



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2005 Volume III: History in the American Landscape: Place, Memory, Poetry

Introduction

This seminar introduced the history of ordinary landscapes as a resource for creative teaching. In addition to urban and architectural history, we explored processes of public and private remembrance, approaches to constructing historic narratives in the public landscape, mapping as a part of history and memory, and strategies for the representation of places. It included eight teachers of all levels from K to 12, including several involved with history and creative writing. All were interested in extending their students' investigations of place.

In our first meeting I posed several questions. What do we mean by sense of place? What are some of the reasons to preserve places? How do societies remember as opposed to individuals? What are the aural, spatial, and visual triggers of memory? How do writers, artists, and designers use them? By the second meeting we were examining the city as the creation of all its residents, that is, women, children, and men of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, all ages. How can citizens be encouraged to claim and protect places important to their lives and work?

Our first field trip explored the memories contained in public space on the Yale campus in New Haven. We then moved on to discuss ordinary neighborhoods and their distinct histories. The urban landscape is not a museum, yet activities involving remembrance go on all around us. What are the many ways a place-based narrative can be constructed? What are the possible places certain kinds of stories can be told? What is a "trail"? How do walks and driving itineraries differ from guided tours?

We then looked at the stories that artists, architects, and poets tell. For example, Houston Conwill's *The New Charleston*, a history of African Americans in Charleston from the time of slavery, is presented as a dance floor in a community building, while the Biddy Mason project in Los Angeles tells the story of an African American midwife, her walk across the continent, and her life in the city, through both a wall and an artist's book. Architects (such as guest speaker Amy Lelyveld) have also told stories about old buildings and new additions. She discussed an early 19th century house and the contemporary addition she designed in terms of the physical elements in the two designs and the changes in family life that also occurred.

Sense of place is often conveyed by poets as part of lyric or narrative poems. For example, James Dickey's "Cherrylog Road" portrays teen romance with a hint of violence in a used car graveyard, where the history of particular junked and wrecked automobiles is part of the narrative. Is this sequence like a history trail? Do traditional poetic forms help to frame local places in ways that make them more accessible?

Finally we addressed eminent domain and the disruption of sense of place. The United States Supreme Court decided *Kelo v. New London* in favor of the city. This is a very controversial case about eminent domain and

the right of government to take property - in this case, the homes of working-class people - for public use. In New London, the definition of "public use" was a town plan calling for upscale projects by private developers on order to increase the tax base of the city.

The curriculum units from this seminar which the teachers present here include Joan Malerba-Foran's exploration of the architectural and social significance of the front porch as a liminal space between the public and private realms of American life, Judith Goodrich's look at building historical understanding through landscape, and Ralph Russo's walking tour of American history before 1877 on the New Haven Green. Sean Griffin pairs fiction and poetry in a unit about understanding literary settings and sense of place. Justin Boucher asks "What is Home?" in a unit designed to introduce world civilizations for high school students. Alison Kennedy looks at mapping as a route to exploring the neighborhood with kindergarten and first grade students. Yolanda Trapp presents Native American shelters to middle school students and Robert Echter looks at sense of place as part of special education.

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