sculpted space

City as Art

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ABSTRACT

SCULPTED SPACE: CITY AS ART

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Corcoran College of Art + Design, May 2013

Thesis Advisor: Selma Thomas

Contemporary art, archaeological objects, and maps all come together in this exhibit to launch a discussion on how we view and experience cities. The arbitrary nature of borders and boundaries will be investigated through the pieces on display and visitors will be prompted to view cities themselves as art. The overarching themes of Creation, Deletion, Habitation, and Relation are presented respectively through the following sections: space and place making, memory and recording, identity and belonging, and boundaries and defining. Taking place at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil during the 2016 Olympics, visitors and residents can frame their experiences of the city while it is in the international spotlight and reflect on their roles as active participants in the performance art of activating urban space. Please visit us in Rio or online at www.sculptedspace.com.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

This exhibit explores how we inhabit space, define it, use it, and ultimately visually record and document it. Operating under the premise that the way we organize space is socially constructed, this exhibition has arrived at a framework to evaluate visual response to urban environments, namely the thematic conceptual groupings of Creation, Deletion, Habitation, and Relation. Each of the sections will be detailed throughout the course of this paper, following an introductory section defining the operating definitions of city and constructed space the exhibit uses, as well as laying out the parameters of object selection.

The view of the exhibit is not solely geographical or topographical maps, but of the sphere of social space as a whole. The built urban environment, not singular architectural constructions or landscapes, but collective space and the we relate to it and each other is the resulting scope of this project. Therefore, private, domestic, interior spaces are not dealt with, instead the public sphere is highlighted. Happenings and changes directed by human intervention are championed over natural events.

While urban settings and cityscapes are the focus, micro and macro views are interwoven to lend context and demonstrate the interconnectedness and interplay among these scales of social forces and physical manifestations of setting. For instance, objects demonstrating national identity as well as individuals in their roles as social

actors within space are on display. Finally, the argument is made that these themes and topics can be applied universally, and as such a view of one region, in this case Brazil, can be extrapolated to represent the generalized global urban narrative.

CHAPTER 2 - WHAT IS A CITY?

"At the outset of the twentieth century, 10% of the population lived in cities. In 2000, around 50% of the world population lives in cities. In 1950, only New York and London had over 8 million inhabitants. Today there are 22 megalopolises. "[1]

"The fact that cities have names suggests that they also have individual character and history in addition to recognizable form. However, their physical integrity is continuously violated. Urban design can be altered by informal processes like squatting or slum-building as well as by formal processes like planned urban renewal. Cities' boundaries are flexible and contested; they grow and adapt to economic, political, and demographic changes. In this sense cities are alive."[2]

"The urban scene in Latin America offers us a privileged view of the social effects and projections of colonialism, postcolonialism, modernization, industrialization, migration, deconstruction, and globalization. In this context, the art of urban cultural studies can be found in its attempt to register multiple scales of urban reality simultaneously…"[3]

".. Regarding the relationship between cities as physical places and cities as events, or fantasies, that 'take place' in Latin America."[4]

"…Journey from the abstract cities we imagine, to the material cities we inhabit and mark, and finally to the volatile cities through and between which we move as social actors and consumers."[5]

"The mimetic notion of correspondence between representation and reality, between maps and cities, which has been so criticized in poststructuralist thought, becomes particularly unsustainable when it comes to the imaginary relationship we all have with urban structures."[6]

"Actors move through the megalopolis by way of "pre-cartographic operations whose results traditionally are described as itineraries rather than as maps;…"[7]

"Why do these maps work more like travel guides that help us move through certain zones in the city and avoid others, rather than like sources of precise information?"[8]

"This model, combining 'North American' circuits of privilege and 'Latin American' sites of decay, and crossed with the cultural logic of Latin pop, is that of the 'globalized city' where all distinction between the North American, the Latin American, and the European loses relevance."[9]

"Historically, cities contain the essence of a civilization. They are the marketplaces for ideas and cultural values as well as material goods. They are the repositories of cultural memory. The city, above all, is the public realm monumentalized."[10]

"Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time. City design is therefore a temporal art…"[11]

"Not only is the city an object which is perceived (and perhaps enjoyed) by millions of people of widely diverse class and character, but it is the product of many builders who are constantly modifying the structure for reasons of their own. While it may be stable in general outlines for some time, it is ever changing in detail."[12]

"Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern."[13]

"A striking landscape is the skeleton upon which many primitive races erect their socially important myths."[14]

"The observer himself should play an active role in perceiving the world and have a creative part in developing his image."[15]

"An environmental image may be analyzed into three components: identity, structure, and meaning."[16]

Notion of paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks - p. 46[17]

"Building cities is the single most important act of production (and reproduction) within society."[18]

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[1] Koolhaas, Rem, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Harvard Project on the City, and Arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Mutations : Rem Koolhaas, Harvard Project on the City, Stefano Boeri, Multiplicity, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist. Barcelona; Bordeaux, France: ACTAR ; Arc en rêve centre d'architecture, 2000. (Front insert)

[2] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 15

[3] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 23

[4] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 23

[5] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 25.

[6] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 56

[7] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 56

[8] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 57

[9] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 77

[10] Kunstler, James Howard. The geography of nowhere : the rise and decline of America's man-made landscape. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. p. ???

[11] Lynch, Kevin. The image of the city. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960. p. 1

[12] Lynch, Kevin. The image of the city. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960. p. 2

[13] Lynch, Kevin. The image of the city. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960. p. 3

[14] Lynch, Kevin. The image of the city. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960. p. 4

[15] Lynch, Kevin. The image of the city. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960. p. 6

[16] Lynch, Kevin. The image of the city. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960. p. 8

[17] Lynch, Kevin. The image of the city. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960.

[18] Koolhaas, Rem, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Harvard Project on the City, and Arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Mutations : Rem Koolhaas, Harvard Project on the City. p. 11

CHAPTER 3 – CITY AS ART

"Cities can be considered works of art."[1]

"At the same time, their physical grounding grants them special status as monuments and museums of history."[2]

"They [Latin American cities] display the evolution of the colonial ideal of ordered city planning into the frenetic movement of twenty-first-century megacities, mass migrations, and globalization. As with citites anywhere, seen from the air, they give the impression of carefully sculpted space; they reveal intricate patterns and designs. From the ground, however, they seem spontaneous."[3]

"Whether it is conducted from a primarily anthropological, geographical, sociological, literary, or historical perspective, [Latin American cultural studies] defines culture generally as 'the realm of production, circulation, and consumption of meanings.'"[4]

"The material aspects of cities are created by and also interact with human imagination; the two constantly alter each other."[5]

"Cities live in real space and time, and they are made of real material objects like concrete and bricks. However, they carry meaning only through the ways in which people live in them, imagine them, and represent them."[6]

"…cities yield to spatial representation." (Armando Silva 1993).[7]

"…Essence of Latin American cities as the intersection of their physicality and their fictionality."[8]

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[1] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 2

[2] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 2

[3] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 3

[4] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 14

[5] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 15

[6] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 15

[7] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 24

[8] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 24

CHAPTER 4 – CREATION (SPACE AND PLACEMAKING)

Like all other artistic acts, cities spring forth from a blank canvas, a product of imagination resulting in the physical manifestation we navigate. Space and place-making are integral to our understanding of the processes behind the rise of urban centers. Haussmannization and planned cities are primary examples of the type of utopian discourse that heralds the birth of newly defined space. Examples of this process on a larger scale can be found in cases of colonialism, where whole "newly discovered" regions were marked and defined, instantly creating new space to inhabit.

An extreme example of creation beginning with a blank slate can be found in the history of the capital city, Brasília. Built ex nihilo as a capital complex to showcase Brazil on the international platform, Brasília represents purpose-built environment for the sake of collective national identity. "It was built in a mere three and a half years in the mid twentieth century to serve as the administrative center of Brazil. It stands alone in the center of the Central Plateau of Brazil 'like an idea, heroic and romantic, the acropolis of an enormous empty expanse,'" states Rebecca Biron.[1]

"…National desire to project itself as modern through experimentation with a new capital city that would seem to appear out of nowhere, and have no history to limit its future."[2]

"It was motivated by the idea that urban design can directly restructure social order."[3]

"..the discrepancy between total design and master planning on the one hand and the contigency design and improvisation on the other produces in Brasília the same tensions that the modernist project was meant to overcome for Brazil as a whole."[4]

"…Both the Plano Piloto (as the privileged Modernist city is called) and the Satellite Cities constitute Brasília…"[5]

"If the spirit of Brasília is, therefore, that of experiment, is it not strange that this city of of total design and improvisation, of innovation and contradiction, is now frozen in time?" "If this experimental city has thus become a memorial, what memory does it record?" "Thus, the spirit of a place - what the Romans called its *genius loci* - consists of what is both emplaced and displaced in memoriam."[6]

"Nevertheless, it presents the fundamentally utopian premise that the design and organization of Brasília were meant to transform Brazilian society. Moreover, it does so according to conventions of utopian discourse: by an implicit comparison with and negotiation of existing social conditions."[7]

"This millenarian modern exemplifies a kind of stagecraft that has come to define the statecraft of modern nation-building: modern states use planned public works to promote

new forms of collective association and personal habit that constitute their projected nation."[8]

"Stagecraft-as-statecraft"

"They saw it as a means to invent a new nation for a new capital…"[9]

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[1] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 85

[2] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p.27

[3] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 27

[4] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 28

[5] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 87

[6] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 87

[7] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 88

[8] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 89

[9] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 89

CHAPTER 5 – MAPPING CITIES; VISUALIZING SPACE

Maps are a convenient and instructive way to break down and analyze space. They serve as guides and assist people in reconciling how they interpret the scale of cities. Palau Scher says, “all maps lie.”[1] As a snapshot and interpretation of reality, maps can not tell the whole truth and often what is not told or shown is just as important as what is. To further illustrate this concept, the Atlas of Radical Cartography states, “Maps, as descriptions of and inquiries into space, are neither neutral reproductions nor mere copies of space. They rather shape space through the act of naming and confining. In opposition to planning, which has as its aim the implementation of an anticipated project in space, mapping describes and un-folds existing structures and forces. Maps are tools to capture the incomprehensible, unconscious, or structurally ‘invisible’ qualities of space. What they describe is the basis for new realities. As maps both disclose and re-shape what is already in existence, they give it meaning and introduce new layers of perception."[2]

It is this interplay of observer and observed that is quite fascinating. Maps involve an aspect of imagination whereby the viewer must imagine herself in that space to operate the map as tool. This exchange is what I would argue is the central element that draws us to maps.

"Since we conceive of space not as something given or fixed but as something constructed that develops through concrete use, experience, forming, or reflection, a map is a constitutive element of this manifold process."[3]

What do we like about maps? Why are we drawn to them? maps - picturing what will be. displaced people - maps . after WWII after Frnce was liberated by the allies. Government of France banished gypsies, vagrants, banleur "banished places" (suburb)

Just as in map making, graphic designers inadvertently distort: “Articles are cut to fit into specific formats, and sometimes the cuts alter meaning. Hierarchies are created to help readers navigate texts, sometime distorting the emphasis of specific content. Pull quotes (those sexy excerpts from an article that are blown out of scale to entice readers) can mislead by making the article appear to be about something different. Info graphics make an opinionated article appear scientific, and are more and more appearing as unbiased stand-alone data, often disguising the dogmatic intent of an author. To make matters worse, the blogosphere completely democratizes such distortions. Anyone can make them, and they do.”
- Paula Scher (http://www.roberthewittasla.com/landscape-architecture/11965.html)

This exhibit looks beyond just maps, however, and presents a selection of artworks in a variety of media all representing constructed space. The primary focus is on urban environments, but to provide context and illustrate the cross-links among various scales of space and belonging, further subjects including social actors, identity construction, and nation building add to the discourse.

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[1] Scher, Paula, and Simon Winchester. Paula Scher, maps : paintings, installations, drawings and prints. New York:

Princeton Architectural Press, 2011.

[2] Mogel, Lize, and Alexis Bhagat. An atlas of radical cartography. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press, 2007. map insert.

[3] Mogel, Lize, and Alexis Bhagat. An atlas of radical cartography. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press, 2007. map insert.

CHAPTER 6 – DELETION (MEMORY AND RECORDING)

"Architecture, landscape architecture, planning, and other environmental design fields are practices whose primary aim is to make the world, to make something new. We give material form to some vision of human society and place. The shadow side of this creation, this making, is that these fields are also about 'unmaking' the world. The world already exists, and every time we plan, design, and/or construct some aspect of worldness, we are replacing and therefore unmaking something else…. The work is inherently utopian/dystopian."[1]

"Across Western cities, there is an increasing obsession with producing manicured landcapes. Standing in contrast to these aesthetically and socially regulated spaces are the neglected sites of industrial ruins, places on the margin which accommodate transgressive and playful activities. Providing a different aesthetic to the over-designed spaces of the city, ruins evoke an aesthetics of disorder, surprise and sensuality, offering ghostly glimpses into the past and a tactile encounter with space and materiality. Tim Edensor highlights the danger of destroying such evocative sites in order to build new developments. It is precisely their fragmentary nature and lack of fixed meaning that render ruins deeply meaningful. They blur boundaries between rural and urban, past and present and are intimately tied to memory, desire and a sense of place. Stunningly illustrated throughout, this book celebrates industrial ruins and reveals what they can tell us about ourselves and our past."[2]

"Others are informal, illegal, or spontaneous; they may be anonymous or collective. All of these creative forces intertwine with one another to produce cities that are inextricably tied to place and time even as they also participate in a global network of meanings." [3]

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[1] Schneekloth, Lynda. "Uredeemably Utopian: Architecture and Making/Unmaking the World." Utopian Studies 9, no. 1 (1998): 1–25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719740.

[2] Edensor, Tim. Industrial ruins : spaces, aesthetics, and materiality. Oxford [U.K.]; New York: Berg, 2005.

[3] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 1

CHAPTER 7 – HABITATION (IDENTITY AND BELONGING)

"Perhaps our perception of the incommensurability between the real and the imagined city depends less on the distinction between the material and the abstract, and more on a difference of scale. That is, our bodies inhabit the city through small-scale, direct forms of contact while our minds comprehend the city as a network of large-scale economies."[1]

- Rio sidewalks
- Identity construction / negotiation
- Population / demographic shifts
- Nationalism (Capitals)

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[1] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 22

CHAPTER 8 – RELATION (BOUNDARIES AND DEFINING)

- Diaspora
- fences/borders (political divisive barriers)
- Balkanization
- notion of nations
- globalization
- do people today recognize borders? (information / internet)
- conflicts of tomorrow
- groups reasserting their identity
- Buenos Aires case example

"I trace how different stages in the city's history have founded their identity in entire continents (Buenos Aires as European, North american, or Latin American)."[1]

"…The established culture began to mythologize that 'great Creole village' that had disappeared at the hands of this horrible new city…"[2]

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[1] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 62

[2] Biron, Rebecca E. City/art : the urban scene in Latin America. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009. p. 63

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APPENDIX – RESEARCH PLAN

Audience & Educational Programming

Demographic research, as well as best practices in museum education techniques, will be researched to guide how best to align my teaching points to be well received by the target audience so that they leave with the desired take home message.

Sept. 23rd (and ongoing)

Site Details

Stemming from my research of urban environments, this section will be on how visitors will arrive to the site, how it is specifically sited in the environment, and how it will be integrated into the community of the regional area.

Specific articles and details on the city of Rio de Janeiro, the Museum of Modern Art Rio, and the 2016 Olympics will provide a detailed context that will guide exhibition choices in regards to audience and timely programming.

Sept. 30th (and ongoing)

Objects

A variety of media will be on display illustrating the four key themes within the exhibition: creation, deletion, habitation, and relation. There will be between 15 - 25 objects per category. As such, this will be the second most time intensive area of research.

Oct. 14th (and ongoing)

General Topic / Identity & Myth

General research on collective story building and place-based identity construction will guide how the overall exhibition is arranged and conceptually framed.

Nov. 6th (and ongoing)

Exhibit Assets & A/V

This will be largely informed through the research on the objects and the anticipated audience for the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Nov. 13th (and ongoing)

Final Assembly of resources and assets

Nov. 27th