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Report on direction-asking interviews
conducted for the Rockefeller Project,
Perceptual Form of the City, in Boston,
Massachusetts

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THE DIRECTION-INQUIRY TECHNIQUE

Origin Points: Columbus Square
Arlington Square
South Station
Old North Church, Salem Street Entrance
Massachusetts General Hospital, Fruit Street Entrance

Destination Points: John Hancock Building
Filene's Department Store, Washington-Summer Streets
Commonwealth Avenue
Beacon Hill
Scollay Square
Public Garden

In every case, first question was, "How do I get to ... ?" or, in limited instances when mode of transport is obvious, "Can you tell me where ... is?" When obvious that the question was answered to the extent of the informant's inclination, the next was posed: "What does it look like?" or, in all-too-apparant cases, i.e., Commonwealth Avenue, John Hancock Building, the query, "How do I recognize it?" Last request was, "How long will it take me to get there?", the informant now aware that the foot is the mode of travel.

General Appraisal

The method worked excellently. The three basic questions, worded in the language of the street and logically ordered, failed to draw suspicion, with minor exceptions, and presumably elicited desired comments. Many implications may be derived from the answers to the three questions, answers which can be broken down into classifications dependent upon the degree of sophistication required in further study. The technique could be effectively adopted to analyze relationships between any two urban geographical points.

(2)

Use of a tape recorder would be far more desirable method, both for ease and accuracy, than the difficult memory system, a system far from impossible if nearby writing sites are accessible, a system in which transcribing consumes ninety percent of the time. Irrelevant details may be excluded from notes and report, thus speeding up the job, if the interviewer is made aware at the start of the precise purpose of the work.

With few exceptions, people answer questions readily. Brief "stranger-in-town" interviews with townspeople hoping to please may be the most efficient and accurate "off the cuff" impressions of their city that people entertain. The average man-on-the-street always hurries, hoping to reply as briefly and concisely as possible, seldom hesitating to think of details except when pressed. On a large scale, real possibility of a thorough scientific investigation into the city's most significant forms, as seen by the unknowing native, exists through the direction-inquiry technique.

Technique Used

1. The Sample:

A genuine sample of persons passing a particular origin point at the time of the interview was a constant goal. Most common breakdown for each series of four: two men, two women, one of each young, one of each old. Completion of ideal sample was eminently successful only with crowds; with few people, those first in sight were interviewed, and the discrepancy reversed in the next destination point interview. Couples were avoided due to difficulty remembering such conversations, with the exception of couples, happening along in absence of others, which fit the current sample. In attempting to prevent personal prejudice from affecting the sample, friendly-looking individuals were often bypassed, to approach a less personable-appearing, though sample-ideal, person. Inescapable intolerance developed against upper middle-aged women, with whom an inordinate number of distaste-

(3)

ful experiences were realized. Men were generally more helpful, with older men particularly anxious to please. Samples reflect prevalence of young or old men, or young or old women, or racial majority, at certain origin points at a certain time of day.

2. The Interview:

The most spontaneous reactions were recorded always. The informant talked until his subject was exhausted, then was influenced to answer another question. If the topic remained incomplete, he was persuaded to continue. If in a hurry, the informant moved on unrestrained by further questions, a policy pursued on the assumption that a brush-off answer was undesirable. If he failed to inquire, "How you goin'?" first, the interviewee generally suggested MTA. In every instance, he was permitted to finish, then informed that walking was required. At Columbus Square, taxicabs were suggested instead of MTA. Directions were pursued until four satisfactory answers to each of the three questions were achieved for every combination. One origin point required nine interviews before four were completed.

3. The Writing:

A tape recorder was never utilized. Every elapsed second between the end of the interview and the writing of notes, counted. Common dilemma: where to record the conversation. February was too cold to stand outdoors and write. The closest telephone booth often sufficed. In absence of the telephone, a doorway or lobby were most frequently used. Major handicap was necessary transfer to new origin site when under suspicious scrutiny of troublesome policemen, cabdrivers, or store proprietors.

Negro woman storekeeper:

To other storekeeper in back room: Man in there writin' a letter. Can you beat that? There's a man in the phone booth writin' a letter.

To interviewer: Mistah! Mistah! Do you intend to write a letter in there? If you do, you get out. That ain't no play

(4)

place. You use the phone, or get out. You don't write letters in phone booths. If you wanta write letters, you go home!

Encounters with people once-interviewed provided volatile situations.

(Warren Avenue, near Columbus Square)

Stocky white man interviewed the evening before: You still lookin' for Louisburg Square? Yeah. Why can't you find it? (Becoming aggressive) Don't you remember me? I talked to you last night, don't you remember? I remember you -- you're the guy who asked me all those questions. I'm the guy you asked about Louisburg Square. (Now very aggressive) You just asked another guy how to get to Louisburg Square. Another guy. What's the trouble? It's just down the street here (indicating east down Columbus Avenue). Why can't you find it? Yeah. Yeah, sure.

Negroes, often indistinguishable to interviewer, were often sources of difficulty.

4. The Product:

The report included interview time because the hour is often important to the meaning of the subsequent interview, i.e., Filene's closing time, streetlights, character of informants, orientation and appearance of streets at a distance. (Additionally, dates of interviews were recorded, but omitted from submitted report due to irrelevance. Originals were saved in event dates become important.) Individuals' characteristics were registered when descriptions seemed relevant. The usual designation "man" or "woman" indicates the informant was an average middle-aged man or woman with insignificant physical qualities. Ages are approximate.

5. The Interviewer:

Interviewer's knowledge of Boston multiplied at least ten-fold. Proposed routes were traced by foot, facilitating understanding of city's structure, but interviewer gets lost by auto in areas mastered on foot. During the 120 interviews, he encountered one major fire, one knifing, one auto-pedestrian accident, one broken bottle fight, twelve propositions, six historic shrines, one California hometowner, one army buddy, and two new friends.

(5)

Origin Point Characteristics

Old North Church provided the ideal setting to evaluate the relationship of an isolated minority group to the rest of the city. As northeastern terminus of colorful Salem Street, the church centers in the self-contained North End, where nearly every interviewee was of Italian descent. Mentioned in every interview is the Central Artery, which forms a barrier for everyone. North End natives know their area well, but draw comparative blanks attempting to describe the "outside." Their general ignorance of Boston, excepting only Scollay Square, outer limit of their world, and Hanover Street, key artery linking them with Scollay Square, is shocking.

Massachusetts General Hospital informants possessed the best knowledge of Boston. Charles and Cambridge Streets were properly the most suggested routes to most places. Beacon Hill, which streets were thought to be too puzzling for a stranger, was avoided in all directions. Hospital staff and visitors divided the interviews about equally.

South Station ideally exemplified the transients' Boston picture. Strangers' totally blank answers notwithstanding, those who could give directions offered superior instructions. Summer Street constituted the dominant emanating route.

Arlington Square, where many genuine "characters" were encountered, seemed to be a center of foreign born. Descriptions of John Hancock Building and Public Garden were rendered useless because the destination in question could be seen and pointed to. As well, available direct routes to Commonwealth Avenue and Scollay Square rendered Arlington Square the least productive of the origin points.

(Similar situations: View of Beacon Hill from Massachusetts General Hospital, view of John Hancock Building from Columbus Square.

(6)

Columbus Square was dominated by Negroes and generally nondescript characters. Usually confused about their city, Columbus-and-Warren informants failed to utilize Warren Street as a direct route downtown and failed to recognize West Newton Street as the direct route to Back Bay, as intervening railroad tracks represented a barrier.