BOUNDED DEMOCRACY: GLOBAL WORKSHOP ON AMERICAN URBANISMS

Workshop at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), March 1-2, 2018. Conveners: Anke Ortlepp (GHI/University of Cologne) and Bryant Simon (GHI/Temple University). Participants: Freia Anders (University of Mainz), Jonathan Anjaria (Brandeis University), Lizabeth Cohen (Harvard University), Andrew Diamond (Sorbonne University), Elisabeth Engel (GHI), Robert Gioelli (University of Cincinnati), Jan Hansen (Humboldt University), Stefan Höhne (Technical University Berlin), Sarah Lemmen (University of Bremen), Patricia Morton (University of California, Riverside), Suleiman Osman (George Washington University), John Robinson (Washington University), Anne Schenderlein (GHI), Alexander Sedlmaier (Bangor University).

This workshop brought together cultural, urban, environmental and architectural historians, sociologists and urbanists to discuss the changing relationship between the built environment, public space, and democratic culture in the United States and around the world in the twentieth century. It focused on the making, unmaking, and remaking of public space and how the law, urban planning, architecture, popular culture, and people on the street created real and imagined dividing lines between people and communities. Participants explored how spaces and boundaries were often deliberately and repeatedly made to bring people together and more often to keep them apart for legal, social, political, business, and ideological purposes. Discussion questions about how dividing lines were drawn, obscured, resisted and renegotiated by historical actors included: Who has the power and agency to make and unmake public spaces — in terms of ideology, but also in terms of design and building? How have conceptions of the public changed over time and region? What is a democratic public space? What do (physical and symbolic) boundaries look like? What is the role of political power and legal oversight in the making of public space? What is the role of the state, commerce, the arts, and popular culture in the construction of urban environments? How does ideology shape the public? How does the public, in turn, shape ideas about democracy, citizenship and built environments?

The workshop opened with a keynote address by Lizabeth Cohen. In her lecture entitled “Place, People, and Power in City Building in Postwar America” Cohen explored the benefits and costs of rebuilding American cities through the life and career of urban planner Edward J. Logue.
Logue contributed to major redevelopment projects across the Northeast. Cohen elaborated on his training, vision, and urban planning activities in New Haven and Boston. She showed that Logue was instrumental in drafting plans for the “New Boston” that emerged in the 1960s. One of the centerpieces of his ambitious urban renewal agenda for the city was Government Center. It transformed Scolley Square, one of Boston’s popular working class entertainment districts in its colonial center, into a public service area. Cohen argued that while the project contributed to the city’s economic revitalization, many Bostonians disliked the design and architecture of the new buildings (including City Hall) and rejected the area as a gathering ground for the public. Looking at her case study, Cohen delivered a reinterpretation of modernist urban planning and its consequences for urban public space and American democracy.

The workshop’s first panel, “Public Space, Identity, and Citizenship,” focused on urban public space as an arena for the negotiation of collective identities and notions of citizenship. Jonathan Anjaria in his paper “The Slow Boil: Street Food, Rights, and Public Space in Mumbai” focused on food vendors and their use of public sidewalks in Mumbai, India. He showed how for decades food vendors have used sidewalks to sell their food although it is officially illegal to do so. Regular raids by municipal authorities have not led to the disappearance of food vendors, who vacate premises before a raid only to return soon thereafter. Anjaria showed how a complicated web of bribes and extortion has produced some form of coexistence between food vendors and municipal law enforcement. He concluded by arguing that we have to read the food vendor’s activities as an effort to contest spatial boundaries. By claiming the sidewalks as their space to do business in public, food vendors continuously renegotiate the form and content of their rights as citizens of the city. Alexander Sedlmaier and Freia Anders focused on squatters as agents in shaping urban environments and access to public space in their paper, “Global Perspectives on Squatting.” Focusing on different urban contexts in both the Global North and South, they examined how squatters and urban activists have occupied what they called “temporary autonomous zones” and “insurgent public spaces” and in so doing challenged conventional notions of space and urban authority. They showed how such practices have responded to urban planning and development that produced ever more privatized, gentrified, and securitized spaces and communities. Along the way, they argued, public space was transformed into “protected” zones that were supposed to be sealed off from non-elite citizens. Suleiman Osman’s contribution, “Glocal
America: The Politics of Scale in the 1970s,” investigated the agency of communities on a local level. Local, regional, national and global scales, he pointed out, have always been constructed for a variety of political purposes. Localism in the 1970s could be both progressive and reactionary. While globalism signalled a more radical planetary politics for some local activists on the left, it was also the language used by new multinational corporations, whose politics they often rejected.

The second panel investigated the role of the state in the policies and practices of boundary making. John Robinson’s paper, “Filtering Out Cabrini: Race, Housing, and the Politics of Boundary Reclassification,” investigated the significance of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit as tool of spatial transformation in urban neighborhoods in the city of Chicago. He showed that in recent years, the LIHCT was increasingly used by private developers — both commercial and community-based — to pressure the city to open up new urban areas for housing construction. Robinson argued that developers put pressure on existing racial and class boundaries by questioning zoning practices and, incidentally, the redlining they entailed. He also demonstrated how market forces rather than state action have imposed racial progress on communities, renegotiating notions of public and private space along the way. Robert Gioielli focused on the connections between metropolitan inequality and energy intensive suburban lifestyles in his paper, “Fighting ‘Public’ Housing: White Flight, Sprawl and Climate Change in Metropolitan America.” Looking at the St. Louis suburb Black Jack, he investigated how the struggle between planners and local stakeholders over the construction and design of a publically subsidized housing complex reflected the contested nature of public space and its imagined purpose in suburban America. Fighting the housing project and rewriting zoning ordinances, the predominantly white residents of Black Jack defended their racial and class privilege to draw residential boundaries. Jan Hansen explored the connection between municipal services and public rights in his paper “Clean, White, and Male: Water Infrastructure and the Making of Modern Los Angeles (1870–1920).” Designing and building infrastructure, he showed, was never neutral. By bringing water not to those who needed it, but to those who had the political power to get it, municipal governments helped to bolster private real estate markets and sketch red lines based on class and ethnicity across the maps of the emerging metropolis. Hansen showed how in the process access to water infrastructure became a signifier of inclusion in or exclusion from urban public space, which in this case was located underground.
The third panel, “Actors, Agency, and Borders,” focused on the agency of diverse urban actors and stakeholders in shaping and reshaping urban environments by drawing, contesting, or erasing physical and/or social borders and boundaries. Andrew Diamond’s paper, “City of Neighborhoods on the Make: Race, Authenticity, and Community in Chicago,” began by pointing out the alarming levels of inequality and the persistence of segregation in Chicago. These divisions, he argued, were no accident but the result of generations of real estate-led policymaking. Some were explicitly racist, and more recently, the boundary drawing appeared to be color-blind and class neutral, but only on the surface. In the end, Diamond showed, boundary making was what city leaders did in Chicago and elsewhere; this was an essence of urbanity. Patricia Morton dealt with architecture and design in one of New Haven, Connecticut’s largest public housing projects in her paper, “Public Life and Public Housing: The Case of Church Street South, New Haven.” Morton explained how architects and planners deliberately experimented with innovative designs and spatial layouts designed to invite social interaction between future residents, who were mostly working class African Americans. Investigating the significance of real and symbolic boundaries, she elaborated on the role of design and why the project ultimately failed as a public place. Stefan Höhne explored urban boundaries and their contestations on both collective and individual levels in his paper, “Trouble beneath the City: Boundary Making and the Politics of Complaint in the New York City Subway, 1953-1968.” Analyzing letters of complaint from customers to the local transit authority, he identified issues these subway riders were unhappy with at a time when the system was in steep decline: crime, violence, neglect, the social make-up of subway ridership, and poor service quality. He suggested that we read these often denunciatory articulations as efforts to redraw social boundaries in the city and to deal with the larger social, political, and economic problems of the time.

The concluding discussion took up issues that had emerged in the productive panel discussions that followed each set of presentations. Discussion returned to notions of agency and power; dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion; state power and its different scales; and the materiality of public space. The workshop’s debates and discussion provided a starting point for further research into the relationship between the built environment, public space, and democratic culture.

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