Lending Articles

Borrower: RAPID:GZN
Call #: HT169.I52 C46 2017
Location: Watson Library Stacks - 1 West Stacks Map
Journal Title: Chandigarh rethink
Volume: Issue:
Month/Year: 2017
Pages:

Article Author: Arijit Sen
Article Title: Discarding Corb's Shoes: Rethinking Aesthetics and Authorship of Cities in the 21st Century

ILLiad TN: 1749968

Shipping Address:
NEW: Main Library
rapid

OCLC#: 994156196
ISSN#: 9781939621368
Discarding Corb’s Shoes: Marginal Voices and Local Histories from the Urban Edge

ARJIT SEN

ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a critical alternative to the Urban Edge Symposium’s goal of “stepping vicariously into Corb’s shoes” and argues that transforming notions of city and urbanity in the 21st century necessitates that we actually “forget Corb’s shoes”—at least initially—as a way to build the 21st century city. By rethinking authorship (who builds and who designs the urban tabula rasa) and aesthetics (what constitutes spatial and formal ordering) we may challenge the professional hierarchy of architects and planners in the way cities are conceived. The research therefore engages the concept of the urban edge by pointing towards a novel way of thinking about order and aesthetics as an emerging frontier of urban thinking and architectural design, beyond the narrowly conceived visual and aesthetic culture developed by modernist architects and planners that continue to frame much of contemporary professional work. Using example of events and projects in the city of Milwaukee the research argues how current practices may force professionals to reevaluate and redefine entrenched concepts of beauty, aesthetics, and authorship in the making of urban spaces and cultures. The new city no longer emerges from the plan and sketch in an designer’s office to be defined and preserved for perpetuity; rather it begins with, what the SARUP Urban Edge calls, “visceral urbanity,” a concept that requires us to rethink the design process as we know it.

For architects and planners, urban design has always been a holistic process, a process where the big picture is the goal as well as a point of origin. Corbusier’s design of Chandigarh and subsequent scholarship on the city’s urbanism continue to take this universal point of view beginning with a view from the top - distant, objective, and cartographic. Chandigarh’s plan, a proto-anthropomorphic grid shifted in order to accommodate existing settlement and topographical conditions, is ensconced within a mountaineous terrain with a green corridor running through it. This grid-form urban layout tends to be fetishized and is often used as a rhetorical point of entry to any discussion of the city’s overall relationship to the region. The map of Chandigarh and its cartographic logic lead any explanation of the organization of the residential, administrative, commercial, and recreational territories, as well as the lived experience of the city itself.

This paper suggests a critical alternative to the Urban Edge Symposium’s goal of “stepping vicariously into Corb’s shoes” and asks, that given transforming understandings of city and urbanity in the 21st century, what happens if we “forget Corb’s shoes” as the initial point of entry into a discussion of Chandigarh? Will that allow us to dramatically rethink Chandigarh as a twenty-first century city or will such a move be futile? What would our analysis look like if we rethink authorship - is the city also produced by those who live in it or is it the sole product of a designer or planner’s vision? I argue that the city no longer emerges from a plan and sketch in an designer’s office to be defined and preserved for perpetuity; rather it begins with “visceral urbanity,” a concept that requires us to rethink the design process as we know it. When we juxtapose these two forms of urban productions we begin to get a better understanding of urbanity.
Much has changed in urban historiography in the last 50 years. Globalization, resurgent local resistance, an emerging DIY culture, new technologies, social media, movement of people, and new infrastructures have transformed urban living in the new century. These changes frame the way in which scholars such asAboumaliq Simone, Susan Ossman, Brian Larkin, Jeffrey Hou, or Ash Amin—emerging from vastly different disciplines and contexts—describe cities as visceral, contingent, emerging geographies of urban analysis in order to offer a critical alternative to the ongrass-roots storytelling and examine how such methods produce urban cartography.

The following narrative is not about Chandigarh. It’s content is centered around Milwaukee, a city distant from the latter, geographically, culturally, and politically. But discussion methods, or ways of seeing that frame our knowledge of Milwaukee even though Chandigarh and Milwaukee may not be comparable case studies, this may contribute to the way we study other cities, including Chandigarh.

Methods: Maps versus Stories

Central to our discussion is the question of epistemology: how we know, we know, what we know. For an architect interested in urban landscapes it means that we need to enrich our ways of seeing, deciphering, and judging these landscapes.

When we view contemporary urban space in the form of plans, maps, and aggregate data we miss an aspect of urbanity that this point of view renders invisible, perhaps intentionally. The point of view that remains masked is the human experience of the city, a view from the ground, that suggests that everyday world-making produces a transitory, fragmented, and perspectival worlds that, at first glance, seems to lack coherence. Different individuals know and construe their city in personal ways, and diverse mental maps of the city and its neighborhoods. An architect or planner’s analysis at the urban scale misses everyday dissident practices of the human bodies, what Michel de Certeau terms tactics of daily life.

The history of Corbusier’s Chandigarh with the attendant cartographic analysis points towards a geographical logic that is distinctly different from the daily paths and words of urban residents. Yet in fact, these two urban imaginations—on paper and top down and another, informal and bottom up—coexist. Saskia Sassen, points towards “analytic moments when two systems of representation intersect. Such analytic moments are easily experienced as spaces of silence, of absence.

They are analytic borderlands whereby discontinuities are given a terrain rather than being reduced to a dividing line. Juxtaposing these two geographies renders an urban edge where two forms of urbanism meet—traditional and tactical, two forms of representation—specialized versus the quotidien, two kinds of aesthetics, visual and formal versus social and everyday, and two kinds of experiences, visual and visceral. A powerful story of disjuncture between the two modes of reading a city emerges when we examine a visitors map produced by the city of Milwaukee in order to promote tourism (Image 1). The Visit Milwaukee tourist map tells us the official story of Milwaukee’s neighborhoods. It identifies historic and cultural attractions located along three rivers and a lake, rendering the historic growth of this riverine city—at least the history that the city’s grand storyteller John Gura likes to tell. This map invests certain urban neighborhoods such as the Historic Third Ward, Walker’s Point, and Brady Street with positive values, meanings, and histories, and delineates them as historically significant. However the urban description is not quite complete, because a dark gray section in the Visit Milwaukee map remains unmarked. This gray zone raises critical questions. Why does life seem to stop, tourism seem to end, and land seem to disappear into a void in this unmarked region? Is this a territory that should be speedily passed over via a freeway marked in red or is this a merely land we need to cross in order to reach Wauwatosa, also marked as a destination on this map?

Coincidentally this cartographic erasure points us towards a more pernicious reality. If we compare the extents of this gray zone to a racial dot map of the city—an aggregate map produced using census data—we discover that the Visit Milwaukee’s map correlates with race, income distribution and wealth. The neighborhoods that hold some of the most affluent parts of the city and have majority white residents correspond to those spaces marked prominently as destination points in the Visit Milwaukee map. The tourist map leaves out large parts of the city that happens to be neighborhoods with urban poor and racial minorities such as African Americans, Hmong, and Burmese. The stories, views, life, heritage, hard work, and struggles of those who are some of the most valiant citizens are not showcased in the official guide map of the city and neither are the architectural and cultural heritage of these neighborhoods celebrated in this rendition of Milwaukee’s history. Aggregate maps crafted from census data, crime data, housing data, or environmental and geographic data tell us little more about the gray zone than what we already know: that the gray zones are minority-heavy, low income, high tenancy, low housing stock, and crime ridden neighborhoods. Sans any other narrative the gray zone remains known as a lumpen territory of disinvestment, decay, and blight, a "single story" of Milwaukee’s segregated neighborhoods.

Image 2:
The Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures summer field school @ UWM, 2014. Photo Credit: BLC Field School
This is where storytelling enters as a bottom-up strategy of historiography. Community storytellers render grassroots urban histories that are written from the margins. Analysis of stories narrated by local residents is a common strategy used by public historians to capture the diverse experience of living in urban neighborhoods. Urban histories emerging from place-stories are also noted by preservation scholar Ned Kaufman who calls them storyscapes. He calls upon urbanists, historians, and folklorists to help craft standards and methodologies “that capture the power of stories” in “heritage conservation.” Scholars have demonstrated that people and buildings are repositories of stories of stewardship and heritage, and stories of places narrated by local residents render visible dreams and aspirations of people whose voices are often ignored in planning discussions. Although, stories cannot solely generate a more equitable and sustainable discourse in the face of apathy, disinvestment, and neoliberal policies, nevertheless, they have the power to bring communities together. As Henry Louis Taylor Jr. puts it, when disparate strands of stories are collected and organized, there is “a synergy between people, physical and social environments. People are connected to their neighborhoods and each other, so these connections must be acknowledged and taken into account.” Storytelling also produces accounts of the human body in everyday life, that elsewhere I call embodied placemaking. Such stories produce an alternate kind of urban knowledge that may inform planners and urban designers engaged in collaborative and engaged practices such as tactical urbanism, performative urbanism, or integral urbanism.

Picturing Milwaukee: An alternative epistemology

Since 2012, Project Picturing Milwaukee (thefieldschool.weebly.com) has explored urban historiography from the margins (Image 2). This project uses storytelling as way to write urban histories of Milwaukee and examine how these alternative histories, in turn, can help us transform local landscapes. Between 2014-16 the project concentrated on collecting place-based stories from Washington Park, a 20th Century streetcar suburb, now part of Milwaukee’s segregated inner city, located on the northeastern edge of the metropolis. We collected oral histories from residents describing their physical environments, urban heritage, and personal accounts of Milwaukee’s history and urban culture (Image 3). We also examined the built environment as a cultural artifact and social catalyst (Image 4, 6). We approached the material world not as mere containers of human activities, but instead, as an active agent influencing urbanity, human behavior, settlement patterns, and cultural activities. In other words our urban storytelling strategies involved collecting stories from local residents and local places, both voices otherwise marginal in the city. In this way our methods of urban historiography claimed to borrow from narratives from the urban edge.

Grassroots storytelling also involved crowdsourcing where digital media and smartphone technologies provided new innovative and multidisciplinary methods of data collection, curating, and dissemination (Image 5). We used technologies of digital indexing and organizing of information in order to very quickly extract storyclips from the interviews. We used Pixistor, an iPhone-based digital application that captured soundscapes and human narrations of place and superimposed these audios over images of places (http://biclfieldschool2014.weebly.com/forum.html). Displayed on a public website we were successful in rendering audio-visual architectural histories and place stories directly to a wide cross section of non-expert audience. Stories generated a grassroots dialog and people responded by sending us their stories of their neighborhood and their unique urban experiences. This multi-year iterative spatial and ethnographic process generated new knowledge about ways local residents construct and construe the urban built environment. Because this was an interdisciplinary and collaborative process that engaged local artists, architects, students, scholars, neighborhood residents, institutions, and activists, we found it necessary to rethink authorship (who builds and designs the city or who recounts and writes its history) and aesthetics (what constitutes spatial and formal ordering) in ways that challenged the professional hierarchy and creative agency of architects and planners. Our knowledge of the city no longer emerged from the plan and sketch, rather we saw the design process as narratives from the margins or edges.
Lessons from the urban edge: Plotting urban relations

Hayden White proposes “that to write a history meant to place an event within a context, by relating it as a part to some conceivable whole.” He called this act of historiography, “emplotment,” or assembling a series of historical events into narrative genres with a plot. We quickly discovered that grassroots urban histories from the margins too tended to revolve around central plots and followed particular narrative genres as discussed by White. Individual stories describing the city could be extracted from interviews and related to a host of other similar stories with narrative strategies and plots. In other words, these stories were in conversation with each other and they could be plotted within a larger thematic matrix. These alternate to urban mapping and master planning (http://blicfieldschool2014.weebly.com/relationships-and-ties.html).

Stories of human lived experience of Washington Park, suggested that urban space territorial demarcations produced by governmental and policy bodies. The latter wards, and neighborhood boundaries. These ‘official maps’ help organize the city imaginaries culled from narratives and stories of lived experiences challenged, transgressed, and breached the official chorographies.

The stories we heard were not simply accounts of selves, that is, individuals’ location in this world or a collection of personal memories. They were ways by which people participated and acted in this world, forms by which they mapped a city made up of social networks. We met a variety of residents: recent immigrants such as Sahara who is Somali and Proctor Yang who is Hmong, or long-term African American residents such as Rosalind Cox and Ulisses and Barbara Brown who lived in the neighborhood for 30 years, white residents such as Lois Luglio, who was born here, and Dave Boucher who owns a popular neighborhood café (See http://blicfieldschool2014.weebly.com/people.html).

Each of these individuals mapped ‘their’ physical city in different ways. They charted the residences of their neighbors, co-workers, church groups, and co-ethnics. They described settings and sites that were associated with their social networks and everyday life. Their mental maps of the city varied over time. For instance, their world on holidays differed essentially from their world on weekdays. Much like the “psychogeography” maps of the twenty-first-century Situationists, the city space of Washington Park was mapped by the words, memories, emotions, and actions of its diverse residents.

These disparate, value-laden, spatial networks were not idiosyncratic, isolated geographies experienced by individuals. Rather they overlapped and coincided at points that people had in common – producing true public nodes. At Washington Park we met Dave Boucher who manages one such node common to multiple narratives about relationships and ties. His café is a place where diverse individuals meet each other and create strong or weak bonds (Image 7). We also identified other public nodes such as an interconnected network of urban gardens and agricultural lands farmed by individuals, groups, institutions, and small farms. These spaces brought together Hmong elders, African American entrepreneurs, young adults, and Anglo volunteers from outside the neighborhood. Sahara, Rosalind, Proctor, and Dave’s stories coalesced around these garden plots. Recently, Washington Park residents officially connected these productive garden spaces to create their own urban agriculture tour – a new geography that connected these locations within a coherent map created by the residents (Image 8).
Biologists and animal ecologist call such territorial reticulations as home ranges, or turfs where an organism lives and visits on a regular basis. The way our respondents described their home range demonstrated that they straddled multiple worlds, within which they operated on a daily basis. The cities reproduced by Sahara, Proctor, Barbara, or Lois were different from the neat and well-defined grid maps, the neatly delineated GIS (geographical information system) property records from the City of Milwaukee, or the gridded plans of Corbusier’s Chandigarh. Rather the view from the urban edges was multiple, disjointed, blurred, and overlapping. While each point in an urban grid in official city maps are equivalent, individual sites or nodes within mental map are weighted, valued, and charged with memories and meanings.

Our continuing semantic analysis helped us identify some key values that underpinned the ways residents mentally mapped these spaces (http://brcfieldschool2014.weebly.com/forum.html). One such concept is “relationships and ties.” As examples of Hayden White’s historiographical “emplotments,” stories of real places, people, and buildings in Washington Park were wedded around this term, implicating spatial networks of places. These places gave material structure and order to human relationships within this community. Despite a common plot-line each individual described their world from different points of view and perspectives. Hannah Arendt, speaking of the public realm refers to this commonality when she says that “to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.” Yet she hastens to remind us that “though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.” The city became a “world in common” yet produced by a “plurality of perspectives.”

Conclusions: Why narratives from the margins matter?

The narratives from Washington Park demonstrate how transiently occupied spaces make their temporary presence felt more permanently within a collective memory and a collective geographical imagination of residents. These stories of geographical imaginings coalescing around residents’ ‘emplotments’ of urbanity contests the singular histories proposed by hagiographies built around designers (such as Corbusier, Kahn, or Koolhaas) or around formative acts of government and planning bodies. But in order to capture the former narratives of this urban edge we need to move beyond opticentrisn, i.e. our overdependence on the visual at the expense of the textual, historical, tactical, olfactory, sonic, or gustatory conditions. We have to rethink our ways of reading and interpreting cities and urban public places in ways that account for the workings of power and everyday resistance, guerilla appropriation of authorship and ownership of place, and local insurgencies against the silent hand of powerful ideologies and ontologies.

Saskia Sassen, talking about a growing popularity of tactical urbanism practices and new forms of urban action explains that “current conditions in global cities are creating not only new structurizations of power but also operational and rhetorical openings for new types of actors and their projects.” By that she means that cities offer opportunities for the powerless and the subaltern to make their presence felt, that “while many of today’s urban struggles are highly localized, they actually represent a form of global engagement; their globality is constituted as a horizontal, multi-sited recurrence of similar struggles in hundreds of cities worldwide.” The residents and other non-expert stakeholders often make their presence felt on urban space. The urban agriculture tour on the use of Amaranth Café described above suggest such alternative and counternarratives. These urban experiences may actually have something in common with similar practices and experiences of urban dwellers across the world. Therefore Washington Park stories open up ways to link myriad, horizontal, empowering possibilities of social action and new forms of urbanism.

I want to end with a related proposition that we rethink how we understand aesthetics in order to render visible these alternate urbanisms. It requires a shift in our interpretive vantage point to move towards an expanded discussion of aesthetics as a way to understand and experience our world. Ben Higmore’s reading of Terry Eagleton suggests that “aesthetics, in its initial impetus, is primarily concerned with material experiences, with the way the sensual world greets the sensate body, and with the affective forces that are generated in such meetings. ... It is attuned to forms of perception, sensation, and attention; to the world of the senses; and to the body.” Aesthetics is also highly political and contested. Higmore refers to Jacques Rancière’s use of the term “the distribution of the sensible” as “a dynamic arena constantly managed by the policing activities of forces bent on maintaining what and who will be visible and invisible and constantly disrupted by aesthetic and political acts that will redistribute the field of social perception.” Therefore benchmarks of taste, practices of design, connoisseurship, and the sensory presence and visibility are contested terrains. The narratives from Washington Park point towards the emerging and presencing of a new aesthetic, it also points towards the failure of traditional forms of aesthetic evaluation that is predominantly visual and formal - and based on object-form and top-down expert knowledge of architects. If we were to reconsider aesthetics, we would have to rethink our dependency on the visual, formal, and the architectural object as a tabula rasa, turning instead towards the human body and the transient, experiential, and somatic acts of placemaking, we can’t begin with Corb’s shoes. Instead, we have to begin with the acts of everyday placemaking, tactical urbanism, and social aesthetics that reconfigures grid, place, and urbanity in contemporary Chandigarh.

2. During the 2014 Urban Edge symposium, Dr. Manu Sultih used the term “vulgar urbanity” to refer to the quotidian, embodied and dramaturgical experience of the city.


14. Our curriculum draws upon the ethics of collaborative storytelling by encouraging scholars and community residents to discuss common values and narratives that are important and central to both parties. Collaborative ethnographer Joanne Rappaport calls this co-ethnography or a “collaborative approach” a “collaborative approach” as developed by our interlocutors from local non-specialists. This form of collaborative ethnography suggests that we conduct research and thinking in ways that reduce the gap between long-term “look over the shoulder of our informants ...” but rather “look with them ...” Such an outlook instead community members are collaborators and co-participants in the making of new knowledge and a laboratory. That context is what we at BLC call the “field ...” Joanne Rappaport. “Beyond Participant Observation Collaborative Ethnography as Theoretical Innovation” in Collaborative Anthropologies 1 (2009), p. 1:13.

15. The project began as a summer immersive field school that was offered jointly by the Buildings-Landscape-Cultures (BLC) field school initiative, a joint electoral level initiative between the Department of Art History, University of Wisconsin Madison and the Department of Architecture, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Since 2009, students and scholars associated with the BLC field school have collected and interrogated our fieldwork, developing new visions such as civic pride. We speak to residents, but we also talk to buildings and landscapes—the material world that is often overlooked as mute—but they too tell us stories of heritage, values, struggles, and resistances. See www.FieldSchool. weeby.com.


18. Arjilt Sen did additional studies where she asked the research participants to draw cognitive maps of their neighborhood. She discovered that these scholars too developed their own maps of this neighborhood as a result of their engagement with the local residents. See Arin Gorsch. Enacting Place: A Comparative Case Study, Theses and Dissertations. Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 2015.


References


