



Placemaking and Homelessness in the City of Lemon Grove

Spring 2017 • Communication 462 – Ethnography

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About the Sage Project

The Sage Project is a partnership between San Diego State University (SDSU) and a local government in the San Diego region. Students, through their course work, engage in meaningful real-world projects and contribute to pressing social needs in a community in SDSU's service area. Students from across the University assist local governments with partner-directed projects that address their livability and sustainability goals. SDSU students and faculty connect with high-priority, high-need, highly interdisciplinary community projects, thereby generating interest and fresh ideas that create momentum and provide real service to the community. Each year, the Sage Project at SDSU engages hundreds of students from diverse disciplines who invest thousands of hours assisting communities in our region as they seek to build a more equitable and sustainable future. The Sage Project is part of the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities (EPIC) Network and is based on the highly successful and award winning Sustainable City Year Program at the University of Oregon.

About Lemon Grove

The City of Lemon Grove is an intimate community of about 26,000 residents in southeast San Diego County. As a small municipality nested within an expansive metropolis, Lemon Grove faces the unique challenge of preserving its history and small town charm amidst a largely urban landscape. The city's small town attributes are not only attractive to residents and visitors, but they also allow for more feasible implementation of rapid and widespread sustainable practices. The City of Lemon Grove continues to gain momentum as a model of sustainability as it seeks innovate ways to address both community and global needs.

Executive Summary

In collaboration with the Sage Project at San Diego State University and the City of Lemon Grove, this report details the methods and findings of the Spring 2017 course, Communication 462. Qualitative data were collected using ethnographic techniques, including in-person interviews with Lemon Grove residents, to examine placemaking and homelessness in Lemon Grove. An ethnographic approach allowed for an in-depth and empathetic view of these subjects and development of creative solutions to the problems faced by Lemon Grove. Communication, as both an area of concern and a source of potential solutions, emerged as a recurring theme in our interactions with Lemon Grove residents. Our recommendations include increased communication and community awareness, equitable access to key resources, and revitalization and implementation of community traditions, gatherings, and other events.

Keywords: communication, placemaking, homelessness, community, ethnography

Placemaking and Homelessness in Lemon Grove

This report describes the research and findings of the Spring 2017 ethnography course, Communication 462, at San Diego State University. Ethnography is the scientific description of the customs and cultures of individual people. Through their coursework, students compiled ethnographic reports on the topic of either placemaking or homelessness, specific to the City of Lemon Grove. Defined as the scientific description of the customs and cultures of individual people (Tracy, 2013), ethnography allowed us to develop an in-depth and empathetic view of these subjects and generate creative solutions to difficulties currently faced by Lemon Grove. Our examination of placemaking focused on the value of community, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote the health, happiness, and well-being of community members (Markusen & Nicodemus, 2014). Our examination of the homeless population in Lemon Grove included description of the resources currently available to homeless individuals and exploration of potential solutions to the growing issue.

Qualitative data collection allowed for direct observations of culture and experiences that might not have been adequately captured through surveys or other quantitative techniques. Data were collected by compiling detailed field notes from direct observations and interviews with the residents of Lemon Grove. By accumulating field notes, interviews, and narrative stories, we were better suited to shed light on the realities of individual residents. These qualitative and ethnographic techniques constituted an empathetic and immersive approach, allowing multiple perspectives to be heard, human-centered problems to emerge, and creative solutions to develop.

The city's goals for the project were to facilitate creative patterns of use of public space through placemaking and to find viable solutions to the issue of homelessness. By collaborating with residents and city staff of Lemon Grove, we explored and expanded the scope of inquiry for the project. The remainder of this report details a comprehensive analysis of the collective data compiled for this project, separated into placemaking and homelessness sections. Each section consists of project details, findings, and recommendations. This report concludes with a concise summary and final recommendations.

Placemaking in Lemon Grove

Our goal for placemaking was to participate in a collaborative process with the residents of Lemon Grove to shape the use of public space within their city. In addition to promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, with particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define Lemon Grove and support its ongoing evolution. The goal of an ethnographic approach to placemaking is to engage residents in the planning of quality public spaces that contribute to their own health, happiness, and well-being. Perhaps the most effective approach for creating and revitalizing public spaces is to adopt a collaborative community process.

Placemaking Details

Our investigation of placemaking in Lemon Grove addressed the pride, hope, and connection of the residents to city history, the urban design and demographics of the city, and the impact of the new medical marijuana law, Measure V, on the residents of Lemon Grove.

Many residents of Lemon Grove have resided in the city for years and reported a sense of pride and connection to their city. However, younger inhabitants reported detachment in addition to a lack of pride and hope for their home. The “Lemon Grove Incident,” a landmark event that established Lemon Grove as the first city to successfully desegregate a public school (Alvarez, 1986), is a significant piece of local and national history; however, most residents we interviewed were unaware that this impactful event had occurred in their city. City history was considered an appropriate area for investigation because tradition and culture are strongly tied to a sense of history. Lemon Grove hosts a variety of traditions each year that offer its residents opportunities to gather with their neighbors and develop a sense of community. Traditions that were found to be most popular will be further described in following sections of this report.

The urban design of Lemon Grove has been negatively affected by recessions and economic crises, which can ultimately impact the overall well-being of the city and its inhabitants. Issues related to urban design will be discussed in terms of their impact on maintenance issues, access to modern amenities, and homelessness.

One area of study examined the impact of Measure V, which recently passed by a narrow margin in November 2016. Before this measure, the residents of Lemon Grove had voted against repealing a ban on medical marijuana dispensaries in the area; however, beginning on March 20, 2017, applications and permits will begin to be issued to those seeking to open dispensaries, now legal under Measure V (Lemon Grove, California, Repeal Ban on Medical Marijuana Dispensaries, Measure V). This measure passed by a very slim margin, suggesting that the operation of these dispensaries is a topic of controversy. The main opponents of this measure are concerned with the safety of children and the potential increase in crime due to easier access to marijuana.

Placemaking Findings

The first major finding related to placemaking was that traditions and community events have the potential to connect the city. Lemon Grove could be considered more community- and family-centered than other cities in San Diego County; nonetheless, there appears to be a relative lack of pride among residents for their home city. Community events offered by the City of Lemon Grove have successfully brought its residents closer together and, similarly, allowed them to develop lasting community ties. The interpersonal relationships that develop within a city can be as important to the well-being or success of the community as having a low crime or poverty rate.

When individuals feel a strong sense of community, there are many benefits for the entire community. Specific events, such as the beauty pageant, the winter bonfire, sporting events at Helix High School, concerts in the park, farmer's markets, fire department pancake breakfasts, and the city parade that used to take place in Lemon Grove, were frequently cited and viewed positively by residents during our interviews; they appear to appreciate the solidarity and sense of community that comes with participating in such events. These staple traditions allow Lemon Grove residents to develop interpersonal connections with one another and provide stability and trust within the community.

There are many benefits to engaging in local traditions, but they also require thorough planning, such as ways to distribute information about these events to community members of all types. Nowadays, social media is considered one of the most efficient avenues for communicating current events and activities in the community; however, word of mouth has also proven to be successful, including in cities similar to Lemon Grove. In addition to communication and outreach, funding is a significant consideration when supporting city traditions. The residents we interviewed acknowledged that they feel they lost their trademark when the city was unable to host a well-known annual event, the Lemon Grove Old Times Day Parade. The monetary issues that contributed to the downfall of this parade also negatively impacted these residents' sense of community; however, many are eager to get it back.

Keeping the city free of crime and violence is important to many residents. Most individuals who voiced this concern drew from the increasing number of homeless individuals in their city and the high amount of drug use, particularly marijuana. Many felt that the legalization of medical marijuana would trigger an increase in crime rates and gang activity. These issues of safety are not exclusive to Lemon Grove; however, it was a significant concern consistently discussed by this city's residents.

From our interviews, we also found that Lemon Grove could benefit from supporting efforts to enhance and highlight its culture and diversity. Lemon Grove is highly diverse, comprised of individuals from all over the world who speak a variety of languages. In addition to members of many minority groups residing in Lemon Grove, there are also many military personnel living in the city. Lemon Grove is not bound to stagnant demographics, giving it a uniqueness that could be further fostered and embraced.

In addition to cultural diversity, Lemon Grove seems to embrace a close relationship with its elders and youth. The local community center and YMCA are state of the art, built with excellent infrastructure, and filled with vibrant activity. They shine as a noticeable bright spot in the community. The proximity of these activity centers to the only high school in Lemon Grove, speaks well to the city's support of the well-being of its youth. The Citronica Two building, which contains new, affordable apartment complexes for the senior population, includes units for adults with mental illnesses and offers services, such as on-site laundry and cleaning. The Citronica Two building as well as the community center and newly remodeled YMCA were given preferential treatment and have demonstrated that the investment in these special projects was put to good use. Lemon Grove's urban design suggests that it places high value on its senior residents and youth.

Placemaking Recommendations

By examining themes that emerged from initial findings on placemaking in Lemon Grove, we developed solutions resulting in the following recommendations for the city.

Regarding implementations of Measure V, we suggest that new dispensaries could be kept away from Main Street and heavily populated areas, including schools. If possible, we recommend that dispensaries be linked with local health centers and placed near police stations or other well-monitored areas to maximize security and ensure appropriate use. Tax revenue from marijuana-related sales could provide funding for regulation and education efforts related to marijuana use as well as for other improvement initiatives, described below.

Implementation of the following recommendations might be limited given monetary restrictions; however, their importance has been identified by the Lemon Grove community. Re-implementation of established traditions, such as the Lemon Grove Parade, could have a positive impact on the city by improving the sense of community. Because funding for these events can be limited, we suggest that funds be allocated toward lasting traditions that foster solidarity. Funding for these traditional events, at least in part, could be acquired through resident-initiated fundraising or attendance fees. Implementing these traditions may be the first step toward creating a sense of community pride among residents, which in turn leads to greater community participation.

Our last recommendations require substantial financial support and would likely entail specific allocation of city funds. Updating sidewalks, roadways, and buildings would improve the appearance, and, therefore, the atmosphere of the city. Lemon Grove officials may choose to focus on showcasing and restoring the physical and natural beauty of the city, which would in turn improve overall aesthetic. The city could improve infrastructure and overall condition at a lower cost by encouraging community-building, service-oriented activities in the community. The recent implementation of a trash pick-up day in Lemon Grove is one successful example of a positive community event. (City of Lemon Grove Community Litter Pick-Up Event, 2017). Such community events that improve aspects of the city, simultaneously address community involvement and city aesthetic.

Homelessness in Lemon Grove

The goal of our investigation of homelessness in Lemon Grove was to uncover which services are needed and offer effective solutions for the unsheltered homeless issue in city. Although the 2015 unsheltered homeless count showed 11 unsheltered homeless in Lemon Grove, there has recently been a noted increase in homeless individuals.

Homelessness Details

As with the placemaking projects, a number of salient themes emerged in our investigation of homelessness in Lemon Grove. First, it was evident that there was a need for services and support, especially technological resources, for the homeless individuals in Lemon Grove. Second, the parallel increase in crime and homelessness does not appear to have been resolved or diminished by the current city laws in place. A final reoccurring theme was that a perceived lack of concern for homelessness has caused distrust and boundaries between homeless individuals and government officials.

Large homeless populations, in Lemon Grove or elsewhere, can contribute to crime, circulation of drugs, and unemployment; however, any examination of homeless groups must consider the dichotomy between those who are homeless by choice or by mental illness and those who are homeless because of circumstance. This dichotomy contributes to the need for special attention to and careful examination of homeless communities to determine appropriate solutions. High rates of homelessness can contribute additional strain on the community and, in a circular fashion, propagate the lack of resources they so desperately need. In addition to this, some residents do not like to reside where there are large homeless populations, which allows these demographics to define the city. These factors contribute to the importance of active attempts to change the current homeless situation faced by the City of Lemon Grove.

Through direct interviews with homeless individuals in Lemon Grove, we found that a disconnect exists between the resources available and the actual use of these resources by homeless individuals. Additionally, some homeless individuals in Lemon Grove perceive the resources and assistance provided by the city to be nonexistent or unaccommodating.

The barrier of technology is causing some homeless individuals to remain in their current state, because it is logistically challenging to find and keep jobs without access to certain technological resources. With an inability to acquire jobs, many homeless individuals are, consequently, unable to provide homes for themselves without governmental support. Because of the absence of upward mobility, some individuals are turning to crime, and the current actions being taken by the city may not be sufficient.

According to our interviews, there are homeless individuals who feel they may be mistreated or harassed by law enforcement. An increased police presence may reassure non-homeless residents of Lemon Grove, but it can also contribute to tension with the

homeless population. Any perceived persecution can create an apprehensive environment. This environment hinders the capacity for change, especially if homeless individuals feel that there is no help available for their struggles.

We also found that many homeless individuals would benefit from assistance for recovery and rehabilitation from drug or alcohol addictions. Many individuals have become homeless because of their previous addictions and/or those they developed while homeless, creating a cycle of dependence. This course might be avoidable with greater access to appropriate interventions.

Homelessness Findings

Two recurring themes shaped our findings related to homelessness in Lemon Grove. The first finding was that the lack of public resources and access to technology might contribute to an increase in crime and in the number of people who are becoming and remaining homeless. The second finding was that the lack of communication between homeless and non-homeless residents, including government officials, might contribute to problematic issues related to homelessness in the Lemon Grove community.

We believe it is appropriate to examine this social issue through an ethnographic lens to discover the internal and external factors affecting this phenomenon. The amount of money dedicated to preventative programs does not seem to be deterring the growing homeless population; thus, it is important to uncover alternative solutions to the problems the city is currently facing. All of our conversations with Lemon Grove residents—both those who are homeless and those who are not—identified lack of support for those in need of shelter. Greater provision of homeless shelters could address this need unanimously identified by residents and help homeless individuals get back on their feet.

Along with creating facilities to house and support homeless individuals, we also recommend providing access to critical technological resources. Technology can be expensive and is not always readily available. However, Lemon Grove could facilitate access by providing free or low-cost opportunities to use much needed technology. Not only do many homeless individuals lack access to technology, but this inaccessibility can prevent individuals who are unemployed for a variety of reasons. One current setback is the obstacle that technology creates when homeless individuals seek to apply for jobs. Technology is a necessity because many job applications are electronic and require a phone or email address to be contacted for interviews and for interaction in general.

When speaking with an employee in Lemon Grove, we found that there were programs in place for low-income individuals to receive cell phones through Medicare and Medicaid; however, these programs fail to reach and assist those individuals who are, in fact, homeless and do not qualify for these services. It is an unsettling and persistent cycle that is keeping homeless individuals on the street and, for this reason, immediate assistance would be valuable to the homeless community.

We also noted the need for greater access to programs that assist those homeless individuals with drug and alcohol addiction. Through our investigation, it became evident many homeless individuals in Lemon Grove place great value on drugs, and persistent addiction may be preventing many homeless individuals from breaking out of homelessness.

In addition to limited resources for the homeless population, we noted poor awareness among community members of the prevalence of homelessness. Residents we spoke with seemed unaware of the complex pervasiveness of the situation. Awareness is an impactful issue because the surrounding community can play an important role in addressing homelessness in a collaborative fashion. For instance, the McKinney-Vento Act for Homeless Education, employed in all United States schools during the late 1980s to spread awareness about the issue of homelessness and homeless youth (Tolliver, 2014), exemplifies how community engagement can positively impact issues related to homelessness, including increased awareness and monetary support for homelessness-related resources.

We identified a need for communication between non-homeless and homeless individuals in the community. For example, we observed several instances in which an individual's boundaries were crossed, which resulted in them feeling threatened. Understanding the difference between an individual who feels threatened versus a violent individual, can release the tension between members of the homeless and non-homeless communities. Through improved communication, the environment in Lemon Grove can be made safer and more cohesive. Although implementing public resources is the end goal, we believe there must also be a change in ideology and an increase in communication that will incite immediate action from city government.

Homelessness Recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer some recommendations for the City of Lemon Grove to address current issues related to homelessness.

We noted that there are a number of old, abandoned buildings in the vicinity of the city's center. With renovation, these unused buildings could house resources currently lacking for homeless individuals in Lemon Grove. These facilities could provide physical spaces for homeless individuals to recuperate, eat, or simply take a shower. Ideally, these support centers would also include psychological support services, such as those that assist with drug and alcohol addiction. Alternatively, or concurrently, these spaces could also serve as a food bank.

We noted the need for homeless individuals to have access to technological resources. Free and widely available wireless Internet access is increasingly common in cities across the globe. Furthermore, wireless hotspots could offer the additional benefit of attracting more residents and visitors to public spaces in Lemon Grove. Other resources that could be made more readily available to homeless and non-homeless residents are free-to-use phones and computers with Internet access.

A final sector of recommendations to alleviate some of the issues related to homelessness in Lemon Grove is related to hosting events that draw community members together in collaborations that serve the well-being of the community. In order to increase awareness of homelessness and de-escalate perceived tensions between homeless and non-homeless residents, we recommend creating opportunities for interaction between these two groups. These opportunities might, for instance, revolve around provision of a service that would provide quality-of-life improvements to homeless individuals. It would be important that both homeless and non-homeless individuals feel welcome at these events, which could involve community service, such as trash pickup or providing meals to homeless individuals, or something more elaborate, such as a job fair with participating businesses interested in hiring homeless individuals. By providing these types of opportunities for cross-group interaction, the Lemon Grove community can combat stigmatization and dehumanization of its homeless population.

Conclusion

Across our placemaking and homelessness investigations, issues related to communication emerged as a recurring theme in the concerns raised by residents and in many potential solutions to some of the real-world problems faced by the City of Lemon Grove. Initially, our placemaking goals were to analyze the use of public spaces and urban design in relation to the residents of Lemon Grove, but our findings uncovered much more. The residents of Lemon Grove did request a remodeling of public spaces; however, most individuals desired revitalization of established traditions to bring back the spirit of community in their city. Our findings related to homelessness suggest a lack of physical, technological, and psychological resources for the city's homeless population as well as a need for increased community awareness, engagement, and communication related to homelessness issues. As with our placemaking findings, many residents of Lemon Grove requested events that would bring the city together. Affecting impactful change addressing problems related to homelessness requires an investment of time and fiscal resources. This might require that the city shift existing priorities in order to fund efforts to mitigate a growing problem that continues to impact the residents of Lemon Grove.

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