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Urban Landscapes as Public History

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In January and February of 1975, Herbert J. Gans and Ada Louise Huxtable debated the public meaning of the built past on the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*. Gans, an urban sociologist, opened the controversy by attacking New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission for what he called rewriting New York's architectural history: "Since it tends to designate the stately mansions of the rich and buildings designed by famous architects, the commission mainly preserves the elite portion of the architectural past. It allows popular architecture to disappear. . . . This landmark policy distorts the real past, exaggerates affluence and grandeur, and denigrates the present" (Gans, 1975a).

Ada Louise Huxtable, architectural critic, member of the editorial board of the *Times*, and a supporter of preservation, defended the commission's record. She warned: "to stigmatize major architectural monuments as products of the rich, and attention to them as elitist cultural policy, is a perverse and unserviceable distortion of history. . . . These buildings are a primary and irreplaceable part of civilization. Esthetic singularity is as important as vernacular expression. Money frequently made superb examples of the art of architecture possible, and there were, fortunately, great architects to design and build great buildings" (Huxtable, 1975). She also argued that, in addition to monumental buildings she judged essential to public culture, the Landmarks Preservation Commission had designated twenty-six historic districts including 11,000 buildings, most of them what she called "vernacular."

Gans countered Huxtable's plea for "great buildings" by great architects in a second article, where he made the case for a broader approach to ordinary buildings as part of public history: "Private citizens are of course entitled to save their own past, but when preservation becomes a public act, supported with public funds, it must attend to everyone's past" (Gans, 1975b).[1] He went on to analyze New York's designations in quantitative terms, looking at landmark designations among buildings erected after 1875: 105 of 113 were by major architects, 25 by one firm, McKim, Mead and White. Most of these were not accessible to the public. 91 were located in Manhattan, which left the other boroughs with very few or no historical landmarks. 17 of the 26 historic districts were built as neighborhoods of the affluent. Although these numbers might have won the day, Huxtable nevertheless had the last word. Gans's second article was not published on the op-ed page, but appeared in abbreviated form as a letter to the editor. His arguments about the equitable use of public funds and the neglect of boroughs other than Manhattan never reached a metropolitan audience.

In this exchange from two decades ago, a leading urban sociologist and a distinguished architectural critic were unable (or unwilling) to understand each other's language. When he said "architecture," he meant all urban buildings, or the built environment. When she said "architecture," she meant buildings designed by professionally trained architects operating with aesthetic intent, or perhaps one percent of the built

environment. When he said "vernacular" he was classifying buildings by social use, referring to definitions of social class and accessibility, and implying tenements, sweatshops, saloons, and public bathhouses. When she said "vernacular," she meant that the architect was unknown, and the classification was by architectural style and/or typology, such as Greek Revival side-hall row house, so that, in her terms, there would be many "vernacular" town houses on the wealthy Upper East Side, as well as in more modest areas. When he said "neighborhood" he meant a complex network of social as well as spatial ties, and implied a working-class population, giving examples like Williamsburg and Bushwick. She said "neighborhood" and meant the physical line bounding a historic district such as the Upper East Side or Greenwich Village.

As they argued, their underlying values made the debate more heated. He wanted more social history, she wanted more culture. He wanted taxpayers' money spent equitably in all neighborhoods. She believed aesthetic resources should be ranked in order to buy the best in terms of connoisseurship. She wasn't against designating the occasional public bathhouse or tavern or tenement or philanthropic housing project as a landmark, but her passion was for preserving the aesthetic qualities of great buildings: "Because their restoration and re-use are formidably difficult and costly and their land values usually high, these are the hardest buildings to preserve." She scolded Gans, "So 'elite' them not; they need all the help they can get" (Huxtable, 1975).

They exasperated each other, because he wasn't interested in aesthetic quality and she didn't want to spend a lot of money on social issues. He believed the past had different meanings for different people, all equally valid in social terms, but he had little interest in design: "whether buildings are beautiful or ugly is a personal judgment that should not be left solely to professional estheticians." She argued that history, expressed in designated landmarks, was socially "inclusive," yet she didn't agree that there could be more than one standard of what was important when it came to aesthetics.

Neither delved into the downside of what they promoted. He did not explore the problems of preserving and interpreting ghetto locations or bitter memories. She did not ask how to justify spending taxpayers' money without giving public access or interpretation. And neither of them tried to identify opportunities to realize both his ideal of urban preservation and her ideal of architectural preservation. For instance, more warehouses, shops, and boardinghouses, the kind of urban vernacular buildings he defended, might have been saved to supply the social and economic context for the row houses she defended. Or the private clubs and mansions she defended could have been interpreted in terms of the masons' and carpenters' skills in constructing them, and the maids' and gardeners' skills in maintaining them, to supply the urban working-class history he desired.

The debate appeared to be a dead end at the time. But from today's perspective, both Gans and Huxtable seem to have shared a common concern that Americans were losing significant public memories when neighborhoods like Boston's Italian American West End were bulldozed or monuments like New York's Penn Station met the wrecking ball. And they shared an inability to predict either the changed social composition of the city's population two decades after their debate, or the worsening economic condition of the American city. As an eminent sociologist, Gans was an outsider to preservation, raising some polemical questions. He thought this debate was primarily about social class in the city. As a distinguished architectural critic, Huxtable emphasized buildings. Neither anticipated that the 1990s would involve major controversies about the definitions of public history and public culture in a democratic society.[2]

Today, debates about the built environment, history, and culture take place in much more contested terrain of race, gender, and class, set against long-term economic and environmental problems, especially in the large cities of the United States. The citizens of New York were still over 75 percent white in the 1970 Census. By 1990, New

York had a white population of only 38 percent, outnumbered by African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans who comprised 61 percent of the city, including both long-term residents and new immigrants.[3] (Across the nation, the top ten cities show similar changes, from about 70 percent white in 1970 to less than 40 percent in 1990 (Davis, 1993).) Federal support for cities has declined over the past twenty years, while extreme poverty and homelessness have become increasingly concentrated in the inner city. Environmental problems are concentrated there as well – unhealthy air, polluted harbors, abandoned housing units, rusting bridges, broken water mains.

While the urban landscape may be less attractive, there are far more claims being made upon it to furnish resources for public history and public culture. Today, James Baldwin's question "And why isn't it for you?" echoes across the city streets where he felt excluded as a young boy. An African American group seeks support for the protection of the remaining traces of the African Burial Ground near the present City Hall in Manhattan, and its sympathetic interpretation as a site where people of color were buried in the colonial period. "The city has been commemorating other aspects of its history for three hundred years," notes Howard Dobson, head of the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture in New York (Myers, 1993; Fabre and O'Meally, 1994). His indignation is echoed by many other groups across the city and across the country. Centuries of neglect of ethnic history have generated a tide of protest – where are the Native American, African American, Latino, and Asian American landmarks?

Gender involves similar, interconnected questions. Why are so few moments in women's history remembered as part of preservation? Why are so few women represented in commemorative public art? And why are the few women honored almost never women of color? Issues about working-class and poor neighborhoods remain – what, if anything, can public history or preservation projects add to their identity and economic development? How do these issues intersect with the claims for ethnic history and women's history? And what kind of public processes and techniques best represent commitment to social history in public places?

Private nonprofit institutions (such as museums and preservation groups), as well as public agencies (city landmarks commissions and arts councils), are challenged daily to become accountable to the diverse urban public, whose members are both taxpayers and potential audiences. Current census statistics suggest that it is indeed appropriate to find new ways to deploy tax dollars in cultural programs that may range from exhibits to the preservation of historic buildings and landscapes, or the creation of permanent works of public art. While some private institutions and public agencies struggle to address their ways of working, and sponsor various kinds of "cultural planning" in order to become more accountable, many impatient citizens' groups are putting forward their own projects to represent their communities' history and tell their own stories in public space (see Karp et al., 1992, for examples). The politics of identity – however they may be defined around gender or race or neighborhood – are an inescapable and important aspect of dealing with the urban built environment, from the perspectives of public history, urban preservation, and urban design.

Indeed, interest in themes of identity is not limited to the city. Women's history and ethnic history drive many preservation controversies across the country. Recently, the National Trust for Historic Preservation established goals for cultural diversity in preservation (Anon., 1993).[4] There have been successful efforts in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia to preserve buildings associated with the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King. *Historic Preservation News* recently announced the start of an effort to preserve the Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina, "where four black students staged a historic sit-in at the whites-only lunch counter in 1960" (Anon., 1994). At the same time, the first national

conference on Preserving Women's History was held at Bryn Mawr in 1994, coinciding with the publication of a guide to landmarks of women's history across the nation, *Susan B. Anthony Slept Here* (Kazickas and Scherr, 1994). Dozens of other guides to landmarks of ethnic and women's history are becoming available from states and cities around the country, as well as scholarly accounts (Wade, 1994). Yet both the ethnic and women's landmarks are proposed at a time when some of the large questions Gans and Huxtable debated are still unresolved. Architecture, as a discipline, has not seriously considered social and political issues, while social history has developed without much consideration of space or design. Yet it is the volatile combination of social issues with spatial design, intertwined in these controversies, that makes them so critical to the future of American cities.

Change is not simply a matter of acknowledging diversity or correcting a traditional bias toward the architectural legacy of wealth and power. It is not enough to add on a few African American or Native American projects, or a few women's projects, and assume that preserving urban history is handled well in the United States in the 1990s. Nor is it enough to have a dozen different organizations advocating separate projects. Instead, a larger conceptual framework is required to support urban residents' demands for a far more inclusive "cultural citizenship," as Rina Benmayor and John Kuo Wei Tchen have defined it, "an identity that is formed not out of legal membership but out of a sense of cultural belonging" (Inter-University Project for Latino Research, Hunter College, 1988, quoted in Tchen, 1990). Benmayor and Tchen argue that public culture needs to acknowledge and respect diversity, while reaching beyond multiple and sometimes conflicting national, ethnic, gender, race, and class identities to encompass larger common themes, such as the migration experience, the breakdown and reformulation of families, or the search for a new sense of identity in an urban setting. They are asking for an extremely subtle evocation of American diversity, which at the same time reinforces our sense of common membership in an American, urban society.

Public space can help to nurture this more profound, subtle, and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American. Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we have come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities. Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories, because natural features such as hills or harbors, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes. Decades of "urban renewal" and "redevelopment" of a savage kind have taught many communities that when the urban landscape is battered, important collective memories are obliterated. Yet even totally bulldozed places can be marked to restore some shared public meaning, a recognition of the experience of spatial conflict, or bitterness, or despair. At the same time, in ordinary neighborhoods that have escaped the bulldozer but have never been the object of lavish municipal spending, it is possible to enhance social meaning in public places with modest expenditures for projects that are sensitive to all citizens and their diverse heritage, and developed with public processes that recognize both the cultural and the political importance of place.

The power of place – the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory – remains untapped for most working people's neighborhoods in most American cities, and for most ethnic history and most women's history. The sense of civic identity that shared history can convey is missing. And even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered – so as not to diminish their importance.

To reverse the neglect of physical resources important to women's history and ethnic history is not a simple process, especially if preservationists are to be true to the insights of a broad, inclusive social history encom-

passing gender, race, and class. Restoring significant shared meanings for many neglected urban places first involves claiming the entire urban cultural landscape as an important part of American history, not just its architectural monuments. This means emphasizing the building types – such as tenement, factory, union hall, or church – that have housed working people's everyday lives. Second, it involves finding creative ways to interpret modest buildings as part of the flow of contemporary city life. A politically conscious approach to urban preservation must go beyond the techniques of traditional architectural preservation (making preserved structures into museums or attractive commercial real estate) to reach broader audiences. It must emphasize public processes and public memory. This will involve reconsidering strategies for the representation of women's history and ethnic history in public places, as well as for the preservation of places themselves.

Despite the eloquent pleas of a few architects in favor of building and city as "theatres of memory" as much as futuristic "theatres of prophecy" (Rowe and Koetter, 1978),[5] most consideration of the built past in the United States has dealt with European architectural fashions and their application to American monumental buildings. For many years American cultural landscapes and urban vernacular buildings were ignored. Today the vernacular is subjected to more thoughtful scholarly and professional analysis, but often this is still based on physical form rather than social and political meaning. The same kind of creative work writers and artists have undertaken in claiming American places is yet to be accomplished by American architects, landscape architects, and urban planners, locating ourselves in the cities of the United States in a serious way, coming to terms with the urban landscape as it exists and has existed, connecting the history of struggle over urban space with the poetics of occupying particular places.[6]

This implies a stronger connection between scholarship in urban landscape history and work on cultural identity, as well as firmer links between theory and practice in urban design. In the last decade there has been an explosion of scholarly work on cultural identity. Cultural and political geographers have mapped the tensions as urban communities struggle for terrain; social historians have looked at women's, workers', and ethnic history. Scholars in cultural studies have forged new syntheses of work on feminist, class, and ethnic issues, and emphasized new ways of looking at popular culture. At the same time there has been new interest in studying space as a cultural product. Environmental psychologists and anthropologists have examined people's responses to places. Environmental historians have applied new agendas to urban history. Geographers have put forth "postmodern geographies" with some connection to architecture and literary studies. But all this work is fragmented in separate disciplines, disciplines that are constantly attempting to reconnect aspects of knowledge within themselves, whether social, economic, environmental, or cultural. Also, scholars' fresh insights about urban space are not always available to professionals and community activists struggling to create new kinds of projects. And the activists' or artists' experience does not always reach either professionals or scholars.

A socially inclusive urban landscape history can become the basis for new approaches to public history and urban preservation. This will be different from, but complementary to, the art-historical approach to architecture that has provided a basis for architectural preservation. A more inclusive urban landscape history can also stimulate new approaches to urban design, encouraging designers, artists, and writers, as well as citizens, to contribute to an urban art of creating a heightened sense of place in the city. This would be urban design that recognizes the social diversity of the city as well as the communal uses of space, very different from urban design as monumental architecture governed by form or driven by real estate speculation.

As the debate between Gans and Huxtable demonstrated, saving a public past for any city or town is a political as well as historical

and cultural process. Decisions about what to remember and protect involve the grounding of historical scholarship as well as the possibilities of public history, architectural preservation, environmental protection, and commemorative public art. Yet all of these approaches to conserving the past operate in partial and sometimes contradictory ways. The traces of time embedded in the urban landscape of every city offer opportunities for reconnecting fragments of the American urban story. (Lynch, 1972). But until historians have more understanding of the intricate relationship between cultural landscape history and place-specific memory, making the whole more than the sum of the parts will be difficult.

George Kubler once described the historian's craft as delineating the "shape of time." The art of the historian, he wrote, resembles that of the painter, "to discover a patterned set of properties that will elicit recognition all while conveying a new perception of the subject" (Kubler, 1962). The historian who confronts urban landscapes in the 1990s needs to explore their physical shapes along with their social and political meanings. Learning the social meanings of historic places by discussing them with urban audiences involves the historian in collaboration with the residents themselves as well as with planners and preservationists, designers and artists. It engages social, historical, and aesthetic imagination to locate where narratives of cultural identity, embedded in the historic urban landscape, can be interpreted to project their largest and most enduring meanings for the city as a whole.

NOTES

1. Gans supplied me with the complete text of his article, which appeared in very abbreviated form.
2. Gans wrote *Popular Culture and High Culture* (1975c) but didn't anticipate ethnic diversity as a focus. The Organization of American Historians [held] its 1995 meeting on "Public Pasts and Public Processes." An overview of some current museum efforts is Karp et al. (1992). Also see Karp and Lavine (1991), Leon and Rosenzweig (1989).
3. Cisneros (1993) provides a good summary of changing demographics. Also see Davis (1993).
4. Also see Anon. (1992) for an extensive list of ongoing projects.
5. They are quoting Frances Yates's term from *The Art of Memory.*
6. Turner (1989) is an admirable account of several American writers coming to terms with American places. Simonson and Walker (1988) is a good introduction to current writing. Lippard (1990) is an excellent analysis of how American artists are dealing with ethnic heritage.

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