

# MANDATORY FIELDWORK

Jörg Rekitke

## Qualitative Research

The global scientific community seems to be split into two fundamental factions: There are the “hard” scientists, who invariably trust quantitative research, and there are the “softer” disciplines that likewise rely on qualitative research. Qualitative research is comprised of methods such as semi-structured interviews, observation studies, group discussions and the analysis of written documents. These methods are used and advocated by anthropologists, sociologists and educationalists in particular. In “Qualitative Research and General Practice,” Britten and Fisher (1993) summarize the results of such methods: “The end product of qualitative research may be elucidation of a new concept, construction of a new typology, mapping of the range of phenomena within a subject area, generation of new ideas or hypotheses, development of an explanatory framework, or the basis for an intervention strategy.”<sup>1</sup> We have to point out that while this excerpt reads like the words of a born and bred designer, it has not been written by designers and it deals with subjects that lie entirely beyond the design professions. However, the design disciplines do apply qualitative methods. Landscape designers may, in fact, make up the “softest” of all qualitative research-related professional groupings.

There is no denying that design work may be understood as a form of research. Research can be defined as: 1) a careful or diligent search, 2) a studious inquiry or examination (especially an investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revisions of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical applications of such new or revised theories or laws), and 3) the collecting of information about a particular subject.<sup>2</sup> Outside the design disciplines, in fields such as sociology, psychology and anthropology, a fierce battle is fought about the validity of qualitative research. In anthropology and sociology—both genuinely relevant disciplines for essential spatial design questions—, “participant observation” became the most prominent form of qualitative research. It is a form of field research or *fieldwork*. In quantitative research, conducted in a laboratory setting, research aims to perfectly control an

1 Nicky Britten and Brian Fisher, “Qualitative Research and General Practice,” *The British Journal of General Practice* 43, 372 (1993), 270–271.

2 “Research,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed on May 6, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/research>.