



Scholar Profile for the 2015 Summer issue of *e.polis*

Dr. Arijit H. Sen- Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies.

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This is a scholar profile of Dr. Arijit H. Sen, faculty member at the UWM Urban Studies Program and the School of Architecture & Urban Planning. Professor Sen is also the coordinator of the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures doctoral initiative between the University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (www.blcprogram.weebly.com). He served as a fellow at the Centre for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as a board member of the Vernacular Architecture Forum. Dr. Sen's areas of interest include architectural history, social, cultural and behavioral analysis of the built environment, and American cultural landscape studies. His writings cover South Asian immigrant cultural landscapes in Northern California, retail spaces of ethnic immigrants in New York, Chicago and San Francisco, Muslim cultural landscapes in Chicago, and early 20th Century immigration in the United States. Dr. Sen has also worked on post disaster reconstruction and community-based design in the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans and Milwaukee. His publications include co-edited volumes such as *Landscapes of Mobility: Culture, Politics and Placemaking* and *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City*. His personal website address is www.senspeaks.wordpress.com.

The interview reflects Dr. Sen's passion for teaching through a curricular initiative called the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures field school where scholars conduct fieldwork in order to examine interdisciplinary and humanistic knowledge of the built environment. He explains how this program helps bring people and the built environment together during summer. Throughout the interview Dr. Sen speaks about the concept of everyday place making. For instance, he describes how food items of South East Asian immigrants, such as fish, reproduce new kinds of spaces and spatial practices as these comestibles travel across the world. These food items, such as the *illish* fish of Bangladesh, may even exacerbate international conflicts. Through the simple application of multi-scalar analysis and thick descriptions, a method that he calls "spatial ethnography," Sen elucidates how the students of Urban Studies may benefit from a study of material and cultural landscapes.

Interview Transcript:

Ditimoni Baruah (DB): Can you tell us about the current projects you are doing?

Arijit H. Sen (AHS): Right now I have two large projects on the board. The first one has to do with a summer field school that focuses on community engagement and storytelling. It is a fieldwork course as well as a research project. The field school students come from local and international destinations and they work with local community members in order to collect

stories of people and places that matter to them. Parts of this course is directed by nationally recognized scholars of architectural history, preservation, public history, anthropology and digital humanities. Preceding the field school, in spring, an very large undergraduate class called “Architecture Human Behavior” begins work on data collection from Milwaukee neighborhoods. They collect demographic, ethnographic, archival and architectural information. This class is also one of the few classes in the Department of Architecture that examines race, gender, class and identity as central categories. Many students enrolled in this course get interested in learning more about identity and the political aspects of the built environment and they enroll in the summer field school.

During the summer field school they meet and work with students from History, Geography, Social Work, Art practice and art history —many disciplines come together on the ground essentially collecting stories of people and stories of places. We draw on Ned Kaufman’s notion of storyscapes—“a preservation narrative that builds historic narratives from residents’ memories.” We ask local neighborhood residents to tell us how they see their neighborhood, how they care for their built environment and why they do so. Our summer fieldwork website is www.thefieldschool.weebly.com. Our long term goal is to compare a series of neighborhoods along Milwaukee’s North Avenue—an urban cross section that environmental historians call a “transect. For the next few years, we are going to stay put in Washington Park, a neighborhood located on the western end of this street.

By the end of summer, the field school generates important stories, relevant categories and concepts and we are able to trace important narrative arcs that help us begin to engage these neighborhoods and help us understand how the neighborhood residents construe their world. During the fall semester, we take these stories and concepts and continue to work with a local architecture firm called Quorum Architects, neighborhood organizations, local collaborators, resident mentors, students, and faculty. In fall we are interested in understanding how architecture and design professions can contribute to neighborhood development in sensitive and collaborative ways. In 2014 my architecture class was joined by a site specific choreography and dance studio from Peck School of the Arts and a social practice of art studio from Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (MIAD). Our inter-class, inter-campus collaboration is loosely organized— everyone doing their own thing but they are all based on the stories that we collected during summer. We just finished the 2014-15 courses and it was a tremendous success. I didn’t expect it to generate so much community interest! You can see all that stuff at www.citizenarchitects.weebly.com.

We had a community event day in Washington Park followed by a roundtable discussion in the Milwaukee City Hall where politicians, artists, and scholars and local residents discussed the role of place based arts and design in community engagement and urban development. They also noted how our project could create civic consciousness.

The second project that I am working on is a study of the urban cultural landscapes of South Asian immigrants in the United States. This project is funded by the UWM Research Grant Initiative. I have examined ethnic retail streets in California, New York and Illinois. Currently I

am collecting spatial and social data from Devon Avenue, Chicago, a South Asian retail street that has grown in this location since the 1970s. This is a book project, but because of my commitment to public humanities, much of the work is also available at www.intertwinedcultures.weebly.com. I made this website to illustrate a tour designed for the 2015 Annual Vernacular Architecture Forum conference (June 3-7, 2015).

DB: How do you define the place making through food and memory as in the Devon Avenue project?

AHS: Food is a versatile area of studies—especially when you are studying the cultural landscape of immigrants. That is because immigrants move from one place to another and it is difficult to situate them in one location and call that place their home. But not only does the landscape change; cultural practices, sense of belonging and identity changes over time too. Food allows me to see human history as part of larger and transforming environmental and non-human historical process.

Recently I published two coedited monographs, one on mobility with Jennifer Johung, and another on the role of the human body in everyday placemaking practices with Lisa Silverman. I have been interested in urban placemaking in a world that is intensely mobile. I have followed scholars such as Susan Ossman, George Marcus, James Clifford, Mimi Sheller and Tim Cresswell whose work on mobility argues for an epistemology that is itself agile. For instance Marcus calls for a multi-sited ethnography and Peters calls for bifocality that allows researchers to shift their perspective, media, and scales of analysis. These scholars show us that the observer as well as the observed are in motion—moving through geographies and changing over time. When our methodological structure turns agile then the notion of place itself becomes fluid: it becomes a network, a landscape, a series of flows and eddies. The human being negotiates this complex and viscous context with his or her body. Such negotiations are often mundane and everyday acts, ignored by architectural historians—even by political economists or political geographers who may focus on social and economic flows at a larger structural level. But I am primarily interested in how an individual negotiates the world they construct and construe.

The Devon Avenue research project argues that placemaking is an intensely temporal act. If we consider different temporal scales (such as the long duration of environmental history, the generational pulse of cultural history or urban history, or the transient moments during individual embodied experiences), we will find that myriad forms of placemaking can be experienced simultaneously at any given site or location at any given instance. So let's take geological time. The physical landscape of Devon Avenue, descending from a humped ridge towards the east into the lake and towards the west into Lincolnwood is made of a topography that is mineral rich and that supports a fecund agricultural land. That explains the agricultural history along Devon Avenue, the Native American trails along Ridge Avenue and the new urban gardens today. If you consider the urban history of Chicago, your story may begin in 1920's when Chicago expanded northwards and Devon Avenue grew as a commercial strip. But a focus on micro-time will produce a different history that emerges from memoirs and oral histories. For instance many residents remember the Jewish landscape of Devon Avenue, the delis, synagogues, and stores,

some of which still stand. If you enter a South Asian immigrant store, you find a different kind of placemaking via sounds, smells and ephemeral sensate acts. I look at immigrant spaces and discover these embodied and instantaneous productions of place. So when you put all these temporal scales and processes together within that one location, you begin to see that there are multiple interlinked forms of placemaking. That's what the Devon project really is.

The fish story begins at a global and environmental scale because *ilish* is an anadromous fish (born in fresh water, spends its life in the sea and returns to fresh water to spawn) that crosses the national borders of multiple South Asian states. Its transnational and trans-habitat histories generate a shared environmental (and pre-nationalist) memory among people from that region. But contemporary global economic politics and migrations have changed the fish habitat and fishing practices. Today you get flash frozen *ilish* in Bangladeshi immigrant stores on Devon Avenue. The story of *ilish* allows me to talk about landscapes of mobility and the complexities of South Asian immigrant memories, identities and senses of belonging. And the story of *ilish* begins to shed light on the disjunctures and overlaps between national identity, cultural identity, urban placemaking, and individual histories.

DB: Thank you Professor Sen for your time and agreeing for the *e.polis* interview. Lastly, why should urban studies people be coming to architecture?

AHS: In the 21st Century knowledge-production and research is complex, multi-scalar and trans-disciplinary in scope— especially when you are interested in an analysis of complex cultural processes and systems that scholars such as Webber and Rittel call wicked problems. If you want to understand the material world you have to examine it from multiple perspectives and scales. Architecture, urban studies, cultural landscape studies and studies of human everyday activities are related areas of research. The urban scale has a certain set of evidence that works for it. It could be policy or it could be morphology. Scale determines some of the evidence and research methods that we use. And when you shift scales, issues that are essentially invisible at one scale becomes visible to us. It's kind of a methodological thumb rule that I have used in my work and in the production of what I call spatial ethnographies. So architecture may allow urban studies scholars to shift their perspective to the architectural interior or to the operations of human body in place. It would allow us to see how power and resistance works at an everyday context and how it morphs across multiple situations. Stories of power/resistance that may not be available when we focus on policies and economics, can be found when we look at the human body scale. So architectural studies have much to offer to an urban studies student.