

Teaching 'the City' in Cities: Teasing the Global from the Specific in Chicago

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On any given day a Chicago resident, walking across the 'Loop,' may be hurrying, head-down, scrutinizing a graphic on neighborhood demographic change published in the *Chicago Tribune*; and in this distraction, bump into a group of gawking pedestrians on an architectural tour organized by the Chicago Architecture Foundation, or any one of several private tour companies.

While distracted walking and sidewalk congestion are common in any big city, the underlying premises of a newspaper graphic displaying "community areas" and the focus of the tourists' gaze – Architecture – are not. Chicago has been "schooled" in a manner that now affects the everyday activities of otherwise inattentive city dwellers. There are *myths* of both a Chicago School of Sociology and a Chicago School of Architecture.¹ Current scholarship pecks away at each, attempting to convert them from naive origin fables to more prosaic accounts. However, the narratives of each seemingly still have the power to cause people to bump into each other on the crowded streets of downtown Chicago. They are *real* in their effects.

Sociologist, Bruno Latour, has advised those who wish to know how any variety of contemporary knowledge practices, from high-speed rail systems to medicine, are "drawn together" to just "follow the actors."² This prescription lies at the heart of much work in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) generally and in Actor-Network Theory (ANT) more specifically. One recent definition attempts to distinguish the approach.

Actor network theory is a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities, and methods

of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located. It assumes that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of those relations.³

The approach differs from much work in the social sciences in that it is concerned with *situated* and even *emplaced* knowledge. Much more common than STS and ANT in architectural education is a current infatuation with evidence-based design among some architects and educators.⁴ Lying at the opposite end of the spectrum from the messy and nuanced world of ANT's "web of relations" is the belief among some trained in both design and positivist science that facts can be made to speak for themselves. In evidence-based design the premise is that data can inform and transform design practice independent of the peculiarities of situation and place. The differences between the approaches are not without precedent, nor are the prospects for a beneficial integration.

These contemporary and contrasting perspectives raise the question as to how to generalize from specific and unique situations and places, and to make use of that knowledge. Thomas Gieryn, who helped develop a sociological concept of "boundary work" in the sciences, has more recently become interested in the way social scientists, particularly those associated with the Chicago School, have mixed the generalizable and the specific, the lab and the field.⁵

The city becomes, at once, the object and venue of study – scholars in urban studies constitute the city both as empirical referent of analysis and the physical site where investigation takes place.⁶

While the terms *lab* and *field* are less commonly used in architectural education, we too make our distinctions between the *design studio* and, well, everything else!⁷ Like scientists we rely heavily on the opinions of peers for evaluating our intellectual and creative production. While the journal article reporting on well-documented lab experiments is accorded validity by the very fact that it is not place-bound, so too images of our designs, published in magazines with scarcely a bit of contaminating context, are accorded stature among those who do what we do. However, as Gieryn notes, when our disciplinary control is lessened, we too, also like scientists, may stand to benefit from the *field*.

Scientists *en plein air* are more likely to be open to surprises that might interrupt research expectations in promising ways, if only because it is more difficult for the field-site to fence out human and natural intrusions.⁸

GETTING INTO "THE FIELD"

This essay is intended as both a field report and a pedagogical reflection. Each Spring, for the past three years, I have led a group of 8 to 12 graduate students in architecture, planning and historic preservation in a three week intensive course, in which the middle week is spent in "the field" of Chicago. On an individual professional level, teaching this course has made it both a lab and the field for me. I have been able to make and control small incremental changes in the experiment; and I have also been surprised by the various perturbations and intrusions that occur each year. However, as an educator of students in the design professions I have also attempted to structure the course so that it becomes a learning opportunity for them about "working the boundary" between *design lab* and *the city*.

The pedagogical method is one that draws on the literature of situated cognition. In the 1989 article "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning" Brown, Collins and Duguid launched a continuing discussion about the relationship of "know what" to "know how" in education.⁹ Arguing that what "practitioners" consider to be "causal models" are thought to be "laws" by the "student" novice. In this model of learning the student is not always prepared for applying that which has been learned to new and ill-defined situations. However, the authors introduce another model of learning, one that comes from apprenticeship. The category of learners as JPFs, Just

Plain Folks, is introduced to promote the importance of "causal stories." JPFs are people who engage in problem solving in everyday life. In the course of this approach to learning, narrative brings meaning to novel situations. Subsequent work in the field of situated cognition produced a model where learning is supported through:

1. stories;
2. reflection;
3. cognitive apprenticeship;
4. collaboration;
5. coaching;
6. multiple practice;
7. articulation of learning skills; and
8. technology.¹⁰

Without going into the details of this approach, it is one that is particularly well-suited to the format of the Chicago field course. Each of the elements of the model is employed in the three week sequence.

As the pedagogical problem of the course has evolved, I've increasingly presented this learning experience as an example of something architects often are asked to do in our professional lives, when we are "Just Plain Folks." First, we are asked to demonstrate knowledge and competence about some place of which we may know little. Such requests may come in the form of a direct inquiry from a potential client or in responding to a request for proposals. Next, we quickly research both the scope of the project and also, when it is somewhere "afield," the place where the project is to occur. Finally, we propose to the requester. Here, we must show that balance of being knowledgeable while still inquisitive; and confident, but without arrogance. The tripartite approach, conveniently conforming to the three week format (referred to as 'Maymester' in our curriculum) supports the steps: 1) pre-field, 2) in-field, and 3) post-field.

In the first week of this course, we attempt to learn from a wide variety of secondary sources about Chicago. Some of these are largely accepted as factual, such as individual entries in the on-line *Encyclopedia of Chicago*.¹¹ Others are bracketed, including, for example, readings on the various "Chicago Schools" and grounded, but imaginative, accounts such as Eric Larson's novel, *Devil in the White City*, largely based on Donald Miller's historical account, *City of the Century*.¹² Fortunately, much of this work takes

the form of fine storytelling. One reading, architectural historian Robert Bruegmann's, questioning of the myth of the Chicago School of Architecture, is couched in the very specific tale of the firm Holabird and Roche's design of the Marquette Building.¹³ Gieryn's article too, discussing the play of lab and field, is not just an instrumental intellectual framework, but also a practical example of the problems of learning from place; and one that is regularly referenced in class reflection and discussion.¹⁴



Figure 1. Marquette Building in 1895

Additionally, during this pre-field week, we discuss various recent interpretations of how the canonization of both Chicago schools of architecture and sociology may have influenced subsequent interpretation, design and policy actions. Newspaper articles are juxtaposed with attention to controversies in the city that are current at the time. The threat of the demolition of Bertrand Goldberg's expressive modernist Prentice Women's Hospital provided discussion fodder in 2011, as did the threat to the Michael Reese Hospital complex (a project in which Walter Gropius participated) in 2009, and

the subsequent demolition of the same in 2010. The transience and open-endedness of the pre-field discussions is very intentional, and predicates the idea of "on the ground" fact finding. Before departing for Chicago, each student prepares a preliminary statement of interest that is both peer-reviewed and discussed in class. It is a document which proves pedagogically useful in this course, because almost without fail, students want to revise their proposals soon after "hitting the ground."



Figure 2: Michael Reese Hospital before demolition

We meet in Chicago for a full week. Most students choose to reside in a privately-managed "apartment dorm" in the South Loop. Our classroom is the city. Beginning every morning, we trek out on a five to ten mile walking tour, with public transit links between sites. Each day is organized both by theme and sector of the city. While most days begin and end in the 'Loop' daily transit and walking excursions take the class far outside the tourist bubble. The intent is to be illustrative of the readings and first week lectures, but also sufficiently loose to accommodate individual discoveries. In the most recent offering of the class, May 2011, the themes included: 1) public planning, real estate, and "open space;" 2) architectural character and significance: their interpretation and revisions; 3) migration, demographics, ethnic succession and neighborhood identity; and 4) architectural tourism and place marketing. As might be noted each theme can easily be linked to both the mythic presence of earlier interpretations and also discussed in the context of more recent revisions. In the course of the week there remains sufficient time for individual and small group exploration and re-

search. All students are provided with memberships to the Chicago Architecture Foundation, affording them free walking tours, and unlimited transit passes. During this week, we continue to use the Blackboard course management system, Google Groups, and other social media to refine, revise and overturn preconceptions.

The third week brings us back to our home base in Denver, where students are responsible for presenting their field findings and completing three sequenced assignments. The first of these consists of continuing an online discussion begun in the first week, on architectural tourism and authenticity. Following readings and field experience, the students reflect on the various tours (students were required to participate in at least three professionally guided ventures outside of our regular class meetings). The second assignment includes in class and online discussion on challenging the official canons of both Chicago Schools of sociology and architecture. The intent is to encourage understanding of varied arguments, but also to promote the empowerment that comes with informed critique. Finally, each student is responsible for RE-presenting the city that each has just experienced in a final, focused, multi-media presentation. This exercise -- which can be accomplished through video, power point presentation, graphic display, interactive Google mapping, photography exhibit, or other means -- is the synthetic culmination of the experience. Important to the class is the discussion of what has been excluded from these presentations. We very consciously discuss the editing process, its virtues, and shortcomings.

While three weeks is much too short to present and internalize any sense of deep understanding about any individual place, let alone a concept as unwieldy as "the city," it is ideally suited to teach a lesson about proceeding in the context of partial and incomplete information; a situation in which we as architects, and JPFs, frequently find ourselves. This attention to process, and not just the "content" of information about urbanism or Chicago, addresses the sense of vocationalism among many students, while also introducing them to these more arcane discussions.

SOME FURTHER QUESTIONS

Aside from the practical concerns of successful teaching, the preparation and revision of this

course has provoked other questions for me and in some cases for my students. Every time I return to Chicago, I, together with my students, tease out more questions, not just about how this specific city works, but also about cities more generally.

Chicago: Typical or Unique?

Why Chicago? Aside from being able to point to the instructor's particular and peculiar interest in the topic, my students confront the same dilemma faced by both the sociologists and architects of the early and mid-twentieth century who attempted to convince those around them that Chicago is both typical and unique. Upon consideration, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that each group, past sociologists, past architects, and current students, was engaging in the construction of a complex narrative that was descriptive, expressive and also promotional. For the sociologists the human migrations and resulting social deprivations brought opportunity; for the architects the great booms in building and bravado of urban growth created a commercial opening; and for today's students, opportunity may be merely the chance to brush-up against more than a century of innovation.

Nevertheless, like the tourists who flock to the city to look up at the architecture, the students are pursuing an experience that is intended to hold value and advantage beyond immediate satisfaction. The tourist's snapshots and the architecture student's sketchbook lend evidence and authority in returning from the field and in engaging others who have not had the same experience. That experience of the post-trip dénouement is certainly not unique to traveling to Chicago. What is global about Chicago is not that the city is typical or "generalizable" but that the experience can be translated.

Toward Generalization or Translation?

Reading the city, which is also the name of this course, is a skill valuable to designers and social scientists alike. The underlying premise of the term "reading," here used metaphorically (with no particular attachment to semiotic or textual references), is more about the skill to translate experience and knowledge from one domain to another, from one place to some place yet unknown. Hence, the reason we as students of design survey the city is not to abstractly generalize from its specifics, but

to make our learning of the relational webs of the city concrete, yet portable. While not Denver, nor any other city, need be compared to Chicago, the skills associated with preparing for the field, being in the field, and returning from the field can provide shape to future urban experiences.

Translation is a concept often employed by STS scholars. They use this term to recognize both equivalence between one domain and another and the shifting and repositioning that also inevitably occurs when individual actors attempt to make sense of new situations.¹⁵ So in returning from the field to present final projects, students experience first-hand the difficulty of conveying the breadth and nuance, even to each other, of the common events, observations and activities that occurred just one week prior. The practical lesson is not that communication is impossible, but that it is selective, an awareness which is extremely important to a designer.

Why Enactment over Theory?

In the course of teaching this three week class, I seldom, if ever, refer to my own interest in actor-network theory. This is not because I doubt the students' interests or abilities, nor merely that there is not enough time, but because the proponents of this approach themselves promote performance and enactment. In providing examples of scholarship proceeding in the spirit of ANT without acknowledging this pedigree, Latour favorably cites historian William Cronon's grand narrative of Chicago's relationship to its natural resource base and its hinterland.¹⁶ Our own social practices as students and teacher, in relation to the material engagement with the city, assemble and enact sometimes shared, and sometimes heterogeneous, realities that need not seek recourse in theoretical justifications.

Why not Los Angeles or Shanghai?

Some would have it that Chicago is a poor representative of twenty-first-century globalization.¹⁷ This is possibly true, but no matter. This course could be taught in Los Angeles or Shanghai; or in Rome or Cairo for that matter. The point of the class is that the processual pedagogy of pre-field to field, and back again, be performed. This stands as contrast and complement to our usual professional



Figure 3. *The urban classroom*

preoccupation with the studio, our own version of the controlled environment of the scientist's lab. To return to Gieryn's assessment of the sociologists of the Chicago School, they needed not prove that what occurred in Chicago could help predict events elsewhere, only that as practitioners of their discipline, sociology, that they were truthful in their explorations of both domesticated Chicago, that of the lab, and that which remained untamed, the Chicago of the field.

Should Enrolment Displace Evidence?

At the outset of this article, I expressed reservations about evidence-based design and other strategies that suggest data as a substitute for thoughtful immersion. In voicing this skepticism, my intent is not to place a processual and relativistic ideal above factual knowledge. The suggestion here is one whereby the student, the novice architect (and for that mat-

ter, the expert), attend to the context of the city. This *context* is not merely, or especially, the spatial context of built form. Rather, the ANT concept of *enrolment*, is useful in understanding how webs of relations come into being through the actions and reaction of human and material actors. Facts alone do not speak, interactions and persuasions intervene. Law and Callon have separately and together argued that what practitioners of science often hide as being epiphenomenal is both interesting and important; the work of good science and good design involves cognitive alignment among actors as much as it does evidence.¹⁸ So no, *enrolment* should not displace evidence, but, nor should it be ignored.

CONCLUSION

There is clearly no one right way to teach architecture students about cities. However, when new and unique instructional opportunities present themselves, as was the case when my university introduced a three week intensive mini-semester at the end of the regular Spring semester, it is worth attempting new things. In my case, I saw this as an ideal situation for combining my on-going research interests in the urban development of Chicago, a proclivity toward promoting experiential learning, and an evolving intellectual curiosity about specificity and generalization in the construction of knowledge. My attempt here, was to do as Donald Schon has implored, to become increasingly accountable not just to peer groups, but to the larger communities we as professionals serve, in this case city dwellers, in Chicago, and beyond.¹⁹

ENDNOTES

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