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Urbanism: Observing the City

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Corner, Cullen, and Hiss: Mapping Cincinnati through the Eyes of a Flying Pig

Before you can understand a city, you must first observe it. These observations might lead to a theory to explain the observations. Or it might work the other way around: you learn about theory, and then you set out to use it as a basis for observation. In this seminar, we aim to do just that. I intend to use the work of James Corner, Gordon Cullen, and Tony Hiss to support my observations of Cincinnati to help create a visual representation of my experiences.

James Corner, a Manchester-born landscape architect, wrote an article on the definition of mapping and many ways to do it. His main argument is that mapping is inherently different from tracing. According to Corner, tracing is “what is” while mapping is “what is *and* what is not yet” (214), meaning a tracing is simply a representation of what exists, while a map should create new perspectives and ways of viewing things that exist as well as represent them. And the things that exist are “more than just the physical attributes of terrain (topography, rivers, roads, buildings) but [include] … natural processes such as wind and sun; historical events and local stories; economic and legislative conditions; even political interests, regulatory mechanisms and programmatic structures” (Corner 214). Corner’s solution is to look to more abstract methods of representation, such as drift. Drift is a technique that resulted from the Situationists in Europe. Guy Debord was one important theorist of this group. He made his own maps that he called “psycho-geographic guides” by simply wandering aimlessly around the city of Paris, through the streets and alleyways, just going wherever he felt like it. He recorded these wanderings, and the result “reflected subjective, street-level desires and perceptions” as opposed to a bird’s-eye-view of the traditional street map (Corner 231). Debord’s work will be useful in creating my own map of Cincinnati because while the Flying Pig Marathon’s route may be specific and purposeful for the event, on any other day, one can view it as simply another route that one might take around the city if he or she were wandering. In my project, I might take this a step further and actually wander around myself and deviate from the course. In this way, I will get more than just a literal representation of my surroundings; I will also get my own subjective views, making this map more personal than anything I could buy in a store.

Corner also talks about a concept called layering. This involves literally layering different kinds of maps to create a new, multidimensional map that can say more than any one individual layer. The end result is greater than the sum of its parts, because you can start seeing connections between layers. The advantage to a layered map as opposed to the traditional plan is that it is open to interpretation and allows for a lot more freedom. As Corner explains, “[j]ust as upon the gymnasium floor, almost anything can happen; the layered structure provides little restraint or imposition” (236). This technique will be particularly useful in my project because I want to create this kind of multidimensional representation of my route through Cincinnati, showing things like noise pollution and the function of a particular area (entertainment, food, office, etc).

As part of my multidimensional map, I want to include some sort of visual representation. I really liked the work of Gordon Cullen and knew that I wanted to use something like it for my project before I even knew what the project was. This method of representation was called “Serial Vision” and is actually a fairly simple concept. It “consists of a series of sketch perspectives arranged in a sequence, as one would wander along a given route. The sequence is accompanied by a plan, indicating the points along the path where the perspectives are taken from” (Lucas 1). The point of sketching for him could be to emphasize things he thought were important and exclude things he thought weren’t. I intend to use something similar to his technique, except that I would use photographs because to me, that’s better than deciding what stays or goes in the sketch; everything is included and each and every person who looks at the pictures can interpret the path for themselves. It also is a more complete representation because almost everything is included (depending on the resolution of your camera). It is similar to the “Street View” on Google Maps, adding yet another dimension to an otherwise two-dimensional map.

Finally I would like to look at the work of Tony Hiss. Hiss is a journalist whose writing is more accessible to the public than, say, Anne Vernez-Moudon. However, he fits well within one of her categories: Place Studies, and in fact, Vernez-Moudon cites him as an example of work in this movement. Hiss is primarily focused on the experiential, as opposed to Corner who focuses on the objective and what can be observed. Cullen is also focused on the experiential, however, he is extremely visual while Hiss prefers to describe and create a metal image, not a literal photograph. While Cullen has a relatively accurate representation that allows for individual interpretation, Hiss provides a method to convey an extremely personal experience. In his essay describing his own experience through Grand Central Station in New York, he was able to describe not only the visual aspects of his surroundings, but also his own perspective on the movement of people around him and his own part in the choreography of the scene. He talks about being caught up in the crowd of people and being moved almost against his will, as well as the sound of the many voices humming throughout the station. This method of description is valuable not only for its visual cues, but also the phenomenological ones. It gives insight to both the look and feel of a place. I intend to use Hiss’s method in some capacity in my project. The extent of that has yet to be determined, but I really like the idea of using both visuals and descriptions to provide a complete picture of the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the city. I am toying with the idea of writing a blog or some sort of journal to accompany my map. I want to create a map similar to Debord’s with the drift technique, where I break up the route into separate areas and connect them with arrows indicating the route to the next place, and then within each smaller map, create a visual using pictures I have taken, as well as excerpts from my writing to create that comprehensive map I am looking for. Of course, I will provide access to the entire project—things that didn’t make it on the final map, such as pictures and the rest of my writing.

All of these theorists will provide valuable insight into my observation project. With Corner, I get the practical help with making a map and how best to convey different kinds of information. With Cullen and Hiss, I get help with representing the subtleties of the city—things that normally are left out in a standard road map. These features will be the key to creating a comprehensive map of my chosen route.

Works Cited

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