How to Read an Intersection

This “place-based” activity can be done at any intersection. Just like a person can read a book, people can also learn how to “read” the built environment. The activity is intended to enable people to notice details in the built environment and to ask questions about how decisions are made. This activity also enables participants to consider what is special or unique about an intersection and how it relates to the community or location it is in.

**Goals** Observe the built environment, interpret observations and to ask questions and discuss how what is being observed might be designed differently.

**Time needed** 30-45 minutes

**Materials** Copies of the Read an Intersection Handout, clipboards and pens or pencils.

**INSTRUCTIONS** Give each participant (or pair of participants) a copy of the “Read an Intersection” Handout.

**Observation** (10 minutes)
Give participants 5-10 minutes to just look at the intersection and work through the observation questions. Call the group back together and ask for answers to the questions.

**Analysis** (10-15 minutes)
Next ask participants to start to think about the implications of what they’ve observed. Remind participants that features of a built environment don’t just “grow” - they are the result of decisions that people make. This part of the activity asks participants to begin to consider the purpose (or purposes) of the intersection.

**Redesign** (10 minutes)
After participants have discussed the analysis questions move into “redesigning” the intersection. If they were in charge of decision-making how would they change or improve the intersection. Participants may have differing ideas about how they would modify the intersection. During this part of the conversation it is important to ask people why they would make the changes they propose, what their decisions would be based on and, especially who those decisions will affect.
READ AN INTERSECTION HANDOUT

Observe the Intersection

- Quick! How many people can you count at this intersection right now?
- Is the intersection loud/busy or quiet/calm?
- How many lanes of traffic run in each direction?
- Is the intersection “labeled?” Are there any street signs or signs that let you know where you are? What kind of information is on the sign?
- Are there stop signs or stop lights?
- Does the intersection have sidewalks? Are crosswalks marked?
- Are there curb cuts/ramps to make it easy for a wheelchair to cross?
- Are there any trees or plants?
- Are there any businesses? What types of things can you buy here?
- Do buildings sit close to the edge of street or are they set back?
- Is there any public transportation?
- Does the intersection have any bike rentals or bike lanes? How many bikes can you see here?
- Are there any railroad tracks nearby? If so, are the trains for public (people) transportation or freight? Are the tracks elevated?
- How many streetlights do you count at/near this intersection?
- In a heavy rainstorm, where would the water go?
- Is there any art? Describe it.

Analyze the Intersection

- Who—or what—do you think this intersection was designed for?
- How do you feel standing at this intersection?
- Do the heights of the buildings make the space feel enclosed and protected? Or do you feel you’re out in the open?
- Would you feel safe crossing this intersection? What if you were a child or a senior citizen? What is affecting whether or not you would feel safe? What if you were blind or deaf?
- Do you think the stoplights, if any, give the pedestrians enough time to cross the street—or do pedestrians have to hurry?
- Is there anything unique or special about this intersection? Does the intersection have any special aspects that relate to the location or community it is located in?

Redesign the Intersection

- How do you think this intersection has changed over time?
- Is there anything you would add or change about this intersection based on the specific community location?
- If you could change one thing about this intersection to make it a more enjoyable place to be as a pedestrian, what would it be?
- If you could change or add two things about this intersection to make it a more enjoyable, secure place for a neighborhood what would you change or add?