

“Seeing from Below: Urban Cultural History and Built Environment Studies”

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In her discussion of self-portraits of the city, Nancy Stieber contrasted the experience of being a voyeur looking down upon a cityscape with the experience of walking the city at ground level. Understanding where and how these two contrasting views meet, she suggested, could provide a vehicle for connecting large-scale social and cultural processes with the quotidian experience of daily life in the city. Built environment studies offers a particularly useful vehicle for bringing these stories together. Processes that take place at the macro level, such as the transnational flow of goods, people, and ideas, for example, are articulated and take form in the local landscape. It is in and through the production of urban space that shifting power relations often manifest themselves. This is not to suggest that the physical fabric of the city is a coherent reflection of global social, economic, and political practices. Rather, the fragmentations and disruptions that emerge from changes in work process, new concentrations of capital, and government disinvestment in the public realm are visible and legible in the built form of the city. Studying people’s interaction in, engagement with, and conflict over urban spaces provides scholars of the city with a tool for analyzing the relationship between the built environment and urban culture, and between large-scale social processes and daily, lived experience.

The example of Cabrini Green, the notorious public housing project in Chicago, provides a useful lens through which to understand how this dialectic approach to the study of urban culture and the built environment might look. Cabrini Green, as Jeffrey Melnick pointed out, has been demolished as part of an effort to reshape the face of public housing. The current logic, according to many public housing advocates, is that high-rise public housing has been a disaster in large part because of the physical form of that housing type, with its pervasive concrete playgrounds; long, caged-in alleyways; and dark, narrow stairwells that became the symbols of concentrated poverty and neglect in urban America. Yet, as Melnick argued, the physical space of the housing project also gave rise to some of the most innovative music in American culture, from do wop to hip-hop. Melnick’s micro-level analysis showcases how daily interactions with a supposedly alienating landscape set the stage for cultural creativity. Yet what do we make of this process? What does it tell us about the social, political, and economic factors that have shaped decisions about housing the nation’s poor and promoting segregation? A 1999 documentary on Cabrini Green, called “Voices of Cabrini,” examined residents’ concerns about their future following the demolition of the housing project. Residents feared the loss of community support networks, the end of businesses like barber shops that catered to the Cabrini population, the gentrification and displacement from the neighborhood that they surely would experience. Mostly, they feared the uncertainty about their futures. They had an attachment to Cabrini because of their history there and the local ties they had forged. They did not, however, romanticize the buildings or the conditions they had

lived under. While it is important for scholars to recognize the products of cultural creativity that have emerged from places like Cabrini, we need to be careful not to disaggregate these cultural artifacts from the social processes that helped shape them. Certainly groups that have been marginalized by the physical form that cities have taken have contested and negotiated the meanings and uses of those spaces in their day to day lives. Yet as scholars we also should not let this ground-level view replace a larger perspective on the social and economic inequities that have given rise to conditions such as segregated cities and sub-standard housing historically.

The study of the built environment also provides a window into understanding the process of shaping collective memory at the local level. Daniel Bluestone discussed the potential of engagement with the built environment to build social, economic, and political capital. By connecting various histories of a place with the politics of place-making, a variety of groups in the city can have a stake in and lay claim to the future of that landscape. By linking history and culture to place, there is an opportunity to create and inscribe ownership and belonging among a wide variety of groups. Of course, shaping collective memory often has within it the potential for contested memory. Preservation of the bungalows that Bluestone described could foster a sense of shared local identity or could raise questions about whose history is preserved and at what cost. One effect of preservation could be the process of gentrification, whereby some members of the community that shaped a particular landscape ultimately find themselves priced out of their neighborhood as more affluent groups seek housing there. Preservation efforts can help make cities legible as sites of collective identity, but they also can promote exclusivity and segmentation. By looking at the impact projects like preservation have on a variety of groups in a city, scholars gain a better sense of how changes in the physical form of the city are part of larger social and economic transformations in a community.

Historians tend to privilege the written word over other forms of knowledge. Built environment studies offers another useful tool for understanding the past. Because so much of history is preserved in built form, “reading” the physical landscape provides scholars an opportunity to study people who often did not leave formal written records. A site like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan provides an invaluable education into life in New York City among a variety of immigrant groups during different stages of the building’s existence. By recognizing the variety of textual evidence the built environment offers, historians can more fully appreciate the complexities of urban life from the variety of actors that have shaped the urban stage.