H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dolores Hayden. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996. 320 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-262-58152-3.

Reviewed by Bradley Queen (Boston University)
Published on H-PCAACA (June, 1997)

Dolores Hayden's book, less a piece of academic scholarship than an instructive text by an urban preservationist engaging the politics of multiculturalism, is clearly written and conceived. Relying on the work of J.B. Jackson, Yi Fu-Tuan, David Harvey, Frederic Jameson, Edward Soja, and Mike Davis among others, Hayden situates her theoretical presentation: preserving the built environment along the interstices of architectural and landscape history, culture theory, and the discipline of geography with its inclusive conceptualization of postmodern space. She wisely avoids the jargon associated therewith (letting theory speak for itself) and presents examples of how multiculturalist theory–its concerns with otherness and the ethics of historical presentation–can be put to practical use.

Hayden describes the construction of public history as the process of making the invisible visible, and of teaching historians, artists, architects and planners to work together with the people and communities who occupy certain places. Fluid communication, she argues, is the key to recovering aspects of public memory, specifically those involving women and ethnic minorities, in all their grace and bitterness. Hayden concludes that this dialogic method of constructing history leads to a sense of shared authority among those with the political power to preserve the urban environment and those with the cultural power to preserve the city with time-honored sensibilities and place-specific memory.

Hayden newly frames this approach, by showing how it diverges from the twenty-year-old debate on preservation, argued by by sociologist Herbert Gans and architectural historian Ada Huxtable in the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*. Gans defined architecture as the built environment, the vernacular as a social use determined by class, and the neighborhood as an area bound by cultural ties. Huxtable, in contrast, defined architecture as a building designed by a professionally trained architect, vernacular as a building whose designer was unknown, and the neighborhood as that space determined by imposed boundary lines. Hayden moves beyond the polarities of this debate by assuming that the built environment is a fundamental element within the contested terrain of race and gender. The politics of identity takes primary importance in her preservationist effort to locate a sense of place, to find those elements of the past which capture the inevitable collusion between the natural environment of a location and the culture which occupies it. Hayden envisions the construction of community-based public history with a focus on the idiographic elements of place, as part of a broader effort to enrich the nomothetic urban fabric.

Her non-profit organization, aptly entitled *The Power of Place*, brought such an approach to Los Angeles. Rediscovering workers' landscapes and livelihoods, recovering African-American memory, reinterpreting Latina History, and commemorating Little Tokyo enriched each distinctive culture as well as the history of Los Angeles; the well-springs of public memory were seemingly replenished by the efforts of Hayden and her group. If there is a criticism to be made of such a necessary book, it is that one is left wondering what a Black Angeleno thought of the commemorative effort at Little Tokyo, or what comments were made by a Latina about the publicly presented story of Black midwife Biddy Mason. If Hayden and her efforts are limited in both theory and practice by the categorical rigidity of multiculturalist politics, she is wise to conform, for she knows how to get things done.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Bradley Queen. Review of Hayden, Dolores, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1056

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.