

## **Wish Lists for the Future of Built Environment Studies**

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Reconceptualizing the History of the Built Environment in North America

The efficiency expert, Frederick Winslow Taylor, and most beginning Ph.D. students as well, would be disappointed with this conclusion, but the discussions of the past 24 hours make clear that there is no “One Best Way” to explore the histories of the built environment. Nor should we expect or want to see any one single approach arise in the future. We can also expect that future histories of the built environment will necessarily, and fruitfully, be distributed among the several existing disciplines that we have heard from at the conference. Thus, for the future of built environment studies, I have simply hopes and wish lists.

Among scholars in what we might call “Camp One,” history-department historians and geographers, it would be wonderful to see more use of building-scale, spatially specific details as valid research data, and more use of those data as part of their arguments. This hope for Camp One would include, particularly, an expectation of seeing historians and geographers make more use of interior organizations of space and the routine inclusion of building and site plans in their work. To do this, they must learn

the art and craft of reading and presenting (for other readers) environments in plan form—hardly rocket science, but an essential first step.

In a retreat earlier this spring, the Warren Center fellows noted that scholars in “Camp Two,” architectural historians and art historians (particularly traditional, old-fashioned practitioners from those disciplines) have had a natural tendency to see buildings as an end in themselves, rather than as the sedimentation of social relations. And in many ways much architecture history remains “under-theorized,” or theorized only with esthetic theory which often underplays the influences of social and economic forces. Thus, for the future, we might hope that more architecture and art historians would use social theory as a basis for their questions and speculations about the multiple meanings of built environments.

Choices of theory, of course, follow rising and falling trajectories over time. Twenty years ago, at a conference like this, people in both camps would have been citing Foucault, if not reading him. The words “power” (and perhaps “powerlessness”) would have been very common. Ten years ago, “identity” and “postmodern” would have been more common. We have learned a great deal of value from the use of post-modern theory, although we are beginning to see the limits of literary theory (especially of the postmodern variety) as a basis for understanding the environment. Although the environment is indeed experienced individually, it is also experienced socially. Given my interest in the dialectical relations between the individual and the social, it should be no surprise that I have hopes for more use of process theory, built perhaps on Pierre Bourdieu and more recent writers like Etienne Wenger. See, for instance, Wenger’s *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press,

1998), and for those new to Bourdieu, the short, plain-English introduction to his work in the second chapter of Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (MIT Press, 1998). No matter what theories we use, all of us in both disciplinary camps need to keep our minds on the useful and essential tensions between the particular and the universal, the ideographic and the nomothetic.

That being said, my personal hopes for the future also include several questions and topics that someone should address soon. This is only a beginning wish list. We need far more research about workplaces of all kinds: white collar offices, factories, the sites of janitorial jobs, and third world sweat shops. Landscapes of consumption tend to get emphasis over landscapes of production. Annmarie Adams and David Sloane have begun the long-overdue task of interpreting the histories and meanings of hospitals and health care environments; more of us should follow their lead. Other building types also are waiting for better explanations that will make them more visible to the reading public: schools, those wonderful and widespread public environments and recreational settings of the New Deal period, slums and blue-collar housing districts that never became slums, Native American reservations, and other environments of socially marginalized peoples. The processes by which we perceive and use built environments are a particularly rich vein for future work; David Henkin's *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (Columbia University Press, 1998) is an apt example, as will be Dell Upton's forthcoming urban history book.

Finally, in all of our work, we need to heed Robert Fishman's call, in his plenary comments here, for the study of built environments as "a humane complexity of growth from which we can still learn."