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.”

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?
In 1982 I founded a small non-profit corporation, The Power of Place, to address underrepresented aspects of the urban heritages. 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 Tichenor. 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 inseparability means when people have seen it, they remember it as part of the city. I agree with Kevin Lynch, who once said “Choosing a path helps us to construct...”
a future. Thus 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 ethnologists, including Henry Glassie, John Vlach and Christopher Yps. 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.”

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
The Power of Place’s Biddy Mason

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 home and various community organizations in Los Angeles.

When I first saw the site of Mason’s home, it was a parking lot at 333 Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles, an unfriendly 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 historic hotel and garage complex. The developers and their art consultant, Michelle Luebker, were also supporters of the project. I was project director and historian on the team, which included graphic designer Sheila de Bretteville, artist Betty Saar and Susan King, and curator Donna Graves.

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: 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, was published in an edition of 25. 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 home and the house that became a 19-story building.

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 spoons of those embedded into the concrete. De Bretteville also included a picket fence around the home and agonies leaves and wagon wheels representing Mason’s walk to freedom from Missippi to California. Both her “Freedom Papers” and the deed to her house reflect in the historic documents and photographs located to limestone panels.

Fourth, we produced an expansive poster, “Grandma Mason’s Place: A Midwife’s Home,” also designed by de Bretteville. Historical text I wrote for the poster included midwives’ folk remedies. Finally, my article, “Biddy Mason’s Los Angeles, 1856-1891,” appeared in California History in fall 1989.

The pieces share common imagery: gnarled vines 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 of 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

Sheila de Bretteville.

Biddy Mason: Time and Place.

1985.

Photo courtesy The 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.R. Jackson suggested in *The Incertitude 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 pattern, such as Chinese-American gateways and underground passages, or Latino mar-

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4. Jackson, J.R. *The Incertitude for Ruins*. 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. 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.
Territorial history are perhaps the most complicated part of the ethnic cultural landscape to research. Territoriality is a term geographers use, 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 1920s and 1930s 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 crowding newspaper like the Los Angeles Eagle, whose editor took up fair housing. In this context, these buildings can become more visible 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 pre-fabricated housing factory and garment factories, as well as midwivens 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 preservation...
tourists 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. 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 equitable 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 of Place would like to help create.

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Notes


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