

**“What is implied, what is unspoken when we reconceptualize?”**

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Comment on the Warren Center Conference “Reconceptualizing the History of the Built Environment in North America”

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The organizers of the Warren Center conference asked presenters to consider the “current state of built environment studies and [to] set an agenda for future work.” Not surprisingly the papers as read focused more on the new – that is the “future” – than on current paradigms and practice. When speakers did invoke the “current state” of scholarship (our present conceptualization) they cast it as a stage in a process of knowledge formation. Present knowledge, imperfect or incomplete, would give way inextricably to the reconceptualization to follow. Though often unarticulated, what that discourse brought to mind for this listener were the conceptual frameworks, categories, and methods we take for granted. In other words, I found myself thinking about what is implicit in present studies of the “social, cultural, and political processes that produce buildings and landscapes.”

Stated as a question we might ask: Ought we evaluate our “habits of perception,” to borrow a phrase from Dianne Harris’ presentation, as we work to reconceptualize how we study the built environment and perhaps what it is we study? In this brief note I call out four themes – the state, civic space, the senses, and nature – that thread through the papers, that were often implied rather than examined, and that might warrant additional attention. Then in response to the organizers’ request that commentators note possible next steps and the methodology one would employ in such endeavors I call for linking evidence of the experience-near materiality of actual places with macro-level factors such as economic restructuring, demographic dynamism, and legal and property regimes and for greater reliance on and application of ethnography in built environment studies.

The state and its authority to define space undergird much of what we heard during the conference. Whether it was as a setting for or a performance of authority (Fascists in Rome, the Community Redevelopment Agency in Los Angeles); a state’s definition and oversight of legal and property regimes; the crafting, imperfect

implementation, and selective regulation of policies for housing or historic preservation; or the design and construction of public works and infrastructure authors presented cases of governance, law, and technical experts engaged in processes generative of our built environment. Left unexamined, by and large, were the ways in which individuals and groups who created built environments have constituted States and how these processes have developed at multiple scales (the municipal, the state, the nation).<sup>1</sup> Public works and infrastructure, systems of service provision for the movement of goods, water, power, or waste, are a significant case and the ways in which the design, construction, and management of these large-scale systems encouraged the creation of bureaucracies staffed by technical experts is well known.<sup>2</sup> Yet far less attention has been paid to the local, to everyday practices of governance. These range from the ways land use regulation and zoning have been generative for the institutional structure within municipal governance on one hand to how big projects for transportation and power generation have linked territories once discrete into metropolitan regions and these regions into nations.

How might such projects proceed? We might begin by mapping practices and processes. For example, a number of papers underscored inequity in housing. We know deed restrictions and property appraisals have served as legal and fiscal tools for segregation and as gatekeeping mechanisms for the formation of capital and the intergenerational transfer of wealth.<sup>3</sup> Yet there are no maps showing precisely where restrictions were in place in a particular city or of how frequently these sanctions were employed and of where and how aggressively and how effectively property owners, investors, and agents of a municipal state regulated these covenants or not. Nor do we have maps showing property values over time within metropolitan regions or of property tax rates and special purpose charges. Such maps would reveal how location, an attribute often seen as intrinsic, is in fact created and the implications of location for everything from education to health care.

A number of papers considered civic space and spaces of interaction. Here the "agenda for future work" appears to be a reframing of the discussion away from issues of ownership – the simple dichotomy of "public space" (property held by a state for its citizens) and "private space" (property owned by individuals) that scholars from most

disciplines have used to frame analysis and interpretation – toward studies of use and meaning.<sup>4</sup> When and under what conditions and circumstances have individual or collective experiences cohered to designate particular sites significant? Might we view landscape as spaces for interaction and spaces for retreat? Note that neither question is rooted in ownership. Rather than assuming a city sidewalk, a mainstay in studies of public space, is intrinsically a site for interaction (the “urban accident”) these questions and correlate questions might lead us to consider what the experience of different age cohorts, of members of different race-ethnic groups, and the like has been. For some a sidewalk is a site of interaction, for others a space of isolation, anonymity, and solitude, for some a place of pleasure or leisure, for others a space of terror or fear. Each may be true for a given individual at different moments, in different cities, alone or in the company of others.

That variability points toward a third theme, that there are built environments, with an emphasis on the plural, and that we experience environments through five senses. Not surprisingly, most presentations favored the visual, what has been or is seen. Jeffrey Melnick’s account of the sonic environment in public housing ought to encourage us to pay greater attention to what is heard, smelled, touched, and tasted. Such work will require close analysis of the experience near, of bodies in space.<sup>5</sup> The challenges are obvious, most notably in the case of archival sources for the study of past landscape, but also in the application of ethnographic methods for analyses of contemporary landscape. How, for example, ought we account for demographic cohorts such as youth, non-citizen residents, or those deemed deviant who often have been excluded from built environment studies?

Though rarely stated, nature was an unspoken keyword for much of the talk during the symposium. Ironically, nature, understood as other than human, was apparent most in Camilo Jose Vergara’s photographs of Camden, New Jersey (including the image on the conference poster). Those images tell a predictable story of disinvestment and urban decline. Much of their narrative power comes from an implied juxtaposition; trees sprouting in abandoned buildings are an antipode to the standard, ascendant narrative of reintroducing nature into industrial cities (ala Frederick Law Olmsted) or of the city in a garden (ala Ebenezer Howard and the “suburb”).

Reconceptualizing these well-known and oft-repeated histories requires a rethinking of key terms such as nature and, for that matter landscape and environment, as well as close attention to how the use and meaning of such terms have changed over time.<sup>6</sup> In other words, reconceptualization begins with what we know, that is epistemology, and our attempts to rethink and re-imagine the processes that produce built environments must contend with how we have come to know the world in order to imagine how else it might be known.

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<sup>1</sup> I use "creating" to refer to planning and design, construction, alteration, demolition, the full panoply of human use and modification of sites over time.

<sup>2</sup> Keith D. Revell, Building Gotham: Civic Culture & Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) is a model for studies of this dynamic.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Kenneth Jackson, "Race, Ethnicity, and Real Estate Appraisal: The Home Owner's Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration," Journal of Urban History 6 (Aug. 1980): 419-52, and George Lipsitz, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Representative accounts range from Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) to the essays in Michael Sorkin, ed. Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> See Dell Upton, "The City as Material Culture," in Ann Elizabeth Yentsch and Mary C. Beaudry, eds., The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology: Essays in Honor of James Deetz (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1992) and David Howes, ed. The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> The literature on conceptions of nature is voluminous; the essays in William Cronon, ed. Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995) provide an introduction and overview.