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FUSE

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at the Art of Referendum

Bruce Barber on the Art of Giving
Interviews with First Nations poet Chrystos
& photographer Jeffrey Thomas

Urban Design & "Public Art" on the Margins
Rereading Victim Art

plus reviews of "White Indians," Juicy Fruit, Wearable Environments



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Loredana Sangiuliano & Petra Chevrier



Publicity still from
If Only I Were an Indian,
directed by John Paskievich,
16mm film, 1995, 80 min.
Review by Deborah Root on page 46.

Public Art and Its Discontents

URBAN DESIGN

AND "PUBLIC" ART ON THE MARGINS

by Gordon Brent Ingram

Urban Revisions: Current Projects for the Public World
Centre canadien d'architecture, Montreal
October 19, 1994–January 15, 1995.
University Art Museum, Berkeley, California
March 15, 1995–July 16, 1995.

Urban Diary
Walter Hood
University Art Museum, Berkeley
March 4, 1995–May 7, 1995.

The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History
by Dolores Hayden
(Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995)

Why are there so few discussions on public and environmental art in contemporary journals like *FUSE* and *Border/Lines*? Why is so little of the new wave of public art concerned with making new statements? Why, with all the postmodern emphasis on "site-specificity"¹ and with so much talk of urban design being "art," is so little of it representative of marginalized communities and perspectives?

The short answer goes like this: for most of the last five hundred years much of western cultural expression has been about aggrandizing the rich and Eurocentric through architecture, design of public places, and monuments. The late twentieth century saw the direction of art deviate from that primary social function—but only so far. For a while, naked expressions of wealth and power were slightly uncool but this is now changing. Public art has emerged in this contradictory time with renewed pressures for control and *de facto* privatization of public spaces while being driven by various forces

for inclusion. But as the avant-garde is consumed by global capital's addiction to consumption of the new, public art's typical compromises around space and real estate have effectively defanged much of its radical and transformative potential. End of the short answer.

There is a longer answer to why so much of the art in contemporary urban design still only vaguely addresses new perspectives, marginality and democratic decision-making over public space. It comes out between the lines of *Urban Revisions*,² in the walk down to Walter Hood's *Urban Diary*, which in Berkeley was in the basement below, and in Dolores Hayden's important new book on relationships between local history and public art with its focus on women and communities of colour.³

In the very large exhibition, *Urban Revisions*, that should have been a milestone but is not, planning is architecture is art is the logic that suggests that urban design can be examined critically as culture. The twentieth century has seen destruction or privatization of much of the public space that spawned the democratic and collectivist revolutions of the past two centuries. Disturbingly, very little of the social and environmentalist activism of recent decades has translated into new designs or have been concretized into new "space," places, or recorded culture.

Urban Revisions, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles with the Canadian Centre for Architecture, ambitiously explores new ways to reconstruct public spaces and, indeed, to place this in a central position on the frontiers of the making of art. Unfortunately, much of the work in the exhibition still works safely within the confines of the various design "professions" and their various guilds, while more interesting cultural statements are thrown in as afterthoughts. There are many untapped possibilities in this rich cusp of "design," "environment," and "art" but in *Urban Revisions* we get dry technical exercises with a bit of colour splashed in at the last minute. At best, *Urban Revisions* is a recap of

"progressive," and that does not mean radical, environmental design over the last twenty years. We all know the canons. Cars are bad and public transportation is good. Public art is good especially when no group is offended. "Diversity" is good as long as it does not bite and stays in the *barrio*. But where are the edges of these landscapes of declining liberalism and intensifying contests over public space, its functions, representation and real estate values? What are the sources of new conflict? Little of this is clear in the descriptions and designs. And, sadly, the "public" is only vaguely differentiated through attempts at "revision" skirting confrontation in favour of the blandness of vaguely ecological decorum. The supposedly "new directions" of *Urban Revisions* call for the expansion of non-automobile corridors and pedestrian neighbourhoods and increased public participation in planning and design processes. But only a few of the works confront the power of economic groups and the role of the design practitioner and would-be artist as mediator of social conflict.

Fortunately, there are three projects that begin to address power in civic space and the role that contemporary art might play. There is one project on the (Black/Latino/Asian) Crenshaw neighborhood of south central Los Angeles, another on the Uhuru Gardens of the same area, and a "Site Plan for a Park for the New World" from Raleigh, North Carolina. The video installation, "Crenshaw Neighbourhood Plan/Cultural Explainers Project" most carefully deconstructs underlying power dynamics as they are played out in discussions around public art and, in particular, in questions of which groups are allocated the resources to remember which historical experiences. Early on an elderly Latino defines public art as "building...monuments to people's history" and later two Latino artists link public representation to strategies for countering gentrification.

[H]ow do you control something that gave birth to itself... [N]ow you have...developers who come in to dictate what is happening...it's now an us-against-them mentality and it sucks... They just came in and said we really like this bohemian-type atmosphere but we don't like people kissing in the back alley...*Barrio* art...is outdoor...is out there...but sometimes we use murals as methods for putting a band aid on a sore essentially to colonize or gentrify... What is problematic is that these same strategies are used to avoid assimilation... We must resist becoming decorative.⁴

The Crenshaw video is particularly exciting because of its recognition of the power of language

and the disparities in articulations between Spanish and English.

As for accessibility of the "design process," the project on Uhuru Gardens is the clearest and most authentically articulates a community based approach to creative exchange and decision-making—even if the final design looks oddly like that of a theme park. Jenny Holzer's vision for a park for the New World⁵ begins to explore power dynamics but falls short of biting the (public agency) hand that feeds. There is her standard wall of sloganeering but little sense of its relationship to the users of the park. *Urban Revisions* certainly poses some interesting questions about the possibilities of linking public art with grassroots environmental activism but, because of its attempt to enhance the traditional roles of the design practitioner, most of the radical implications are pointedly ignored. The catalogue for *Urban Revisions* is more accessible than the exhibition itself but unfortunately it omits the texts and most of the images from the videos in the exhibition. There are a number of very useful written pieces, not actually presented in the exhibition itself, such one by urban theorist Mike Davis on public art and the "cannibal ecology" of Los Angeles.

In contrast to the subtle re-enforcements of power in public spaces, and the insecure positions of planners and designers in those mediations, Walter Hood's *Urban Diary* begins to strip away the hype about people and place. Hood is a Berkeley-trained, African-American landscape architect. He lives and has his professional practice in a poor Black neighbourhood of Oakland that is the focus of *Urban Diary*. Hood grapples with and sometimes celebrates various layers of Black culture in the landscape of home. He relates design responses to his position as (privileged) insider, and is careful to listen and watch before proposing his own solutions. While his design statements are understated, there is an honesty and integrity that lays the basis for more authentic linkages between "community," narratives of place, and activist design response. Here, the urban design response as art is very much about celebrating the weave of the culture that already exists and that is surviving on its own terms.

Urban Diary sustains a thin thread of positions that examine and deconstruct notions of power and aesthetic responses to inevitably contested neighbourhood spaces. Given the twin spectres of degradation of poor inner city environments and their *de facto* privatization by the privileged, many more careful looks at home and "place" as sites of marginality and resistance are needed. Such new environmental

art will need to begin, much more, with the studied respect of insider/outsider Hood than the slightly modified reproduction of the same old urban power relations seen in *Urban Revisions*. In all of these new and authentically democratic urban visions, art is often tied to a reclamation of memory that is both personal and collective. The public outdoor site becomes a counter-point to the distortion of history and portrayal of minority cultures. Hence, the importance of Dolores Hayden's new book, *The Power of Place*.

In *The Power of Place*, Hayden's defines one function for public art as to "rebuild public memory"⁶ Further, she relates "restoring significant shared memory"⁷ to the more inclusive use of public space through "connecting the history of struggle over urban space with the poetics of occupying particular place."⁸ She sees the actual locating of histories and events, through mapping, and the revitalized use of public space as central to new urban political agendas. Her tools for delving into local memory are both mental sketches, called "cognitive maps,"⁹ and the more personalized processes of individual artists. But while *The Power of Place* has a lot of theory woven into its discussions, Hayden's specific descriptions of the long-term efforts to redevelop public memory in Los Angeles and to work it into art practices are far more compelling and inspiring. *The Power of Place* will probably become the single most important text on public art in the 1990s.

The long answer to why so much "public" art is still not very public? Much of the design processes, with their inevitably political aspects, that lead up to site-based art and even site design as art have been less about listening to the power of place and more about reworking modernist power relationships, especially those associated with the corporations and the government bureaucracies. There is a resulting negation in collective memory that makes it difficult to produce designs that are compelling or authentic—even in proposals that have a veneer of being democratic, feminist, "multicultural," or pro-labour. Given the growing importance of public pedestrian spaces, as alternatives to car-bound suburban isolation, art on these sites which "works" must take into account local memory while "coming clean" on the particular "take," "design response," and political position of the public arts bureaucrats and artist(s). Delving into the editing and *de facto* censorship processes that go on in such design processes will lay the basis for vital new links between urban design and public art. Truly public art is inevitable but it will take a lot more listening, over longer periods, to the many dissonant voices that make up the real power of place.

Gordon Brent Ingram is an environmental planner in Vancouver and first editor for the 1996 anthology, *Queers in Space: Landscapes of Marginalized Sexualities and Communities*.

Notes

1. Nina Felshin, "Introduction," *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Nina Felshin, ed., (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 20.
2. *Urban Revisions, Current Projects for the Public Realm*, Russell Ferguson ed., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994).
3. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995).
4. *Crenshaw Neighborhood Plan Cultural Explainers Project* (edited by Glen Kaino), video, 1994, 20 min. Produced through the Social and Public Art Resource Center of Los Angeles and Andale, Andale, and ADOBE, Los Angeles.
5. Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-45.
6. Hayden, *op. cit.*, p. xv.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29.

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