

UC Berkeley

Introduction and Finding Aid

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Orientation to the Global Urban Humanities e-Archive

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Global Urban Humanities/Future Histories Lab e-Scholarship Archive at UC Berkeley

This online, open-source archive of case studies, reflective essays, projects, and videos is intended to be a resource for scholars, students, teachers, practitioners, artists, and community organizations interested in creative, interdisciplinary approaches to researching and teaching about cities and urban life, and for instructors in any field developing experiential, place-based, project-based courses. It grows out of ten years of experiments at UC Berkeley in the Global Urban Humanities Initiative and its subproject, Future Histories Lab.

The Global Urban Humanities Initiative/Future Histories Lab was a joint venture funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and led by Arts & Humanities Division of the College of Letters & Science and the College of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley. The Initiative was part of Mellon's Architecture, Urbanism and the Humanities Program, which provided support to universities and other educational institutions to engage in innovative pedagogy and research on cities and urban life by linking the arts and humanities with environmental design fields including architecture, urban design, city planning, and landscape architecture. A fundamental question the Global Urban Humanities Initiative posed was: is there such a field as 'urban humanities'? And if not, should one be created?

From 2013 to 2023, Global Urban Humanities/Future Histories Lab brought together scholars and practitioners from the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, city and regional planning; scholars in humanities disciplines including foreign languages and culture, comparative literature, performance studies and history of art; and artists in genres including dance, theater, music, and visual arts. Together, faculty and graduate and undergraduate students developed new theoretical paradigms, research methods, pedagogical approaches, and community-based partnerships to help address the complex problems facing today's global cities and regions.

The Global Urban Humanities/Future Histories Lab e-Scholarship Archive documents these activities and related publications, and serves as a resource for faculty, students, and practitioners interested in cities from both academic and urban praxis perspectives. The archive includes detailed case studies of courses as a resource for humanities labs and public humanities research addressing a wide range of topics and themes, as well as for environmental design courses.

For more in-depth reflections, please see:

Cascardi, A., & Dear, M. (2016). [What are the Urban Humanities?](#) *Boom: A Journal of California*, 6(3), 4-11.

Cuff, D., & Wolch, J. (2016). [Urban Humanities and the Creative Practitioner](#). *Boom: A Journal of California*, 6(3), 12-17.

Moffat, S. K. (2024). [A Eutopia for Public Humanities](#). *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship*.

The Global Urban Humanities/Future Histories Lab e-Scholarship Archive provides a window into its decade of intellectual ferment and experimentation. Colloquia focused on particular topics, with weekly speakers from both the academic realm as well as diverse practitioners, and invited the university community to participate; symposia were one- or two-day events that brought speakers from across the country to lecture and lead discussions about urban topics such as mapping and public art. A faculty-student fellowship program, hosted by the UC Berkeley Townsend Center for the Humanities, allowed doctoral students and both junior and senior members of the faculty to present their work-in-progress, gaining feedback scholars at different career stages. Students in many of the courses made a wide range of creative projects including short documentaries, performances, art and digital projects, some of which are included in this archive. The archive also includes videos of lectures by faculty and guest lecturers representing the wide range of disciplines that interacted through the initiative.

Perhaps most central were new cross-disciplinary courses led by teaching teams that paired faculty from the arts and/or humanities with those from environmental design; or by a single instructor knowledgeable in both humanities and environmental design. Seminars focused on cross-cutting theory and methods, while research studios and humanities studios brought together students with extraordinarily diverse academic interests and training, to explore on a particular topic within the context of a particular urban place. Future Histories Lab undergraduate courses served as summer gateway experiences for first-generation students entering the university. Graduate and undergraduate students completing a mix of these courses were awarded a Certificate in Urban Humanities.

The research studios were the most experimental of the courses offered. In them, faculty challenged students to take up theoretical ideas and methods from unfamiliar academic fields, and learn to use diverse approaches to understanding and representing the cities and places. Such approaches included close reading, creative writing, semiotics, literary criticism, dance and performance as well as urban fieldwork, drawing and digital design, fabrication, and augmented reality. In research studios, faculty and students worked collaboratively and critically in a shared space – the studio – iterating ideas, critiquing work, planning exhibits and publications. A number of courses included research trips to cities in Southern California, Mexico, and China, while others were rooted in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some had community partners who generously supported students as they explored specific urban neighborhoods and local institutions, gained insight into their challenges and aspirations, and worked to offer resources with tangible value.

In the final year of Future Histories Lab, a year-long program of courses, studios and programming epitomizing Berkeley's urban humanities approach focused on the historic immigration station at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. Now a National Historic Landmark, the detention barracks and other buildings of the immigration station were built in order to enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act. The site provided a useful pedagogical jumping-off point for considering both historic and contemporary issues of immigration and incarceration. This program, called A Year on Angel Island, introduced student participants not only to the history of Angel Island and the living memories of descendants, but also to the literature of Asian immigration, historical and contemporary Asian communities in San Francisco, and marginalization and violence toward immigrants from many countries both past and present. The project was built around two major dance and choral performances that were linked to courses from many disciplines as well as to field study and a public lecture series.

Did Global Urban Humanities/Future Histories Lab discover a coherent field of 'urban humanities'? One sign of lasting influence is the Urban Humanities Forum, launched in 2023 by doctoral students and graduates of the Mellon's Architecture, Urbanism and the Humanities programs from a variety of institutions. The Forum went on to organize a multi-day conference at the University of Arizona, attracting 100-odd emerging scholars and community practitioners to explore this area of intellectual interest and activity. Their key questions were: "What have we gained from urban humanities? What is missing, and where do we think urban humanities needs to go from here? How has the new generation of urban humanities scholars shifted the field in their scholarship and practice? What gap still needs to be filled, addressed, or imagined? What new questions need to be asked

and networks created?” To which we would want to add: Do approaches from the urban humanities provide a superior understanding of cities and their people – and the profound challenges they face around the world – that more disciplinary-based approaches that came before – and do they generate innovative modes of practice? Based on our decade of experience, we believe the answer is yes.

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