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MAKING PLACE: THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Urban theorists have offered a number of powerful and popular concepts for mapping spatial relations. These languages have delivered considerable benefits to the theorization of spatial production. But the terms are often of less utility in telling the histories of particular places. They often confuse, rather than enlighten, when it comes to understanding the constellations of representation, action, meaning, and power at play in the histories of specific features of the built environment. The concepts themselves are not at fault; rather it is the tendency to see them *as* concepts and concepts only that hinders. As a cultural historian, I believe that uncovering spatial histories demands a close attention to specific, contingent processes, change over time, and struggle among discourses and actors. Revealing the way that spaces become actual places requires distilling from abstractions precise accounts of particular actors and discourses related in a process of flux and struggle across time and space.

INTRODUCTION

My recent book *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban renewal in Cold War New York*, is a new history of urban renewal.¹ As an urban cultural historian, I am concerned with a number of historiographic questions about urban renewal that I won't bore you with—tales we've told ourselves over the years about a familiar urban policy—but I am interested in relating that history through considerations of particular spaces: the United Nations headquarters building, Stuyvesant Town, the Lincoln Square urban renewal area, and public housing in East Harlem. I am concerned with understanding how places are constructed in time, and as such my efforts require a light touch when approaching the relations between time and space and their more concrete analogues, history and place. I am interested in crafting

compelling narratives of the ways that space and time interact, the ways that places and their histories are mutually constitutive.

My work begins with the belief that meaning, the symbolic realm, drives the production of space and the effects spaces have in the world. Most histories of urban renewal have taken as their subject the nuts and bolts of urban policy. My work, while conversant with those details, seeks to put them into a larger conversation about how the vision of urban renewal formed, how it was put into practice in remaking actual Manhattan places, and how it was undone by the experiences and critiques of those living in the places it left in its wake. In keeping with the context of the domestic political culture of the Cold War—in which battles were so often fought in the symbolic realm, with images and ideas as much as brute firepower or military maneuver—we must see that this transformation was cultural as much as political, a matter of meaning as much as movements. It was the result of a contest to win the right to determine what this new mode of city rebuilding meant. Was it development? Was it destruction? Or was it something in between, something more complex?

CONSTELLATIONS OF MEANING

Here's one way to think about this. Riffing on some lines from Willa Cather, the literary historian Carlo Rotella suggests that there is a “city of feeling” and a “city of fact.” These two cities, one actual and one imagined, are in constant collaboration, shaping and reshaping one another. Cities of fact, “material places assembled from brick and steel and stone, inhabited by people of flesh and blood,” inspire cities of feeling, but are also given shape and meaning by ideas and representations. I am interested in the way actual places—cityscapes of fact—are made and remade in the contestatory crucible of their constant collaboration with cityscapes of

feeling. The kinds of places I investigate—urban renewal projects and other like-minded attempts at city-remaking on a grand scale—are first imagined, designed, planned, and built. But then they are represented and used, and thus reimagined, and so, in a symbolic sense, rebuilt. Most importantly, the way they are reimagined give impetus to future efforts at designing, planning, and building, so that new cityscapes of fact can emerge from the old.²

All along the way these cycles of making and remaking are not straightforward affairs; they involve multiple actors, conflict, contingent meanings, and imbalances of power. If postwar cities were shaped by explicitly political and social contestation—products of policy initiatives, struggle between political coalitions, electoral decisions, and street-level conflict over racial and class boundaries—they were also subject to symbolic and imaginative struggle, attempts to give various cityscapes of feeling purchase in the actual cityscape of fact. Some of these contests arose directly from social and political struggles, while others were condensed in the symbolic actions of cultural representation. Either way, any attempt to give meaning or form is a fight for the right to give imaginative and symbolic shape to the city—to say what a place is—and to make that conception natural or normal, the common-sense, shared understanding of what a place is.³ Those contests never really end, and no meaning-making struggle is ever entirely complete. The city of concrete, brick, and steel is always still malleable. Despite the social divisions places make physical, they remain open to physical, imaginative and social remakings. And of course, the shapes they take have immense power to carve out the realm of the possible, to give actors fuel for arguments about what should or shouldn't be done, what should be preserved or overthrown.

As I've suggested, these cycles of making and remaking take shape out of a contestatory crucible with multiple actors and vectors of force at play. Understanding how

spaces are made and mean requires connecting the lines of force between these multiple actors, constructing a constellation of powers, effects, and actions that, as a spatial artifact, reveals who and what is combining to make places. But these constellations must also be narrated—it must be revealed how the nodes in that analytical space are connected, how they influence and impact and condition one another, a set of relations that are not only spatial but temporal.

These analytic steps are needed when looking at particular built environments, but they are also helpful in understanding how larger spatial phenomena like urban renewal are made and mean in both space and time.

RETHINKING DE CERTEAU

The story of urban renewal has often been told by way of a familiar spatial dichotomy, offered most compellingly by Michel de Certeau. In his well-known essay “Walking in the City,” de Certeau sets up a twilight struggle between two modes of understanding city life. On one side, looming from above, is the “solar Eye” of the “space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer,” who “looking down like a god” is consumed with the “lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.” This is the perspective from which the idea of Western perspective itself was created, the standpoint from which city plans and ordering schemes are drawn up, the “aloof” throne of a “celestial eye” that surveys the “clear text of the planned and readable city.” Then, down below, beneath “the thresholds at which visibility begins,” scurrying amongst the putative chaos, are the walkers. They move about blindly—de Certeau seems not to imagine that these blind walkers might recognize, let alone object to the “scopic” fantasies delivered from on high—but the pattern of their migrations, “shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces,” can escape the “imaginary totalizations produced by the eye.” Their

peregrinations make up an entirely other city, a reservoir of affiliations and attachments that, once understood, might serve to reveal that the view from on high is nothing but a fiction, an “optical artifact.” De Certeau intended his essay as the opening salvo in a campaign to deploy the practices of the walkers against the fantasies of the planners, and unseat the intellectual regime of those totalizing fictions that lay at the origins of city mastering efforts like urban renewal. Whatever its success in such theoretical endeavors, de Certeau’s essay has had other, less salubrious effects.⁴

De Certeau’s dichotomy gives a general picture of the forces arrayed in the struggle to define the meaning of urban renewal. His “planners” and “walkers” are metaphorical figures for the two major positions around which the varied experiences with urban renewal collect, but they are fixed and frozen outside of history. When his oft-repeated oppositions are employed in accounts of actual events they become static placeholders, representatives of tendencies and mechanical operations observable by theorists, rather than markers of the actual existence of active navigators reacting to events in the flow of time. The dichotomy presupposes the blind virtue of his walkers—the “common hero” to which his book is dedicated—while never imagining that they might organize their own practices into a counter-narrative to that offered by his planners. Likewise, it assumes the initial corruption of the impulse to plan. In the end, accounts of urban struggles are reduced to already decided referendums on the virtue—or lack thereof—of efforts like urban renewal. What if, instead, we put the planners and walkers back into the flow of history? Their struggle was never as simple as the dichotomy presupposes. Over time, former advocates of renewal joined the resistance, critics looked for reform rather than abolition of renewal, some resisters made their peace with clearance if it meant new housing, and some residents embraced or accommodated themselves to modernist spaces. In the

long run, the vision of urban renewal was not simply undone, Manhattan also absorbed its urban interventions and made them a part of its cityscape.

Ultimately, *Manhattan Projects* shows how the rise and fall of urban renewal was part of a glacial shift within the broad front of post World War II urban liberalism as it confronted the domestic political culture of the Cold War. The story I tell reveals not only urban renewal's transformation, but also the transformation of New York itself as it simultaneously underwent both a fall into urban crisis and a rise to world city status. The new spaces of urban renewal had an active role in shaping this conflict, but they did so in time, as the products themselves of complicated, contestatory processes of meaning making.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
 2. See Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 1-16. My conception is an elaboration of the idea that, as Eric Darton puts it, a building or public space “embodies in its particular form the social imagination that gave it license.” Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 6. Additionally, architecture, as Beatriz Colomina puts it, “is a system of representation... The building should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writing, films, and advertisements; not only because these are media in which more often we encounter it, but because the building is a mechanism of representation in its own right. The building is, after all, a ‘construction,’ in all senses of the word.” See Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 13-14. These formulations are all indebted to the fundamental insight that space is “socially produced.” See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Blackwell, 1990); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (New York: Verso, 1989). For a thorough explication and critique of this literature see Doreen Massey, “Politics and Space/Time,” *New Left Review* 196 (Nov/Dec 1992). Of course this germ of these ideas did not originate with these theorists. For instance, as Lewis Mumford put it, “Mind takes form in

the city, and in turn, urban forms condition mind.” Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938), 5.

3. This is an adaptation of the ideas of Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci class struggle was waged through national ideals and popular forms, in the way that groups of people—“historic blocs” or class fractions assembled from different classes with strategically similar interests—could mobilize meaning to make their concerns, their interests, and their conceptions of national interest and goals the reigning common sense of their time. See Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 411-440.

4. Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 91-110.