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### ***The Shapes of Time***

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Outside the doors of history museums, urban terrain reveals the shapes of political and economic life to those who can decode buildings and landscapes. Skyscraper downtowns, office parks, big box stores, and subdivisions capture the material emphases of our time; we glimpse the spatial priorities of earlier eras in older buildings that have survived by chance or preservation. Traditionally historic preservation has been a field dominated by architects and architectural historians whose lists of landmarks have favored residences, clubs, and places of business owned by the wealthy and designed by celebrated architects. Some architectural preservationists argue for saving elegant buildings as high culture, some suggest preservation promotes economic growth through real estate values or tourism. But what about the interpretation of urban history through preservation? Many historians would agree broad themes in American urban history are usually not well represented in lists of designated landmarks, even though those lists have expanded to include some vernacular buildings in recent decades.

Neglect has generated protest--where are the Native American, African American, Latino, and Asian American landmarks? Where are the workers? Where is women's history as

part of preservation? Why are the few women honored almost never women of color? Where are the slave markets, kitchenette buildings, factories, schools, and prisons to show future generations how space was divided for labor and life? And where are the rare neighborhoods or streets or buildings whose diverse residents challenged the stereotypes of racial and economic segregation?

The politics of identity--however they may be defined around race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or neighborhood--are inescapable when dealing with historic urban environments. Architecture, as a discipline basic to historic preservation, has not often given enough weight to these political issues, while historians have often ignored space and design, yet it is the volatile combination of politics and space, intertwined in controversies about inequality, that makes urban projects so challenging.

In poor and working class urban neighborhoods, what, if anything, can historic preservation projects add? When bulldozers have battered American urban landscapes, people of color have been the most frequent victims, losing businesses, homes, and communities to highways and urban renewal, devastation captured in Francesca Ammon's book, *Bulldozer*.<sup>1</sup> Working class residents of color have also suffered when more affluent buyers have displaced long-time residents from older buildings and neighborhoods. Gentrification through architectural renovation has disrupted attachment to urban places and amplified the losses from demolition, as Fitzhugh Brundage argues in *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Francesca Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance in the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008).

Change is not simply a matter of recognizing urban diversity, acknowledging the losses to communities of color from clearance and gentrification, or correcting bias toward the architectural legacy of wealth and power. It is not enough to add a few African American, Latino, Asian American, or Native American preservation projects, or a few women's projects, to the landmarks lists. The intersections of multiple identities—gender, race, and class—need to be addressed along with the bitter memories.

In the non-profit called The Power of Place I founded in Los Angeles in 1983, and in my book, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, I suggested the framework of livelihood to encompass urban spatial history.<sup>3</sup> Livelihood includes both paid work and the unpaid work of nurturing, so a broad itinerary of urban livelihoods reveals the labor behind any city's economic growth. I proposed an itinerary of sites in downtown Los Angeles to represent the work of men, women, and children, Native American, African American, Latino, Asian American, and white, from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup>, as vineyards, citrus groves, produce markets, and commercial flower fields gave way to oil fields, garment factories, and pre-fabricated housing factories. Bitter experiences—including segregation, deportation, internment, and dispossession—accompanied the struggle for subsistence in the city.

Inspired by public history projects such as Jack Tchen's "Eight Pound Livelihood" on Chinese laundry workers, I was in search of a way to spatialize "cultural citizenship," as Tchen defined it, "an identity that is formed not out of legal membership but out of a sense of cultural belonging."<sup>4</sup> He and Rina Benmayor suggested public culture needs to acknowledge and respect

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<sup>3</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> John Kuo Wei Tchen, "The Chinatown-Harlem Initiative: Building a Multicultural Understanding in New York City," in Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, eds., *Building Bridges:*

diversity, while reaching beyond multiple and sometimes conflicting national, ethnic, gender, race, and class identities to encompass larger common themes, such as the migration experience, the breakdown and reformulation of families, or the search for a new sense of identity in an urban setting. They asked for an extremely subtle evocation of American diversity, which at the same time reinforces a sense of common membership in an American, urban society.

My contribution as an urban landscape historian was to emphasize how public space might help to nurture more inclusive memories of urban history. Yet, the power of place--the power of ordinary urban landscapes to stimulate citizens' memories, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory—still remains untapped for most working people in most American cities. To capture the power of place, to restore significant shared meanings, requires claiming the urban landscape as a material expression of political history and then finding ways to interpret older patterns that are recognizable in the current flow of city life. In Los Angeles, I and my UCLA graduate students at the Power of Place (including Margaret Crawford, Gail Dubrow, Donna Graves, Cathy Gudis, Daniel Hernandez, Susan Sztaray, and many others) ran public history workshops where we discussed remembrance with workers and retirees, firefighters, midwives, flower growers, and garment workers, among others, efforts that went on for about a decade. We partnered with UCLA's ethnic studies centers as well as community institutions—that's when I met Lonnie Bunch, then head of the California Afro-American Museum.

We created a walking and driving tour of downtown livelihoods; reinterpreted existing landmarks to recover ethnic, women's, and labor history; proposed new landmarks of the same

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*The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 189.

kind; and added public art to remember workers where no structures survived.<sup>5</sup> An African American midwife, a former slave, Biddy Mason, was the subject for one of the first public art projects. As a pioneer and single parent head of a family, she was recognizable; as a working woman of color, she expanded the story of city-building as boosters had told it. Works by artists Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Betye Saar, and Susan E. King helped recover the memory of her life as a midwife who delivered hundreds of babies and was one of the founders of the local First African Methodist Episcopal Church. Three organizers, Rose Pesotta, Luisa Moreno, and Josefina Fierro de Bright anchored the second project. They came from Russia, Guatemala, and Mexico. As immigrants their stories were familiar; as working women, two of color, they made the story of union building and community building far more complex and contentious. More details of LA work from that decade can be found in my book—the archival research that grounded it, the collaboration across fields, the projects we were able to do and the ones we could not, the efforts at remembrance by other individuals and groups that followed us, storytellers, authors, artists, museum curators, and preservationists in LA and elsewhere.

Thirty years later more activist groups are committed to community involvement in preservation, public history, and public art. More surveys of landmarks of ethnic and women's history are available. More projects involving labor history have succeeded, as well as more public art celebrating women workers. Presenting urban contexts has become easier: today even bulldozed places can be marked to restore some public meaning through digital maps and technologies that reconstruct and present spatial history on portable devices. Among the current efforts in Los Angeles public history that I admire, Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy

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<sup>5</sup>How could we fail to nudge LA's numbers? In 1986, 98% of the official landmarks celebrated Anglo American history, and 96% men's history.

Cheng's *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*, is an illustrated guidebook to sites of struggle in the wider urban region around race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Calling themselves the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, historians Jenny Price and Cathy Gudis appear in costumes similar to National Park Service rangers, and they perform both in art museums and in the urban landscape along with several other historians, geographers, and activists "to spark creative explorations of everyday habitats, in our home megalopolis and beyond."<sup>6</sup> There are People's Guides in the works for several other cities and the Rangers have inspired other performance groups.

2016 is the fiftieth anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act. Max Page and Marla R. Miller's edited collection of essays, *Bending the Future: 50 Ideas for the Next 50 Years of Historic Preservation*, details current projects interpreting sites of ethnic and women's history across the country as well as dozens of proposals make to preservation more inclusive.<sup>7</sup> And yet, some recent textbooks for students of preservation in architecture and planning include very little besides architectural history. Neglect narrows the audience for any kind of preservation or interpretation. Urban livelihoods, the economic heart of city life, form the shapes of time. It takes political, historical, and spatial imagination to locate the buildings and landscapes where narratives of livelihood, can be interpreted to project their most enduring meanings for the city as a whole.

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<sup>6</sup>Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng, *A People's Guide to Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); [www.laurbanrangers.org](http://www.laurbanrangers.org).

<sup>7</sup> Max Page and Marla L. Miller, eds., *Bending the Future: 50 Ideas for the Next 50 Years of Historic Preservation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

