

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

The Changing Place of Interpretation in American Public Space [Research and Debate]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3gf6s7dm>

### Journal

Places, 16(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Authors

Fleming, Ronald Lee

Miller, Jeannie

Goldman, Melissa Tapper

### Publication Date

2004-04-01

Peer reviewed

# The Changing Place of Interpretation in American Public Space

Ronald Lee Fleming

Assisted by Jeannie Miller and Melissa Tapper Goldman

Every historical form in the built environment carries a language of power. Thus, in today's public realm, manmade structures communicate the values of many eras, providing a variety of perspectives on our own historical time.

Older buildings, in particular, imbued with the authority of rich stylistic traditions, may still conjure up the manners and mores of lost societies. In times when people dressed formally on the street, respecting an aesthetic of expressive detail, the elegance of building cornices and street lamps was more readily understood. By contrast, today's American city is largely experienced through the windshield of a speeding car, and new construction often lacks an ability to communicate on the scale of the pedestrian.

This shift in perception has affected the substantive form of design—both built and graphic. However, in our present multiperspectival system today, we accept a variety of environmental forms. In other times of economic boom, landscapes were destroyed and rebuilt to celebrate contemporary values, but we currently *embrace* these varied styles and influences. We do this both by respecting historic buildings and sites and by retelling their stories in our own language. By reimagining past experience and laying claim to it through new and varied lenses, we often find new meanings for our own times.

Throughout history, *intentional* interpretation of place has also occurred through structural inscriptions, markers, monuments, and decorative reliefs. Representational artwork can also be considered a type of conscious interpretation.

In past societies, the intentional interpretation of place was largely the work of the government and propertied interests. Thus, monuments in

public space were state sanctioned, and the inscriptions on buildings attested to the civic virtue and authority of dominant powers. But in American cities today other voices are being heard. Direct action by residents, new communicative methods, and alternative commissioning structures have expanded the possibilities for telling such stories, and contributed to a new pluralism of interpretative messages.

## Interpretation Today

Narrative expressions have been present in the public realm from Nimrud to medieval England to art-moderne America. However, the narrative approach to interpretation largely disappeared in Western countries after World War II. At that time, practitioners of the Modern Movement stripped away decoration on built form, and sought to express the beauty of materials and form directly.

The tie between narration and traditional power was particularly objectionable to Modern architects. Through the International Style they sought to transcend the existing power system, and so avoid the claims of the nation-state or the encoded triumphs of the local bourgeoisie. In a sense, the projects of Modern architects were still interpretation. But the central message, a protest against older languages of power, was usually neither locally specific nor universally applicable.

Following a cultural reassessment of Modernism's impact, narrative eventually returned to the American city. However, in the late twentieth century it took a more rebellious demeanor. Transformed by abstraction's critique, it shunned past formations of decorative elements and gave voice to perspectives hitherto ignored in the public arena.

Today, the perspectives of the powerful are no longer the only stories



Telling the story of place in its structure. A sculpted metal panel on this nineteenth-century Berlin bridge depicts the growth of the city during the seventeenth century.

that may be told in public space. And rather than attempting to escape the power system, narrative interpretation of place often seeks to comment on its own origins. Such an open and sometimes ironic approach has democratized the interpretive function, rather than hoarding it for a small elite who understand the structure of the city.

Interpretation now points out the events that shape the physical character of places, and comments on the patterns of architectural, economic and social development that are translated into form. Gone are the simple event-oriented plaques and dry chronological litanies of built history once affixed to poles or granite plinths for centennial celebrations. In their place has emerged a richer and more refined system of complex graphics and multiple messages. It is this sense of changing perspectives and a candid, even humorous acknowledgement of shifting viewpoints that imbues the new interpretation with dynamism.

Recent narrative interpretation of American cities has also often focused on the *condition* of neighborhoods, with a particular eye toward the human values of those who have occupied them. This attention to local life has provided a robust armature for place-making art. By building up the information base that can inspire

artistic metaphors, such interpretation has enabled artists to create works that both comment on local conditions and are accessible to those who may not be aware of local history.

The political character of such locally based interpretation may be powerful. Local relevance can be used to spark controversy, reminding people of concealed wounds and hidden conflicts. At the same time, it can also become a positive interactive device, inviting a community to participate in civic planning and design. Strengthened by new technologies and the experience of confronting controversy, both interpreters and artists are initiating dialogues with the public that can be catalysts for social change in such a democratic, accountable process.

Today there is also greater self-consciousness in our placards and artistic works. Mirroring our postmodern age, we have learned to see that representations of the past are etched in the style of *our own* hand. The hope behind such self-reflection is that we may gain sensitivity of perspective, and bring to reinterpretation the values of sympathy, respect, humanism and empowerment.

### New Points of View

A good example of these new layers of interpretation is a recent memorial built to honor a 1936-37 strike in the Flint, Michigan. The strike, at the factories of General Motors, included a worker sit-down that paralyzed production and helped force the company to recognize the American Auto Workers Union. However, as the American auto industry boomed in the 1950s and 60s, the importance of this event was gradually forgotten.

In the late 1980s, when the Flint city government, along with union leaders, began looking for ways to revitalize a diminished downtown,



The Sit-Down Strike Memorial by artist Johan Sellenraad commemorates the hard-won victory of the American Auto Workers Union in Flint, Mich. Drawing on a local pottery tradition, Sellenraad designed ceramic tiles incorporating photographic images from the strike. The multifaceted memorial also includes cement auto seats fabricated by union workers and bronze castings of the auto hinges that workers fired at sheriff's deputies with slingshots when the local government tried to break up the strike. Predella-like images bordering the larger panels add historic quotations on the worth of the labor movement. The final panel in the sequence shows robots replacing humans in the production process—a “solution” to the labor problems depicted, but also an ironic comment on current challenges to organized labor.

one response was to recover this important event through a memorial. Eventually, the city commissioned a memorial to the strikers with the assistance of the Townscape Institute, which recruited New York artist Johan Sellenraad.

Sellenraad's monument today combines photographic evidence, a local ceramic tradition, and union-manufactured goods.<sup>1</sup> It marks the entrance to the historic Carriage Town neighborhood where the auto industry had its roots, and provides a backdrop to an outdoor amphitheater that slopes toward the Flint River (once used to float hardwood logs to the early carriage factories).

Like the statue of the man on horseback in the public square, the Sit-Down Strike Memorial refers to a single event in history. But by giving voice to labor, it goes beyond traditional memorialization. And by



This limestone obelisk from Santa Fe, N.M., commemorating American military conquests over the native population was “edited” by chiseling out the word “savage” from next to the word “Indians.”

integrating text and graphic techniques, it provides an extraordinarily rich and complex interpretation of events.

Another technique that has emerged recently has been to comment critically and directly on earlier efforts at interpretation. Thus, older memorials may be subject to “editing,” as interpretation itself is reinterpreted.

Activists pursued this strategy in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1974 by altering the inscription on an obelisk commemorating a nineteenth-century military commander who fought the local Native Americans. The original inscription on the obelisk read “To the Heroes, who died in various battles with Savage Indians.” But as part of the American Indian movement, anonymous protesters scratched out the word “savage.”<sup>2</sup>

Rather than take down the obelisk after its message was altered, authorities chose to place it in a center for Native American traders. Here the history of racism remains visible, and the deep scratch in the stone draws warranted attention to past insults.

## Avoiding Interpretative Overkill

With new interest in interpretation and new media strategies for transmitting information, today's designers and planners need to exercise restraint. It can be particularly ironic when an historic marker obliterates the very character of the place it is attempting to interpret.

This is the case with the giant, tombstone-like markers erected on a small traffic island near the Common in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This site, where George Washington took command of the Continental Army, has today become a giant textbook. Huge concrete pages offer dense paragraphs acknowledging the complex forces that came together there. Yet, while the slabs ostensibly exist to help recall the past, they demean the character of this famous place and make it difficult to feel any connection to history.

Of course, the minimalism of earlier markers in Cambridge was equally unsatisfactory. These denoted important local events with simple blue plates citing a few uncontroversial facts. In both cases, however, designers have been focused on a single purpose, thinking only of the content to be publicized.

Today it is possible for markers to take a more humanistic approach, not only in their politics but in their presentation. Their appearance may be inviting, their meanings accessible, and their style as revealing of their purpose as their content.

In designing such new historical markers it is also possible to draw from a powerful new public visual language. This exists across media—from magazine montages to interactive graphics on the Internet. Anodized aluminum plaques, for example, can today present photography as well as text, allowing an old form to make use of potent new techniques.



Recent attempts to identify historical sites in Cambridge, Mass., have abandoned these traditional blue markers, which avoid infringing on the site, but which add little to our understanding of it (above, top). An example of the newer historical markers in Cambridge describes the ride of William Dawes during the Revolutionary War (above, bottom). In this picture, the marker is disrupting an historic reenactment.

## New Interpretation as Cultural Criticism

In contrast to such interpretive overkill, many cities leave their cityscapes opaque to the casual visitor. For some cities, this is evidence of an aloof attitude, civic dysfunction, or even cowardice—a refusal to address issues of urban design or architectural preservation.



Unlike the graphically dull Cambridge markers, these monuments use nothing but form to express historic information. Guerrilla artists in Bern, Switzerland, installed the milk bottles without municipal permission to commemorate a site's history as a transfer point for milk arriving in the city from the countryside (above, top). A "cornfield" in Dublin, Ohio, expresses the importance of agriculture to local history (above, bottom).

Contemporary interpretation may even threaten existing political arrangements by making transparent the failure to develop effective policies. Thus, programs of interpretation may ask tough questions about relationships and motives in the cityscape. Why were certain buildings demolished?<sup>3</sup> Why weren't others better designed? Why weren't different voices heard?<sup>4</sup>

On a larger cultural horizon, historical interpretation may even suggest new solutions to controversial issues that affect communities more broadly. In this regard, the simultaneous presence of a multitude of perspectives, and the self-criticism they engender, may be extremely beneficial, allowing individual stories to attain a dignity and honesty normally unavailable in the exclusionary mainstream of public history.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, even when interpretation of such information may empower artists' imaginations, few alliances have developed between graphic artists and local arbiters of interpretation systems—such as historic commissions. While interpretation has the potential to provoke such thinking, it is often squelched for fear of offending powerful constituencies.

Acts of interpretation can also make people aware there are alternatives to any given design. Over time, this sort of communication can anchor a design-review policy, and prepare people to play a greater role in civic design. To display a history of civic change is to be honest with the public; to present future possibilities is to welcome their participation.

Unfortunately, in this regard, interpretive markers have rarely been used to reveal the impact of public design decisions directly. One such program did explore such issues for the Bicentennial in Lexington, Massachusetts. It used the technique of photo metal aluminum to presented various alternative development scenarios. For example, the marker adjacent to the town hall noted that the green there might have evolved into a commercial strip if the town's leadership had not protected it by changing its zoning in 1922. For emphasis, it showed a picture of a New Hampshire village in which the entry sign to a historic district sat

hauntingly amid commercial detritus.

By communicating in ways that are easy to understand, such interpretive markers may make the significance of local government policy more transparent. In the process, they may encourage people to adopt a greater sense of ownership toward the public realm. By describing the changing conditions of place, they ask people how they want a place to be.

### Strategies for Interpretation

One useful way to encourage the interpretation of place is to work within the auspices of public works departments and existing streetscape budgets. In this way, small projects are possible without the more formalized process of commissioning place-making art.

The use of multiple funding sources for smaller projects may also bring in new schemes and perspectives. For example, funding may be solicited from individuals and local businesses, broadening the scope of outlook. Thus, in the Bidy Mason project, multiple funding sources allowed several interpretive projects (in print, inside of a retail center, and outside in public) to come together in a single place-making scheme.<sup>6</sup>

Public-works and planning departments also provide a more fruitful general locus to initiate change, since every city, and most towns, carry out these functions—while only a few have full-fledged arts commissions and councils. Rudimentary components of the streetscape, such as street furniture, shelter systems, trail and historic-site markers, and street signage usually fall within the purview of these city departments. Typically, these elements are installed in a generic and mundane fashion, when they could become far more informative aspects of the public realm. Signage, and graphic design, as well as

## Interpretation in Transit Shelters



The strategy of using interpretive street furniture to convey information about a specific locale and its history is particularly applicable to transit facilities, where people are required to sit and wait, and where time and space can be profitably used for interpretation.

The brightly colored spoons at the Vernon MTA Station in Los Angeles (top), built in 1994, express the identity of the surrounding neighborhood as the city's garment district. Designed by artist Horace Washington, they also provide distinctive seating.

To design a bus shelter in Seattle's International District in 1998 (bottom), artist Laura Brodax first did extensive research in the local community, a primarily Asian neighborhood of about ten square blocks. The exterior of the shelter displays colorful pictures from the community's history, while the interior contains pictures with captions for every decade starting with the 1880s. The pictures from the 1970s show protests against the building of the nearby Kingdome stadium.

## Comprehensive Interpretation through Trail Systems and Trailheads



Only recently have interpretive elements been linked together in America to orchestrate increased meaning from an ensemble. Connecting such a system to a centralized information bank, or “trailhead,” is even rarer. However, the examples here hint at the possibility of such linkages to nurture dramatic encounters with information.

The Seven Hills Park trailhead (above) in Somerville, a densely populated city northwest of Boston, is located at the beginning of a walkway that follows an old rail line to Lexington. These sculptural forms were designed by Steve Purcell to celebrate the historic development of the town’s seven hills. Each hill is represented by a different symbol mounted on a pole in a grassy area of Davis Square, adjacent to the Red Line train station and the trail. The marker in the foreground commemorates Walnut Hill, where Charles Tufts founded Tufts University. In the background is a view of a Bullfinch-designed mansion that stood on an adjacent hill, which later became the site of McLean Hospital. A dairy was once located on another hill. The general design of the trailhead was by Clifford Selbert Design of Cambridge, Mass. If further developed, the cluster of poles could serve as the starting point for a system of trails and markers connecting the different hills and commemorating these sites.

Similarly, in blue-collar Chelsea, a waterfront community just north of Boston, an interpretive



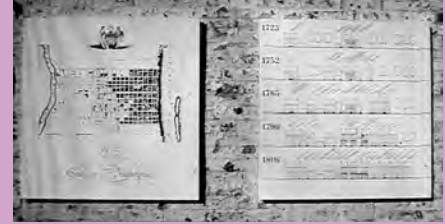
“memory wall” of ceramic panels (above) was conceived in 1979 by Ronald Lee Fleming, Peter Johnson, and Susan Roberts. The portion of the wall shown here is devoted to Laura Lee, an early bohemian whose comments are still arresting today. The author and his associates designed this wall in an alley connecting Chelsea’s main street to a parking lot. But the panel was later moved due to the lack of a long-term site management strategy to address the ever-present problem of vandalism. The wall might have served as a guide to other interpretive elements that were part of a “two-percent for pedestrian orientation” program along the street, when the area was revitalized with a \$3.1 million grant

One reason that these elements—a trail system, interpretive panels, and place-making public art—have rarely been integrated is that they are often fall within the purview of different governmental agencies, whose activities are rarely coordinated. However, the introduction of trail systems is probably the best way to encourage interaction between different commissioning or sponsoring agencies, because it provides a framework for physically and mentally linking disparate sites.

Trail markers can introduce the political and social history of an area; its architectural styles and built character; its natural environment, including geography, flora and fauna; and even its lexicon, through a history of place names that reveals the complex associations of particular locales. Combining this didactic approach with small elements of public art can even offer the transcendence of enchantment.

Paradoxically, even cities with an extraordinary sense of place can benefit from such integrated interpretive strategies. A self-contained, self-guided walking tour is a great way to reveal the mysteries and complexities of an area, which a casual observer could fail to comprehend for years.

## Interpretation as Street Signage



Some street markers have a graphic style suggesting a place’s character. The complexity of a place can sometimes be revealed by graphically using complicated images which depict timelines or changing physical conditions over time.

The Philadelphia marker (above, top) reveals the change in one street over time. It shows both a map of the city’s former Pine Street, as well as a series of historic streetscapes arranged chronologically from top to bottom.

The state marker on the Erie Canal in Waterloo, N.Y. (above, middle), demarcates historic time periods with text and photographic images. As an interior exhibit, it can be more elaborate and display more information. Its elegant sequencing also makes it easy to understand.

In addition to serving an eminently practical purpose, the skateboard guard in Riverside, Calif. (above, bottom), uses the image of a bell to represent the city’s historic Mission Inn. The guard also employs a local graphic identity.

the introduction of craft, may humanize essential elements of cityscape and build curiosity for more ambitious place-making efforts.

Since many public-works projects have been increasingly geared toward pedestrian amenities, we may be on the cusp of an historical change that benefits the larger place-making objective. Several examples of interpretation worked integrated into streetscape street furniture, infrastructure are illustrated here. In general, their strategy is to introduce valuable site information in the course of providing for people's more immediate needs.

### An Ongoing Activity

Why interpret the past in the built environment today? One reason is to confront our own passivity in the face of social complexity. As decision-making becomes more cumbersome, with multiple players and interests, the rift between decision-makers and the general public widens, diminishing the sense of public choice and proprietorship.

Nevertheless, the simple fact that every building, standing or demolished, represents a choice made in the public sphere means that historical change is intimately linked with the world we see around us. To raise awareness of this timeline of *choice* puts every citizen in a better position to sort out the meaning of both past and present impacts.<sup>7</sup>

We are all heirs to a resonant story that continues to evolve through the public mechanisms of design and design review. That such choices lie in our hands is often obscured. But it can be reactivated with sensitive and effective interpretation that reveals choices and motivations.

Representations of the impact of public policies have rarely become part of an integrated interpretation

strategy. But when they do, they can be very powerful. For example, preservation advocates in Seattle used city markers to display photographs of an elegant hotel demolished to make way for a parking lot in Pioneer Square. Similar photographs showed a city-sanctioned apartment-tower proposal that would have destroyed the Pike Street Market—had not the proposal been defeated in a citizen-initiated referendum.

By raising consciousness among residents, such acts of interpretation can give the layman a greater perspective on policy options, ensuring more strength and continuity in responses. Ideally, some cities might even recognize that a permanent exhibit of such elements would serve as an excellent setting for the meetings of a civic design-review commission.

In a 1993 op-ed article, the author suggested that the city of Boston "...require that every new project include, in a publicly accessible place, a photography of the structure or structures that used to stand on the site, and some history of the area, as well as the architect's drawing of the original proposal for the site, to allow citizens to better understand how the Design Commission influenced the project."<sup>8</sup>

In this essay we have advocated that these presentations be made permanent, and that they be designed by artists to not only encourage citizen participation, but to promote place memory. Over time, interpretation must empower and inform residents, visitors, and designers alike, helping us all to recall and reimagine so that we will actualize our true position, at the point of acting as well as reacting.

### Notes

This essay is a shortened version of a chapter taken from the upcoming book *The Art of Place Making: Public Art, Urban Design, and Interpretation That Tell You Where You Are*, by Ronald Lee Fleming.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of Ronald Lee Fleming, The Townscape Institute.

1. Unfortunately, the memorial now has to endure water damage that erodes the delicate ceramic during the harsh Michigan winters.
2. Information courtesy of artist Charlene Teters. For SITE Santa Fe Third International Biennial, Teters created a temporary sculpture outside New Mexico's capitol building, a full-scale obelisk with an inscription reading simply "To The Heroes." The reference remains strikingly ambiguous. Quoting Charlene Teters, correspondence August 22, 2003: "People would ask who are the heroes and who are the savages? My response was, It depends on who is telling the story." See also "Monument's Word Removed," *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, August 8, 1974, p.1.
3. The Preservation Society in Saratoga, New York, has not accepted the gift of a plaque, which shows where the magnificent Grand Union Hotel was destroyed for a suburban-style Grand Union shopping center in 1963. See Ronald Lee Fleming, *Facade Stories: Changing Faces of Main Street Storefronts and How to Care for Them* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1982).
4. Dolores Hayden's work on interpretive history in downtown Los Angeles is an innovative illustration of this process. It follows in the graphic mode of the earlier Chelsea Memory wall, discussed in a sidebar to this essay. For analysis of the link between public art and public memory, see *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p.46.
5. *Ibid.*, p.96.
6. Dolores Hayden, "An American Sense of Place," in Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster, eds., *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content Context and Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), p.268.
7. See also Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).
8. Ronald Lee Fleming, "Public also has a role to play in city projects," Op-Ed, *The Boston Globe*, October 4, 1993.