

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Senses of Place: Urban Narratives as Public Secrets [Dispatches]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1831r2d6>

### Journal

Places, 16(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Williamson, June

### Publication Date

2004-10-01

Peer reviewed

# Senses of Place: Urban Narratives as Public Secrets

June Williamson

“Indigenous residents as well as colonizers, ditchdiggers as well as architects, migrant workers as well as mayors, housewives as well as housing inspectors, are all active shaping the urban landscape,” Dolores Hayden wrote in *The Power of Place*.<sup>1</sup> In this tradition, stories of the powerful and the meek were the subject of presentations by scholars of geography, sociology, philosophy, architecture, performance studies, literature, political science, and urban planning at the conference “Senses of Place: Urban Narratives as Public Secrets.” Participants in the one-day event April 16 at Pace University’s Institute for Environmental and Regional Studies (PIERS) were united by an interest in the increasingly visible field of place studies. But the “secrets” they related often involved political issues of class, race, gender and economic injustice. Sessions at the conference were designed to flesh out this problematic by focusing on such themes as community identity, religion, performance, poetry, politics, nature, and the public interest.

In a keynote address, Ned Kaufman, chair of the newly organized Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at Pratt Institute, spoke of ways the study of place remains a “public secret.” We don’t yet really know what place is or how to describe it, Kaufman began, but we know it when we experience it, and we can easily distinguish between different types of places. When describing specific spaces, we often use a vocabulary of immediate sensory perception, he explained. But this method is inadequate for evoking the histories associated with these places. Alternately, we may rely on a vocabulary of collective or community memory to describe experiences embedded in specific places. But this vocabulary, too, is inadequate. It fails

to fully recognize the individual acts of transmission from person to person required for the meanings and stories attached to places to persist. Furthermore, such narratives may be variable and contested.

Kaufman argued that an improved vocabulary for describing such phenomena would aid debate about the use, preservation, and design of places. Especially in the face of contemporary pressures such as globalization and instantaneous communications, such a project could create common ground for preservationists, environmentalists, designers and planners, groups with goals that are often similar.

Kaufman’s overall concern was the way that conflicting notions of place are often tied to different narratives of cultural identity. But such conflict is not inevitable. For example, in the debate around land use in the western U.S. some environmentalists have found common ground with historic preservationists in recognizing the strategic value of cattle ranching as a culturally appropriate activity that impedes more environmentally destructive land uses such as sprawl development.<sup>2</sup>

## Diverse Views

Of the sessions that followed, the one on “places of performance” provoked particularly lively discussion. Several speakers addressed the importance of place-based cultural rituals to the formation of ethnic identity, and the ease with which they can be flattened into simplistic myths. Architect Lisa Henry Benham (Graduate School of Architecture, University of Utah) analyzed maps of New Orleans to chart the migration and transformation of the bounding, and limiting, rituals of Creole culture. She then commented on ways this affected relationships between gender, race and cultural identity. Blagovesta Mom-

chedjikova (Department of Performance Studies, NYU), told of her role as a guide for the model of the City of New York on view at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing, the site of the 1964-65 World’s Fair. In that role she became acutely aware of the myriad, complex dislocations between the real city and the model one.

Hune Margulies (Pace University) then presented a theoretical overview of what he considers a “continuum” between space, culture and ethnicity. He argued for the importance of elevating the role of space in this continuum — and for redefining ethnicity, since the use of race to determine ethnicity elides issues of class and the importance of neighborhoods. Margulies also presented an interesting expansion of the notion of neighborhood, one that recognized important ties between people in non-contiguous places, such as Dominicans in the Dominican Republic and New York City.

Papers in a session on nature and culture also described some of the places of contested narrative to which Kaufman alluded in his opening remarks. Geographers Harvey Flad and Craig Dalton (Vassar College) told an engaging story of a beloved butternut tree in Poughkeepsie, New York. When the massive tree was threatened by development, neighbors campaigned to save it. Eventually, one of the women in the activist group fighting to save the tree went on to become the city’s mayor.

There has been no similar happy ending yet for “Site Summit,” the former Nike missile facility overlooking Anchorage, Alaska. Geographer Laurel Hummel (West Point) described battles between the military and local government to determine the future status of that place, an important relic of the Cold War already listed for inclusion on the

# The Art of Modern Transit Station Design

David Moffat

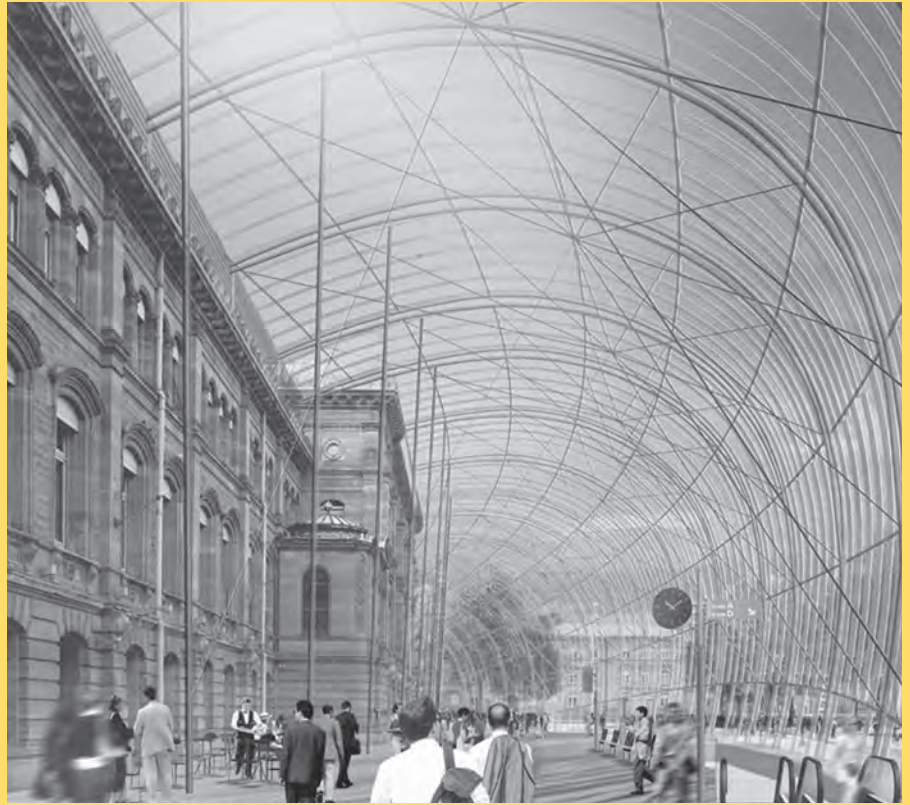
National Register of Historic Places. With arguments about responsibility, funding, access, and security unresolved, the surface-to-air missile bunkers there sit empty, slowly deteriorating. Hummel's narrative also provided an intriguing glimpse into the secretive workings of the U.S. military, custodian of so much of this country's open land.

## An Ongoing Program

"Senses of Place: Urban Narratives as Public Secrets" was organized by Robert Chapman of PIERS. In addition to sponsoring conferences, PIERS offers a visiting scholars program.<sup>3</sup> The Institute, at Pace's lower Manhattan campus, defines its mission as "to provide leadership in the study of the complex interrelationships between human culture and nature with special emphasis on the Hudson River bioregion and its diverse ecological, social and cultural values."

## Notes

1. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 15.
2. Kaufman also alluded to controversies surrounding the preservation of the Audubon Ballroom in New York City, where Malcolm X was assassinated. See Ned Kaufman, "Heritage and the Cultural Politics of Preservation," *Places*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Winter 1998), pp. 58-65.
3. For more information about PIERS, the visiting scholars program, and conference proceedings, contact Prof. Robert Chapman at [rchapman@pace.edu](mailto:rchapman@pace.edu).



The point has been made before, but it bears periodic repeating. To understand the elements of great transit-station design, one has to look to the great precedents. The placemaking qualities of structures such as New York's Grand Central Station or the late-nineteenth-century train stations of Paris and London are inherent in their status as civic crossroads. Extensions of the cities around them, they provide common ground for a common purpose and they give dignity and excitement to thousands of individual ceremonies of departure and arrival each day.

In the second half of the twentieth century such great public gateways largely gave way to the more hermetic "airport experience" — long corridors and commercial concourses in out-of-the-way places that look pretty much the same from one city to the next. Even where the designs of indi-

vidual terminals might incorporate engineering excellence and the latest in architectural materials, they often spoke more of a new international uniformity of experience and expectation than any distinct sense of local pride or identity.

"The Art of Modern Transit Station Design," second in a series of symposia on transportation infrastructure sponsored by the UC Berkeley Transportation Center, was based on the premise that transit stations have now been rediscovered as generators of iconic form, urban identity, and redevelopment energy after a long period of disinterest and neglect. Elizabeth Deakin, Director of UCTC, noted on the first day of the two-day event April 29-30, that

**Above:** Proposal for TGV station on Strasbourg.

**Next Page:** Stations of the French TGV. A) Lille; B) Montparnasse in Paris; C) proposal for Marseilles.