

## **Uncommon Threads; the role of oral and archival testimony in the shaping of urban public art.**

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### **Introduction**

Los Angeles is a quintessential city of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a metropolis bleeding into the surrounding communities, growing around the freeway as a transportation artery, a city where there are few public spaces, and where the difference between public and private spaces is often ambiguous at best.

Since its inception in 1781, Los Angeles underwent continuous changes. Some were due to demographic and economic shifts, such as the outflow of middle class citizens into suburban and other communities. Others were imposed by urban planners and city hall in an effort to reshape the downtown area. Still others had to do with ethnic displacements, which had roots in a variety of causes, such as the displacement of the Chinatown in the 1930s and of Mexican-American working class neighborhoods in the northern part of the downtown area in order to complete large building projects, or the displacement of the Japanese Americans to concentration camps during World War II. The recent large-scale urban projects to revitalize the central urban core brought with them efforts to define urban space as desirable space for public life through, among other programs, the commissioning of public art works.

The question of what is public space is problematic in Los Angeles. This is a city of considerable geographic and urban diversity, many disparate places to see and in which to be seen, with no comprehensible way to link them into a holistic network that could be shared by many of its residents. If one reads any urban analysis about Los Angeles, one quickly comes to the understanding that the absence of public life is linked to, among other variables, the city's deficit of truly public spaces. Public spaces that "do exist can be difficult to gain access to and even to find." (Price, 2003) In downtown Los Angeles "the few public spaces within corporate plazas and buildings tend to look private and can be hard to figure out how to enter." (Price, 2003) Because Los Angeles is a very mobile, fast paced city, a variety of circulation routes, such as streets, alleys, road-tunnels, and public transportation stations have become a locus of display and commissioning of public art.

### **Public Space and the Public**

There is a long standing understanding in Western culture of what constitutes public space. The ideal public space has been historically seen as neutral and democratic. The concept of a neutral public space traces back to antiquity, and assumes a society holding a common view of politics and history, and a common belief in objective freedom. According to Hannah Arendt, the term "public" means that "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everyone and has the widest possible publicity"; it also "signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and [is] distinguished from our privately owned place in it." (Arendt, pp. 45, 48) Traditionally, the kind of public art commissioned for such a neutral, democratic space is commemorative and often contemplative.

A critique of this interpretation of the public realm is articulated by Jurgen Habermas. He describes the public realm as a permanent structure of communication and authority that

is state-related and controlling. (Habermas, p. 24) This notion particularly accounts for the rise of the nation-state and its control of discourse, aesthetics, and space. And it offers another lens through which to interpret urban redevelopment. Thus, commemorative public art works are not merely formal, valorized representations of particular historic events, but in their setting such works are often removed from direct engagement with the public, positioned as awe-inspiring, remote, and authoritarian.

Contemporary theoretical discussions of public space recognize that complete consensus on its meaning is impossible because the concept of the "public" comprises many different sub-spheres, organizations, and institutions, each with many voices representing race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. In art historian Thomas Crow's words, the public is "nothing more nor less than a series of representations." (Crow, p. 102) Instead of consensus building and monumentalizing, public art is seen as fostering public debate and dialogue about representations of the public realm. While most people still think of public art as display of formal sculpture, contemporary examples include functional works (street lamps, bike racks), environmental works (community gardens and plazas), public performance works, and works of spoken word intended for public places. Many works of public art are temporary, and some are ephemeral.

Contemporary urban redevelopment and the processes related to commissioning of public art incorporate a positivist concept of public space, viewing it as democratic at its core, but also as controlling of the public's relationship to urban space. To think otherwise, would mean accepting that there is no "there" to represent. In essence, city planners and other agencies are trying to create a vital urbanity, egalitarian, able to cater to multiplicity of purposes, essentially modernist, where public space is "that which is ultimately within the ownership and care of the people as defined in democratic politics." (Gooding, p. 19) This is an attempt to refashion the urban core, which is presumably feared by members of the middle-class, who shun the city because they perceive that it does not support accepted models of propriety and civility. (Goffman, p. 326) The middle class, once treated as one economic and sociological lump, is receiving more nuanced attention, although very little, considering that it is supposed to be important for urban redevelopment. Related to the question of the composition of the middle class is also the question of what art historians call "the gaze" in an effort to understand how members of a particular class relate to an art work and shape that work's cultural reception and use. Public art squeezes into a world rationalized by city planners for the various publics and becomes a means of announcing and defining certain urban spaces. It is self-referential, as with formalist sculpture, or it is site specific and, perhaps, utopian. It is meant to assuage and define our needs for a communal urban space.

While this modernist understanding of the public realm is still considered legitimate, it is intertwined with the more post-modern conception of public art works, designed to accommodate the social geography, the gendering of place, and to directly engage with the public. Public art, as it moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has eluded definition. One could say that it redefined the notions of "public" and of "art" into certain sets of visual and intellectual activities. It recognizes that art works are a matter of compound experience, which draws the viewer to appreciate their formal representational qualities and to engage the viewer on a symbolic level of messages, beliefs and values. (Novitz, p. 160) Curiously, contemporary public art works that demand a compound engagement contain histories and ideas which may not be easily comprehensible to the general public. And while they try to engage the public symbolically, such works often blend into the busy everyday urban environment.

## Public Art and Oral and Archival Evidence

I will now turn to two recent works of public art in Los Angeles, which use oral or archival information, and which attempt to engage communities based on identity and the public at large with specific, often forgotten aspects of the city's history. Little Tokyo's Omoide no Shotokyo (Remembering Old Little Tokyo), 1996, is a sidewalk stretching along a city block of historic 1<sup>st</sup> street, which encompasses 13 buildings. This public art and urban improvement project reduced the sidewalk width by two feet, to make it more to scale for human use. The original call to artists was to commemorate and describe the history of the development of the Little Tokyo Historic District. What resulted was an artist-designed sidewalk, a poignant historic testimonial set into an every-day environment so common that it is rarely consciously observed by the public.

The artist, Sheila Levrant De Bretteville, divided the entire length of the sidewalk into two sections. The first section extends to the building line, and consists of six timelines, each representing a decade from the 1890s through the 1940s. Inscriptions in front of building entrances identify the buildings' historic uses, the business names, and the goods and services offered to the community. Another timeline recalls the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The information in this section is placed in its social and political context by inscriptions referring to events, which affected the choices and lives of Japanese Americans. (Several, March 1998)

The second section provides quotes from recollections from three generations of Japanese Americans who lived or worked in Little Tokyo. De Bretteville obtained the quotations by conducting more than 50 interviews and by reviewing books and old newspapers. (Ibid)

De Bretteville described her project as an attempt "to invent various ways for the contradictory multiple identities and complex generational different subjectivities to be represented..." From the beginning this project allowed the artist to interact with the community and for the members of the community to carry out a dialog with each other. For example, community representatives had differing opinions about the quotations, with views ranging from highly supportive of de Bretteville choosing recollections of the daily life on the street, to highly critical, with claims that the recollections lacked drama and were banal. There were also intergenerational debates about the meaning of Little Tokyo to the Japanese Americans, many of whom moved away from the downtown area, as well as debates about how the history of the place should be represented visually and textually.

A project in Chinatown by May Sun, called Listening for the Trains to Come (1992) is an homage to the history of the Chinese community at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Los Angeles. This is a work that decorates a portion of a fence around a parking lot close to a medical and business building. That work includes bells (in reference to the ancient Chinese bronze bells), pitchfork heads and shovels (commemorating the kind of work members of the community engaged in), and negatives of historic photographs accompanied by texts taken from history books. The rust on the fence, and the objects displayed evoke a sense of age and blend into the color of both the nearby brick building and the oil pumps in the parking lot.

Among the photos that the artist wanted to include originally, was one of Katherine Cheung, the nation's first Chinese American aviatrix. However, the community advisory committee requested that a photograph of anonymous women be used. Sun also wanted to include a photo of Union Station as a reminder that its construction destroyed most of the city's original Chinatown; that, too, was rejected. After Sun selected the text from archival and published sources, it went through many revisions because it was required to be rich in content, short, easy to read yet not too simple or detailed. After the installation, some members of the community complained about the lack of clarity in the photographs and the height of the placement of the text panels. May Sun re-did the image panels, so that the visual depth in the photographs changes with the angle of the light.

The Little Tokyo project reflects on a time period that is closer to us. While the number of witnesses is getting smaller, there are still many left, and the commemoration of daily life makes sense in light of the fact that there are those who remember it. The memories are individualized and personalized, and the artist uses them to transform the sidewalk into a symbolic and textual record of experiences that shaped the community. Many issues related to a larger oral history project are in the background, which is not necessarily well documented. This includes additional records on the history of the Japanese immigrants in Los Angeles and Southern California in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also that of the discussions which took place during the design of the work, and which reflected different attitudes on how the community saw itself and its relationship to the larger society. (Several, September 1998) The sidewalk project puts snippets of survivors' memories and information from historic records on the same intellectual level and on the same physical level - underneath our feet. As a public art piece, it mixes "oral history" with "recorded history" - the license of the artist, one might say. And, while I was photographing the work, I heard members of the lunch crowd remark to each other: "I pass by here every day; never realized there was this stuff on the sidewalk."

The Chinatown project reflects on a more distant past, from which there are no survivors. The artist stated that her installation "pays homage to the Chinese railroad workers who built the railroad bed for the Southern Pacific" and commemorates the experiences of the Chinese community in Los Angeles from the 1870s into the 1920s. (Ibid.) This project uses archival information which provides a certain narrative view on the history of the entire Chinese community in the city. By using photographic negatives, the artist gives us a ghostly image. A negative disrupts our normal context, it confuses us, until we peer closer into the image to orient ourselves. A negative is, perhaps, more complex than a positive image; it also purports to be the first record of the object photographed. The text, selected by the artist, may provide us with the context for the image, more depth, or an additional layer of interpretation, but it does not explain the image entirely. Thus we are left with a sense of unfinished understanding of the historic past, of the fact that there is more to be excavated, to be learned. This work, located on the fence of a commercial parking lot and blending with it, has been defaced by a variety of signage placed on the fence.

These two examples represent works of public art, which rely on historic interpretation, oral transmission of information, and archival research, grace utilitarian environments. They attempt to fix some of the historic strands of Los Angeles, a city which is continuously evolving, re-imagining itself, and in which much of public space resides within circulation routes. In this city, as in many other contemporary urban settings, most spaces are already assigned to established disciplines: the vertical to architecture,

the horizontal to landscape architecture, and the networks between and through them to engineering. (Aconcci, p. 48). Public places are the in-between spaces, and these works of public art attempt to draw us, the viewer, to that in-between-ness, to allow us to slip into the borderlands of the normative (i.e., the circulation routes) and the fragmented and problematized historic narratives of the city.

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