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The Global Urban Humanities Initiative: Engaging the humanities and environmental design in pedagogical innovation

By Jennifer Wolch and Anthony Cascardi

Abstract

A new initiative to better integrate methods and theories from the humanities with those from the fields of environmental design is being launched at the University of California, Berkeley. The project, known as the Global Urban Humanities Initiative, will bring faculty, graduate students, practitioners and critics together over three years through a series of methods workshops, theory courses, and research studios examining three Pacific Rim cities. This article examines the history of the interaction of the humanities, social science and design and planning disciplines in teaching and practice and describes the pedagogical and research experiments planned for the project.

Introduction

A new initiative to better integrate methods and theories from the humanities with those from the fields of environmental design is being launched at the University of California, Berkeley. The project, known as the Global Urban Humanities Initiative, will bring faculty, graduate students, practitioners and critics together over three years through a series of methods workshops, theory courses, and research studios examining three Pacific Rim cities. This article examines the history of the interaction of the humanities, social science and design and planning disciplines in teaching and practice and describes the pedagogical and research experiments planned for the project.¹

1. For more information on the initiative, contact Project Director Susan Moffat at susanmoffat@berkeley.edu, or visit <http://ced.berkeley.edu/collaborate/collaboration-in-action/global-urban-humanities>

The Relationship Between the Humanities and Environmental Design

Recently, evidence of increasing cross-fertilization between the humanities and environmental design has emerged. Although the humanities have increasingly shifted their attention away from individuals and toward larger social structures, including class, gender, race, and the nation or region, they have now begun to focus on what such conceptualizations have left out, including questions of human subjectivity and agency, passion and affect, experience, and the individual as maker and interpreter of the material world. Humanities scholars are increasingly aware that intersections between large-scale social structures and individual agency are mediated by the built environment, where fundamental, reciprocal relations between human beings and the world around them become visible. This has contributed to a “spatial turn” in the humanities. This has been marked by the use of geospatial data science tools in new humanities scholarship (e.g., digital or spatial humanities, and broader work in geo-humanities). Also, drawing on socio-spatial theorists such as Lefevre and Harvey, the humanities have come to an awareness that people both shape the world around them, and are in turn shaped by that world. However, many questions remain to be answered about how these reciprocal relations are in fact lived, both at the level of the individual and on a larger, super-individual scale in the contemporary world. Similarly, the humanities have tended to approach the human record from the relatively flat, two-dimensional perspectives characteristic of most representations of it. This creates an opportunity to bring the humanities into closer connection with disciplines that regard the built environment as a three-dimensional field—engaging all the environmental design fields, including architecture, urban design, city and regional planning, and landscape architecture.

Simultaneously, in environmental design the role of social, political and cultural factors in the built environment, championed at UC Berkeley in the 1960s and 70s, gave rise to important fields of theory and research known as “social factors in design.” Informed by sociology and environmental psychology, as well as by the arts, social factors highlighted the centrality of lived experiences, and focused attention on how the behavior and satisfaction of everyday users – of buildings, neighborhoods, and landscapes – were shaped by the design of the built environment. At the same time, the field of design theory, also led by scholars at Berkeley, was revolutionized by the introduction of systems theory, mathematics and computer modeling, and debates over the origins of creativity. Later, especially in city planning, scholarship turned toward urban and regional dynamics, transport and infrastructure systems, and social movements. The result locally was a productive intellectual ferment that, along with an emergent Bay Area modernist design aesthetic, defined a “Berkeley School”

of environmental design. However, by the 1990s, patterns of everyday life and questions of the subjective urban experience had largely disappeared. There is now a compelling need to focus again on the individuals who actually experience the built environment, modify and reshape it, embrace it or rebel against it, using a steadily expanding methodological toolkit. It is also time to renew the interrogation of how plans and designs emerge, whether through scientific analysis or inspiration from the arts and humanities.

The Global Urban Humanities Initiative

Today, neither environmental design nor the humanities is well prepared to address the most complex emergent problems of the day, in particular those precipitated by the rise of vast urban and metropolitan regions, especially in the Global South. People living in cities of the Global South, especially those who live in informal settlements, are vulnerable to war and social strife, to climate change and ecological degradation, and to loss of livelihoods in a swiftly shifting global economy. Populations are mobile and move across borders in response to changing factors. Yet such large cities are also places of aesthetic purpose, creativity, and innovation; their built environments play a profound role in everyday life, define and delimit life chances for millions of residents, and shape perception, experience, politics and culture.

The intellectual territory of the global urban region spans the fields of urban studies and environmental design, on the one hand, and the humanities on the other. What can these fields learn from each other? How might their distinctive ways of knowing, doing, and teaching contribute to more robust models of learning, scholarship and public engagement with the challenges that cities face? How can their interaction produce new paradigms of scholarship that simultaneously acknowledge the intellectual contributions of social theory yet re-engage the social, the experiential, and the everyday? Finally, how can this knowledge inform and shape design, planning and policy in diverse sites of global urbanization?

A group of UC Berkeley faculty from the College of Environmental Design and the Arts & Humanities Division aim to explore this territory by means of an innovative collaboration funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Global Urban Humanities Initiative is a joint project that brings together scholars and practitioners from the environmental design and humanities disciplines – ranging from East Asian languages & culture, comparative literature, and history of art to theater, dance and performance studies. Working with a faculty steering committee that includes some of the most innovative thinkers from CED and A&H — Julia Bryan-Wilson, Margaret Crawford, Teresa Caldeira, Whitney Davis, Michael Dear, Shannon Jackson, Alan Tansman, and Mark Sandberg, we

intend to develop new theoretical paradigms, research methods, and especially pedagogical approaches in order to help address the complex problems facing today's global cities and regions. We will also collaborate with colleagues at UCLA, which received a similar grant from the Mellon Foundation focused on the "urban humanities."

Lineaments of the Project

Our effort is comprised of three interrelated sets of activities: a series of cross-disciplinary theory seminars, collaborative methods workshops designed to prepare students for different modes of social and spatial analysis, and urban research studios focusing on the Pacific Rim global regions of Hong Kong/Pearl River Delta, Los Angeles, and Mexico City. These elements of the project will be complemented by joint symposia and studio juries with UCLA.

Reconfiguring Knowledge: The Urban Humanities Theory Seminars

Each year for three years, we will convene a cross-disciplinary seminar for faculty and graduate students that focus on the theoretical approaches and methodological toolkits of the humanities, architecture and urban studies. The purpose of the seminars will be to cultivate new approaches to design and urban theory and the role of subjectivity in the built environment, fertilized by ideas and methods from the humanities while at the same time injecting questions of materiality and place into humanistic discourses on space. There will be one broad focus for each year, linked thematically to the urban research studios and methods workshops.

1. Epistemologies for a Humane Urbanism (2013-14) will examine prospects and pitfalls in the cross-fertilization of ideas about cities and urban problems between architecture, urban studies, and the humanities disciplines. Key questions to be tackled include: under what terms are transdisciplinary practice and comparative analysis possible? How can fundamental strategies for relating knowledge to action in environmental design professions be translated into the humanities? In turn, what can the humanities bring to issues of policy design and professional practice, and so contribute to a more humane metropolis?
2. The Humanities, Design Theory, and Representation (2014-15) will tackle questions of representation and the urban environment, to critically interrogate alternative theories of design, as they apply to diverse spatial scales ranging from the object to the building to urban

landscapes, including global cities undergoing rapid transformation. The seminar will also investigate how the humanities might draw upon environmental design to represent connections between the human record and the city. Are there emergent forms of representation – static and/or dynamic, visual or aural, graphic or textual – that can effectively capture new urban realities and cultural identities? How can we evaluate their aesthetics and efficacy in communicating and problematizing urban life?

3. **Traveling Cultures, Fugitive Arts, and Provisional Urbanism (2015-16)** will engage the city as a central site for the making and exhibition of works of art. At the same time, cities host popular art-making, often spontaneous and ephemeral, fugitive and disruptive, shaped by migrant flows that bring new cultural forms across borders. This seminar will consider new forms of artistic intervention in the built environment that are transitory and provisional, and are the results of both traveling cultures and native grassroots movements. The seminar will explore key questions: how do opportunities for urban transformation, civic engagement, and participatory practice emerge where civic and aesthetic life, intersect? How can urban migrants find space to create innovative and often surprising hybrid artistic interventions in the city? What can we learn from them that might produce new opportunities for urban transformation, civic engagement, and participatory practice?

Reframing Pedagogy: The Methods Workshops

In addition, in order to prepare research studio participants for their urban research studios, an interdisciplinary methods workshop will be offered regularly. The workshops will together form a semester-long course, led by a team of faculty from environmental design and the humanities.

Such workshop courses will prepare participants in different modes of humanities, social and spatial research. One set of methods, for example, may address urban field work, including observation, interviews, ethnography, photography, or soundscape analysis. Another may take advantage of CED's expertise in GIS, urban simulation and visualization techniques as well as integrated design. Additional methods may include digital design, film and animation, as well as methods of digital archiving. Still others may draw from traditional humanities approaches, such as close textual reading. These methods, used as tools of investigation, analysis, and representation, can facilitate understanding of the built world as well as catalyze a re-examination of both assumptions and conclusions about the making, reception, and meaning of works of literature, art, and music, in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Support for these workshops will come from a variety of UC Berkeley resources such as the Urban Analytics Lab, Environmental Design Archives and Visual Resources Center, Townsend Center for the Humanities, and Arts Research Center, as well as external experts and collaborating colleagues from UCLA.

Reconfiguring Research: The Urban Research Studios

In order to understand the nuances and complexities of life in the vast conurbations that characterize contemporary urbanization, we need to educate a new generation of urban scholars. Ideally, they should be skilled in interdisciplinary methods that combine the research techniques and interpretive abilities used by humanities scholars with the social science methods and spatial analysis of urban studies and planning. How can this best be conveyed to students? Our hypothesis is that the best strategy is to engage students in empirical research focusing on specific urban settings and shared themes. Building on traditional studio culture and pedagogical techniques, the project will bring together a group of scholars in environmental design and multiple humanities disciplines to work together in collective urban research studios. Instructors will create a collective research enterprise in which students engage in continuous interaction, presentation of ideas, and the challenge of linking knowledge and action. Similarly, humanities approaches will add interpretive and narrative depth to environmental design.

The studios' focus will be on the distinctive global cities of the Pacific Rim. Each will be intellectually linked with the general themes taken up in the theory seminars that precede them each year. For example, the first seminar focuses on epistemologies and humane urbanism, and this theme is taken up in the first urban research studio in Los Angeles which focuses on environmental risk and its implications in a megacity deeply divided by race, class, and other forms of social cleavage. Similarly, the second seminar delves into issues of design, cultural identity, and the representation of urban places, while the urban research studio will consider population dynamics, economic change and cultural hybridity in the Pearl River Delta. Lastly, together in Mexico City, we will each tackle the question of density but from different angles, looking specifically at how emergent forms of density are related to provisional or fugitive art, music, and architecture.

Mobile Identities and Urban Life in Los Angeles (*spring/summer 2014*)

Los Angeles has long been considered the great "exception" to American urbanism. However, in the past two decades, the "Los Angeles" school of urbanism emerged from a close interrogation of the city's history,

geography and environment, culture and politics, and economic dynamics and suggested that rather than being an exception, Los Angeles could be considered as a dominant new form of postmodern urbanization characterized by its polycentric spatial form, diverse and increasingly unequal populations, fragmented patterns of governance, and the radical restructuring of its economy under pressures of globalization, immigration, and neoliberal state restructuring. In this context, the identity of individuals and communities has developed a complex relationship to place. Ethnic communities are mobile over the course of generations, but also over the course of a day, as people move not only from home to work but through multiple identities. We will examine whether these protean existences add to the resiliency of communities in the face of social, environmental, and economic risks. Our goals will be to question not only our assumptions about cities and urban form, but also the ways in which cities have been understood and represented, in narrative and visual forms. Since new ways of thinking require new forms of representation, this will encourage reflection about existing methods and the creation of a new descriptive and analytical vocabulary. One of the key efforts of the project will be to create hybrid forms of urban representations that combine humanities content with spatial analysis.



Figure 1: Los Angeles. Credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/waltarrrrr>

Changing Cultural Identities in the Pearl River Delta Megaregion (spring/summer, 2015)

The focus of our second research studio will be the Pearl River Delta (PRD), allowing a close comparison with the experience of Shanghai, the focus of UCLA's second studio. Both studios will highlight issues of rapid urbanization and industrialization, population migration, and shifting cultural identities. Like Shanghai, the PRD has been one of the "shock cities" of Chinese industrialization, driven by an infusion of Chinese capital. The region's rapid rise, shaped by dynamic global economic, political and demographic forces, serves to unsettle conventional theories of city building and urban design as processes shaped by professionally orchestrated action. Intensive migration from inland regions and the rapid transformation of farmland into urban development has produced a confusing and paradoxical landscape juxtaposing skyscrapers with peasant villages and gated communities. Also like Shanghai, the PRD is a city of migrants, whose experiences have been of more interest to film makers and artists than to urban scholars. Focusing on urban villages, we will explore the multiple and conflicting forms of cosmopolitanism that have emerged there. These include surprising intersections between rural workers from inland provinces, inhabitants of centuries-old lineage villages, bohemian youth, and African and Middle Eastern traders, in an environment shaped by the influences of overseas Cantonese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and the U.S. The research studio will explore new ways of capturing the "ethnographic present" of this new metropolitan landscape and representing everyday lives of this mélange of residents, their evolving identities in a fast-changing cultural context, amid the dynamic economic trajectories of the PRD's diverse places.



Figure 2: Caption: Guangzhou. Credit: Xiquinho Silva, <http://www.flickr.co/photos/xiquinho/>

Density, Provisionality, and the Emergent Mexico City Art Scene (spring/summer, 2016)

The third research studio is expected to focus on Mexico City, the site of an especially complex, vibrant, and hybrid art scene, in which forms and genres, high art and popular culture, “folk”/native and international movements, alongside religious and secular/political art forms have become an integral part of the urban environment. These expressions build on a long tradition of hybrid arts that goes back to colonial times, but are in other respects completely new, or newly inflected, as a function of the intense urbanization of recent years, new movements of people, and the adaptation of pre-colonial forms to the contemporary urban world. We intend to focus our attention on the movement of cultures in and across the space of urban life in Mexico City, concentrating on the arts as ways in which individuals negotiate and make livable an especially dense and stratified space. Some of these forms are transitory; some are officially sanctioned; others exist at the margins of official culture. Mexico City also affords an opportunity to consider how the arts, architecture, and remnant urban spaces can come together through the efforts of social entrepreneurs and grassroots groups to inflect urban space with artistic productions, green the city, and in so doing mitigate the challenging consequences of dense urbanization. The non-profit VerdMX “Vertical Gardens” are an example of art cum architecture at work in the battle against pollution, and provide an opportune comparison with Los Angeles. Situated between the U.S. to the north, and the rest of Latin American to the south, focusing on Mexico also allows us to consider north-south interactions in addition to east-west linkages between the Americas and Asia.



Figure 3: Mexico City. Credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/austintx>

Conclusion

Global cities and regions provide an expansive territory for intellectual inquiry and opportunity for positive change. The Global Urban Humanities Initiative will enable students and faculty from both the College of Environmental Design and Arts & Humanities Division to develop more robust models of learning, scholarship and public engagement as they merge scholarship in the humanities with theories, applied methods and studio pedagogy from environmental design.

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