The 2015 Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures field school examines a complex urban edge where a bucolic Olmstedian park meets the residential neighborhood of Martin Drive and a 19th Century industrial corridor housing Harley Davidson Motor Company and Miller Brewery intersects a once vibrant Vliet Street.

Pouring over hours of audio footage, pecking and squinting into the blue lines of the computer screen, distinguishing between guidelines and wall lines in AutoCAD drawings, and playing with the documentary software - we are dreaming new worlds, composing new stories. We are music makers and dreamers. Yet that process of telling stories – choosing one from the many stories – makes the task difficult and awesome.

In the seventies Hayden White wrote about the art of writing histories. He argued that historiography is a poetic exercise in emplotment. Historians plot stories; they highlight certain aspects of it and downplay others. They explain change and interpret life in particular ways. Histories follow certain underlining and prefigured narrative structures within which we understand, read and reproduce our reality. Yet, each story, told differently, bent and crooked, follows some basic logic.

This year’s stories speak to us about multiple ways we interpret and experience time. These stories can be organized under three categories.

The story of Vliet Street sharpens our understanding of cultural time, a sense of history that we share as a culture. Memories of the past, realities of the present and dreams of future coalesce as residents talk about this thoroughfare, its environs and the community that developed around it. The street’s location in between a park, industry, a culturally diverse urban neighborhood and suburbia generates accounts of industrial labor and technology, the importance of nature and landscaped parks in US history, and stories of changing settlement patterns in Milwaukee due to constant movement of people.

The second set of stories deals with the cultural landscape of Hmong refugees, recent arrivals in this neighborhood. These tales take us to discussions of personal time, that is, how individuals operate in everyday life by straddling multiple worlds and world views. The story of Hmong is not a singular unified account of an ethnic group. Instead it is about how myriad individuals with distinct interests, lifestyles and backgrounds re-imagine a common past and heritage. It is about how valiant men and women mediate the immediacy and urgency of their everyday world with memories and traditions of a lost cultural past.

The third set of stories makes us aware of a different sense of time in order to take another look at this neighborhood. Washington Park at night explores how urban nocturnal life gives us a glimpse into a different and vibrant world that is often ignored, maligned or simply misunderstood. These stories seek to listen to lives that are rendered invisible, voices that are dismissed and a world that is often ignored. We acknowledge a pulsating and thriving world made of dreams, hard work, disappointments and courage that these stories tell us.

The three story-sets and the subplots are cacophonous and dissonant. They strive not to produce a neat singular urban narrative. Single stories kill conversations. Our stories are not complete, comprehensive and sweeping. We have learnt that the careful craft of a storyteller emphasizes leaving loose ends. Loose ends let your mind soar like a kite and then they set us free. A story, like a kite, flies on, its string limply dangling from the sky, daring us to catch it and pin it down - waving, twisting and turning into the distant horizon till we can see it no more. Some come crashing down on us; into a still and silent moment of utter sadness.
Stories have real power and as we ponder over the mines of digital data, our minds soar into the world of stories. We pick and choose, bite and spit, remember and remind. We have to do a good job – walk that tightrope – not too tight not too loose. Just enough to make space for the next story to snuggle up to us and change our tale in unpredictable ways.

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WHO ARE WE?

The Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures collaborative project at UW Milwaukee and Madison introduces an interdisciplinary research track concentrating on the examination of the physical, cultural, and social aspects of our built environment. The program serves students enrolled in the UW Milwaukee and Madison campuses respectively. It involves faculty members on both campuses with diverse research and teaching interests, including urban and architectural history, cultural landscapes, urban and rural vernacular architecture, public history, and environmental history.

Fieldwork is an important aspect of this program and a cross-campus fieldwork school is a special offering of this project. Each summer the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures field school provides students with an immersive experience in the field recording of the built environment and cultural landscapes and an opportunity to learn how to write history literally “from the ground up.” Students receive training in site documentation (including photography, measured drawings, digital documentation, audio-visual production), historic interpretation of buildings and landscapes (focusing on how to “read” buildings within its material, political, social, cultural and economic contexts), and primary source research (including oral history, archival research, architectural analysis).
WHAT IS PROJECT: PICTURING MILWAUKEE?

We are storytellers, collecting and relaying tales of places and neighborhoods in Milwaukee. We call this idea “Picturing Milwaukee” and our objective is to conjure up –or picture– various neighborhoods of Milwaukee like designs in a wonderfully complex quilt. Individually unique and beautiful, each street is part of a larger whole and we are interested in examining how the local and the urban relate to each other – how a street fits into a larger urban narrative. Understanding this relationship between the whole and its parts is important because it shows us how individual places produce our larger world. We are the sum total of smaller units. Such an understanding promotes civic belonging and allows us to reimagine ourselves as stewards of our worlds.

Why do we tell stories? Stories are powerful not only because they connect and transfix, not only because they are accessible to all, but also because they spread. Stories produce more stories; transferred from one person to another, stories disperse across time and space. Stories produce revolutions – not the kinds that we saw in 1789 and 1917 in France and Russia or the campaign for free speech that set campuses on fire in 1964; not even the kinds we saw recently in 2011 at Tahrir Square or the Wisconsin State Capitol – although those too are born of stories of resistance and intrigue. We collect stories about morals and ethics, ones that recount honor and perseverance, or those that our neighbors and community members communicate to us – all with a moral at the end of it. We are interested in stories that become part of our speech and imaginations; stories that teach us how to behave and react to life and how to walk and to talk – those stories that in turn gently transform who we are and what we do.
WHAT DO WE DO?

At the BLC field school, as we explore urban neighborhoods, we discover their complexity. Neighborhoods are physical locations, material artifacts of everyday life, centers of symbolic action and domestic activities, and community spaces of interaction and social life.

In 1982 Jules Prown asked, “Are there aspects of mind to be discovered in objects that differ from, complement, supplement, or contradict what can be learned from more traditional literary and behavioral sources?” Prown was referring to the importance of the material world around us in telling us stories of our culture in ways that words, texts, and traditional historical sources did not. Our study of this neighborhood begins with an analysis of the world of homes, streets, gardens, gates, and asphalt. We want to find out if the physical character of the Washington Park neighborhood may tell us something about its history that written accounts and official histories fail to describe.

In such a study mere stylistic and aesthetic categories of analysis fall short because these issues merely parrot what the canonical sources of architecture tell us. Describing a building merely by its style—Neo Classical, Italianate, or eclectic—seem less useful since these categories say nothing about how the meanings and interpretations of these buildings changed over time. Questions such as “who was the architect?” or “what is the aesthetic style of a building?” may well explain the initial context and reasons why an architect built a building. But these questions say nothing about social life in these spaces and a pittance about the experiences of those who live in these spaces. Stories of women, children, gardeners, and residents remain untold. Esoteric information about classical details and building morphologies may enhance the significance and value of the building, but they are not the sole registers of architectural connoisseurship.
Attending to this gap in our knowledge of the built environment, the BLC field school turns towards the study of cultural landscapes as a way to interpret this neighborhood. The term cultural landscape is one that is difficult to define. We use it loosely and geographers, anthropologists, and material culture scholars understand the term in different ways. Geographer Carl Sauer in his essay “The Morphology of Landscape” defines cultural landscape as “fashioned from the natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result.” Others focus on the human experience of place rather than merely studying its physical characters. Scholars such as J. B. Jackson and Kevin Lynch draw our attention to symbolic, cultural and cognitive cues in such landscapes while Dolores Hayden and Setha Low argue that understanding cultural landscapes necessitates an exploration of how we perceive those landscapes and how such practices of spectatorship may be contested.

To us, cultural landscape is phenomena materialized in space. We define cultural landscape as the materialization of a complex relationship between an individual and her larger cultural and material contexts. Cultural landscapes need not be physical, tangible and visible. Indeed, much of what we search for may be symbolic, experiential and sensorial—invisible to our eyes. And just as we make our cultural landscapes, these landscapes influence who we are.

At the BLC field school we begin with vernacular architecture scholar Paul Groth’s argument that cultural landscape studies, “focus most on the history of how people have used everyday space—buildings, rooms, streets, fields, or yards—to establish their identity, articulate their social relations, and derive cultural meaning.” Groth’s emphasis on relationships challenges the often-singular focus on architectural authorship and style used by architectural historians. In this field school we explore the experiences of myriad inhabitants and underscore their role in the making of this neighborhood.
Field School Participants
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