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Lessons About Projecting the Metropolis

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Abstract
The city is an object of study, a site of practice, a material artifact of power, and the locus of the imaginary. It is a cultural formation, warranting attention from anthropologists along with many others. It eludes disciplining. It resists singular descriptions. It condemns us to work together. This essay considers the particular ways in which the city can serve as an object of scholarly investigation, dealing with research experiences carried out at UCLA and setting new methodological proposals in the field of spatial ethnography.

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Formulating the urban

The city is the political terrain of our collective lives, where we live in geographic proximity to people unlike ourselves, negotiating the varied understandings that comprise our coexistence[1]. As such, the city is an object of study, site of practice, material artifact of power, and locus of the imaginary. It is a cultural formation, warranting attention from anthropologists along with many others: architects, planners, filmmakers, novelists, artists, philosophers, economists, and sociologists. Indeed, the city cannot keep anyone out. It eludes disciplining. It resists singular descriptions. It condemns us to work together.

This essay considers the particular ways in which the city can serve as an object of scholarly investigation. Because the city is undisciplined, it calls for creative practices among unlikely collaborators who not only interpret the past and analyze contemporary circumstances, but, as I will argue, operate with an imperative to speculate about the future.

The practices of urban scholars productively gravitate toward ways of thinking together that are as undisciplined as their object. At one important juncture – the boundary between architecture and anthropology – we find hybrid forms of investigation, documentation, and representation that encourage humanist urban study. And while there are urgent problems facing the city, the intersection between architecture and anthropology is not where we find solutions, but possibility.

Three bodies of research comprise the foundations for this line of thought: the first concerns the politics of architecture in the city, the second explores mixed practices of urban research and design; and the last, centers on global cities that require new pedagogies to jump the wall separating the university from the city. Working on and in the city creates uncanny bonds that have the power to challenge the way we, as well as the university, organize knowledge. The methods of urban investigation, documentation, and representation have arisen from a range of disciplines through ongoing work my colleagues at UCLA and I are undertaking as part of the Mellon-sponsored Urban Humanities Initiative[2]. Urban humanities is a proto-field with a project-based pedagogy that builds a collaborative network between architecture, urban studies, and the humanities (including anthropology), in order to understand the history, contemporary circumstances, and possible futures of cities. Like anthropological fieldwork, scholarship 'takes place' in the world outside the academy, and like architecture, disciplinary practice involves speculating about the future. In urban humanities, architecture's speculative project infuses anthropology's ethnographic practices with a mandate to imagine the city we want to inhabit.

In what architectural theorist Mark Wigley calls its mythic form, the city is a premodern construct: a medieval, walled, civilized, secure inside that stands against an unbounded, insecure, wild beyond (Wigley, 2002). This tacit imaginary resides comfortably in the Eurocentric ideal types of Paris, London, and New York, and locates its counterexamples in places

1 - This definition is drawn from several sources that include Aureli, 2016; Hajer, Reijndorp, 2001; Beck, 2009.

2 - Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Urban Humanities Initiative at UCLA is led by myself and Professors Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Todd Presner, and Maite Zubiaurre.

like Los Angeles, Mexico City, Shanghai, and Lagos. But these alter-urbanities are the very sites that intrigue contemporary scholars, and beg for new formats of understanding and action. Those new formats uncover threads that bind everyday life in cities, and thus the cities themselves, together. The ancient historical roots of migratory urbanity between Mexico City to Los Angeles, for example, remains embodied, transnational, and intimate. Its forms are tied more tightly to The Laws of the Indies than Haussmann; its peoples live in perpetually unbounded, insecure space; they are potentially neither home or away. Any proposal for a new border wall echoes into this complex narrative.

How can we practice as humane urbanists within such conditions? Urban anthropology, with its roots in urban sociology, might capture a piece of the action[3]. Fieldwork too, the anthropologist's defining, immersive practice, lends insight so long as we question notions of home and away, and how long an engagement is long enough. Anthropology also interjects the ethnographer's own positionality and the importance of narrative in ethnographic studies. All these methods use text-based narrative, whether that be description, creative fiction, or poetics, to represent knowledge, punctuated with the rare photograph or diagram (Clifford, 1986, pp. 1-26)[4].

Such practices require participation by the urban scholar, and yet politically deny her the possibility of transformative engagement, which Jennifer Wolch and I have described as the work of the "creative practitioner" (Cuff, Wolch, 2016, pp. 12-18). To unleash the urban scholar's agency means exploring the boundaries of more conventional anthropological methods, to examine the potential of hybrid, innovative practices deriving from architecture and the arts more broadly. In particular, these practices extend urban studies in two important directions: first, toward visual and material forms of representation, and second, toward speculations about the future. The latter rejects standard academic claims of neutrality or abstraction, to formulate ethical positions about possible futures. When the platforms for such positions are public in nature, the research can be transformative.

Ethnographic studies of architectural firms, both my own early work (Cuff, 1991) and more recently, that of Albena Yaneva (2009), reveal that design ideas stem not from decisions or conceptual breakthroughs, as would be expected. Instead, design originates in the day-to-day practices of talking, drawing, model-making, and negotiating. To construct new understandings, the researcher must stay close to the action no matter how mundane and pay attention to the props, the materials of communication, and the forms of representation. These are not tools per se, but McLuhanesque, reflexive media. 'Making sense' is a literal as well as metaphorical description of design, but it also describes other spatial practices: living in Tokyo, being a good neighbor, community policing, sidewalk vending, or becoming homeless in Los Angeles. Each practice is rehearsed through actions, with props, within networks of power, in

3 - Current conversations about the anthropology of infrastructure are relevant; see for example six articles on infrastructure collected by *Cultural Anthropology*, https://culanth.org/curated_collections/11-infrastructure (accessed 20.03.2017); Larkin, 2013, pp. 327-343.

4 - See also D. Cuff and A. Loukaitou-Sideris. *Neither here nor there*, "Boom: A Journal of California", vol. 6, n. 3, pp. 94-99.

particular settings, over time. To grasp and communicate something of the everyday life of cities, situated practices require not only spatial texts but other forms of representation like maps, videos, models, audio-recordings, and photographs. And if we agree with James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) that written ethnographies are political, contextual, contingent narratives, then these spatial representations are similarly implicated. The ways researchers document, record, communicate, and illustrate their work are constitutive. This has triggered a series of insights within urban humanities: utilizing representational systems, like video and mapping, that are not 'owned' by a particular discipline, opens channels for cross-disciplinary work; these spatial and visual systems thicken research formerly limited to text-based representations.

Evolution

My own practices portray the evolution of the relationship between cultural studies and architecture, and in particular, forms of political agency. My first body of research resulted in the book mentioned above about the architectural profession. During a year of anthropological fieldwork in architectural offices, I examined the interpersonal politics between architects and clients, concluding that design was a form of negotiation, expressed in drawings, models, conversation, and occasionally – decisions. An architectural team and a client group, for example, met to discuss their shared project over long periods of time, and these meetings guided the design's evolution, but not through direct decision-making, as I initially assumed. Power relations, persuasive skills, resistance, control of purse-strings – these political machinations and more were always at play.
That led to a second body of work based on archival research and interviews, which also produced a book. Expanding from interpersonal negotiations around design, the interactions between architects and the public came into focus – -moving to larger scale politics of housing, communities, city agencies, and elected officials. This was a search for moments within the process where design occurred – and by inference, the points of leverage where architecture is effective in political contexts. Mid-century city-wide debates about public housing in Los Angeles, for example, did not preclude hiring architects like Richard Neutra, Lloyd Wright, and Paul Williams – talented designers who worked with astute public clients to create strong projects in spite of tight budgets, strict regulations, and great controversy. What was less publicly documented, was the neighborhood demolition that cleared public housing sites. I later discovered a trove of photos, a single image for each house that would be demolished. Hundreds of property appraisal photos comprise a visual, spatial ethnography of domesticity, in which gardening, porch life, home maintenance, fencing, and the occasional face – all people of color – were inadvertently recorded. These images thickened the narrative about the design of public housing, which begins with violent decisions about what is not worth saving (Cuff, 2001).

After all this rather traditional cultural research into architecture and politics, the very practice of architecture itself suggested a new way into the study of urban culture. As a form of immersive action research, my colleague Roger Sherman and I founded a center called cityLAB. cityLAB initiates projects in which research-based design is the primary lever to create urban impacts that will proliferate, or generalize. At root, cityLAB is a restructuring of research into a kind of design practice. Rather than observing practice as an ethnographer, this research is all-in; those of us at cityLAB are among the stakeholders in each collaboration involving students, faculty from across the university, community activists, and policymakers. Now rather than an etic study – or study from the outside looking in, cityLAB represents an experiential body of research: an emic study from within.
As well as producing a set of research and design projects, cityLAB is also a means of testing ideas about the politics of architecture through projects. One prime example is 'Backyard Homes,' a study of how to double the density of the postsuburban, single-family zone that overlays most of Los Angeles. After almost a decade of project-based investigations, we understood not only the architectural issues related to material fabrication and available sites, but also knew the political landscape, and what citizens resisted or desired in different communities. Fieldwork in backyards all over the city and interviews with residents formed a kind of spatial ethnography of residential density. All this background led to my co-authoring the new California Accessory Dwelling Unit ordinance which became State law in January 2017 (R. Bloom, AB 2299).

cityLAB, therefore, represents an ethically contaminated form of scholarship because it draws conclusions not just about what exists, but how things *ought* to be. This would be anathema to traditional anthropology, which focuses its ethical foundations on issues around human subjects such as informed consent (Murray, n.d.). By contrast, the most fundamental components of the architectural discipline are the studio and design, in which creative spatial practices are intended to change the world to some degree. Architect Rem Koolhaas has called this the profession's dirty little secret, that every architect carries the utopian gene. To over-simplify: clients may ask architects to design their future built environment (a kind of informed consent), but architects add their own desire to design a better world. Since architecture is nearly always public (by that I mean, that it is publicly received and has public implications, such as environmental impacts), the client's consent is never sufficient. Architectural design is thus an ethical practice, which carries the responsibilities and pitfalls taking action in the world engenders. More information, a higher level of expertise, better knowledge of relevant conditions, a closer connection to the lives that will be affected – all these are foundations for design. But with Horst Rittel's notion of design as a wicked problem, there will never be sufficient information to come to the

"right" answer, yet the designer has no right to be wrong (Rittel, Horst, Webber, 1973, pp. 155-169).

But what if instead, urban humanists along with ethnographers, are expected to act upon the knowledge they produce, to create better cities? After studying a situated problem for years, such as the need for affordable housing or the ways urban infrastructure has divided communities, we might hope that some recommendations would be forthcoming. Indeed, the neighboring discipline of urban planning is largely directed toward the creation and evaluation of policy, which is a kind of design proposition. Put in the strongest terms: urban scholars who study the past and the present have no right to disregard the future.

This mandate of urban scholarship, to determine what to *make* of one's knowledge (literally and figuratively), is explained here as the marriage of architecture and anthropology. Although I have argued that we urban humanists are required to speculate about the future, the weaker case is that we have the ability to do so. That ability or mandate depends upon practices that will best engage scholars in the urban situation. Which leads to my current investigations, mentioned at the outset, the Mellon-sponsored Urban Humanities Initiative. This is basically a multidisciplinary curriculum, intended to investigate and train graduate students so that they might undertake more robust urban studies that afford confident, creative speculation. This requires careful consideration of methodology, and because no single discipline can confidently address the urban condition, the methods must be available to collaborating, crossdisciplinary teams. For the past five years at UCLA, my colleagues, students, and I have been deeply involved in the development of such scholarly practices. While the methods are not exactly new, they are rather unconventional. Most importantly, the methods proven to be most productive are those that reside at the margins, not 'owned' by any discipline but accessible and useful to many. These include spatial ethnography, thick mapping, filmic sensing, and socially engaged art (Crisman, Cuff *et al.*, forthcoming). The non-standard methods of urban humanities emanate from outside the Eurocentric city, in sites that demand new ways of seeing: Mexico City, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Los Angeles.

Methods for the urban humanist

In brief, the practice of spatial ethnography stems from anthropology but requires urban and architectural scholarship to grasp the potential of spatial analysis. The ethnographer is embedded in both the social and geographical milieus of a group, which can be called the cultural setting. Fieldwork of the anthropologist combines with the architect's standard practice called the site visit, to form the focus for narratives, historical excavation, and situated contemporary analysis. Consider Clifford Geertz's abundant spatial descriptions of the Balinese cock fight recounted in the *Interpretation of Cultures*, and how much richer it would be if we better understood the physical form and relational geography of those settings.

The potential of spatial ethnography quickly indicts standard data collection procedures like audio-recording, still photography, and note-taking, and leads instead to more creative representations of the research. Annette Kim's work on sidewalk vendors and Rebecca Solnit's city-and-map stories, are two examples of spatial ethnography depicted in fresh ways. Spatial information such as buildings, streets, and city-forms as well as the location of activities are annotated with rich narratological data from interviews, conversations, literature, signage, and so on. It turns out that multidisciplinary teams are particularly useful since architects, planners, and other humanists have relevant experience, though none is likely to have explored the broad capabilities of spatial ethnography.

Cartography is a natural ally of the spatial ethnographer, but measured building site plans and town maps are insufficient records of situated stories. The work of Todd Presner and his coauthors (2014) on "thick mapping" has become a staple of urban humanities, where this form of critical cartography continues to evolve. Thickness here refers not only to the idea of layers, but to the polyvocal construction of a city and to a density of information that stems from multiple disciplines. Thick mapping reveals something of its own construction, in its openness to participation and so that its different voices are acknowledged. In a fundamental sense, thick mapping is propositional in so far as its products are contingent, accessible, and cognizant of possibility. Laura Kurgan's 'Million Dollar Blocks,' maps that are part of the Graphical Innovation in Justice Mapping project, visually document complex data about the city-prison circuits where high percentages of residents are repeatedly incarcerated[5]. Thick mapping makes it possible to tell contested stories that reveal new dimensions about people and places.

A third means to explore the spatial-cultural world is called filmic sensing. Belonging to neither designers or anthropologists, video is the Esperanto of contemporary daily life. Regardless of their discipline, students come equipped with video-capable mobile phones and the facility to undertake simple movie-editing. The next step is to turn these practices into bonafide methods of data collection and thick story-telling. In urban humanities, this means incorporating archival images and found-footage, interactive mapping, along with documentary moving images. Urban filmmakers such as Neil Goldberg, J.P. Sniadecki, and Eric Cazdyn serve as models working to understand the potential of moving images as a sensing apparatus. At UCLA, we are pushing the medium to investigate its projective capacity, to show us possible cosmopolitan futures that our research implies.

A final, unconventional research method is borrowed from contemporary arts endeavors that are variously categorized as creative placemaking or social practice. The marriage of humanist studies like anthropology and history with design studies like architecture and planning begets ethically driven, action-oriented research. When such engaged scholarship includes arts practices, more creative, insightful, and contested

5 - See http://c4sr.columbia.edu/projects/architecture-and-justice (accessed 11.18.17).

realms can be explored. Locating research within the arts opens new directions for participation, so that scholarship's collaborative potential is enhanced. Within urban humanities, we have encouraged multiple forms of partnership between actors in Los Angeles and those in our sister-cities. In Mexico City, for example, we collaborated with Laboratorio para la Ciudad, an agency within the government, to find ways to make city streets safer for pedestrians. Together, we closed a street for 'Peatoniños' under the assumption that a street safe for children would be safer for all residents. This was a creative arts intervention in the city, with families and students together shutting out car traffic and 'liberating' the streets through drawing, play, and sports. The experimental intervention was thereafter developed into a citywide program (Vertiz, 2016).

In conclusion

The methodological strategies described above are fundamentally disruptions into academic structures, to see if more conventional arenas of academic practices (like anthropology and the humanities) and our more projective practices (in architecture) can create the means for the university to be more socially and politically engaged. The urban humanities project at UCLA is one of a number of similar experiments at the boundaries of the university, where it meets the city. In this sense, the city not just our object of study but the vehicle for advancing ways we can study its spaces and cultures.

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