on this stage of research to maintain the credibility criteria of the study. Summaries of the findings were also presented to interested key local stakeholders, some of whom were research participants on two occasions, to obtain feedback and increase confirmability.

Through the analysis of both sources, the key informant interviews and the literature audit, the researchers conceptualized successful shelter service delivery based on the interplay between factors associated with the built environment, community relationships, and the systemic characteristics of the shelter (Shier, Walsh, & Graham, 2007). Successful shelter designs were identified as those that implemented the mutually reinforcing factors of client-focused, dignified service, in relation to community integration and cohesion with the urban environment. Key informants provided some examples of these successful shelters, while others were identified by the researchers through internet searches based on the analysis of this first stage of the research design. Precedent sites were also suggested by shelter operators during data collection in the second stage of research described below. Based on these criteria, further analysis was then conducted, to determine goodness of fit of the identified successful precedents with the site, situation, and service delivery model of the shelter in Calgary, Canada.

The second stage of research involved site visits to 60 shelters in Canada, England, and the United States. Researchers conducted qualitative interviews with a senior management level program administrator at each of the shelters to confirm and expand upon the findings from the literature review and key-informant interviews. The majority of these interviews (n=55) were face-to-face and lasted approximately one hour. The researcher or a trained research assistant conducted the remaining five interviews over the telephone. Following a semi-structured open-ended interview guide, researchers and research assistants asked questions that sought to identify respondents’ perceptions of specific aspects of their shelters: safety; shelter fit within the surrounding community; the environmental setting of the shelter; the location in the city; crime, drug, and violence issues within the immediate area of the shelter; demographic characteristics of the community (such as ethnic diversity and socio-economic status); concentration and availability of other social services in the immediate community; and the characteristics and conditions that support their perception of an ‘ideal’ agency. Within each of these questions respondents reported on the built environment, relationships with community members, and characteristics of their own service delivery. During these interviews a researcher took notes verbatim (as was possible). On a number of occasions a trained research assistant was also present to take notes verbatim (as was possible) during the interview.

Data from this stage of the research was analyzed, similar to that described above in the previous stage of key-informant interviews. The researchers likewise utilized qualitative methods of analytic induction and constant comparison strate-
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gies, and same processes (as described above) were employed to increase the dependability, credibility, consistency, and confirmability of the findings.

Findings from this stage of the research provided further clarification of the characteristics of shelter success as they are related to the shelter’s built environment, shelter relationships with the surrounding community, and the shelter’s service delivery model. For example, with regard to the built environment, respondents identified that physical features such as private entrances and courtyards had a direct impact on their ability to offer dignified services to clients, and to improve relationships with the surrounding community – as programming was maintained within the shelter’s property (Walsh, Graham, & Shier, in press). Beyond these interviews, researchers also took photographic images of the shelter and the surrounding community in which the shelter was located. These photographs were taken to illustrate the spatial characteristics of these shelters with regard to location, size, and design, ultimately, to help identify which aspects of the built environment were consistent within all these local contexts.

The final stage of this precedent methodology involved data analysis of the photographic data collected during the site visits (Ball & Smith 1992; Harper 1989; Wagner 1979). The physical environments portrayed within the images were individually and then comparatively analyzed in relation to the content of the interviews with the shelter operators. Also, the entire sample of precedents was analyzed in relation to their contexts and spatial structures, urban morphologies, typological conditions, and social service provisions and functions. The images provided further analysis of the characteristics identified as positively impacting service delivery by illustrating presentations of the environment and interactions within the environment – between people and other environmental (e.g. other buildings, roadways, sidewalks) and community (e.g. businesses, residences, other social services) elements.

Findings from this final stage of this precedent methodology further conceptualized the significant relationship between the physical shelter structure and the surrounding community. Precedent shelters analyzed in this research were heavily integrated within the community. The physical design of the shelters was consistent with other physical structures in their immediate surroundings; a clear distinction between shelter/programming space and public realm space existed; and, among other things, community and social interactions were prevalent surrounding the shelters (including things like foot traffic, the presence of other residences, and/or service businesses like restaurants) (Graham, Walsh, & Sandalack, 2008).

Based on this method of data collection and analysis recommendations were provided to the local shelter in Calgary, Canada for which the research was initially intended (see: Graham et al., 2008). The findings from this research, though, have applicability beyond the local context of this shelter in Calgary, Canada. The methodology utilized within this program of research also has applicability beyond the initial scope of the study: including an improved method to better understand the physical environment aspects that impact social service delivery within ‘Global North’ contexts, and insight into improved methods for comparatively analyzing social service organizations beyond local settings.

Applicability of research to practice settings

This research has found that successful shelter service delivery in a ‘Global North’ context – where both the people experiencing homelessness and the shelter service organizations are not secluded and socially polarized from the surrounding community – is directly related to the manner in which the physical structure of the shelter is integrated within the surrounding neighborhood. As a result of these findings, this particular methodological approach could be useful for designing shelters for other ‘discriminated’ populations, such as those living in transitional or half-way housing. In this instance, researchers could identify successful precedents in which
individuals accessing these housing services, as well as the service organization itself, have been positively integrated within the local community and within the city community at large.

There are other environments or social service delivery systems in which this research could also be applied. Stigmatized populations or stigmatized services within North America include people accessing mental health services, disabled people, at-risk youth programs, senior’s facilities, low-income housing complexes, etc. The purpose here is to look beyond simply housing need and to reflect on other areas of service delivery; in places where service is defined by a particular social condition and not necessarily housing. Homelessness is defined by both, but the stigmatization of people experiencing homelessness and the social polarization between people who are homeless and those who are not is a direct result of public perception of the social situation of being homeless (Anderson 1998). Further research should examine the factors associated with the built environment that impede the success of social service organizations offering other types of community-based residential services – such as independent living or group home models for developmentally delayed adults, people accessing community based mental health services, or secure treatment facilities for at-risk youth; essentially, service delivery models where the place of residence becomes understood or perceived by the surrounding community as a place for social service delivery. Utilization of this research methodological approach can help facilitate the development of an understanding of those physical environment characteristics within these social service settings beyond shelter services.

**Insight for comparative social work research practices**

This methodological approach also adds to discussions of comparative social work research. Comparative studies within social work research are expansive. For example, many studies seek to identify the like experiences or characteristics amongst population groups (e.g., DeMino, Appleby & Fisk 2007), the social situations of identifiably same populations between countries (e.g., Ramachandran 2006), cultural distinctions between differing cultural groups (e.g., Latzer, Tzischinsky & Geraisy 2007), practitioner and professional roles across countries (e.g., Hermosa & Luca 2006; Muleya 2006), and some recent work has begun to identify similar phenomenon experienced within organizations (e.g., Golensky & Mulder 2006). Missing from this literature, though, is comparative research on specific social service models and the overall quality of social service programs (McMillen et al. 2005). In fact, comparative scholarship on social service models at local levels has primarily been conceptualized by focusing on analyzing or evaluating the success of single programs or service delivery models (with regard to homelessness, see Bridgman 2006; Culhane 1993; Ranklaer & Lauren 2006). Practitioners reading reports and articles are then challenged to infer how these alternative situations apply to their situation and the needs of their clients; essentially, creating a further divide between social work research and its direct applicability in diverse practice settings.

Thinking about this research in a wider social context has drawn attention to the creative and unique approaches that social service organizations are undertaking at local levels. It is widely argued, and understandable, that as a result of localization (from government decentralization in national standards down to the use of programming that is completely funded through local public donations) social service delivery has become unique to local situations. The success of such a situation is found within the organizations’ ability to be responsive to the needs being presented within the immediate local context. More comprehensive comparative research on social service delivery organizations, though, can still help better inform practice at local levels.

The research presented here has reinforced the point that shelter services uniquely differ from
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one community to the next as they respond to factors in the local context – such as available funding, human resources, culture, location, relationships with other social service organizations and with city governments, and other dynamics. This suggests and reinforces the point, that social services cannot be mimicked or adopted from one local context to another. The underlying point, though, is that even though these local contexts are distant, and providing service based on a locally identified need, they can be mutually informing through applicable interdisciplinary research methods of comparative analysis. As this research has shown, these organizations share common experiences and face similar social pressures from organizations in different cities, in different countries, and even on different continents. Further reflection on the manner in which comparisons are made, and the reasons for making those comparisons, is significant and necessary within social work research in order to create meaningful solutions for larger systemic issues – such as homelessness. And this, arguably, could then have greater applicability for practitioners working with the populations in which the comparative research is intended.

CONCLUSION
This precedent methodological approach was utilized to respond to present omissions within scholarship that does not consider the role of the physical environment in relation to success of social service programs. This interdisciplinary collaboration and uniquely structured methodological approach provided the means to address this omission. Furthermore, utilization of this methodological approach provided insight into ways in which social service organizations across many local contexts similarly experience success. The general nature of this approach also allows for application beyond homeless shelter services, essentially allowing for further knowledge development of the inter-relationship between the built environment and social service organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This project was funded by Torode Realty Advisor Ltd and the City of Calgary Crime Prevention Investment Program.

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Received 28 August 2008 Accepted 17 April 2009