Arijit SEN

Arijit Sen, Associate Professor of Architecture, teaches architectural design, urbanism, and cultural landscapes at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He is the co-coordinator of the Buildings Cultures Landscapes doctoral program initiative between the University of Wisconsin-Madison and UWM. His research interests include physical and cultural landscapes of immigration in the United States. He is currently completing his book "Creative Dissonance: The Politics of Immigrant World Making" and a co-edited monograph "Devon Street, Chicago: Interpreting Landscapes of Transnationalism." Sen received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley and served as a Center for 21st Century Studies fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and a Quadrant Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

Architects Approaching the Anthropocene

In organizing Placing the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene, the exhibition curators Dehlia Hannah and Sara Krajewski ask, "If the Anthropocene is accepted, then one major question must be answered: when and where did human activity begin to leave its indelible mark upon the surface of Earth?" Most references to the Anthropocene point towards major disasters resulting from climate change, industrial resource extraction processes, and other large global, financial, and environmental crises produced by human actions. Scholars of architecture and the built environment are primarily interested, however, in the everyday acts of human beings and the politically charged nature of the mundane.

In her groundbreaking work on the Power of Place, Dolores Hayden (1995) writes "exploring... issues in terms of landscape history means framing questions of power around the politics of land use." This line of thinking suggests that one such "golden spike" moment was when humans colonized the Earth's crust, indelibly marking it with political boundaries delineating agricultural and human settlements.¹ Erle C. Ellis argues that "the critical challenge... is in maintaining, enhancing, and restoring the ecological functions of the remnant, recovering and managed novel ecosystems formed by land use and its legacies..." This practice of reclaiming geography that fundamentally altered our ecosystem prompted Ellis and Navin Ramankutty to coin the term "anthropogenic biomes" or "anthromes" to describe such environs.² An anthrone redefines land as property. It reconfigures geology and topography into nation states, urban regions, metropolitan jurisdictions, and local neighborhoods. These ontologically inscriptive processes are historical in nature and they influence the way we understand and value anthromes as a world made by intricately intertwined human and non-human systems.

Placing the Golden Spike offers an invitation to explore how anthromes are socially constructed, represented, and maintained in everyday life and to consider how art and architecture might intervene in their formation. In order to understand how myriad anthromes are locally reproduced, an undergraduate architecture class of 117 students studied 15 public main streets in the city of Milwaukee as case studies of complex ecological and political systems. As part of a class assignment, students enrolled in Arch 302 (Architecture and Human Behavior) engaged with or responded to INOVA's work with Natalie Jeremijenko's Environmental Health Clinic (xCLINIC).³
xCLINIC proposes an approach to social and ecological problems of the Anthropocene by introducing creative, participatory models designed to engage with specific concerns at the local level. As INOVA Director Sara Krajewski describes it, Jeremijenko’s work proposes that a successful strategy to mitigate and adapt to the local effects of the Anthropocene demands the aggregation of localized knowledge and increased local participation. Over time, shifting social behavior and transforming physical circumstances directly at local sites empower communities to take responsibility for environmental health and make informed demands for public policy changes.

The students in Arch 302 applied a method of spatial ethnography to study selected urban retail streets across Milwaukee. Spatial ethnography is a strategy that merges analyses of place as material culture with a thick description of human stories. It is an improvised interpretive method of restless storytelling that combines analysis of artifacts with ethnographic, historical, and observational accounts of how people use and give meaning to place. This methodology explores the reflexive relationships that happen between people, culture, everyday processes, non-human agents such as flora, fauna, and climate, and material settings on multiple scales in the urban setting.

The city of Milwaukee is made of smaller neighborhoods, each with its own main street—a public thoroughfare with retail establishments and public life. By choosing to study and analyze different main streets, the students produced a comparative body of knowledge and information about the various human and non-human agents and activities within these streetscapes. After completing a series of assignments focusing on how to collect, analyze, and represent data, students were challenged to suggest a targeted and place-specific catalytic design that generated resilience, capacity, and improved environmental health of these main streets. Ultimately the class exercise repositions an understanding of architecture in the Anthropocene by testing if local neighborhoods were indeed unique anthromes or place-specific ecologies that necessitated exclusive design responses.

Urban anthromes are ecologically, environmentally, and politically fraught as various urban inhabitants (both human and non-human) contest their place within this complex ecosystem. Until recently, much of urban life has been seen from an anthropocentric lens, as if humans are the only habitants of the city. Take the concept of the right to the city first proposed by Henri Lefebvre. According to David Harvey, “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.” Yet discussions focusing on the freedom to make and remake our cities, and, by extension, redefine ourselves as citizens, often leaves out the role of animals, birds, plants, seeds, and the material and nonhuman environment.

Discussions of rights to the city within the context of industrial and postindustrial metropolises have often centered on arguments around the social construction of urban publics and contested public space. This way of thinking emerges from Georg Simmel’s discussion of the transformative role of cities and Louis Wirth’s Urbanism as a Way of Life. In current scholarship, a range of scholars such as Jane Jacobs, Sharon Zukin and Saskia Sassen have continued these debates over the meaning of public space to the twentieth and twenty-first century, showcasing the multiple forms of contesting publics and interested social constituencies. Questions such as “whose space?” interrogate the nature of ownership and authorship in public spaces. Who is admitted into such spaces and how public is constituted and legitimized have been the center of much debate. Public spaces (and public identities), scholars agree, are neither neutral nor uniform or innocent. What is unique to the student assignment and Jeremijenko’s work is shifting this discussion of the “right to the city” to include the role of non-human agents and environmental factors.

Contested Urban Anthromes in Milwaukee: An Example

In the city of Milwaukee, the politics of public space is palpable—some public sites are celebrated and emulated while others are demonized and segregated. Some locales are ignored while others are declared culturally and historically significant. The politics of public space is further implicated in chorographic acts of governmental and planning agencies that designate boundaries of historic and cultural districts, neighborhoods and tracts, and various forms of vested economic territories. Refocusing our comparisons of public space using the Anthropocene lens opens up ways to see the interconnected environmental, ecological, political, economic and cultural systems in the making of urban space in this city. Interlinked issues such as climate change, infrastructure, social networks, environmental racism, food justice, and human rights come to the forefront.
Milwaukee likes to boast of its communities and neighborhoods, many designated by the City government and planning agencies in order to improve tourism and economy.⁹ At an urban scale these designated territories, or what Dennis R. Judd and Susan S. Fainstein call tourist bubbles,¹⁰ define a checkered public realm. Visitors arriving in Milwaukee often receive a colorful map along with an official visitor’s guide produced by Visit Milwaukee convention & visitor’s bureau.¹¹ To a visitor this map reconfigures a large swath of continuous bedrock abutting Lake Michigan into a kaleidoscope of colorful shapes representing neighborhoods and historic districts that Ellis calls “an anthrome mosaic.” A light blue swatch demarcates the historic East Side neighborhood and a dark blue band depicts the old immigrant neighborhood of Brady Street. Both these locales sit on top of a green patch titled East Town, a “downtown neighborhood filled with a mix of high rises, restaurants, boutique shops, hotels, condos, and apartments.” Lake Michigan borders the right edge of this image. The map legend describes all these marked neighborhoods as places worth visiting. Descriptions of museums, parks, art galleries, and restaurants invest these neighborhoods with cultural and historical assets. Each neighborhood is unique because they have a designated retail district or a main street, creating an appearance of a decentered mosaic of smaller boroughs. In reality it is not so, since census tract boundaries, sewage and water parcels, and aldermanic districts have conflicting boundaries. Nevertheless, these historic districts are powerful public imaginaries and residential neighborhoods, public fairs, main street business organizations, and grassroots groups cohere around these territorial monikers.

At the top left hand corner of the map, outside the tourist bubble, lays a gray zone with no names, no neighborhoods, and no historical references. A freeway cuts across this geographical twilight zone like a bridge. What makes this gray non-space even more distinct is a red inset marking Wauwatosa a neighborhood “10 minutes west of Downtown Milwaukee,” too far away to be included in this map, but apparently worthy of a visit. This large gray zone is not a black hole. Indeed the unnamed gray space holds a complex ecosystem, diverse neighborhoods, and historical and cultural assets. This area also experiences economic disinvestment, major loss of housing as a result of the 2010 foreclosure crisis and environmental degradation in the form of post-industrial brownfield sites. It is home to a vast majority of poor and minority residents. The racial dot map shows that the gray zone is racially segregated, mostly African American with smatterings of new low-income immigrant communities. EPA and environmental
justice maps show us that a large number of industrial brownfields and polluted sites are located in this area. This unnamed gray space is important because its existence is more than a mere act of innocent omission. This large gray zone brings forth the contradictions inherent in the way humans have colonized land and unevenly invested places with meanings and histories. It speaks of environmental racism and associated economic and ecological devastations. Returning to the Visit Milwaukee map we see a more complex environmental process by which we humans tend to differentiate our physical landscape into networks of interrelated geographies.¹²

Erasure of stories plague racially and economically marked neighborhoods. Places that are neglected, devastated, disinvested, and depopulated also lose their stories when their storytellers die or move, when their heritage is ignored or forgotten, and when singularly negative stories of crime, depopulation and poverty take center stage. These purposeful erasures are not merely social disasters. They are environmental disasters that systematically damage our anthromes.

By comparing the anthromes of urban main streets across the spectrum of neighborhoods, the student projects throw a spotlight on the interconnected, structural, and systemic environmental inequities of our times. Their projects provide an opportunity to rethink and redefine the urban cultural landscapes of Milwaukee as a product of profound—and unequal—ecological, environmental and political processes. Neighborhood main streets are social constructions and they are reproduced within a complex web of social, economic, cultural and environmental politics. Inner city neighborhoods such as Washington Park and Mitchell Street are produced by years of uneven development, environmental racism, persistent disinvestment, and biased planning strategies. In contrast streets such as Downer Avenue in the wealthy Historic Water Tower neighborhood next to Lake Michigan display a different kind of ecosystem and relationship to its ecology. These neighborhoods are connected and related to each other. The working class neighborhoods hugging the banks of Milwaukee River or the 30th Street industrial corridor and the rich neighborhoods of industry captains located along Lake Michigan are related to each other. They are part of the same nineteenth and twentieth century industrial economy that collapsed in recent decades. The complex and intricate webs of social, environmental, material, services, and ecological systems of these neighborhoods point towards interconnected forms of inequity that seem

to be characteristic of the evolving Anthropocene. The student projects show how new catalytic interventions and restructuring in one neighborhood’s main street have palpable impacts across the city and at many levels within it. Architecture in the age of the Anthropocene is part of a complex web of mutually interconnected landscapes where we have a chance to reexamine and rethink the social, ecological and the political discussions of urbanity using an encompassing environmental lens.


¹² Ellis, “Taxonomy,” 179

4. NYU’s Environmental Health Clinic (xCLINIC), under the direction of Professor Natalie Jeremijenko, is a design lab focused on accessible, community-driven innovation that improves the air, water, and nutritional quality of urban neighborhoods, especially low-income urban neighborhoods that face high levels of pollution and constrained access to quality nutrition. By fostering an open-source network of community organizations with local roots, xCLINIC operates on three continents with sustainable impact and high financial efficiency.


David Harvey, The Urban Experience (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).


9. Now a non-profit corporation, the organization website explains that “[f]ormerly a department of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, the “Convention & Visitors Bureau of Milwaukee” was incorporated in the State of Wisconsin on January 6, 1967. … The bureau officially changed its name to the “Greater Milwaukee Convention & Visitors Bureau, Inc.” in 1977. In 2005 the addition of “VISIT Milwaukee,” was added to our name as part of a re-branding and re-imaging process.” See more at: http://www.visitmilwaukee.org/about-