

Urban Tours as Civic Engagement: New York City and El Paso, Texas

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This paper will explore the concept of the “city-as-museum.” In this model, the city and its sites replace the traditional museum and its contents. While a museum visitor goes to one location to view objects grouped by theme, time frame, historical perspective or artist, the visitor to the city-as-museum experiences locations related thematically or historically. There are many contemporary examples of the city-as-museum, the most common being the guided (or self-guided) tour. A simple Internet search of tours for New York City reveals hundreds of such tours, and anyone living or working in Manhattan cannot escape the double-decker tour buses making their loops through the city’s sites. In general, tours are lead by a guide or may be self-guided with accompanying information about the stops on the tour, and operate from one hour to several weeks in duration depending on the scope of the topic and depth of study.

Distinct from tourism, the city-as-museum concept has an implicit goal of civic engagement. This may focus on various topics such as educational, environmental, historical, social activism, or religious pilgrimage or migration. To these ends, cities offer sites not available to traditional museums: historical places, tombs, cemeteries, restaurants, memorials, plaques, and sites of political action or change. Some have official texts accompanying the sites; some have alternative text prescribed to them by the neighborhood or by those giving the tours. City-as-museum tours can play an important role in providing depth to specific historical topics and are particularly adept at exploring the palimpsest of a city.

An interesting aspect of the word “history,” as discussed in Raymond Williams *Keywords*, is its tie to the process of representation, both verbal and physical, in the story people tell from their memory of an event. Of particular interest are the city-as-museum tours that view history or historical forces as “products of the past which are active in the present and which will shape the future in knowable ways.”¹ These forces can be studied, interpreted, and applied to current trends and events. In this way, history takes on current significance, even urgency, as we struggle to educate against future tragedy. It is this aspect of history that memorial designers strive to capture as they incorporate diverse needs into one lasting monument to a tragic event.

Radical Walking Tours of New York City, led by Bruce Kayton, are an example of the city-as-museum phenomenon.² Through his guided tours and newly published self-guide (*Radical Walking Tours of New York*), Kayton provides neighborhood-based, educational tours that highlight activist or “radical” history. The description of the Wall Street tour is as follows: “From Robber Barons to those who resisted them, this tour includes The Rockefellers and Junius and J.P. Morgan as well as Abbie Hoffman, the first organized slave revolt in New York City, and the FALN bombing of Fraunces Tavern.”³ A tour of the Lower East Side entitled “Radical Jews” is described as

... focus[ing] on the massive Jewish immigration of the turn of the century and includes Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Abraham Cahan and the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Sidney Hillman and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Socialist and Communist Party activist Rose Pastor Stokes, and more.⁴

There are many more tours listed of various New York neighborhoods, which include “all of the history that the mainstream tours (and PBS) leave out,” and visit monuments, buildings, plaques, memorials, and other sites of historical significance.⁵ Importantly, Kayton’s book and web site also reference sites and organizations beyond the tours. The fact that these tours are offered in New York City, a place filled with museums of every type, is evidence of a need for a city-as-museum historical narrative that is missing from the traditional museums of the city.

On Kayton’s Central Park tour, Sheep Meadow is not just the site of sunbathing and Frisbee games for overworked New Yorkers. It is the former site of an all-black shantytown on the outskirts of what was then the city. This town was demolished for the creation of the park, and the inhabitants were barred from entering the park upon its completion by prohibitive codes of dress, conduct and use. Nowhere in the park is there a monument to this town or its displaced inhabitants. In this way, Kayton engages the social, political, economic and racial past of the city, thus adding a new dimension to the understanding of the park.

Another city-as-museum example is El Paso, Texas, which shares the national border with Juarez, Mexico. Here several different educational tours for groups have developed out of a need to understand the complex social, political, historical, racial, military and economic dynamics of the United States/Mexico border. El Paso does not have a well developed or extensive museum culture, and its official sites of history and memory are uncritical of the larger social context of the border. The extended “border experiences” available in city-as-museum tours include visits to sites that, when taken as a whole, offer a radically different history of the border than the official texts. Sites include the Rio Grande, the river dividing the two cities; the bridges spanning this border river; the chain link and barbed wire fence marking the separation of the two countries in the desert; city plazas and markets in both Juarez and El Paso; the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Border Patrol Museum; “maquilas” (sweatshops run by multinational corporations in Mexico); clinics, orphanages, schools, shelters and community centers; various neighborhoods within the two cities, both wealthy and impoverished; and specific families who have agreed to participate in the program and hold discussions with the groups.

A particular site visit is the Black Bridge, one of the several bridges spanning the Rio Grande and linking the U.S. and Mexico. The border crossings are heavily militarized and flags, signs, fence, razor wire, uniformed and armed guards, sensors, cameras, and a plaque marking the line itself all emphasize that the visitor is crossing from one territory to another. Standing on the dividing line looking north, one sees El Paso’s valley, an orderly city with houses, shopping malls, and mansions on the mountain facing the border. Looking south, one sees the sprawl of Juarez’s winding streets and the city’s edge, lined with cardboard and metal shacks pushing out into the Sonora desert. The official text of the border is that of political division and national sovereignty. The subtext of the bridge is that of disparity, inequitable distribution of resources, and of exploitation. So many civic issues are present at just this one site on the bridge: militarization, economic policy, human rights, labor practices, racism, cultural integrity, resource distribution, environmental impact, and nationhood. Depending on the time allotted and the particular groups’ interest, any of these topics may be discussed. Thus the bridge is a city-as-museum site that provides a vantage point from which to consider community, nation, and world. It furthermore physically implicates the community, the nation, and the world.

Several critical issues can arise from this construction of the city-as-museum. While typical museums have collections of objects that can be displayed and analyzed, the city as museum has among its “objects” the people who inhabit the city. Their lives, homes, and even persons can be subject to study and scrutiny. Selling the idea of an authentic experience of the U.S./Mexico border as food, music, shopping and dancing, is a charade of surface appearance — one that does not carry through into the manner in which the business of the border actually occurs. Perhaps unintentionally, tours may also feed negative stereotypes about a culture or group of people due to the fact that only privileged people are able to journey far from their homes to observe less privileged groups of people. Tours can thus set up an imbalanced power relationship. Tour operators and local people who agree to work with the tours may also obscure the dynamics of the historical and present situation by presenting biased views of events. Tour groups may feel unsatisfied with an experience that fails to show them a particular pre-conceived scene of “authentic” culture.

City-as-museum tours fill an important role in providing depth for specific historical topics, and are especially adept at exploring the palimpsest of a city. While particular attention should be paid to the danger of constructing people as objects to be viewed and discussed on these tours, much can be gained by exploring historical sites in this way.

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 147.

² Bruce Kayton, *Radical Walking Tours of New York*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. Internet tour listing site: “www.he.net/~radtours,” accessed December 2003.

³ “www.he.net/~radtours,” “Wall Street Area.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, “Lower East Side I” and “Lower East Side II.”

⁵ “www.he.net/~radtours”