

REVIEWING THE REVIEWS

Planning academics and practitioners have one research practice in common: conducting literature reviews. You may think of this as an inherently academic exercise (nearly all academic articles include a literature review right after the introduction). But I would wager that most technical memos written by planners begin with Google searches aimed at finding relevant literature.

This column is meant to help both academics and practitioners conduct literature reviews. As a template, I will refer to the publication criteria used by the *Journal of Planning Literature*, and as an example of a solid literature review, I will draw on an upcoming *JPL* article, “Urban Form and Residential Energy Use: A Review of Design Principles and Research Findings,” by Yekang Ko of the University of Texas at Arlington. I was one of the peer reviewers for this article, which after revision and resubmission, nicely embodies the journal’s five criteria: style, scope, accuracy, analysis, and connection to planning.

Style

Is the paper well-written, in the active voice? Does it have a cogent statement of purpose? Is it clear, convincingly argued, and logically organized? It’s the last of these—the lack of organization—that bothers me most in reviewing academic papers. Thoughts do not flow logically, and extraneous or tangential matters find their way into sections where they don’t belong.

Headings and subheadings can help. They serve as signposts for readers and instill discipline in authors, who are less likely to stray from their topic when it is neatly labeled. Ko’s review organizes the relevant literature under four headings (housing type and size, density, community layout, and planting and surface coverage) with three subheadings under each (statistical studies, simulation studies, and experiments). The review doesn’t stray from the topic at hand.

Scope

Does the article cover the literature on the topic comprehensively, focusing on the most important work and citing additional

material? The trick to ensuring that a literature review is “systematic” (to use the term of art) is to search bibliographic databases.

Academics have access to many excellent databases through their universities, but everyone can make use of Google Scholar. As a test, type in the keywords “residential energy” and “urban planning.” Google Scholar comes up with a whopping 1,160 choices and tells you just how often the source article has been cited.

How can you possibly be “comprehensive” when faced with so many articles? There are three tricks. First, relegate lesser studies to tables. Ko summarizes 17 articles in one efficient table. Second, limit narra-

their more urban counterparts.” Not even close to true.

The main findings of articles are usually contained in the abstract, the conclusion, or the results section. When it comes to quantitative studies, I recommend that you also look at the tables. They tell the whole story.

Analysis, connection

Two other *JPL* review criteria, in my experience, are problematic. To save space, I offer one cautionary note for each. The first is analysis: Articles should be more than a simple presentation of what has been published, avoiding the tendency to uncritically report what Smith or Jones says. I re-

viewed a paper on sprawl recently for the journal *Sustainability* which, in the first two drafts, recounted the findings of the now infamous Echenique article without acknowledging the controversy surrounding it (see my column of October 2012).

Connection to planning is another tricky criterion: The question here is whether the discussion is useful for the planning profession

and the practice of planning. Literature reviews and research studies often overreach, going beyond the available evidence to draw broader conclusions that support the author’s biases. A paper I reviewed recently for *Environment and Planning* recommended streetscape improvements based on a project’s walk score. But walk scores do not measure streetscape quality.

For the past two years, I have been working as a coeditor of a book called *Research Methods for Planners*. After finishing this short and incomplete column, I have concluded that the volume needs a whole chapter on literature reviews. Any volunteers? ■

—Reid Ewing

Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah and an associate editor of JAPA. Writing Literature Reviews by Jose L. Galvan (Pyrzczak Publishing, 2009) is a good general guide to the subject.

The Use of Databases

DATABASE	HOW OFTEN CITED
ACADEMIC SEARCH/PREMIER	3
DISSERTATION AND THESES/FULL TEXT	169
ENERGY CITATIONS/DATABASE	49
GOOGLE SCHOLAR	1,160
JSTOR	28
PAIS INTERNATIONAL	2
PROQUEST	183
SCOPUS	26
SOCIOLOGICAL ABSTRACTS	3
WEB OF KNOWLEDGE	0

KEYWORDS: “residential energy” and “urban planning”

tive summaries of individual articles to the most important and synthesize the rest—e.g., “Several authors agree on . . .” Finally, limit the scope of the review. Ko lists both the topics that will be covered in her review and those that will not be.

Accuracy

Does the author describe and interpret the literature accurately and explain technical items at an appropriate level of detail? Authors tend to present other scholars’ findings through the lens of their own thesis. In another paper I reviewed for *JPL*, the authors summed up five articles by saying that the authors “all concluded that people living in low-density suburbs are more likely to be overweight, use an automobile more often and for shorter trips, ride bikes and walk less, and have a higher risk of obesity-related illnesses than