Embodied Placemaking in Urban Public Spaces, Part 1
A symposium

For this academic year, the Center’s annual conference has taken the guise of a two-part symposium, Embodied Placemaking in Urban Public Spaces. Part 1, organized by Arijit Sen (Architecture) and Lisa Silverman (History), featured the architectural historians Swati Chattopadhyay (UC, Santa Barbara) and Jennifer Cousineau (Parks Canada); professor of religious studies, Charlotte Fonrobert (Stanford), in absentia; urban planner and artist James Rojas (Latino Urban Forum); the folklorist Joseph Sciorra (Queens College); and professor of urban affairs, Karen Till (Virginia Tech).

Arijit Sen introduced the symposium by providing background on the term “embodied placemaking.” Tracing its roots back to Heidegger’s concept of Dasein (being-in-the-world), which emphasizes the “dialectical, constitutive relationship between people and their physical environment,” Sen noted that the term “placemaking” became more common in the 1970s as architects and urban planners used it to describe “the ways the human body engages with the material world” and the ways individuals then invest meaning, identity, and sensory experiences with the material. Integrating “embodiment” with “placemaking” allows one “to identify human agency in the social production and construction of place.” For the conference organizers, embodied placemaking is “the primary way by which societies and social systems reproduce themselves.”

The opening panel was devoted to the Politics of Place. Swati Chattopadhyay, in her paper “Visualizing the Body Politic,” investigated the materiality of political space by using India’s recent ban on political wall writing (“clean walls equal clean elections”) to question both the instituting of a “normative urban visuality” and the political subjectivity that underlies such a policy. The banning of this long-running Indian activity—the legibility of political wall writing in India is different from the illegibility of graffiti—marks the move of democracy from the streets to the parlors of the privileged.
In “Vernacular Exegesis of the Gentrifying Gaze: Saints, Hipsters, and Public Space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn,” Joseph Sciorra zeroed in on the “super-gentrification” of Brooklyn’s Williamsburg area. Once a multi-ethnic, working class neighborhood, “the burgeoning bohemian culture of hipsters has greatly shifted power relations in regards to public life and local identity.” This shift is most visible through the many religious processions of the Italian-American Catholics, held since the 1880s: the hipsters, for instance, have no desire to be part of the Catholic community—they snap photographs of processions like they were at Disneyland—and they equate the tradition of donating money during the processions with public panhandling. Although many aspects of this gentrification have been detrimental to the Italian-American community, it has also brought with it accelerating home values and a youthful energy.

To open the second panel, Making Jewish Space, Lisa Silverman provided an extended definition of the Jewish eruv, a ritualized aggregation of properties that allows observant Jews to carry objects beyond the boundary of the home. Charlotte Fonrobert, who was unable to attend at the last second, had her paper, “Marking Boundaries: The Politics of Mapping Neighborhoods,” read by Silverman. Although historians have typically seen urban Jewish space—e.g., the Jewish quarter, ghetto, and mellah—as examples of confinement, segregation, or exclusion from “the right to the city” (David Harvey), Fonrobert suggested that the eruv “lent diasporic Jews a coherence to collective dwelling in cities not their own.” In other words, the Jewish eruv can be read as not being merely enforced by others, but as “a tactic of diaspora.”

Jennifer Cousineau’s paper, “Rabbinic Urbanism as an Index to Popular Belief in Late 20th Century London,” focused on the establishment, 18 years in the making, of the eruv in London’s North West district. As a sacred space, the London eruv demonstrates the way contemporary Jews relate to the holy, and to each other, collectively and individually, in a distinctly urban space.

In the afternoon session, Civic Performances, James Rojas spoke about the many interactive urban planning workshops he has run since 2007. After working as an urban planner for many years, Rojas felt there was a disconnect between the way urban planners thought about re-casting the city (“too bureaucratic”) and the way people lived and navigated the city, so he came up with these workshops to get people to think about what it means to “make place.” For these workshops, Rojas’s preferred medium is toys—and plenty of toys!—to help participants design their own idealized public spaces, “to engage materially with the concept of placemaking.” Because these sessions are generally considered fun, participants across all sorts of demographic lines tend to break down barriers and talk with one another. Rojas’s ultimate goal with these workshops is to get
people involved at governmental levels to inject some humanity into the bureaucracy.

Karen Till, who considers herself a “cultural geographer,” next presented her paper, “Witnessing and Performing Place: Memory Traces of Displacement in Wounded Cities.” Her main interest is with artists and performers who work collaboratively with communities—especially those communities marked by violence, injustice, economic blight, and displacement—to represent and respect their “memory traces.” She focused particularly on the Colombian-based artistic collaborative, Mapa Teatro, whose Proyecto C’undua is a testimonial to the vanishing of the historic Santa Inés-El Cartucho barrio of downtown Bogotá. Long a place that housed modest shopkeepers, most were displaced by violent criminals selling drugs and guns, then the entire area was razed to create the green—but largely unused!—spaces of the Third Millenium Park. Over four years, Mapa Teatro worked with former residents to revisit the space and to create maps, memory books, and several performance pieces. For Till, these sorts of artistic practices “treat ground as inhabited space rather than property,” and create a threshold through which “the living can make contact with those who have gone before. Through embodied creative processes, residents and visitors, even if only momentarily, become witnesses to, rather than spectators of, practices of memory and placemaking.”

At the conclusions of the morning and afternoon panels, symposium speakers and audience alike were treated to surprise performances by Dance professor Simone Ferro’s students. In a darkened Curtin 175, dancers literally embodied space by slowly maneuvering themselves down the aisles, projecting expressionistic shadows on walls with bright, head-strapped lights. Working from the writings of many of the speakers, Ferro and dancers effectively shocked attendees’ consciousness from the conceptual into the physical. The use of choreographed “big movements” applied in “constrained spaces” led to many discussions during the concluding plenary on various spatial “bubbles,” both personal and public, and on “the inside” vs. “the outside.” The dancers helped all of the conference attendees to re-embody the place of the assembly hall in new and interesting ways.
Dancers conclude the morning and afternoon panels