

Response to “Going Public with the Built Environment”

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Reconceptualizing the History of the North American Built Environment

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The concept of “Going Public” is both tantalizingly vague and highly charged - or at least, suggestive. It begs the question of how and what public? It also suggests both/and/ either some kind of public offering, as of shares in a privately held company, and/or the release of information, which had also presumably been private – or at least to which access had been limited. At the same time, however, for all of its ambiguity, the concept of Going Public is both active and directional – describing a clear trajectory – from the academy into the world.

I would guess that the ambiguity and wealth of associations implicit and complicit in the title of this session are, most likely, intentional; they have, in any case, proven to be useful and productive. All of the speakers have taken up the issue of what “Going Public” could/should signify in the context of their own work and discipline. Both Daniel Bluestone and Dolores Hayden – preeminent scholars and public actors in their respective fields of Historic Preservation and Landscape History – engage the issue in terms of academic practice and political action. I will start with them.

As Daniel Bluestone makes clear in his description of his own interventions in connection with EPA Superfund sites and Chicago bungalow neighborhoods – that historic preservation, even when situated in the academy, is inherently activist, and in the world. It involves working with public archives and entities, local groups, community activists, and ordinary citizens. But the true agency of the discipline, he argues, is the site-specific histories it produces. It is these histories – narratives tied to place – which, he argues, foster a politics of place; empowering the inhabitants and users of those sites to understand the forces that shaped them and on the basis of that knowledge to make informed decisions about their future.

Dolores Hayden also makes a claim for the role of the scholar as public intellectual; in this case writing for, and speaking to, a broad, non-specialist audience. Going public involves, as she puts it, “finding subject matter that matters” not just to scholars or the design professions, and “choosing contested spaces to write about,” encouraging readers to see “hidden conflicts within design,” and “framing questions of power around politics of land use, building design, construction, and inhabitation.”

Going Public, in both of these iterations, describes a clear trajectory. It involves stepping outside of the academy and its discursive structures and re-situating – or reconceptualizing – one’s work/scholarship in the “public” discourses of a broader human landscape. The way in which scholars of the built environment can “go public,” both of these papers seem to suggest, is by moving outside the ivory tower (albeit temporarily) and into the lives of the inhabitants and users of that environment – sharing the insights of our research with them, learning “their language,” and in return providing

them with (as Daniel Bluestone puts it) a “narrative scaffolding” and “historical framework” for understanding and making decisions about the spaces of their own lived experience. What troubles me about this, is that it feels a little like “public outreach”

It seems to me that if the built environment (as all of the speakers maintain, and I would certainly agree) is the place of politics, then to “go public with the built environment” is not just a matter of developing a shared vocabulary and set of images to facilitate communication between groups, nor is it a matter of taking on an advocacy role with respect to historic preservation – although these activities (as both Daniel and Dolores have demonstrated) are as important as they are effective for achieving certain clearly defined goals. But, in order to really “go public” with our work, I would suggest, we should attempt to actually situate our own research in that political space and in those debates. In other words, it would seem to me that going public involves engaging “matters that matter” (as Dolores Hayden put it) from the get-go – in the research itself – and situating that research and the questions that drive it, not only in place, but also in time, and especially in the present moment – that is, to situate it politically.

I wonder if it might be useful to think about the issue of “going public with the built environment” in a different way. Rather than trying to determine a socially active role for the historian and ways of instrumentalizing history, to instead, ascribe **agency** to the built environment itself; to conceive the built environment as a **protagonist**, as an active participant in the making of history. Rather than seeing the urban landscape as text to be decoded, we could regard it as an interlocutor – that [who] continuously challenges our assumptions, resists codification, and, because of its temporal reach, is ultimately uncontainable within any historical or other narrative.

In fact, this (it seems to me) is precisely what makes Camilo Jose Vergara’s photographic studies of urban ghettos – and especially his Camden Documentation Project and website – so compelling. But this is not only because the narratives he constructs rely on images rather than on words to present their subject, nor is it because the Camden website is interactive – although these factors are key to the way in which the narratives work. Instead, I believe, the principal reason that the narratives constructed by the images and historical/factual data (which are continuously being added to the Camden website for instance) are so powerful and absorbing – is because the narratives themselves are completely dynamic and unstable. Not only do they unfold gradually over time, but each narrative sequence is entirely open to re-sequencing and revision.

In the case of the Camden project, in particular, images and information are continuously being added to the documentation. As a result the focus is constantly shifting, new connections are made, things change, disappear, and are replaced – in fact just like the built environment itself. This is historical narrative situated in the political space and time of the built environment itself – in constant dialogue with its subject and in a permanent state of revision.

As Camilo Vergara says, the Camden website may (disappointingly) “become yet another place where people gather to tell stories about the good old days” instead of a forum for

discussion of a “visual history of a city going through a generation of decline” which it is intended to portray. It seems to me that it is precisely because it can support both readings, and many more, that this is such a vital discursive format.

I wonder if we can think of opening our own work as historians up in similar ways – to posit our historical narratives as provisional and open-ended, so that they too can speak to a wide range of public, as well as professional and scholarly concerns. To do this, it seems to me, involves developing research methodologies that not only incorporate, but also – and this is vitally important – critically engage modes of representational discourse, from mapping and photography, to film, video, and a range of digital media, that are both spatial and temporal.

But I think it also involves working actively to situate our work, and by that I mean research, in a more dynamic and exposed **dialogic** relationship with the built environment and its many constituencies -- by not only, as Margaret Crawford has put it, “listening to the city,” but by actively engaging in ongoing dialogue with it and acknowledging that whatever historical insights we can provide are as provisional as the narratives and landscapes in which they are embedded.