# Putting the Academy in its Place

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There has been much lamentation recently about the disengagement of academic work from public life in the U.S., a disengagement that seems especially corrosive in the arts, humanities and design. Many scholars, artists and cultural advocates have decried the costs of that divide to both civic discourse and higher education, and they have called for efforts to bridge it through experiments in pedagogy, research, design and creative work. [1]

This article describes one such experiment, the University of Michigan's Arts of Citizenship program. Arts of Citizenship seeks to enlist university-based artists, humanists and designers in collaborative community projects and to explore what difference such public work can make for scholarship, teaching and creative expression. In so doing, I will argue, it is also an experiment in place-making, for to engage the American academy in the work of co-creating public culture is to ask what sort of place a university should be, what sort of places it can help to make and what place it inhabits in the larger community.

## Exploring Broadway Park

Let me start with a small story: a joint field trip to Broadway Park two years ago by Professor Bob Grese's first-year landscape architecture studio and Mary Van Alstyne's first- and second-grade class from Bach Elementary School. Broadway Park is a three-acre, triangular meadow near the university; it sits wedged between the Huron River, the old rail depot (now a fancy restaurant) and two bridges that cross the railway and the river and connect the city's downtown and north side. To most Ann Arborites, the park is invisible, used almost exclusively by local fishermen (mainly African-American) and homeless squatters.

The design students had been asked to redesign the park as a child-centered space; Van Alstyne's students were, in effect, their clients. Multi-age teams explored the site, the youngsters noting what they liked best and what they saw the park becoming. Not surprisingly, they gravitated to spots that the adults found dangerous: cut-throughs to the tracks, boulders on the river's edge, the wooded corners of the park. And in most of these places, they found the traces of homeless people: shirts hanging from branches, a coffee mug on a stump, a mattress in a clearing. The people who lived in the park by night were on the streets or at work. Van Alstyne's students tried to make sense of these belongings, sometimes in uncanny and disquieting ways: "This must be a place where poor people live." "Somebody must have died and left these here." "No, this is where people leave their clothes when they go to the store to buy new ones."

"A place where people leave their clothes when they've bought new ones"—I will return to that comment later. But first let me suggest how it connects to the broader theme of civic engagement. The field trip was part of Students On Site, an Arts of Citizenship project that brings together university and K-12 educators to create community-based curricula in local history, writing, landscape design and environmental education. [2] These teaching partnerships are, in turn, linked with a public works initiative: the city of Ann Arbor is rebuilding the adjacent bridges and has asked Arts of Citizenship to propose opportunities for public art, outdoor exhibits and landscape redesign in and around the bridge site.

The opportunities are rich. The bridge neighborhood is the historic core of Ann Arbor's rail and river corridor, the heart of its black and German-American settlements and its original mill district. Broadway Park is, in effect, the crossroads for all the histories of Ann Arbor that are not the University's—histories that, like the park itself, are often as invisible as they are central. Thus the field trip was part of an omnibus, multi-generational project that integrated research into teaching about, and reshaping a local place—a place of rich and relatively untapped community meaning.

## Civic Engagement and Disengagement

Students On Site reflects something of the zeitgeist of American higher education. Calls for civic engagement are a current staple of academic conferences, national reports and foundation programs. Arts of Citizenship was founded four years ago out of the impulse to meld intellectual exploration with public work—or, rather, to transplant that impulse into the arts and humanities: [3] Community work is more frequently practiced and more highly valued in the policy-based social sciences and the helping professions than in the liberal arts. For all the rich scholarship on popular and public culture in recent years, humanists still tend to envision research as a lonely encounter with the archive and teaching as a sedentary conversation centered on a teacher-authorized text. In contrast, Arts of Citizenship has sought to develop a model of intellectual work centered on the collaborative project, a model that brings together faculty, students, staff and community partners to co-define and co-create public goods. Along with the Students On Site partnerships, we work with museums, performance troupes, youth groups, grass-roots associations and community centers to make exhibits, websites, drama, public art and other cultural resources.

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The goal of such collaborations is not only civic do-gooderism. It is also to reverse the devaluation of academic work that has inevitably attended its dissociation from civic and community life. As the Kellogg Foundation argues in its influential report, *Visions of Change in Higher Education*, universities need "to revitalize their public service missions" in the face of recurrent budgetary emergencies, broad discontent within the professoriat over the dominance of esoteric research and "loss of legitimacy with external stakeholders." [4] Calls for civic engagement and programs like Arts of Citizenship, in short, represent a response to an incipient crisis of legitimacy that threatens the American academy.

Several factors have worked in recent years to isolate U.S. universities from their publics and endanger the material and moral support on which their privileged access to resources and autonomy relies. Most important was the sheer success of American higher education after World War II, with its huge student bodies, proliferation of research fields and institutional missions, and growing dependence on public funds. When the postwar economic boom came to an end in the mid-1970s, the scale and complexity of universities provoked runaway budgets and growing friction with tuition-paying families and taxpaying voters. [5]

The loss of public legitimacy was exacerbated by the hyper-professionalism that organized work and status in the academy. The stress on specialized research regulated by peer review meant that access to tenure and prestige was inversely proportional to public access. The fiscal stress of the past quarter-century only intensified matters. Hard times and scarce jobs raised the bar for hiring and advancement, increasing the pressure on young academics to think of their career as a Malthusian scramble for credentialed publication and disciplinary visibility. In such a climate, universities may appreciate the public engagement of their scholars, but they rarely make it salient to issues of promotion, pay and power.

Finally, and ironically, the growing distance between academic and public life was reinforced by the scholarly effects of the 1960s. Although spurred in part by a critique of the hyper-specialized university, the left professoriat has been absorbed into the regime of the academy with astonishing efficiency. On the whole, I believe, the intellectual legacy of the '60s has had a vibrant effect on American universities, stimulating innovative scholarly and theoretical work, improved teaching practices and new interdisciplinary fields like women's and ethnic studies. Yet, for all its insurgent energies, recent scholarship has not offered a sustained critique of the university itself. Rather, heterodox fields have used the apparatus of peer-reviewed journals, scholarly conferences and endowed chairs to wrest legitimacy and resources for themselves; radical scholars routinely run the professional associations of established disciplines. [6]

The arts and humanities represent a particularly costly instance of the estrangement of the research academy from its publics. On the one hand, recent cultural studies has yielded rich insights into popular attitudes, public values, media representations and the meaning of everyday life, producing a body of work that takes seriously the political stakes and social complexity of cultural forms. On the other hand, academics have pursued such scholarship in ways that are notoriously opaque to the publics we study. Its esotericism has many sources, including a widespread, and to my mind, healthy breakdown of disciplinary boundaries. But it also reflects the tendency toward civic withdrawal and professional insularity that I described above, the pre-shrinking, if you will, of the political imagination that animated the work to begin with. The resulting distance between new work on public culture and the public sphere has had the ironic effect of making the arts and humanities lightning rods for conflicts over such issues as the teaching of American history and the imputed moral relativism of theories like post-structuralism. [7]

The thematics of place offers an important frame for understanding these problems and some important resources for overcoming them. It is helpful to see the crisis of legitimacy that threatens American higher education as a crisis of place-making: an attenuation of the university as an embodied community of inquiry embedded in both a local community and a larger civic realm. All the historical factors that I described above act to erode the loyalties and interests that bind academics to local, non-academic significant others. Because this attenuation of place is so deeply embedded in the structure of academic life as to seem natural, I do not think that we have fully realized how new or how corrosive it is. It has given rise to a star system that rewards transience and undervalues continuity. And, especially in the cultural, creative and design disciplines, it imposes cognitive and intellectual disabilities on the work itself, depriving artists, humanists and designers of non-professional interlocutors and knowledge.

Conversely, I would argue, the traditions of landscape studies and design pedagogy within universities offer interesting models for bridging the academic–public divide. J. B. Jackson and William H. Whyte, pioneering ethnographers of place, worked to

elide the distinction between research and cultural commentary in their writing; Jackson's journal, *Landscape*, addressed a mixed readership of scholars, practitioners and design-minded citizens. Similarly, when Arts of Citizenship was founded, our models for university-based public cultural work included Anne Whiston Spirn's West Philadelphia Landscape Project and Dolores Hayden's Power of Place—place-making initiatives that melded environmental and archival research, design and artistic practice and thoroughgoing collaboration between academic and community partners. [8]

It is not surprising that such projects found a home in design schools, one of the few institutional spaces within the academy that integrates research, cultural critique and practice-based pedagogy. Nonetheless, re-engaging the university in civic and community culture means going beyond the client- and studio-based models of design education. It means embracing a dialogical, participatory model of intellectual work, one that enlarges the circle within which problems are defined and knowledge circulated to include civic as well as professional peers. Doing such work would entail experimenting with the ways universities teach, do scholarship, train professionals, give out money and evaluate student and faculty achievement. It would mean putting the academy in its place. [9]

**Broadway Park: A Case Study in Civic Placemaking**

This brings me back to Broadway Park. In its own small way, the field trip exemplified the sort of work I am talking about: a simultaneous effort at civic engagement, intellectual experiment and placemaking.

I want to return to the comment that I heard one of the Bach School children make after coming upon a squatter's campsite: "This is where people come and leave their old clothes after they buy new ones at the store." As I thought about this haunting remark, contemporary cultural studies offered me some useful tools for illuminating it. Work on power and social classification—that of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Allen, for instance—point up the (un-self-conscious) process of othering in which the boy's comment participated. [10]

Similarly, post-structuralist and psychoanalytical theories of meaning, with their attention to the unsaid in ideological discourse, helped me see that the powerful sadness of the comment came from the way that it placed the truth of the situation under repression. The child could not permit himself to recognize why the shirt was hanging on the tree branch; the indirect way that he made sense of it gave the shirt an even more unspeakable power than if he had said, "Oh, no, a man without a home has to live here." Fredric Jameson argues that when the fact of human misery is placed under erasure in this way, traces of it make themselves half-known in social narratives; thus the child displaced into a story about discarded clothing his intuitive sense that here was a discarded human being.

Finally, recent geographical scholarship on what Edward Soja calls "the socio-spatial dialectic" helped me to understand the salience of Broadway Park as the setting of this moment of revelation. As I have noted, the park is a mix of centrality and marginality: It is near the heart of Ann Arbor but underused because of the barriers of tracks, bridges and river. It is almost a geographic representation of an aporia: the unacknowledged gap in the center of a presence, the abandoned heart of the city. It was not surprising to me that homeless people should choose such a place to encamp, protected by its invisibility, so near the town center on which they depended for their subsistence.

In short, I came to this field trip with all kinds of academic resources to make sense of the park, its residents and its effect on the visiting schoolchildren. At the same time the extramural nature of the encounter led me to insights that were wholly unexpected. Most important was the connection that it suggested between children and the homeless, groups that tend to be cast as antitypes and ideological competitors. Children are the ultimate category of legitimization in our society and the homeless, especially homeless men, are demonized as the ultimate threat, particularly to children. Indeed, when Grese and I discussed his studio assignment to redesign Broadway Park as a child-centered space, we worried that a public space consigned to the homeless could not be re-imagined as child-centered by his students.

What I saw in the park, however, was a surprising homology, even a kind of intimacy, between the social needs of the homeless residents and the imaginative needs of the children. Both groups took to secret spaces that offered a mix of security and marginality. Far from being threatened by such edge places, the children were drawn to them by a sort of Huck Finn fantasy of being at once hidden and footloose, safe and uncivilized. The children seemed to identify with significant others whose identity they could not fully recognize.

The Masters students were able only partly to incorporate the lessons of the visit into their proposed redesigns. On the one hand, the collaborative process pushed them to engage the children as clients, co-creators and interlocutors. Organized into inter-age teams of about eight

people, they explored the park together and worked in a follow-up school visit to sketch, brainstorm and build models. The landscape architects took these materials back to the studio, where they drafted, critiqued and revised individual plans for the park. They selected five plans for presentation in Van Alstyne's classroom, where the first and second graders subjected them to searching questions and sometimes probing critique; by now, the kids were deeply invested in the outcomes and knew their own minds about what they wanted. Grese's students, in short, went through a more extended experience of learning to place their expertise in dialogue than the one I described for myself.

Apart from investigating the landscape and ecological issues that the site posed, Grese's pedagogical goals were to teach his students the skill of deep listening to inexpert partners—and to view children as competent but marginalized social actors in the community design process. Mary Van Alstyne's pedagogical goals were, concomitantly, to teach her students to view themselves as social actors with the power and responsibility to shape their place in the world—and to recognize that such power was constrained by the reality principle. Both teachers were skilled at melding these goals in the project, and the process of collaboration met both sets of goals admirably.

On the other hand, the product of the collaboration—the plans themselves—only partially incorporated the park's multiple users and potentials. Taking their cue from the children's exuberant response, most of the landscape students minimized hardscape and stressed exploration and adventure, offering opportunities for tree climbing, rock clambering, racing across meadows and hiding. Many also foregrounded the history of the site as a Native American crossroads, a mill district and a rail and river corridor. Nonetheless, the most difficult issue raised by the park, the conflicts and links between children and squatters, was not directly addressed by anyone's plan, although it had been discussed extensively in the studio. Given the ways that the homeless are figured in public discourse and policed in public space, it was, perhaps, impossible for the Masters students to envision a design solution that could accommodate both potential users of the park's hidden spaces.

As I thought about how Broadway Park might be revived and what role Arts of Citizenship might play, I turned again to intellectual resources to advance the dialogue I had begun in the park. Children's studies scholars provided a body of research that made sense of the Bach students' attraction to the rough but sheltered margins of the park ("the secret spaces of childhood," in Elizabeth Goodenough's wonderful phrase).[xx] Architectural criticism explored the ways that the policing of socially marginalized people is designed into public spaces. Community historians taught me that Broadway Park was known in the 1930s as Hobo Park because of the tramps who camped and hopped freight trains there. Student researchers discovered that at the turn of the century it was "the wretched condition of this property" as a rail yard redolent with danger and vice that had animated the campaign to create the park in the first place. Clearly, Broadway Park had its own history of hidden spaces, of survival on the margins, of casual labor and invisible men, whose traces the children had sensed.

For now, the story of Broadway Park has reached a pause. As the adjacent bridges are rebuilt, the park will be a staging area for materials and equipment; the homeless will be displaced, presumably to neglected public spaces elsewhere in town. Yet the question of the site's future remains. The park is both lovely and unlovely, central and marginal. A riverside meadow in the heart of the city, a crossroads of invisible histories, it is neglected by nearly everybody except the dozen or so squatters who live there, the handful of anglers who fish there on warm mornings and a small number of walkers who cherish its quiet and emptiness. It cannot succeed as a neighborhood recreational space; two nearby parks better fill such needs. Yet if a solution could be found to its inaccessibility and to the security issues posed by its seclusion and homeless users, Broadway Park might serve as a citywide outdoor classroom for environmental, cultural and historical education.

Can that reprogramming be done without displacing the homeless encampment, the usual effect of park reclamation efforts like this? More to the point, can a university-based program like Arts of Citizenship advance such a strategy of accommodation—in both senses—of squatters, children and other potential stakeholders?

It seems to me that academics might play two key roles in the remaking of Broadway Park. First, we might bring our craft of cultural analysis to bear on the discourse of community place-making, pointing out ways in which homeless squatters are demonized in public space and public conversation and advocating the inclusion of both children and homeless in discussions of the park's redesign. Second, we might bring our design expertise to the table, offering specific ideas about the uses and structures that could accommodate the residents of the park and at the same time accommodate them to other users

such as schoolchildren. What sort of shelter spaces, storage spaces and play spaces might such a place contain? What temporal rhythms of activity and rest would structure the daily choreography of encounter, toleration and avoidance? What tacit agreements would be reached about boundaries, zones and permissible conversation? To make Broadway Park such a place of accommodations would be a genuinely important contribution to public design. [12]

**Putting the University in its Place**

Putting the university in its place does not mean retreating into localism or rejecting the cosmopolitan linkages that represent one of the great strengths of academic life. Quite the contrary: It entails the creation of new, place-based forms of intellectual cosmopolitanism that extend the range of partners, peers and languages shaping our work. Like interdisciplinary research and teaching, perhaps even more so, the project of bridging civic and academic work is disruptive of old closures.

Yet the reward for such work is nothing less, it seems to me, than the mutual revivification of both public culture and higher education, both of which are threatened by the distance between them. Much has been written recently about the attenuation of the public sphere and the privatization of contemporary social life, a threat symbolized in the proliferation of gated communities across the American landscape. Universities are one of the few institutions—perhaps the only institution of local, embodied community—with the capacity to challenge this gating of American society. Most Americans live with us at some time in their lives, and universities serve as unique social laboratories in which new forms of living and collective practice can be modeled. Part of the job of the academy is the engagement of our intellectual work with the practice of public life. For we cannot live in a society of gated communities without becoming, as we may already be, a gated community ourselves.

Notes

I am grateful to Mary Van Alstyne and Bob Great for partnering on the Broadway Park project and to the Michigan Humanities Council for funding it. Dean Earl Lewis of the Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, and professors Robin Bachin and Samina Qureshi of the University of Miami graciously invited me to present earlier versions of this essay. My thanks to Nancy Cantor for her thoughts on this essay and her leadership.

1. Important critiques of the disengagement of higher education from public life include: "Wingspread Declaration On Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University" (http://www.compact.org/news/Wingspread.html); Thomas Ehrlich (ed.), *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 2000); and Gregory Jay, "The Community in the Classroom," *Academe* 86:4 (July-August, 2000), 33-7.

2. For an overview of Students On Site, see the Arts of Citizenship website (http://www.artsofcitizenship.umich.edu).

3. Initiatives like the University of Pennsylvania's Center For Community Partnerships and the University of Miami's Initiative On Urban and Social Ecology reflect a growing commitment "to foster an interdisciplinary program of research, education and outreach that supports the people, places and processes essential for creating and sustaining family-centered communities." See Samina Qureshi, "The Spirit of Place and Building Community," in Todd W. Bressi (ed.), *The Living Traditions of Miami's West Coconut Grove* (Coral Gables: University of Miami, 2002). Also, see the Center for Community Partnerships website (http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/Bibliography/Ed_HUD_paper.html); and Ira Harkavy, "School-Community-University Partnerships: Effectively Integrating Community Building and Education Reform" (http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/Bibliography/Ed_-HUD_paper.html).

4. *Visions of Change In Higher Education* (W.W. Kellogg Foundation, n.d.).

5. For the institutional history of American research universities in the second half of the twentieth century, see Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Hugh Davis Graham, *The Rise of American Research Universities: Elites and Challenges In the Postwar Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Clark Kerr, *The Great Transformation In Higher Education, 1960-1980* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991); and *Daedalus* 126 (Fall, 1997), a special issue on "The American Academic Profession."

6. On the relationship between academic professionalism and the intellectual, see Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Lawrence Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); MARHO, the Radical Historians' Collective, *Visions of History* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1983); and Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

7. On professionalism, place and the geography of academic life, see Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, "Renewing the Democratic Spirit in Higher Education," in Ehrlich, and A. Bartlett Giamatti, *A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

8. See J. B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Ehrlich Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) and *The Necessity For Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); and William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, D.C.: Conservation Foundation, 1980).

For a discussion of the efforts of landscape studies to integrate academic and public audiences, see Paul Groth, "Frameworks for Cultural Landscape Study," in Groth and Todd W. Bressi (eds.), *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

See also the West Philadelphia Landscape Project website (http://www.upenn.edu/wplp) and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes As Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

9. For a critique of the social hierarchies embedded in the studio model of integrating pedagogy and practice, see Linda N. Groat, "Rescuing Architecture From the Cul-de-sac," *Journal of Architectural Education* 45:3 (May, 1992), 138-46.

10. My thinking here was especially informed by Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Pantheon, 1965); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space In Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989).

11. See Elizabeth Goodenough (ed.), "Secret Spaces of Childhood," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39:2,3 (Spring, Summer 2000); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 221-63; and Michael Dear and Jurgen von Mahs, "Housing For the Homeless, By the Homeless and Of the Homeless," in Nan Ellin (ed.), *Architecture of Fear* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 187-200. The quotation describing Broadway Park is from "To the President and Common Council of the City of Ann Arbor" (30 June 1902); see (http://www.si.umich.edu/CHICO/sos/new/archives/henningacquire.html)

12. On the university as a social laboratory, see Nancy Cantor, "Reinvention: Why Now? Why Us?" keynote address to The Boyer Commission Report: A Second Anniversary Retrospective (28 April 2000) (http://www.umich.edu/~provost/speeches/boyer.html).