



Bendiner-Viani, Gabrielle. Contested City Art & Public History as Mediation at New York's Seward Park Urban Renewal Area

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BOOK REVIEW

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Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani's book offers a compelling argument for what the arts and public humanities can bring to understanding and ameliorating real-world social problems but also makes an equally compelling case for the limits of what higher education can accomplish in its current form. The focus of *Contested City* is an undergraduate course that Bendiner-Viani developed for the New School's Urban Studies program. She relates the course goals, rewards, and challenges, as well as her pedagogical practice, which she calls *visual urbanism*.

The New School's only stipulations for Bendiner-Viani's class were for students to partner with a community group and to make something public at the end of the single-semester course. For more than five years, as a non-tenure-track professor, the author taught "City Studio," which met once a week for three hours, to an average of eight to twelve students per term. Community partnerships require enormous amounts of trust and time, and as Bendiner-Viani notes, public exhibitions are not conducive to academic time lines. The author nonetheless developed an ambitious learning experience for her students that also benefited their community partners (who in some cases also may have been remunerated, although coteaching honorariums are not detailed here).

Bendiner-Viani's class took the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area (SPURA) as a case study for its research and creative work, culminating in a different exhibition each semester. The area of SPURA, fourteen blocks on New York City's Lower East Side, has a deeply troubled history of urban displacement, racism, housing discrimination and gentrification. In 1967, in the name of urban renewal, New York City took ownership of the area and slated it for slum clearance. The city displaced 1,852 families and never fulfilled its promise of their right of return to affordable housing in a new development. Marking 50 years of aborted development proposals, the press characterized a peaceful resolution as being as unlikely as one for Israel and Palestine. The author brought her students into this contested space to experience, map, research and learn the "fragmentary and competing" (33) local stories that make up SPURA while partnering with a neighborhood housing and preservation organization, a public history initiative and a university-based center for community development.

The author called her students' projects "Layered SPURA" because of the layers they excavated together: "the histories of the people who had lived there over time, the policy decisions ..., [the] processes that would shape the space moving forward" (6). After students read architectural history and social criticism and spent time at the site and with partners individually and as a class, they developed their exhibition projects. Berdiner-Viani wanted her students "to make the site visible not as a tabula rasa or as a parcel of real estate but as a place possessing community and history" (84). Some projects, for example, included "recordings of people's reminiscences, speeches from community meetings, and site-specific ambient noises" (88). Another culminated in a SPURA resource exchange (89). For a later class, students designed a flier for the Seward Park Area Redevelopment Coalition to help identify former site tenants given priority to rent in the new development ultimately planned for the site, Essex Crossing. The author describes uplifting moments such as when stakeholders from opposite sides of the housing debates attended a City Studio exhibition. It was the first time they had ever coexisted amicably in a space devoted to understanding SPURA.

Readers of *Public Art Dialogue* will wonder how visual urbanism relates to social practice, participatory art and creative placemaking. The author embarked on Layered SPURA before the term *social practice* was used in the realm of art. One of the major questions this book leaves for readers is how other public art practitioners have negotiated similar projects since 2012 when social practice gained more institutional momentum. The author's challenges beg the question of whether there are pathways forward for academics engaging in these kinds of projects at the undergraduate level and whether traditional undergrad programs can give professors more latitude to develop public humanities courses that mix practice and theory, making and learning. The author's conviction rings true until the end of her study, when she writes, "We need arts and culture in our organizing, our teaching, our neighborhoods, and our everyday lives. We need them to help us talk about history and about histories, those stories that continue to have resonance and meaning today, even if they are not always recognized" (135).

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