

Response to "Going Public"

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Reconceptualizing the History of the North American Built Environment

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In our Going Public session this afternoon we have heard from three individuals who have, through professional biography, marked out an interdisciplinary path that straddles academic life and public practice. Camilo Vergara is a photographer with training in sociology, Dolores Hayden a historian with training as an architect, and Daniel Bluestone a historian-preservationist. Both Hayden and Bluestone have, in their earlier research projects, successfully challenged the traditional art historical focus on the artist and monument with innovative work that has helped to define the social history of North American architecture. Their work continues to challenge us as they shift their venues from the classroom and the office to the community meeting, radio studio and the AP exam.

Their entreaties to follow in their paths and "go public" in our work are not just a call for us to fulfill our responsibilities as citizens after hours. They go further and ask this interdisciplinary audience to consider the historical enterprise in instrumental terms, both as individuals and as a field. Their presentations raise some of the most fundamental, and uncomfortable questions we need to ask ourselves as we break new

ground in the historical study of the American built environment: what is history, who is it for, and who does it serve?

For much of its history, as Dell Upton pointed out last night, it served architects, and Daniel Bluestone suggests that in the past preservation history was geared to the patriotic rhetoric of politicians. Bluestone and Hayden suggest a realignment to serve both the scholar and the public. In their exhortations to “go public” they appeal both to our self-interest and our sense of civic responsibility. Going public is presented, on one hand, as a means of invigorating scholarship, preserving our primary sources, and asserting our influence in the “real world.” But they don’t leave it there. Unlike more traditional conceptions of public history, which involve the translation and dissemination of historical research to a larger audience. Hayden, Bluestone, and, to some extent, Vergara, want to promote more historically informed debate about contested contemporary issues and, more ambitiously, hope to “build social capital and foster a more vital politics of place.” They ask us to go “beyond the narrower populist interest in disseminating the academic insights of our collective work,” to embrace architectural history as a tool of advocacy and reform. They offer examples of how they have begun to do this, including populist books, national register nominations, collaboration with artists and designers on public projects, radio broadcasts, secondary school curricula, and, perhaps most interestingly, the new and suggestively “democratic?” medium of the webpage.

This vision of built environment studies emphasizes action, contestation, and contemporary relevance, not surprising given the typical location of architectural historians in schools of architecture, planning, and preservation in this country. Indeed going public, defined in these terms, seems more akin to practice than scholarship. This kind of practice has a historical precedent, defined by fellow fellow Paul Groth as “public architecture.” Rejecting the typological association of this term with city halls and libraries, Groth describes it as a process used by a variety of actors to promote social change through the conception, development, design, regulation, funding, and criticism of buildings or space. As his excellent work on the history of residential hotels in the United States shows, such practice dates not from the 1970s, but at least as far back as the Progressive Era, when “public architects,” including designers, but also social workers, planners, lawyers, budget analysts, real estate experts, policy experts, essayists, critics, reformers and politicians, served as “space police” who marginalized and ignored those who chose hotel life over settled domesticity in their quest for a uniform social and architectural culture in the 1920s and 30s. Even with the best of intentions these “public architects” defined the public interest and shaped the built environment in a way that denied the reality of people’s lives and asserted their universality of their own values. The omission of hotel-dwellers from their plans, policies for the redevelopment of cities rendered them and their way of living, as Groth suggests, invalid and invisible.

The scholarship of Groth, Hayden, Bluestone, and many other social historians of the built environment has done much to redress this "impaired vision." They and many others who have entered the field since the 1970s have provided critical perspective on the multiplicity of landscapes, individuals, and identity groups obscured by the aesthetic trajectories of architectural history. Now, given this emphasis on communicating with the public and the public sphere, similar focus and care need to be taken in identifying the audience for history. Who is the public what is the nature of the community we are building? Is it an updated version of the Deweyian vision of citizenship cited by Dell Upton last evening, united by common goals and access to the internet? Following in Gwen Wright's footsteps I've paid special attention to the vocabulary used to describe the public in these presentations: people, people all over America, citizens, the general public, NPR hosts and listeners, and well-educated Americans. Whose vision is represented in this public work? There is a claim for contestation, but characterizations of certain types of planning as "bad" and billboards as "litter on a stick" give a very clear message of the hierarchy of values. Do all members of the "public" share these values?

As well all know, landscapes work and function on many levels and are not just nascent possibilities for historical insight and catalysts for social action. Those that inhabit these spaces may not share our tastes, values, and priorities. A toxic waste

dump might not only be understood as an opportunity to promote critical reflection on issues of environmental stewardship, but a lingering health threat. In considering the designation of the bungalow neighborhoods of Chicago as historic districts it seems entirely possible that those involved are as interested in improving the value of their homes as much as building ties with their neighbors. I can't help but ask if this effort is going to build social capital or real estate value?

I agree with Eve (Blau) that Camilo Vergara's presentation and work on the Camden website, with its minimum of narrative and visceral photographs provides a more flexible model of how new, more democratic communication technologies and interaction with the public might inform the practice of built environment studies, if not necessarily history. Vergara shares with our other speakers an interest in informing community development and design with his visual documentation and interpretation of the Camden landscape over time, as well as the development of a descriptive vocabulary that will help us understand these images. His values and ideas are present in every aspect of the work, from the choices he makes in choosing subjects and framing shots to the selection of images to include in the project to the development of categories like panorama and graphics as keywords to search the database of photos.

But the tone and format of his work also allows for the possibility of multivalent readings by different audiences, including residents of the neighborhood, upon whom he relies for his interpretation. His photographs are taken from a human perspective, whether on the ground, a car roof, or the upper floor of a building and they document change over time, the historian's mainstay. They provide a scaffolding in which various audiences and the "author" construct the meaning of the built environment together, from the ground up.