

Comments: “The Future of Built Environment Studies”

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My entry into the study of the “built environment” is through the interdisciplinary field of American Studies and, like American Studies (and perhaps all interdisciplinary fields), the “built environment” often seems to struggle for a sense of place as an intellectual endeavor. Its great strength, of course, is the ability to bring a wide variety of perspectives to bear on its subject, but, as a kind of hybrid—of art history, anthropology, social/cultural history, landscape studies, urban history, cultural geography, and, of course, architectural history—with all these disciplines being brought into play—Built Environment Studies runs the risk of becoming so methodologically and intellectually diffuse that it loses all coherence. Most of us would probably agree that, fundamentally, we are concerned with physical space, but that still leaves us with a pretty broad swathe. In the Charles Warren Center’s “Politics and Culture of the Built Environment in North America” workshop this year, for instance, we heard papers on the imagery of freeways in Chicano Art, working-class housing, city planning and activism, the relationship of the body to the city, YMCAs, glamour and obsolescence, speculation and failure. But even among these widely disparate projects a unifying theme is that we are not just interested in the physical environment, but we are also essentially concerned with how people make meaning from (and with) the material world.

One striking aspect of this conference, however, is that, despite the wide range of fields represented by the speakers, the emphasis is on topics that are largely situated in the late twentieth century and are focused on urban areas or on “urbanism.” I realize that many of the conference scholars have worked in earlier periods and on other topics, but with a dozen papers on the “Built Environment of North America” we have ended up with a fairly narrow slice of that very large topic. In the interest of full disclosure, my work focuses on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but I do think that this conference is indicative of a more general intensification—a glut perhaps—of scholarship on the post-WWII American city. As an aside, I was once chided at a conference for giving a paper that was too chronologically narrow. When I pointed out that my paper had covered the years 1650-1850—a mere two hundred years, in other words—the speaker insisted that without a discussion of the twentieth century (that is to say modernism) my paper was incomplete.

If Built Environment Studies has fixed its sights on the late-twentieth-century city to the relative exclusion of other time periods and places (including those scrutinized by J.B. Jackson), then it is important to ask how and why scholarship has moved in this direction and to speculate on what we may have lost in the process. What are we missing, in other words, and is it important?

It would not take long for any of us to recognize some of the reasons for a focus on the late-twentieth-century American city. Certainly cities are complex, conflicted, rich in sources, and endlessly fascinating. But there are also explanations that are not rooted in intellectual questions or traditions: the interest of schools of architecture in training designers, the agendas of research universities who want their faculty’s scholarship to

connect with the world of business, and perhaps even the fallout from 9/11 may all contribute to this hyper-scrutiny. But I also wonder, as Dell Upton suggested in his keynote address, about the cultural influence of architecture conceptualized as *art*. Scholars are not immune from the desire to be seen as influential after all. Have we turned to the late-twentieth-century American city because that is, in fact, where cultural capital is flowing?

What have we lost by narrowing our focus? First, I think we end up leaving most of the history of the built environment in North America to the traditionally trained social and cultural historians, who, despite some notable exceptions, remain relentlessly text-based. To have a long-lasting effect on the work of history broadly construed—to make a case for the importance of studying the physical environment—we need to be speaking not just to twentieth-century specialists, but to those working in all periods. Also, I think we end up with false dichotomies. Concepts like “urban” and “rural” are helpful as descriptors, but they do not really function as absolute categories. Cities don’t exist in isolation; they are deeply connected to their hinterlands. In fact, I would argue that one of the most interesting topics in the *long duree* of the built environment of North America is the changing relationship, both real and imagined, between rural and urban places.

My hope, then, for the future of Built Environment Studies is not that we jettison the late twentieth-century city, but rather that we recognize—and be self-conscious about—why we have chosen this focus at this time and to encourage scholarship that engages the built environment in its full historical and contextual depth.