Consider this project as a beginning of a conversation. More precisely, a three-year long conversation exploring enduring values, themes, dreams and practices that capture the spirit of the Washington Park neighborhood. This conversation will involve local residents, businesses, organizations, community scholars, students and faculty and engage them in a collaborative dialog. Philosopher Hannah Arendt once said that to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. That shared common world, for the purpose of this project, is Washington Park—its people, events, daily life, architecture, roads, green spaces, gardens, and the many networks of relationships that connect them. But Arendt also reminds us that this world we share between us is never interpreted as the same by each of us. Rather we all approach it from different perspectives, bring our unique worldviews and “differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives.”

When we set out to write urban stories of Washington Park, we confronted a conceptual dilemma. What do we choose to hear amongst the rich din of voices? Do we only hear the few loud commentaries and ignore those who prefer to remain silent? How do we make sense of this thriving multicultural neighborhood without reducing and simplifying its stories? If we all see Washington Park neighborhood from diverse points of view, then what is it that we hold in common?

Mainstream commentaries and media representations of this neighborhood are woefully insufficient. Quantitative demographic numbers, property values, or more vulgarly, coarse statistical narratives of crime and revenue do not do justice to this neighborhood. These stories of Washington Park neither represent the nuanced diversity of opinions within this community nor do they solicit the life histories of a range of local residents. At the BLC field school we became intensely aware of the shortfalls of any research project that “reduces” a neighborhood and ends up narrating a single story of a place and its people.

The historical complexity of Washington Park ensured that we discovered an entangled network of myriad stories. Our stories emerged from our conversation with residents. Material culture and homes spoke to us too. Events and daily life suggested more tales. Each account came with a plot, a cast of characters, and larger contexts within which they played out. We approached the stories of Washington Park by identifying central themes around which they cohered. These themes were like plot-vortices around which many conversations coalesced. In the section titled forum we introduce you to community voices around seven central themes that emerged during our 2014 field school: Change, Strength, Values, Dreams, Resilience, Ties, and Contact. Although the themes were common, people interpreted them from distinct vantage points, making each individual story a variation on a theme. If you search the stories of people and places in this website, you will discover that each story resonates with many of these thematic ideas.

A vibrant discussion around these themes will serve as a point of entry for our long journey. We need your feedback and engagement. We encourage this nascent conversation to become a civic or community discourse. We hope that this project will provide strangers, visitors, and neighbors something common to talk about.
How are our stories relevant for future action? We suggest two tentative answers: enhancement of grassroots power and knowledge. During the next three years we will explore if multiple stories around enduring plots can be heard in ways that are resounding and empowering. We want to find out if by sharing our knowledge about our common world we can strengthen, support, and enhance that world. We want to examine how our personal stories and public conversations may unite us as citizens.

So let our journey begin.

Arijit Sen
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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.

Fieldwork is an important aspect of this program and a cross-campus fieldwork school is a special offering of this project. This summer the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures field school provided 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 received 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 their 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 and such an understanding promotes civic belonging, allowing 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.

Photo Credit: Danielle Burren Photography, www.dsb-photo.com
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.