Towards Urban Frameworks

Accommodating Change in Urban Cultural Landscapes

Sean O’Donnell
Towards Urban Frameworks
Accommodating Change in Urban Cultural Landscapes
Sean O'Donnell

ABSTRACT

This project is based upon a case study of an existing urban environment in New York City. The history of this environment has been characterized by a succession of ethnic communities and the consequent creation of their distinct cultural landscapes. The construction of these cultural landscapes has generally outpaced the construction and reconstruction of the large scale features of the environment however, and this process of sequent occupancy and the creation of cultural landscapes is still vigorously occurring. Accordingly, this suggests that important insights can be gleaned from this environment that are generalizable to the practice of urban design. These insights involve the creation of urban environments that are designed to accommodate change in cultural landscapes. In designing for such change, it is argued, new environments would be more likely to resist obsolescence.

In approaching this task, the case study has endeavored to identify the elements of the physical environment and the legal system that have facilitated or impeded the creation and modification of two distinct cultural landscapes, those of Little Italy and Chinatown. This was accomplished through the use of cross-cultural and historical analyses and a model of "urban frameworks" comprised of five scales: Streets, Blocks, Lots, Buildings and Smaller Than Buildings. Also important to the study is a definition of cultural landscapes that encompasses fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed features of the environment. In analyzing these features, the study focused on the public domain and on the transitions to the private domain. The private domain is considered generally beyond the scope of the current study, but is addressed when pertinent to the discussion.

The research was performed over a two year period and it entailed literature reviews, archival investigations, field observation, site inventories/behavioral mapping, interviews and comparative site visits in San Francisco and Oakland, California.

PUBLICATIONS IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING

Center for Architecture and Urban Planning Research
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
P.O. Box 413
Milwaukee, WI 53201-0413

Report R95-2

Additional copies of this publication are available by writing to the aforementioned address.
Acknowledgments

Introduction

Chapter One - Why Design for Change? The Interrelationship of Sequent Occupancy, Cultural Landscapes and Frameworks 1

Chapter Two - A Brief Environmental and Social History: From the Bayard Estate to Chinatown/Little Italy 15

Chapter Three - Mott & Mulberry Streets: A Case Study of Diachronic and Synchronous Variability in the Physical Environment at Several Scales 31

Chapter Four - Mott & Mulberry Streets: The Impact of Formal Rule Systems on the Public Domain 73

Chapter Five - Towards Urban Frameworks 99

Glossary 129

Bibliography 133
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people that I owe a great deal of thanks to for their assistance, encouragement, and support during the research for, and preparation of, this document. Since it was originally prepared as a Master's thesis at the UW-M School of Architecture, many of these people are affiliated with this institution, including: Robert Greenstreet, PhD, Dean; Harvey Rabinowitz, Associate Professor; and particularly Amos Rapoport, Distinguished Professor. These scholars have introduced me to a body of knowledge that both provided the foundation for this study and which continues to inspire me. Then there are the people that I encountered over the past two years in New York, San Francisco and Milwaukee. I met these people in libraries; archives; on the streets of the study area; in their homes, places of work or socialization; or by correspondence. Some will find themselves referenced in the text; some will remain anonymous as I unfortunately do not know their names. I greatly appreciate the contribution of each of these people and my effort to understand a small portion of New York City would have been futile without them.

However, even with the kind assistance of all of these named and unnamed individuals, this work is exclusively my interpretation of the material discussed and I am solely responsible for its content.

Sean O'Donnell
June 1995
For My Family
In Manhattan, not far from the Brooklyn Bridge, there is an area that used to be farmland. In the decades just prior to the American Revolution this land, like a great deal of agricultural land surrounding developing cities, was subdivided and over the course of two centuries, two generations of buildings have been built upon it. The current generation of buildings, like those that they replaced, has been occupied by several different groups of people over time who collectively created neighborhoods or communities in the area. As time passed, the earliest neighborhoods or communities faded and were subsequently replaced by others, which began a process of social/cultural change that continues to this day.

During this process, each of these new, or growing, communities effectively inherited a considerable legacy of streets, property boundaries, blocks and buildings from its predecessor. As these people established themselves in their new environs, they often made modifications to the environment that suited their particular lifestyle, and since many of these groups were comprised of people with a common ethnicity, they often tailored their neighborhoods to reflect their shared "culture." These tailored environments often became identified (frequently by outsiders) with certain characteristics of the group's culture and the neighborhoods became known as Dutch-town, Little Italy or Chinatown.

This paper is going to suggest that this process of community/neighborhood change and the process of "tailoring" an inherited, and largely predetermined, physical environment should be fundamental tenets of the practice of urban design, and that there are lessons to be learned from existing environments that have continually weathered these transformations. This is because these environments have seemingly kept obsolescence at bay for long periods of time and they have apparently done this, in part, by successfully accommodating the distinct cultures of these different groups.

This paper then can be considered a record of one investigation into how a small portion of New York City has supported these different groups. This investigation has been performed largely by observing change over time and by comparing the environments created by the different groups to one another. In approaching this task, three concepts have been used to provide the study's foundation. These are: sequent occupancy, cultural landscapes and frameworks. These concepts will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, but generally they help to answer the questions: who is modifying the environment, what is being modified/created and how can this information be applied to urban design?
These three questions also provide the basic outline of this document, with the addition of Chapter Four, a discussion of the impact of regulations, and the chapter to which we now move, a discussion of the project’s theoretical foundation.