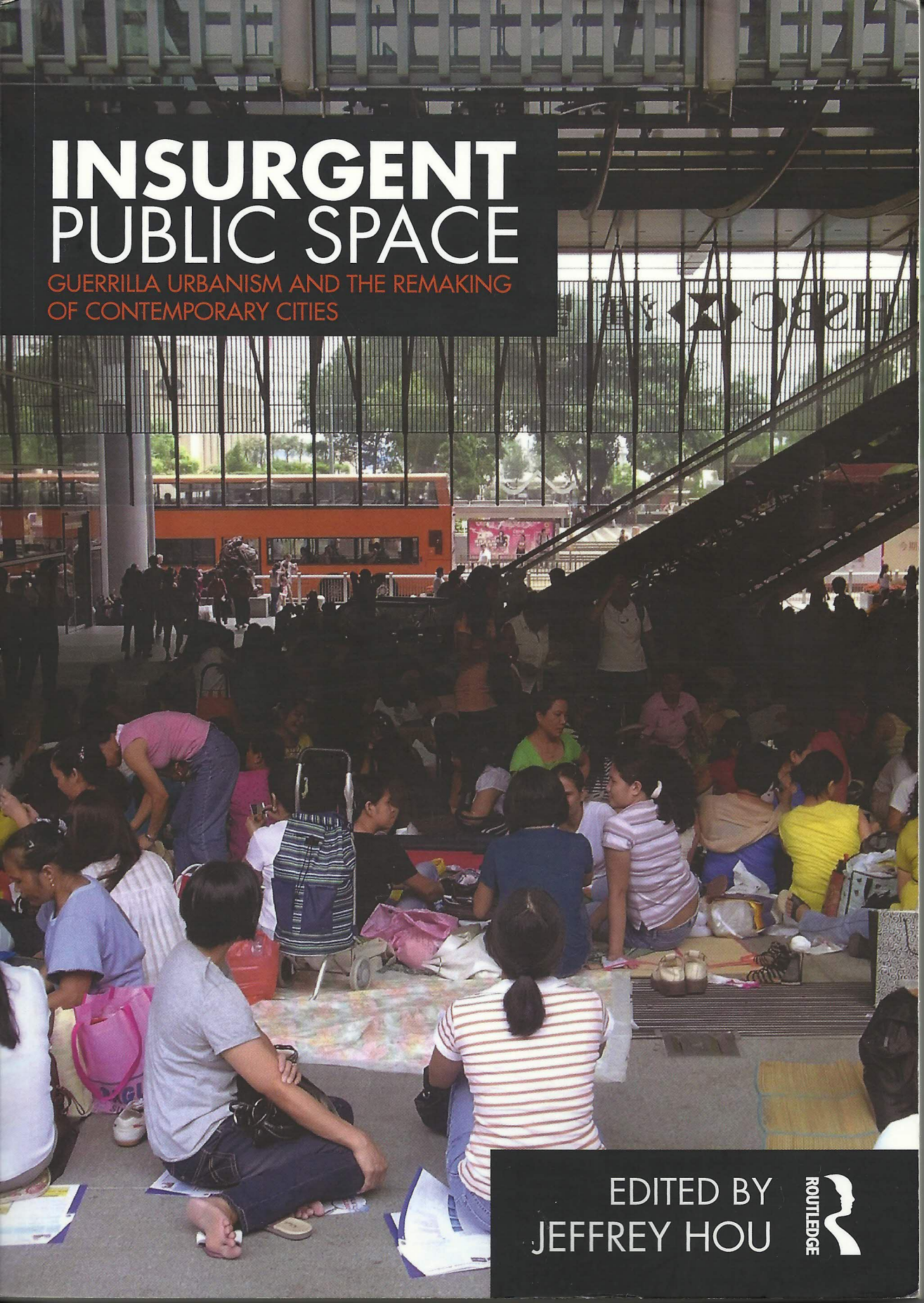
INSURGENT
PUBLIC SPACE
GUERRILLA URBANISM AND THE REMAKING OF CONTEMPORARY CITIES
EDITED BY
JEFFREY HOU
ROUTLEDGE

This edition published 2010
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Typeset in Frutiger by Prepress Projects Ltd, Perth, UK
Printed and bound in the United States of America
by Edwards Brothers Malloy

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Insurgent public space: guerrilla urbanism and the remaking of the contemporary cities/edited by Jeffrey Hou.
p. cm.
1. Urbanization—Case studies. 2. Public spaces—Case studies. I. Hou, Jeffrey, 1967–
HT361.I48 2010
307.76 – dc22 2009041890

ISBN10: 0–415–77965–0 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0–415–77966–9 (pbk)
ISBN10: 0–203–09300–3 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978–0–415–77965–4 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978–0–415–77966–1 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978–0–203–09300–9 (ebk)

CHAPTER 15

Urban Archives

Public memories of everyday places

Irina Gendelman, Tom Dobrowolsky, and Giorgia Aiello

In the face of economic globalization, some scholars argue that we live in an increasingly placeless world. Market forces can destroy and rebuild decontextualized places of consumption, creating a "geography of nowhere" (Zukin 1991, Kunstler 1994). Superstar cities compete to attract the investment capital of globe-trotting elites who are not tied down to one particular geographic region (Gyourko *et al.* 2006). Urban centers, therefore, become luxury commodities, which are attractive for their unique character but at the same time can be easily substituted for each other. In this process, cities essentially become global neighborhoods that require intense marketing in order to gain a competitive edge in attracting high-income buyers. The resulting rapid development threatens alternative histories embedded in the materiality of the urban environment.

In this chapter, we discuss how the Urban Archives – a digital archiving project that we have created and developed – contributes to documenting, preserving, and telling the stories of places that get ignored, overlooked, or marginalized. We treat the city as a laboratory to research diverse and often unconventional forms of urban expression in an attempt to understand the complex relationships of power that exist in our everyday surroundings.

We view everyday, material aspects of space as manifestations of underlying cultural values and explore the meanings of public, private, and liminal spatial narratives in order to actively participate in the shifting (re)definitions of public spaces. Documenting ephemeral communication in the urban environment, we glean insights into local histories and cultures. We investigate networks of visual expression (e.g., graffiti and advertising) in both static and dynamic forms. Not only do these networks yield temporary and permanent artifacts, but their participants range from official authorities to illicit actors. In sum, we analyze the city as a diverse spectacle composed of interwoven signs, competing stories, diverse actors, and social boundaries in constant flux.

By combining technology and institutional infrastructures with the study of vernacular urban texts, the Urban Archives challenges two related issues in the representation of memories in the contemporary city. On one hand, institutional archives tend to focus narrowly on traditional forms such as "historic" architecture or official documents. On another, emerging types of populist documentation on the Internet lack consistent annotation. We utilize emerging technologies such as tagging, metadata, and geolocation, with accessible media – digital photography

and artifacts – and academic methods to map landscapes, annotate their semiotic content, and analyze their meanings.

Urban Archives: a short history

We started the Urban Archives in 2003 as graduate students (in the Information School and the Department of Communication at the University of Washington [UW] in Seattle) interested in urban environments, ethnography, and visual communication. Of particular fascination were ephemeral artifacts that are often overlooked or ignored by institutional collections and by conventional scholarly research about cities. We began gathering our data by exploring the city on foot, observing the everyday images that form Seattle's cultural landscape in a cacophony of visual signs. Our tools were digital cameras and our early collections consisted of graffiti and ghost signs (the vanishing, old painted advertisements on building façades).

Once our eyes acclimated to the city as a hodgepodge of communicative genres, and with the help of a team of undergraduate assistants, we began to compile a list of categories that could organize the multitude of texts in the urban visual landscape: graffiti, ghost signs, prohibitive architecture, official signage, etc. One of our students, for example, identified a category that she called Yard Art. She found fascinating contemporary examples of how people use private property around their own homes to carve out a space as a venue for public expression. In another project, we assigned students to research Seattle's Aurora Avenue. The students photographed street signs and conducted archival research in order to situate the newly gathered data into a historical context. At the same time, as with *The Ave is Back* mural project, we continued our own research alongside our students, learning from one another and sharing our findings in the classroom and, publicly, through the project's website.[1] We were energized by the opportunity to craft categories of urban texts for the archives and, most of all, by the sudden academic license to explore aspects of the built environment that had previously been disregarded as derelict or irrelevant. Our team of urban archivists sensed that important discoveries lay among the low-brow explorations of alleys, walls, and urban decay.

Eventually, we realized that in order to keep track of our growing data we needed a repository for the digital images as well as a system of metadata, or information about the images. The University of Washington Libraries' Digital Collections was our logical solution and fortunately a willing collaborator. It had the server space to hold our photographs, an existing database infrastructure, and a desire to grow its digital collections. Aside from storage and classification, we would be able to display our archives publicly online. One requirement of the Library's system was a controlled (standardized) vocabulary for the metadata. In developing this scheme to organize our images, we further refined the process of categorizing urban texts. We will revisit metadata later, after we introduce the three case studies mentioned above that exemplify our project.

Case study one: Yard Art

When space is contested, people often use their own property to publicly express identities, political views, and complaints. We defined Yard Art as such modification, intentionally made to residential façades or the private property surrounding them, which may include decorations, works of art, or political signage. Over a period of ten weeks, our student LeeAnn Robison documented "famous" or spectacular yards that were locally known in various Seattle locations. She primarily found these spaces through word of mouth, reporting that, once she told people about the project, inevitably someone would say, "did you see the yard on such and such street?" A saturation point was reached when she started to come across mention of the same notable yards. Selecting four yards as her sites, she visited them multiple times, documenting and recording changes to their exhibits.

Photography was essential as a method of data gathering and analysis. The photographs helped us identify patterns and order to what appeared fragmented and chaotic from the street. We looked over the photographs, transcribing any writing and viewing the entire image of words and objects as a unified text. Additionally, LeeAnn searched recent local newspaper articles and government documents for mention of the spectacular yards, uncovering that some of the most radical of these genres were indeed contested spaces, teetering on the verge of vanishing

For example, one yard (Figure 15.1) was intensely decorated with found objects and signs made from surfaces that lent themselves to writing and painting. On closer inspection, objects such as rocks, wood, and hubcaps were found to be carefully arranged in orderly patterns, often to form larger images. Many surfaces were covered in poignant writing. The writing on various pieces of fencing, for

Figure 15.1 Found objects outlining the shape of a train engine. Photograph by LeeAnn Robison, Urban Archives Item Number 20050311LAR0048.

instance, read "underground railroad," "you got to pay for using us as your mules," and "just like you kill my 1st nation tribe for our home landz [sic] now you kill arabz [sic] for their landz [sic]." In her research, LeeAnn found out that the city, responding to neighbors' complaints about the disorderly yard (detrimental to property values), pressured the yard owner, an elderly African-American and Cherokee woman, to "clean up" her property. This move angered and further provoked the artist to post additional signage on her property, confronting city officials.

In order to avoid bad publicity, the city decided, for the time being, to turn a blind eye. This inattention allowed the woman to voice her protests, but kept them from becoming any more public (via the media) than they already were in the neighborhood. The powerful words and images were easily brushed off as irrelevant largely because the neighbors and the city perceived the medium as an eyesore of the neighborhood. In documenting and archiving this type of Yard Art, we agree with the deputy director of Seattle's Museum of History and Industry, who told a Seattle newspaper that "such images could help historians decades from now 'take the pulse' of the city in 2005" (Frey 2005).

Case study two: Aurora Avenue

Another disregarded urban space that we found intriguing is Aurora Avenue, the busy thoroughfare that cuts across several neighborhoods in north Seattle. We conducted this study with the undergraduates Naraelle Barrows, Arin Delaney, Edith Fikes, and Ingrid Haftel. In this case, we combined ethnographic fieldwork and visual data collection with extensive archival research. A busy thoroughfare lined by run-down motels and strip-mall businesses, and an urban area that is considered an eyesore by many, Aurora Avenue is never featured in popular travel literature about Seattle (see Aiello and Gendelman 2007). However, the thoroughfare is also a living, yet fast decaying, slice of Seattle's visual landscape and, more broadly, US history. Part of the former US Route 99 (now Highway 99), Aurora once was Seattle's only "speedway" (Dorpat 1988) until the completion of Interstate 5, which has been the West Coast's main highway since 1968. Aurora saw its heyday in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when most of the businesses – motels in particular – and neon signs that line the road were built in the midst of the post-war economic boom and in anticipation of the 1962 Seattle World's Fair.

The neon signs mark Aurora Avenue as an historic area with a nostalgic, kitschy character. Signs for businesses such as the Pink Elephant Car Wash (Figure 15.2) and Puetz Golf are examples of well-kept landmarks in Seattle's vintage Mom & Pop commercial landscape. On the other hand, derelict places such as the Villia del Mar Motel (Figure 15.3) or the Bridge Motel – which was given over to the development of townhouses and turned into a huge site-specific installation by local artists before being demolished in the summer of 2007 (Edwards 2007) – remind us that the era that originally conceived the majority of these neon signs is over. Over the past two decades, Aurora's motels have primarily been homes for transients and settings for crimes such as prostitution and drug dealing (Sullivan 2008). City authorities and neighboring homeowners have pushed for and welcomed the uptake in development and, in some cases, the razing of these establishments.

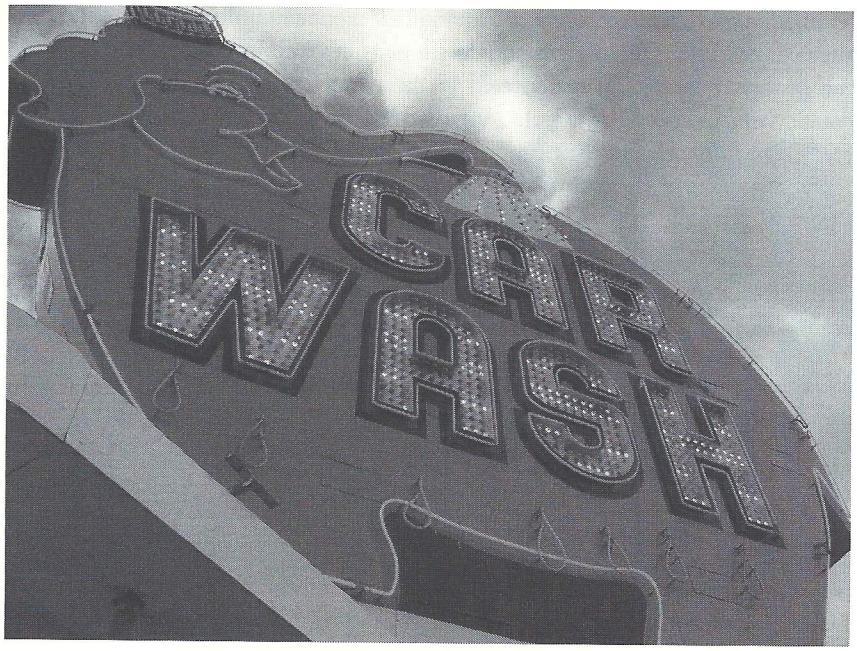

Figure 15.2 Pink Elephant Car Wash. Photograph by Naraelle Barrows, Urban Archives Item Number 20060130NKB0004.

Figure 15.3 Villia del Mar Motel. Photograph by Naraelle Barrows, Urban Archives Item Number 20060130NKB0012.

Our interest in documenting and studying Aurora Avenue, then, was sparked by an urgency to confer enhanced visibility and permanence to urban spaces that are most often kept hidden in the public presentation of a city. By the same token, we were quite aware from the onset that the texture of decay and the retro, "Americana" aesthetic of neon signs also constitute the appeal of such places as Aurora. Last, it seems such landscapes are increasingly destined to vanish.

In addition to adding nearly 200 annotated, mapped photographs to the Urban Archives collection, the undergraduate students involved in the project researched the history of Aurora's development in the municipal archives. Finally, with the creation of a project website (http://urbanarchives.org/projects/aurora/aurora.html), the students connected the historical and contemporary discourses regarding the aesthetic qualities and flaws of Aurora Avenue with underlying social and economic issues. This illuminated the power-laden processes of defining what is worthy or unworthy of appreciation and preservation.

Case study three: The Ave is Back

In 2002, the City of Seattle embarked on a project to renovate University Way NE, colloquially known as "the Ave." This street runs parallel to the University of Washington's main campus – one block away from it – and constitutes the main commercial thoroughfare of the University District neighborhood. It has been one of Seattle's alternative business districts, and UW's "campustown," since the early 1900s, shortly after the university moved to this location in 1895. As a result of its proximity to the university as well as its varied businesses, this street features an eclectic mix of students, residents, street people, and visitors. It is a high traffic area, both pedestrian and automotive, with a highly visible streetscape.

The Ave's renovation resulted in complete repaving, new sidewalks, and quaint new street lamps. It was perhaps an attempt, through municipal reinvestment in infrastructure, to spark commercial and public reinvestment in the street. Unfortunately, this renovation did not fully rectify the widespread presence of vacant storefronts. One such storefront was located prominently on the corner of NE 45th Street and the Ave, essentially the main crossroads of campustown.

Partially to advertise the improvements and partially to mask a prominently vacant property, a large, colorful mural was pasted across the length of the empty store's windows. It read, "The Ave is Back" in giant letters. Its background panels featured images of flowers, fruit market stands, historic views of the street, insets of local landmarks, and buzzword text such as "Alive," "Progressive," and "Diverse" (Figure 15.4).

Made of vinyl and having been pasted on top of the windows, it was especially susceptible to accepting marks. Local taggers and citizens wasted little time in annotating this mural. Some played with its elements, drawing faces on images, for example, or adding word balloons making George Washington's statue say things (Figure 15.5).

Others disregarded the background altogether; these marks seemed to stand out in a third dimension against the mural's lithography. Still others affixed stickers. One sticker expressed hope: "beer store . . . make it happen." Another sticker protested:

> Recall, arrest, and hang Mayor Greg Nickels. He's a corrupt, conceited, self-promoting, pompous, piece of shit. This street improvement project was a big fat waste of taxpayers' money.

The mural was an illuminating and entertaining record of public conversation.

Figure 15.4 45th St. view of mural. Photograph by Tom Dobrowolsky.

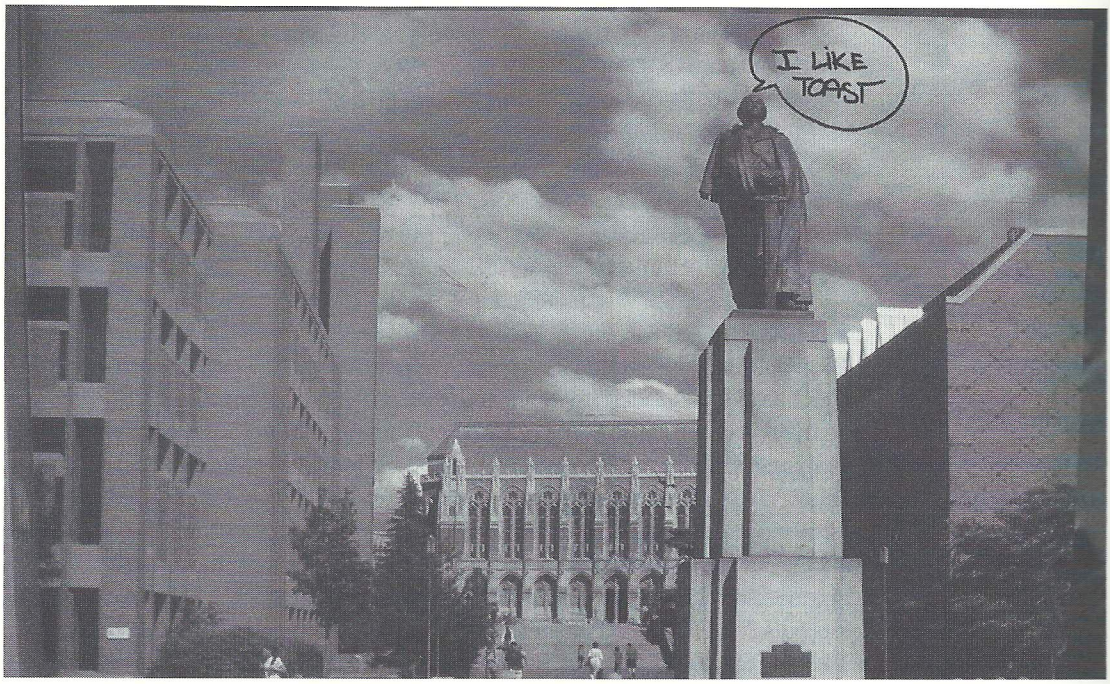

Figure 15.5 Close-up of George Washington graffiti. Photograph by Tom Dobrowolsky.

Although its official authors included the city, the university, and the chamber of commerce, the mural's subsequent annotations by unsanctioned authors transformed its original, one-dimensional message into a rich, layered document exemplifying the diversity of street-level discourse. The mural is long gone, its vacant storefront now a functioning business. The collection of insurgent marks, expressing

the voices of illicit writers, disgruntled citizens, and the politically powerless, has been wiped from the landscape.

Our project, however, has preserved visual records of this conversation. This documentation can be combined with a 1955 photo of the corner from the UW's Special Collections, which shows it to be a Martin & Eckmann Clothiers store. Conversely, a contemporary photograph will show it as an American Apparel store. Our photographs, then, illustrate an incarnation in between, an illicit one, at this storied corner.

Studying the city

Jacobs (1961: 6) writes that "cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success in city building and city design. This is the laboratory in which city planning should have been learning and forming and testing its theories." The Urban Archives takes this advice to heart, extending the study of the city into visual, cultural, communication, and information studies. Accordingly, we view public spaces as complex, living laboratories. Fieldwork is paramount to our research. We reflexively observe the streets, interacting not only with spaces but with the people using them.

In this laboratory, the camera and notebook are our primary instruments. Jakle (1987) introduced the simple concept of sight-seeing as a way to study visual landscapes: touristic behavior "involves deliberate searching out of place experience" (p. 8). Pedagogically, we encourage such behavior as a starting point for investigations into public spaces. We first examine sites without a definite question or plan. This mimics how visitors parse unfamiliar landscapes and make sense of their surroundings. Since most of our students have familiarity with and access to cameras and are eager to walk the streets in search of data, photography becomes an especially keen pedagogical instrument for studying the city. Photography introduces students to ethnographic research in relation to three key aspects of well-rounded scholarship: selecting and collecting field data, annotating and processing visual data that can be accessed by other researchers, and, ultimately, critically analyzing collected and archival data.

From the outset, archiving photographs and artifacts has been an important component of the project. Ostensibly, such documentation is not so novel. Graffiti writers and admirers, for example, have infiltrated the web with galleries and forums devoted to writings on walls. However, these sites contain little description, contextual annotation, or geolocation. Thus, they have little use for research beyond displaying entertaining pictures. In recent years, photo-sharing sites such as Flickr have come to the fore, allowing users to organize photographs, add them to communal albums, place them on maps, and tag them with keywords. Although Flickr's rudimentary classification tools are robust, the site still fails to ameliorate archivists' worst nightmares about the ambiguous nature of the tagging (folksonomies) and the uncertainty of the archives' stability (the images are often hosted on proprietary servers).

In consideration of this, since libraries are some of the most reliable places to store information for long periods of time (Foote 2000), our collection is housed in library archives. Moreover, we apply standardized metadata to the materials.

We employ a faceted classification scheme that offers the flexibility of free-tagging with the rigor and quality control of a standardized vocabulary. Current researchers debate possible new terms before inclusion in order to best gauge how future researchers may access them. In this way, we add value to both the materials tagged as well as the tags themselves; we make them useful for a larger number of users. Systematic methods allow us to address the shortcomings that we have identified with ubiquitous digital photography, popular sharing sites, and the lack of planning for long-term preservation.

Our data and analyses are not meant for our use alone, nor are they to be packed away from public view. Digital technologies allow us to easily share our data, reflecting significant trends in collaborative scholarship, and focus on collective intelligence. Visitors have contacted us with corrections, photographs, and new information about our images and the metadata. For example, one author, of a text documented by our collection, emailed us explaining the origins of his idea. Others have decoded faded signs or graffiti or offered their own images. And, in an insurgent gesture apropos of the digital era, a graffiti writer annotated some images in our Flickr group with tags identifying some texts in the photographs.

These occurrences demonstrate the potential that collective knowledge could bring to our archives. More importantly, they mimic ways in which people communicate and construct public memory in the built environment. Urban Archives has merely tapped into the power of new media in facilitating exploration of liminal spaces.

Space, memory, and dialectic

Insurgent spaces are often impermanent precisely because cultural authorities and institutions have not sanctioned them. For this reason, it is important to document and archive these ephemeral spaces, which may disappear before their importance is noted.

Our interest in impermanent and unsanctioned dimensions is rooted in the recognition that archives are not neutral, nor are their biases necessarily intentional. Rather, this inherent bias is a consequence of a larger social structure. As Zinn (1977: 15) states, "the existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, records in our society are very much determined by the distribution of wealth and power." As a consequence, the "impotent and obscure" (Zinn 1977: 16) are most often excluded or diminished to irrelevance in archival practices. On the other hand, both institutional archives and their publicly visible counterpart, museums, are extremely powerful tools for the production of knowledge and collective memory among the members of an imagined community (see Anderson 1983). Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki (2005: 88) write that "[h]istory museums are a popular way for US Americans to engage the past, and more importantly, they are perceived by the public to be the most trustworthy source of information about the past." However, in the act of collecting, exhibiting and (re)presenting artifacts, history museums select, recontextualize (and often decontextualize), and ultimately also actively interpret and "anchor the transient character of memory" (Dickinson *et al.* 2005: 89).

Arguably, online digital archives of both past and contemporary artifacts are, not

unlike traditional museums, "sites of remembering and forgetting" (Dickinson *et al.* 2005: 89; see also Foote 2000), as they engage equally in acts of documentation, archiving, and display or exhibiting by way of the web. In this sense, online institutional archives – with their ability to both preserve and display – play a major role in shaping collective memory as well as setting the agenda for what should be seen as worthy of documentation and remembrance (Foote 2000).

Although our project may not yet be able to affect the shaping and consolidation of collective memory at the scale of a city, the Urban Archives is an effort to contribute to the creation of public memories by illuminating everyday urban texts that would otherwise be effaced or relegated to the status of curiosities or sub-cultural expressions in the increasing number of online folk photo collections (such as Flickr), blogs, and homepages dedicated to the various aspects of our urban landscapes including graffiti, vintage signage, and yard art. In a time when personal memories are systematically shared with others through digital recording and social networking practices, to the extent that they become part and parcel of the broader cultural fabric (van Dijck 2007), it becomes all the more crucial to embrace and mobilize the power of archives (Jimerson 2003). We therefore render popular yet often unsanctioned urban texts accessible and searchable in ways that promote the development of further academic and expressive knowledge about our cities.

In addition to the academic utility of classifying and displaying images within a highly organized information system, our digital archives create a virtual "space" for everyday materials found in the built environment. By preserving them digitally, we extend the lives of ephemeral street texts, allowing them to continue speaking as documents long after they have been removed from the physical landscape. On one hand, particular sub-sets of images may be considered detailed documentation of specific times and/or spaces – Aurora Avenue, for example. On the other hand, moving the representations (photographs, scans, etc.) of artifacts from their original physical environment into this virtual space allows us to reconsider and recontextualize their meanings in novel ways. The digital archives as a whole transcend the limitations of space and time by connecting themed images across disparate locations, as with images of Yard Art in other countries or documenting landscape evolution through time as with The Ave Mural project.

Although physical archives have provided this utility to some degree, digital archives provide quicker and more easily reconfigurable access to different combinations of images. Digital space is infinitely malleable. Unlike physical objects, digital ones can simultaneously belong to multiple virtual sets, collections, and exhibits, for example. These configurations can be derived by users on the fly as well as pre-packaged into "canned collections" by archivists.

Furthermore, online archives provide greater access to a wider audience. For example, a street painter in Chicago may view and copy a text from Seattle. Additionally, different archives may link to one another's materials. In the end, the networked space of online archives, combined with promiscuous hyperlinking, extends ideas across physical distances that could not have been as readily accomplished otherwise.

We might conceptualize these networked, online spaces as sort of *fourth places*, albeit more asynchronous than Oldenburg's (1989) *third places*. Given our ability to

geocode photographs with location metadata, we can ameliorate the initial feeling of placelessness in the online environment by mapping their embedded geodata and reconstructing the spatial placement of the photographed artifacts. This ties virtual space back to tangible places in the built environment.

Conclusions

Though critique of development and globalization often turns to placelessness, Escobar (2001: 147–148) argues that we should also consider the "existing local production of place and culture of the local; not from the perspective of its abandonment but of its critical affirmation; not only according to the flight from places, whether voluntary or forced, but of the attachment to them." Critical affirmation of place, in the face of global interests, can be uncovered by studying informal and vernacular uses of space that are often overlooked as too insignificant in comparison with larger and more formal urban projects. It is therefore imperative to compile a significant body of data of these missed, sometimes unauthorized, and at times illegal urban texts in order to examine how people rebel, speak out, or try to assert control of their built environment.

Naturally, as a site for the creation and preservation of public memories, the Urban Archives is not exempt from the problematic nature of acts such as collecting, exhibiting, and (re)presenting (Dickinson *et al.* 2005). Some of our decidedly low-brow subjects and sites of study, however, provide a balance to the collections of high-brow museums and archives. Our project supplements these collections to help paint a more complete story of places. Jimerson (2003) writes that we need to let go of the notion of an archive as a temple or a prison of information and employ its power for social justice. Indeed we see the documentation and public academic analysis of contested urban spaces as a way to contribute to debates of public interest. As a result of our graffiti research, for example, we have been able to share our data and take part in media discussions about contested policies related to urban revitalization.

With the emergence of new technologies, the academy faces new challenges and opportunities in the way that we can contribute to public life. DeRuyver and Evans (2006: 945) survey "the digital landscape of online primary sources" in American studies and write that there is a lack of transparency of the digitizing processes that underlie digital humanities projects as well as widespread digital illiteracy among scholars in the humanities at large. Through their overview, they advocate for the development of a generation of scholars that is much more in tune with the technologies, processes, and languages at work in the digitization of primary sources.

In line with this observation, the New Media Consortium in collaboration with EDUCAUSE released a report (Horizon Report 2008) about the key emerging technologies likely to impact teaching, learning, and creative expression in higher education. The report predicts that emerging technologies such as mobile devices including cell phone cameras, easy-to-use web applications such as Flickr, ways to "mashup" data (such as combining images and maps), and collective intelligence harnessed through wikis or shared tagging are changing pedagogy. As the

EDUCAUSE report emphasizes, "[t]he academy is faced with the need to provide formal instruction in information, visual, and technological literacy as well as in how to create meaningful content with today's tools" (Horizon Report 2008: 6). We have tried to illustrate how our project attempts just that. The combination of institutional resources, digital technologies, and collaborative/dialogic pedagogy allows us to create meaningful and polysemic content about our urban spaces where (re)presenting, or the act of interpreting the artifacts/data, becomes a potentially multiplicitous endeavor, as the database is available for anyone to use for their own research at http://www.urbanarchives.org.

Note

1 http://www.urbanarchives.org showcases our research projects, links to a collaborative wiki, our blog, a search portal to the UW's Digital Collections, and other resources.

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