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Author
Hayden, Dolores

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Using Ethnic History To Understand Urban Landscapes

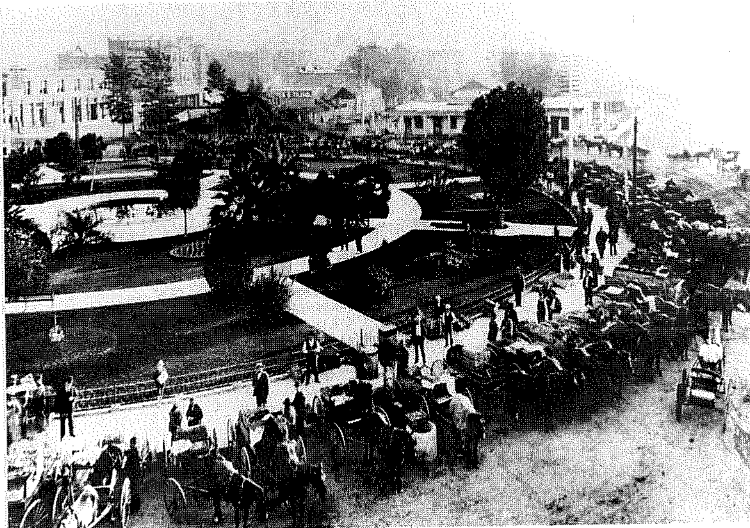
In 1954, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service abandoned it as a place for processing immigrants and deportees, Ellis Island, the greatest national monument of American ethnic history, was considered surplus government property. The General Services Administration couldn't sell it. The National Park Service said it had little historic significance. Not until 1965 did it become part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Finally, in the 1990s it will reopen as "a fine example of America's changing sense of what we should historically commemorate and how."[1]

Yet, except for nationally significant places like Ellis Island, preserving and interpreting the history of urban ethnic groups is still controversial. Opportunities to save vernacular buildings in many urban neighborhoods—the modest homes, workplaces, public spaces and landscapes that have framed the daily lives of working people in the past—are still ignored. J. B. Jackson was one of the first to point out the importance of the vernacular landscape to understanding American culture. The vernacular urban landscape is also crucial to understanding our unique American urban history, which has immigration and ethnic diversity as central themes.

Because neither the national government, states, nor big cities have dealt well with urban ethnic places, many small non-profit groups have organized to celebrate their own cultural heritage. Today in Los Angeles African-American, Chinese-American, Japanese-American, Native American and Latino history groups are active. This is partly a response to a predominance in Los Angeles of landmarks of more traditional kinds—marking political, military, business and professional history and focusing on the achievements of men of Anglo-Saxon Protestant background. In Los Angeles today, at last count, more than 97 percent of the official landmarks were of this sort. But Los Angeles was founded in 1781 by a group of settlers whose heritage was predominantly Mexican, Native American and African. Even now, three quarters of the citizens are not white males. So where does the majority find its history?

Facing page: The Embassy Hotel and Auditorium remains the most significant site for commemorating the combined activities of ethnic minorities, women and labor unions in the development of Los Angeles. A Power of Place public art project will recall the community and labor organizing, especially among garment and cannery workers, that took place here. Photo courtesy Dolores Hayden.

Japanese-American family in a commercial flower field near downtown Los Angeles. Photo courtesy Japanese-American Cultural and Community Center.



Chinese-American produce vendors at the La Placita outdoor market, 1895. Photo courtesy Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

In 1982 I founded a small nonprofit corporation, The Power of Place, to address underrepresented aspects of the urban heritage. We are committed to identifying landmarks of ethnic, women's and labor history not yet seen as cultural resources, and creating more balanced interpretations of existing landmarks to emphasize the ethnic diversity of the city. We publish walking tours and scholarly research about historic sites and buildings, sponsor community history workshops, make proposals for historic preservation and sponsor public art.

The Power of Place is unusual because it is an organization with a multi-cultural focus, and because the focus is both historical and visual. While well-known professionals work on the project teams, most of the day-to-day work is done by UCLA interns —young architects, planners and scholars—who are learning to incorporate these concerns into their work.

I am a social historian of architecture and urban development. In focusing on public history, I have been influenced by groups such as the Brass Workers History Project of Waterbury, Conn., led by Jeremy Brecher, and the New York Chinatown History Project, started by Jack Tchen. I share their commitment to workers' history and ethnic history, but I am also interested in the physical design of the city (preserved buildings or districts, new art works, new itineraries) as a medium for some of our work.

It is a medium that promotes public memory. For example, the Black Heritage Trail, run by the National Park Service in Boston, is a project that has a strong physical presence on Beacon Hill, and this imageability means when people have seen it, they remember it as part of the city. I agree with Kevin Lynch, who once said "Choosing a past helps us to construct

a future."[2] I would make this more explicit: Choosing to celebrate ethnic diversity, as a part of our history, should be an essential part of urban and cultural planning.

This is controversial in terms of both theory and practice. There are various approaches to the vernacular, the urban and the ethnic. One of the best books on ethnic architecture, Dell Upton's edited collection, *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America*, includes brief essays on different rural ethnic groups and their vernacular buildings by a number of architectural historians, cultural geographers, folklorists and anthropologists, including Henry Glassie, John Vlach and Christopher Yip. This illustrated guide helps the student or the traveler spot an Irish-American house in Appalachia, a German-American barn in Pennsylvania, slave cabins in Mississippi, or a Japanese-American temple in Hawaii. While Upton suggests that "large urban ethnic groups evidently built little that was distinctive," he then allows, "we cannot be too confident in making such assertions. The absence of urban ethnic architectures may be more apparent than real."[3]

I think it is possible to tease out this material by using methods from social history as well as from vernacular building history to define some surviving ethnic cultural landscapes dating from 1850 to 1940 in many

Latina garment workers meeting at the Embassy Theater, 1946.
Photo courtesy Dolores Hayden.

The Power of Place's Biddy Mason Project

The first public art project undertaken by The Power of Place focused on Biddy Mason, an African-American working woman who struggled to gain her freedom from slavery, establish a practice as a midwife, raise a family and establish both her own homestead and various community organizations in Los Angeles.

When I first saw the site of Mason's homestead, it was a parking lot at 333 Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles, an unlikely place for a history project. Then in 1986 a planner at the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, Robert Chattel, contacted me and asked if The Power of Place would be interested in proposing new public art for the site, which was about to become a 10-story retail and garage complex. The developers and their art consultant, Michelle Isenberg, were also supportive of the project. I was project director and historian on the team, which included graphic designer Sheila de Bretteville, artists Betye Saar and Susan King, and curator Donna Graves.[1]

The first public event was a workshop. Historians, planners, community members, students and the project team discussed the importance of the history of the African-American community in Los Angeles, and women's history within it. Mason's role as a midwife and founder of the AME Church was stressed.

The project included five parts. First, Saar's assemblage, "Biddy Mason's House of the Open Hand," installed in the elevator lobby, included motifs from vernacular buildings of the 1880s as well as a tribute to Mason's life. Second, King's large format letterpress book, *HOME/-stead*, was published in an edition of 35. King incorporated rubbings from Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights, where Mason is buried. These included vines, leaves and an image of the gate of Heaven. The book weaves together historical text with King's meditations on the homestead becoming a 10-story building.

Sheila de Bretteville,
Biddy Mason: Time and Place,
1989.
Photo courtesy The Power of Place.

Third, "Biddy Mason: Time and Place," a black poured concrete wall with slate and granite inset panels, designed by de Bretteville, chronicles the story of Biddy Mason and her life. The wall includes a midwife's bag, scissors and spools of thread embossed into the concrete. De Bretteville also included a picket fence around the homestead, agave leaves and wagon wheels representing Mason's walk to freedom from Mississippi to California. Both her "Freedom Papers" and the deed to her homestead are among the historic documents and photographs bonded to limestone panels.

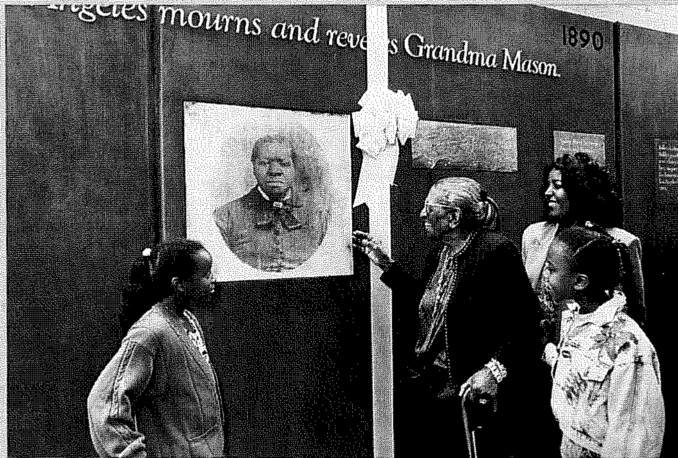
Fourth, we produced an inexpensive poster, "Grandma Mason's Place: A Midwife's Homestead," also designed by de Bretteville. Historical text I wrote for the poster included midwives' folk remedies. Fifth, my article, "Biddy Mason's Los Angeles, 1856-1891," appeared in *California History* in fall 1989.

The pieces share common imagery: gravestone rubbings in the book and carved letters in the wall, and a picket fence, medicine bottle and midwife's bag in the lobby and the wall. One old photograph of Mason and her kin on the porch of the Owens family house appears in several parts of the project, as does a portrait.

Everyone who becomes involved in a public history or public art project hopes for an audience that reaches beyond the classroom or the museum. The wall has been especially successful in evoking the community spirit of claiming the place. Youngsters run their hands along the wagon wheels, elderly people decipher the historic maps and the Freedom Papers. People of all ages ask their friends to pose for snapshots in front of their favorite parts of the wall.

—Dolores Hayden

Opposite:
Women of the Owens and Mason families at the Owens' home.
Photo courtesy University of California, Los Angeles.



Descendants of Biddy Mason at the dedication of the Biddy Mason wall.
Photo by Dolores Hayden, courtesy The Power of Place.

Betye Saar,
Biddy Mason's House of the Open Hand, detail, 1989.
Photo courtesy Power of Place.

American cities and towns. Indeed, it is not only possible to find these ethnic, urban places, but also our last chance to save some of them. As J.B. Jackson suggested in *The Necessity for Ruins*, decline is often the stimulus for action.[4]

What do these ethnic urban landscapes consist of? In addition to vernacular buildings, there are ethnic spatial patterns, ethnic vernacular arts traditions and territorial histories contributing to the whole.

Let me define each of these components. *Vernacular building* can be part of the public history of any community, if the construction of residences and workplaces is understood and interpreted as a social and economic process.[5] While many vernacular structures are not exceptional as architecture, their age, scale and neighborhood meaning may make them vital reminders of the ethnic past.

In addition to considering the ethnic social history behind many physically unremarkable structures, it is also essential to analyze building types and their special relationships to ethnic neighborhoods. Religious buildings, meeting halls and markets have been important for almost all groups, but some building types are identified with particular ethnic groups. Laundries, produce markets and herb shops, for example, were often developed by Chinese-Americans; and flower markets and midwives' hospitals by Japanese-Americans. Not only can one study ethnic groups' distinctive approaches to creating space, it is also important to study buildings that are occupied by different ethnic groups over time, to see how groups impose different requirements and how architectural transformations take place.

Ethnic spatial patterns, such as Chinese-American gateways and underground passages, or Latino mar-

kets, streets and public plazas, can also be found in many neighborhoods. The kind of research David Chuenyan Lai has done on the spatial structure of Chinatowns in Canada would serve as an excellent example of what is needed for American ethnic neighborhoods.[6] This physically oriented research can be joined to studies of people using space, such as Dan Rose's anthropological work on African-American street life or Christine Stansell's historical research on women and children in the streets of New York.[7]

Ethnic spatial patterns also mark the history of work in the city because members of different groups arrive with different skills and because occupational segregation often occurs along ethnic lines. Tying the history of work to the urban landscape often reveals patterns of infrastructure construction that can be interpreted as part of ethnic history. Water systems in Los Angeles were built by Irish-Americans, streetcar lines by Mexican immigrants working on *el traque*, railroads by Chinese-American workers. The brickyards were run by Latinos.

Ethnic vernacular arts traditions are also distinctive. Some I have come across in Los Angeles are Japanese-American flower decorations for streets, Anglo fruit and walnut architecture for citrus festivals, Chinese-American vegetable gardens and Mexican-American sign painting traditions for both commercial buildings and trucks. Many ethnic groups also have traditions of street festivals—an art form itself.

Probably the most complete account of the decorative traditions of a specific ethnic group is the Fleisher Art Memorial's Italian-American catalogue for Philadelphia which describes masonry, confectionery, window dressing and street festival design, among other traditions.[8]

Territorial histories are perhaps the most complicated part of the ethnic cultural landscape to research. *Territoriality* is a term geographers use;[9] *territorial history* is a term I have devised. By territorial history, I mean the history of a bounded space, with some enforcement of the boundary, used as a way of defining political and economic power. It is the political and temporal complement of a cognitive map; it is an account of both inclusion and exclusion.

The interviews of oral historians are full of territorial history that the compilers usually don't know what to do with. For example, a black lawyer who grew up in a middle class family in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s recalls that he had to sit in segregated movie theaters, that he could not drive to Compton, Inglewood, or Glendale, but that he could go to the beach safely at any time on the streetcar.[10] The lawyer also remembers having Japanese-American friends, watching them sent to Manzanar, going to visit there and finding a fence in the visiting room, so that he couldn't play with the other children. This is an individual account taken from an oral history interview; a collection of such accounts can create an ethnic territorial history for a given time in a city's history.

That ethnic territorial history will also help to locate potential landmarks that are sites of political struggle—a church whose congregation led the civil rights movement or a crusading newspaper like the Los Angeles *Eagle*, whose editor took up fair housing. In this context, these buildings can become more viable locations for architectural preservation efforts than they might be as isolated structures.

There are many territories, some defined by ethnicity, some by class and some by gender, just as there are many identities. It is important not to generalize too broadly about any one of these territories or identities in isolation from the others. If public history projects are organized by ethnicity, then it is particularly important to review them to make sure that class and gender have been represented.

I tackled the problem of integrating ethnicity and class by beginning The Power of Place walking tour series with a multi-ethnic tour of downtown, based on the history of the labor force in the city. It included workers in the vineyards and groves, produce markets, flower fields, the oil field, a prefabricated housing factory and garment factories, as well as midwives and firefighters. Ethnicity and gender were subthemes, as men, women and children of every ethnic group were identified as part of the work force needed to feed, clothe and shelter the residents of the city. Overall, the tour tells the history of the city through production rather than consumption.

Like class, gender cuts across ethnic lines and is a distinctive aspect of territorial history. Women's history has been neglected even more than class or ethnic history, and acknowledging the presence of women in history should be an essential part of every new ethnic history project, as well as an incentive for the reinterpretation of many existing landmarks. The Power of Place has found that it is possible to celebrate women's traditional occupations (such as housewife, midwife, nurse and garment worker) as well as women's entry into non-traditional fields (such as oil wildcatter and labor organizer) in a small area of downtown Los Angeles, and touch all of the major ethnic groups.

Ultimately, the strategies I have been describing are the scholar's ways of understanding ethnic history and making it visible in lectures, books, tours and exhibits. Historic preserva-

tionists may also find some of them useful. Ethnic history presents great challenges for American architectural preservation, with its emphasis on commercial real estate and adaptive reuse.[11] The Power of Place has helped save some buildings, but what is more unusual is that we have experimented with involving artists and designers in making ethnic history visible.

Successful ethnic history projects can expand the audience for all public history and preservation. First, the awareness that every citizen's history is important can generate a new kind of pride in a multicultural city. Second, recognition of historic structures in poorer neighborhoods can support other kinds of community organizing for change. Such projects can be tied to the overall economic development of a neighborhood and anchor a variety of activities. Third, if vacant sites of historic importance can be used for new public art projects based on ethnic history, or for new open space designs with the same emphasis, the energies of talented artists and designers will enrich the city.

A variety of ethnic history projects—some walking tours and books, some physical projects based on preservation of vernacular buildings, some on new art or landscape designs—can create a stronger urban sense of place and a more egalitarian approach to the urban landscape, where attention is given to every urban neighborhood, not just those where commercial real estate ventures are profitable. This is the kind of city The Power Place would like to help create.

The author acknowledges Donna Graves, executive director of The Power of Place, for her comments on this paper.

Notes

1. Michael H. Frisch and Dwight Pitcaithly, "Audience Expectations as Resource and Challenge: Ellis Island as Case Study," in Jo Blatti, ed., *Past Meets Present: Essays About Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences* (Wash-ington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), p. 157. An excellent overview of preservation, including a chapter on ethnicity, is Antoinette Lee and R.E. Stipe, *The American Mosaic* (Washington, D.C.: US/ICMOS, 1987).

2. Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), p. 64.

3. Dell Upton, ed., *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1986), p. 14.

4. J.B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 89-102.

5. Elizabeth Collins Cromley, "Public History and the Historic Preservation District," in Blatti, pp. 30-36.

6. David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver, B.C.: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1988).

7. Dan Rose, *Black American Street Life* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), and Christine Stansell, *City of Women* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

8. Dorothy Noyes, *Uses o Tradition: Arts of Italian Americans in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Fleisher Art Memorial, 1989).

9. Robert Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 1-2. Another example is Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth Century Virginia," *Places* 2:2, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 59-72.

10. Los Angeles *Times Magazine*, Feb. 5, 1990.

11. Dolores Hayden, Gail Dubrow and Carolyn Flynn, *The Power of Place: Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: The Power of Place, 1985) a walking tour; and Dolores Hayden, "The Power of Place: A Proposal for Los Angeles," *The Public Historian*, (Summer 1988), pp. 5-18.

Note for "The Power of Place's Biddy Mason Project"

1. Funding came from the National Endowment for the Arts and local sources.