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THE POWER OF PLACE

Claiming Urban Landscapes as People's History

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Layered with the traces of previous generations' struggles to earn a living, raise children, and participate in community life, the vernacular urban landscape, as John Brinckerhoff Jackson writes, "is the image of our common humanity—hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love,"¹ a definition that carries cultural geography and architecture straight toward urban social history. At the intersection of these fields lies the history of urban space and its public meanings. How do past urban landscapes hold public memory in the multicultural city? And why should Americans struggle to understand complex spatial meanings as part of our public culture?

Every American city and town contains traces of historic landscapes intertwined with its current spatial configuration. These parts of older landscapes can be interpreted to strengthen people's understanding of how their city has developed over time. But often what happens is something else. Cycles of development and redevelopment occur. Care is not taken to preserve the spatial history of ordinary working people and their everyday lives. A few buildings or even small districts may be preserved for their architectural excellence—often the houses, clubs, and business places of the wealthy. (For example, the Manhattan buildings designed by the architects McKim, Mead, and White at the turn of the century are closely identified with the patrons who commissioned them. To save this architecture, however good it is stylistically, is to also preserve the identity of the White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male elite who commissioned the men's clubs and other structures from which many citizens were often excluded.) In contrast, modest urban buildings that represent the social and economic strug-

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gles of the majority of ordinary citizens—especially women and members of diverse ethnic communities—are often overlooked when it comes to historic preservation. The power of place to nurture social memory—to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory—remains untapped for most working people's neighborhoods in most American cities. The sense of civic identity that shared history can convey is lost or repressed. Even bitter experiences need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance.

To reverse this neglect of socially significant American places is a two-part process. First, it involves claiming the urban landscape as an important part of American urban history, identifying the building types—such as tenement, market, factory, school, church, union hall—as well as the neighborhoods and the infrastructure. Second, it involves finding creative ways to interpret historic urban landscapes as part of the flow of contemporary city life. This means finding a politically conscious approach to urban preservation, complementary to architectural preservation, as well as finding a spatial approach to cultural heritage in the city.

Los Angeles is a multicultural city. Residents—more than one-third Latino, one-eighth African American, one-eighth Asian American, one-half women—cannot find their heritage adequately represented by existing cultural historic landmarks. (In 1985, 97.5 percent of all official city landmarks commemorated Anglo history and only 2.5 percent represented people of color; 96 percent dealt with men and only 4 percent women, including Anglo women).² No one has yet written a definitive multiethnic history of Los Angeles. By the early 1980s, however, older works by Carey McWilliams, Reyner Banham, and Robert Fogelson were being complemented by narratives about ghettos, barrios, and little known parts of the city, as Richard Griswold del Castillo, Ricardo Romo, Rudolfo Acuña, Lonnie Bunch, Don and Nadine Hata, Mike Murase, Noritaka Yagasaki, and many others were creating accounts of Latinos, African Americans, Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans in L.A.³ The new work suggested the outline that the broad history of Los Angeles must one day fill.

As a scholar concerned with the history of the urban landscape, in 1979 I was transplanted from New England to the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning at UCLA. In 1984 I founded a small nonprofit corporation called The Power of Place. I was trying to bring

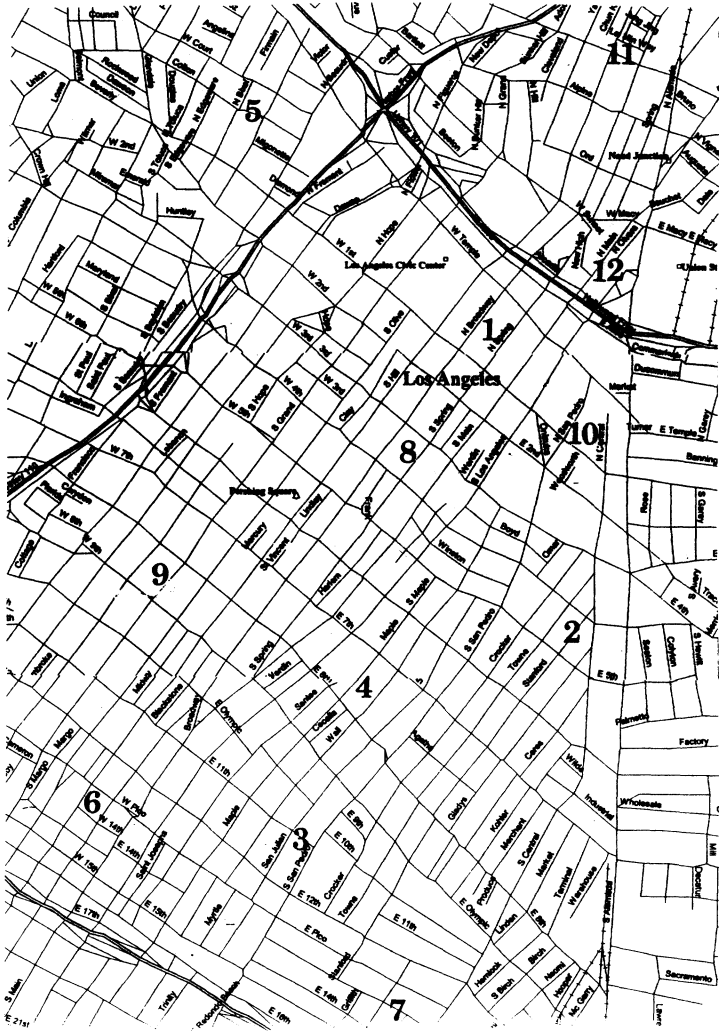


Figure 1: The Power of Place, Itinerary of Historic Places in Downtown Los Angeles (map from DeLorme's map expert) (*Indicates standing structure):

- *1. City Hall, 200 N. Spring St.
- 2. Area of Wolfskill Grove, between 3rd and 6th, San Pedro and Alameda.
- *3. City Market, 9th to 12th, San Julien to San Pedro.
- *4. Flower Market, 755 Wall St.
- 5. Area of City Oil Field, bounded by Figueroa, Beverly, Belmont, Temple.
(*some derricks visible)

more urban history into my teaching in a professional school whose students were concerned with the physical design of the city in areas such as preservation, public art, and urban design. And I was looking for ways to enable students to take something from the school back to their own communities.

The first project of *The Power of Place* was a walking tour of downtown (coauthored with UCLA graduate students Gail Dubrow and Carolyn Flynn).⁴ Organized around the economic development of the city, the tour looked at some of the working landscapes various industries had shaped over the previous two centuries. It highlighted the history of production, defining the historic core of the city and emphasizing the skill and energy workers have expended to feed, clothe, and house the population. These workers included women, men, and sometimes children of every ethnic group employed in citrus groves, flower fields, produce markets, oil wells, and factories of every kind, as well as midwives, nurses, and fire fighters. Although most of the research was based on secondary materials, the State of California's ongoing research on ethnic landmarks (eventually published as *Five Views*) was available in manuscript form.⁵ Along with my own new archival research, focused on the built environment, *The Power of Place* ran some public humanities workshops on topics such as Japanese Americans in the flower industry and African American fire fighters. The published tour finally identified an itinerary of nine downtown places: some were buildings eligible for landmark status because of their significant social history; some were buildings with architectural landmark status needing reinterpretation to emphasize their importance to social history; and a few were vacant historic sites where no structures remained, but new public art or open space designs might be possible to commemorate the sites' social importance.

6. Pacific Ready Cut Homes, 1330 S. Hill Street.

*7. Fire Station 30, 1401 S. Central Avenue.

8. Biddy Mason's Homestead, now Broadway Spring Center, 333 South Spring Street.
*site of public art by Betye Saar and Sheila de Bretteville with *The Power of Place*.

*9. Embassy Auditorium, 843 S. Grand St., subject of *The Power of Place* workshop and art by Rupert Garcia and Celia Muñoz.

*10. First Street Little Tokyo Historic District, north side of First Street between N. Central and San Pedro, site for proposed public art sidewalk by Sheila de Bretteville.

*11. Chinatown (second version, earlier Chinatown was destroyed for the construction of Union Station).

*12. El Pueblo State Historic Park.

Next, I led an unsuccessful attempt in 1985 to save Fire Station 30 as a landmark of African American history. It was made a city landmark as a result of The Power of Place's efforts. And substantial funds were raised for its renovation and reuse. But, after a highly publicized workshop in Black History month, arson damaged the building before construction could start and then key potential tenants decided the neighborhood at the edge of downtown was unsafe.

In 1986 The Power of Place launched into work of a much more experimental kind—combining public history and public art to commemorate a site with no historic structure remaining. Using an African American midwife's biography as the basis of the project was the key to finding a broad audience.

One pioneer's life cannot tell the whole story of building a city. Yet the record of a single citizen's struggle to raise a family, earn a living, and contribute to professional, social, and religious activities can suggest how a city develops over time. This is especially true if the person is Bidy Mason. Her experiences as a citizen of Los Angeles were typical—as a family head, homeowner, and churchgoer. Yet they were also unusual—because gender, race, and status as a slave increased her burdens.

Born in 1818, Bidy Mason was the lifelong slave of a master from Mississippi.⁶ She had trekked west with her master and his family and other slaves, including her three daughters, herding his livestock behind a Mormon wagon train, first to Utah and then to San Bernardino, California. They arrived in Southern California in 1851. Bidy Mason brought suit for freedom for herself and thirteen others in court in Los Angeles in 1855. When she won her case and chose to settle in the small town of Los Angeles in 1856 as part of the very small African American community there, her special medical skills, learned as a slave midwife and nurse, provided entry for her into many households. She became the city's most famous midwife, delivering hundreds of babies. She lived and worked in the city until her death in January 1891.

The Bidy Mason Project focused on the changing experience of being African American in Los Angeles, the problems of earning a living as a free woman of color in the city, and the nature of home as one woman created it. Although Mason at first lived with another



Figure 2: Biddy Mason (Reproduced by permission of Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, UCLA)

family and then rented on her own, the homestead she built in Los Angeles in the 1880s, a quarter-century after her arrival, was a surprisingly urban place, a brick commercial building with space for her grandsons' business enterprises, that included a livery stable, on the ground floor and, for her own quarters, upstairs. Here the early

organizational meetings of the Los Angeles First African Methodist Episcopal Church were held.

A working woman of color is the ideal subject for a public history project because in her life all the struggles associated with class, ethnicity, and gender are intertwined. Although she herself was unable to read and write, the history of Biddy Mason was not lost. Through Mormon records of colonization, I was able to trace her journey west. Through the account of her suit for freedom in the local newspaper, I followed the legal proceedings. Some diaries and a photograph from the family her daughter married into provided personal details. Then using work in the history of medicine concerning other African American midwives and women healers, I constructed an account of what a successful urban midwife's medical practice was probably like. (A few years later Laurel Ulrich confirmed it.) Finally, using detailed records of the built environment, I was able to unlock the narrative of how she created her homestead beginning in 1866, although the building had been razed and the site turned into a parking lot. The records of her property happened to be particularly significant because the growth of the Spring Street commercial district in Los Angeles between 1866, when she bought her land, and 1891, when she died, proceeded right down her street and included her land. Thus her life story spans the wider themes of slavery and freedom, family life in pioneer times, women in the healing professions, and economic development in Los Angeles between the 1860s and 1890s.

In 1986 and 1987, the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency was developing a plan for a ten-story commercial and garage building at 333 Spring Street, replacing the parking lot. Because the material in the walking tour had been listed in their computer, the address popped out as Mason's homestead. The Power of Place was invited to propose a component for this new project involving both public history and public art. I served as project director and historian. The team included art curator Donna Graves, artists Susan E. King and Betye Saar, and graphic designer Sheila de Bretteville. The first public event was a workshop in 1987, co-sponsored by African American studies at UCLA, where the team came together with community members to discuss the importance of the history of the African American community in Los Angeles, and women's history within it.



Figure 3: "Biddy Mason: Time and Place," Designed by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville with The Power of Place (Photograph by Jim Simmons/Annette Del Zoppo)

The Bidy Mason project eventually included five parts. First, Betye Saar's assemblage, "Biddy Mason's House of the Open Hand," was installed in the elevator lobby. It includes motifs from vernacular building of the 1880s as well as a tribute to Mason's life. Second, Susan King designed a large-format letterpress artist's book and produced thirty-five copies.⁷ King incorporated rubbings from the Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights where Mason is buried. These included vines, leaves, and an image of the gate of heaven. The book weaves together the history of Mason's life (drawing on my research and some by Donna Graves) with King's meditations on the homestead becoming a ten-story building. Third, an inexpensive poster, "Grandma Mason's Place: A Midwife's Homestead," was designed by Sheila de Bretteville. The historical text I wrote for the poster included midwives' architectural rituals for welcoming a newborn, such as painting the shutters blue, or turning the door around on its hinges. Fourth, "Biddy Mason: Time and Place," a black poured concrete wall (eighty-one feet long) with slate, limestone, and granite inset panels, was designed by Sheila de Bretteville to chronicle the story of Bidy Mason and her life, as well as the history of urban development in Los Angeles from 1818-1891. The wall includes a midwife's bag, scissors, and spools of thread debossed into the concrete. De Bretteville also included a picket fence, agave leaves, and wagon wheels representing Mason's walk to freedom from Mississippi to California. Both the deed to her homestead and her "Freedom Papers" are among the historic documents photographed and bonded to limestone panels. And fifth, there was prose in a journal. My article, "Biddy Mason's Los Angeles, 1856-1891," appeared in *California History*.⁸

Everyone who gets involved in a public history or public art project hopes for an expanded audience, beyond the classroom or the museum. The poster was widely distributed. The wall by Sheila de Bretteville has been especially successful in evoking the community spirit of claiming the place. Youngsters run their hands along the wagon wheels. Teenagers trace the shape of Los Angeles on historic maps and decipher the old-fashioned handwriting on the Freedom Papers. People of all ages ask their friends to pose for snapshots in front of their favorite parts of the wall. Opened in 1989, we who worked together on this project have had the satisfaction of seeing it

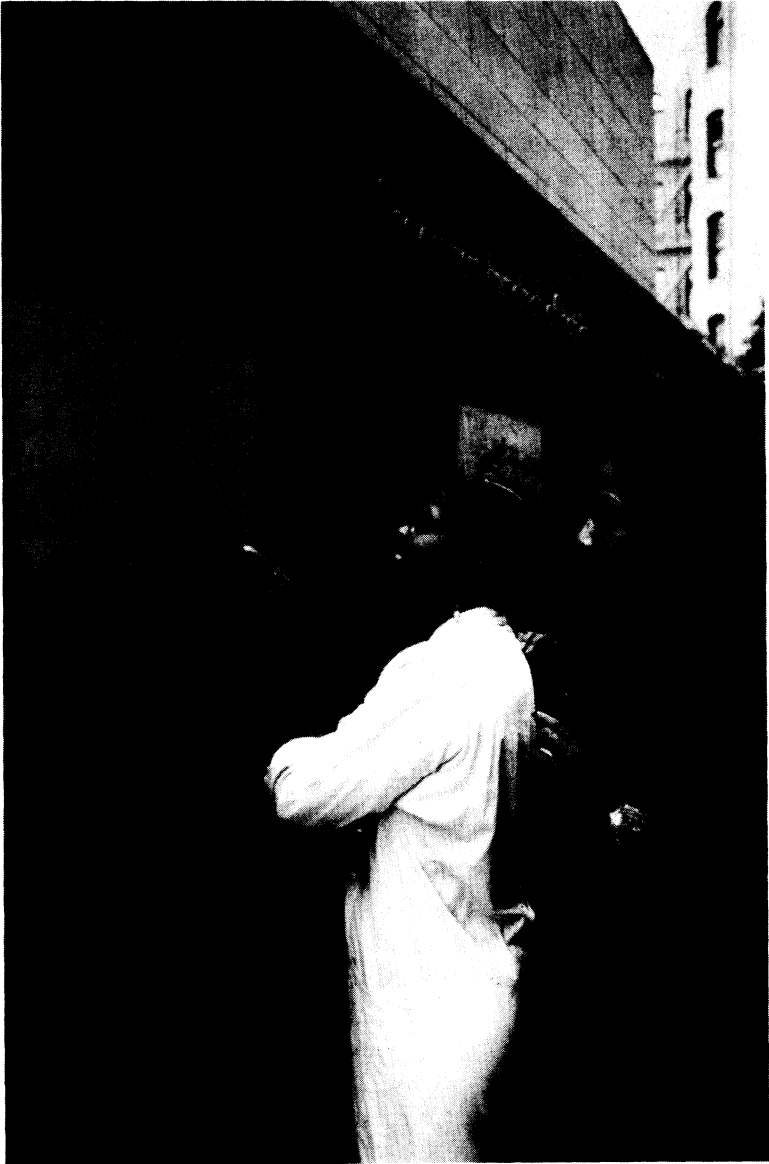


Figure 4: "Biddy Mason: Time and Place," Designed by Shella Levrant de Bretteville with The Power of Place (Photograph by Jim Simmons/Annette Del Zoppo)

become a new public place, one that connects individual women with family history, community history, and the city's urban landscape, developing over time.

If you lift your eyes above the wall, you will see a garment factory, and the next project that *The Power of Place* tackled involved Latina garment workers in the 1930s. This next effort was directed by Donna Graves while I remained as president of the organization. It suggests how an existing architectural landmark can be reinterpreted in terms of its importance to women's history, labor history, and ethnic history. Designated a Los Angeles Cultural-Historic Landmark (as part of a real estate deal) for its indifferent neoclassical architecture designed by Fitzhugh, Krucker, and Deckbar in 1914, the Embassy Theatre is far more important as the historic gathering place for labor unions and community organizations—including Russian Jewish and Latina garment workers and Russian Molokan walnut shellers. Unions, especially women's unions, met inside and marched outside the Embassy between the 1920s and the 1950s, as did the Spanish Speaking People's Congress (El Congreso), the first national Latino civil rights organization. The building was frequented by many of that era's most colorful organizers including Rose Pesotta of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), Luisa Moreno of United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers Association (UCAPAWA), and Josefina Fierro de Bright of El Congreso, the Spanish Speaking People's Congress.

Graves's project highlighted these three organizers. Artist Rupert Garcia created a poster with their portraits to advertise a public humanities workshop, "La Fuerza de Unión," held in the historic main space in 1991. Participants included two artists, Garcia and Celia Alvarez Muñoz; a restoration architect, Brenda Levin; and historians George Sanchez and Albert Camarillo; as well as union leaders, students, and retirees. (Historian Vicki Ruiz also worked on the team briefly.)

Following the workshop, Celia Alvarez Muñoz created an artist's book, *If Walls Could Speak*, which intertwined public and private story lines in English and Spanish, beginning: "If walls could speak, these walls would tell / in sounds of human voices, music, and machines / of the early tremors of the City of Angels." And on the same three

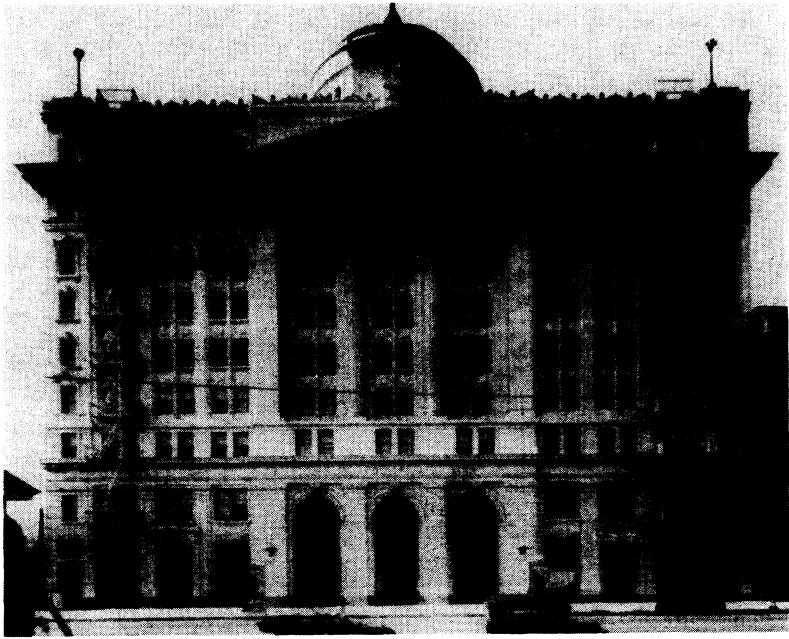


Figure 5: Embassy Theatre, Los Angeles, ca. 1915 (Pierce Collection, reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California)

pages, she wrote, “As a young child, I learned my mother had two families. / One with my grandmother, my aunt, and I. / The other at la fábrica, the factory.” The end papers were union logos, and a typical spread included historic images of Rose Pesotta with her arm around a worker, and another worker stitching a banner reading, “Win the war.” The small book was distributed to several thousand people, including union members, retirees, and students.⁹

At the same time, architect Brenda Levin proposed restoration of two traditional showcases in front of the Embassy Theatre to carry history text, as well as sculptural representations of the workers’ sewing machines, spools, and hammers, while union logos were to be pressed into a new sidewalk. This permanent art was fully funded, but proposals to sell the building prevented installation. Commercial real estate was in a slump in the city, and the owners may have thought this new work of art would make the building harder, rather than easier, to sell.



Figure 6: Rose Pesotta, ILGWU organizer (Reproduced by permission of Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, UCLA)

Both the Biddy Mason and the Embassy projects were located close to the center of Los Angeles' downtown, set near the high rise buildings of the Bunker Hill redevelopment area. They challenged the Community Redevelopment Agency's (CRA's) idea that only massive commercial development could provide downtown with an identity, because *The Power of Place* presented an alternative account of the process of building a city, emphasizing the importance of women of diverse backgrounds and women's work—both paid work and work in family life—to urban survival. In a city where half of the residents are women and 60 percent are people of color. These small projects struck a responsive chord.

The projects straddled several worlds, academic urban history and public history, urban planning, public art, preservation, and urban design. Teamwork is difficult, especially across disciplines. But for historians there are rewards. First, public space has a resonance for urban public history no other medium can match. Second, locking history into the design of the city exploits a relatively inexpensive



Figure 7: Luisa Moreno, UCAPAWA organizer

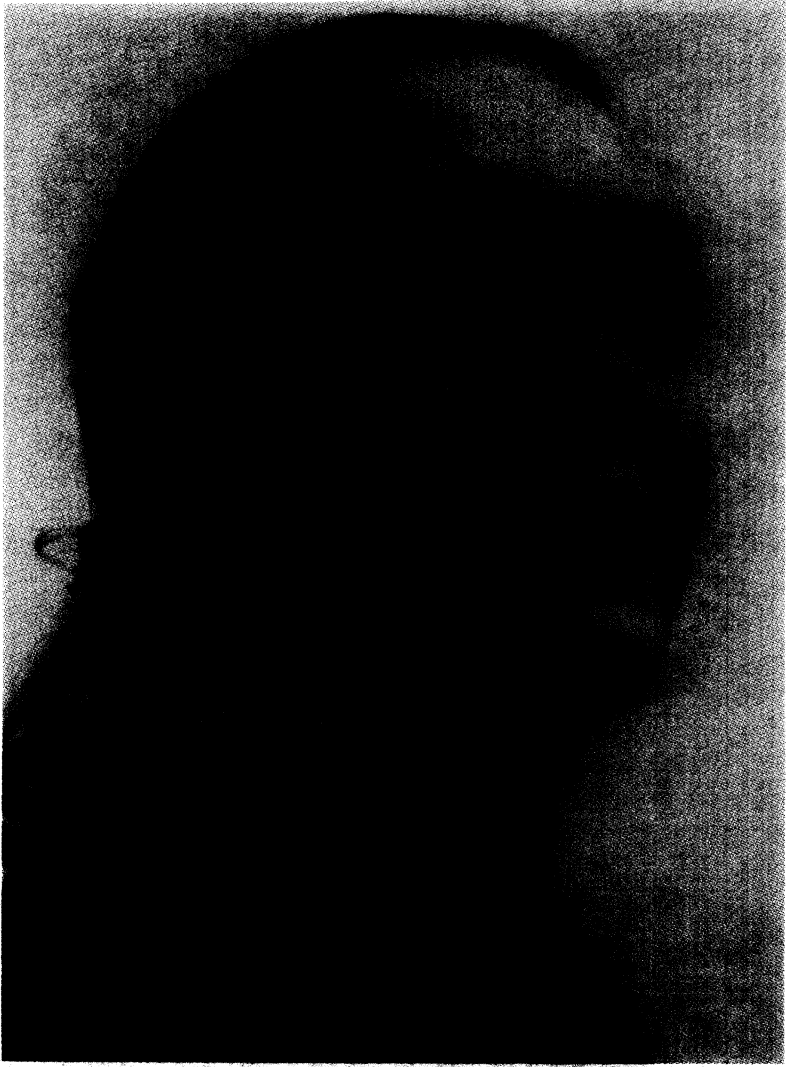


Figure 8: Josefina Fierro de Bright, El Congreso organizer

medium. Over time the exposure can be as great as a film or an exhibit. (One can take a hint from the public art world and speak of site-specific history and both temporary and permanent, on-site and off-site inter-



The Power of Place

The Power of Life is more in the skin
 than in any man or it grows long
 Under the beating hand of the hammer
 Ralph W. Sargent... John S. Arrington

Figure 9b: Endpapers for if Walls Could Speak/SI Las Paredes Hablaran

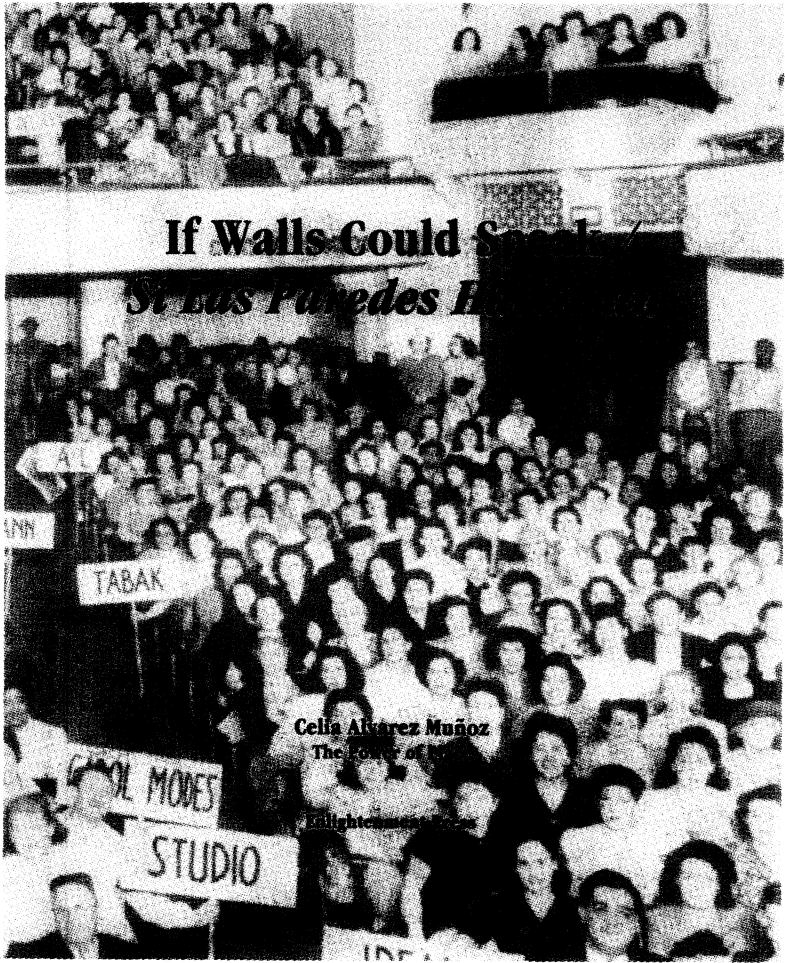


Figure 9a: Celia Alvarez Muñoz with *The Power of Place, If Walls Could Speak/ Si Las Paredes Hablaran*

pretation.) Third, as projects like Bidy Mason and Embassy show, when you have *one* significant public place, there is no need to divide history into academic categories like women, ethnic, or labor, categories that often trivialize and marginalize part of the larger urban whole.

For the city itself, there are also rewards. Putting working people's history into downtown expands the potential audience for all urban

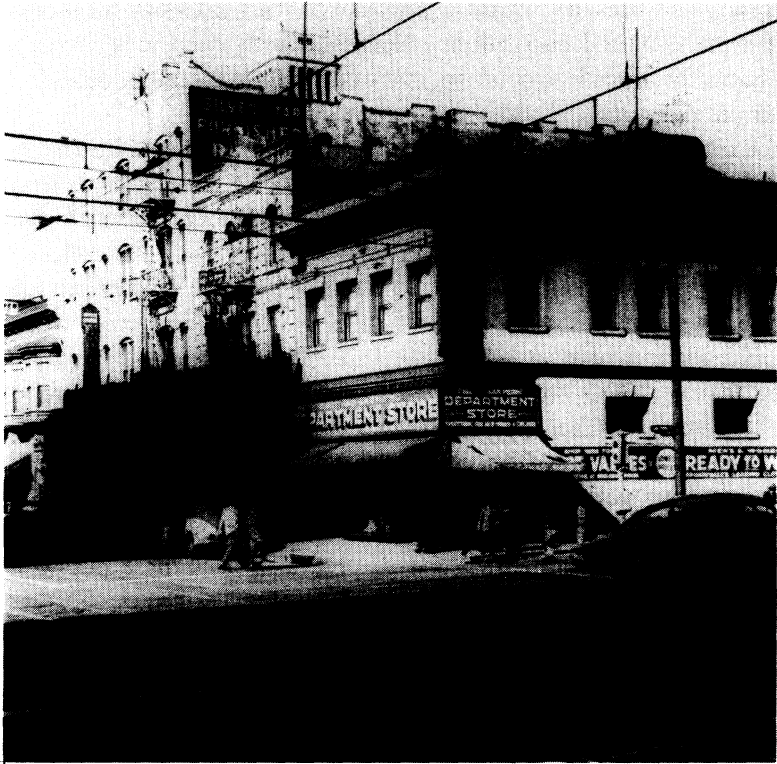


Figure 10: Los Angeles, Little Tokyo, First Street, 1940s (Reproduced by permission of Visual Communications)

preservation and public art. The awareness that every citizen's history is important—firefighters, garment workers, streetcar drivers—can renew family pride and connect to the larger urban community. Second, the recognition of important cultural heritage in diverse working people's neighborhoods can support other kinds of community organizing—including neighborhood economic development and affordable housing. Seeing each and every urban neighborhood as part of the vernacular landscape of the city, past and present, creates a stronger sense of public memory in a multicultural city. Third, a city with a network of public places tied to resonant social history can start educational projects for our children, from kindergarten on, that use the humanities and the arts to inform young citizens about urban life,

its tough choices, its rewards. (This can be the field work component of a multicultural curriculum.) Neighborhoods need jobs, housing, schools for urban restructuring, and a curriculum for public schools to nurture the spirit.

Last, but not least, public space dedicated to women's history, especially to projects focused on working women of color, claims women's political territory in tangible ways. Women can meet in these historic places and work together on new issues, with the collective knowledge of earlier struggles. And this fosters the kind of city that feminist urban designers would like to create: a nurturing place, a public realm where, at last, women are free to be themselves and to see themselves as strong and wise people, because we have represented ourselves that way.¹⁰

Today I and many of the people who worked with me in Los Angeles continue our work in other cities, but the work in Los Angeles goes on too. In Little Tokyo, a UCLA student working with me and *The Power of Place*, Susan Sztaray, helped to plan a project for a public art sidewalk wrapping the First Street National Register Historic District. She wanted to recall the scale of small, traditional Japanese American businesses flourishing there before the internment. Sheila de Bretteville, who designed the wall, is lead artist, and the Community Redevelopment Agency is the sponsor. Construction should begin in 1995. Los Angeles will then have three cultural heritage projects—one African American, one Latina, and one Japanese American—in three very different kinds of settings—ranging from a lost homestead to a reinterpreted theater building to a National Register District—that demonstrate different ways to claim parts of the public landscape as people's history. Finding the stories of working women and inscribing them in public space is one small part of creating a public, political culture that can carry the American city into the next century.

NOTES

1. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), xii.
2. Gail Dubrow made this count.

3. A pioneering work with a multiethnic approach is Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983). This is a classic from the 1940s. Other recent overall treatments include Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles 1850-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Scott Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Mike Davis, *City Of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990). For a few examples of ethnic studies: Rudolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Center, 1980); Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Lonnie G. Bunch III, *Black Angelenos* (Los Angeles: California African-American Museum, 1989); and Noritaka Yagasaki, "Ethnic Cooperativism and Immigrant Agriculture: A Study of Japanese Floriculture and Truck Farming in California" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1982).
4. Dolores Hayden, Gail Dubrow, and Carolyn Flynn, *Los Angeles: The Power of Place* (Los Angeles: The Power of Place, 1985).
5. State of California, Department of Parks and Recreation, *Five Views: An Ethnic Sites Survey for California* (Sacramento: Department of Parks and Recreation, 1988).
6. Dolores Hayden, "Biddy Mason's Los Angeles, 1856-1891," *California History*, 68 (fall 1989), 86-99, carries the full documentation.
7. Susan E. King, *HOME/stead* (Los Angeles: Paradise Press, 1987).
8. Hayden, "Biddy Mason."
9. Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak/Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, (Arlington: Enlightenment Press, 1991).
10. For a fuller discussion of cultural landscapes and social history, see Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming).