

Senses of Place: An Architectural Historian Before and During COVID-19

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I am a German architectural historian and I am writing a book about public library architecture in Germany and the United States. When the pandemic started, I was in Madison, Wisconsin, where I had spent the first half of a fellowship as a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Art History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The fellowship was made possible through the generous funding of the Volkswagen Foundation. In my research project, I study German and American central libraries during the period following establishment of public libraries (after c. 1880) until 2010. I'm particularly interested in the engagement of citizens with public library buildings and public input in the design process. Such public debates arise when new buildings are designed, buildings are threatened to be demolished, or expansions for existing libraries are planned. The case studies for the research project are historic buildings with expansions, or newly constructed libraries that replace demolished buildings: specifically, the Central Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1889/1967/2009); Stadtbibliothek Görlitz (1907/2008); Stadtbibliothek Hannover (1931/1956/1978/2003); Seattle Central Library (1906/1960/2004); Chicago Public Library (1897/1991), and the Stadtbücherei Münster (1993). This selection of examples enables cross connections between different historical periods and allows for a chronologically comprehensive interpretation. Overall, animating this research project is the question of how society's relationship with architecture informs its conception of history—and, conversely, how its relationship with history informs its architecture.

I arrived in Madison in September 2019 and had ambitious plans for the coming year as a visiting fellow. I planned to carry out at least three research trips to Chicago, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Seattle in order to work in municipal archives and library archives, conduct interviews and use the

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vast resources at the UW-Madison libraries. I was excited to learn from other scholars, discuss my research, and be inspired by American academia. Moreover, the fellowship covered the costs for a workshop on library architecture that I had to organize. The fellowship also allowed me to teach one seminar at the Department of Art History at UW-Madison. I enjoyed the services and resources of Wisconsin's biggest state university, but six months into my fellowship the pandemic started.

My coping strategy for the pandemic has been to make a virtue of a necessity by exploring digital resources and learning new skills, such as virtual conference organization and making the results available on a website. More fundamentally, the pandemic forced me to question the outcome of my research on a broader level. The pandemic and the political events of 2020 allowed me concentrate on the relevance of historical awareness for the architecture of public libraries for society.

HathiTrust and Interlibrary Loan to the Rescue

After I finished teaching and had shifted my workshop successfully into a virtual format, I looked forward to the glory of research on campus. However, research institutions and libraries remained closed and curbside pickup was not yet widely established in the first two months of the pandemic. That said, UW-Madison and other American universities had responded very generously to the shutdown. HathiTrust made all its resources available at the beginning of the pandemic, and the university library system allowed users to access unlimited digitized materials across all partner libraries, including, for instance, Harvard's digital collections. In the first weeks of the pandemic all library users were able to download these without any complications. This service was later restricted, but I was still able to access materials, including German sources such as digitized library magazines and architectural magazines, that weren't even digitized in Germany itself. This proved immensely useful and very convenient.

I was also able to access other relevant materials, many of which weren't digitized or no longer accessible, through HathiTrust via Inter-Library Loan. This, too, worked out extremely efficiently, as I often received the requested scanned book chapters or articles from anywhere within the United States within two days. This helped me cope during in the first weeks of the lockdown and I could fully devote myself to my research.

Good Timing

When I realized how much the lockdown and closures would impact my already tight schedule, my first thought was: “Thank God that I already did the two research trips!” I had been very grateful about the opportunities that the fellowship offered that I didn’t want to waste any time. Hence, I had done my archival work in Chicago and Seattle in November and December 2019.

In the meantime, before the pandemic I had been working in the UW-Madison libraries, particularly in the library of the Information School to examine other sources such as library journals, newspapers, and architectural magazines. In May, when we were allowed to pick up materials from our offices, I was relieved to be able to work with the books that I hadn’t been able to access since March. Not having access to these materials would have caused me to lose even more precious time.

Using Archives and Rare Materials During Quarantine

Yet, there was still the Cambridge Public Library and archives that I had to visit for my book project. I didn’t want to abandon this case study yet, and I hoped to be able to eventually make the trip, but in July the Cambridge Public Library told me that they wouldn’t reopen anytime soon. At that time, I considered changing my case study and evaluated other potential libraries. After discussing this with my mentor, Prof. Anna Andrzejewski, however, it became clear to me that another library wouldn’t serve my research as well. Fortunately, digitized online archival materials worked out in my favor. Many resources that are crucial for my project were already online, and the librarians of the Cambridge Public Library provided me with a password that granted full-view access to archived Cambridge newspapers. I was lucky because not all libraries offer this service to users out of state. In Chicago and Seattle, for example, one can only access the newspapers in their collection with a library card or at one of the computers inside the library.

When I contacted the archivist in Cambridge, it turned out that she was also willing to scan materials for me that I had found in the online finding aids. In online Zoom meetings, the archivist, Alyssa Pacy, showed me archival materials, went through all the relevant folders, and checked with me what was of interest. I’m immensely grateful for her flexibility, work, and assistance that saved my research.

Different Levels of Engagement

During the time of social distancing, my social interactions were shifted to the two-dimensional space that unfolds on a computer screen. The closure of so many physical spaces made it hard if not impossible to experience atmosphere, especially, when meeting someone for the first time. The importance of social interaction in a physical space becomes clear to me when I compare the interviews that I did in person with my online interviews. When I think of the interview I performed in January 2020 in Chicago, I'm able to remember general and specific circumstances, for example, the weather, the train ride, and the architecture of the hotel lobby where I met my interviewee. I can see my interview partner and me sitting in the lobby, and I remember the atmosphere of the conversation. I remember my interviewee's voice; that he showed me his notes collected in a black notebook; my own thoughts during the interview and how I tried to force myself not to interrupt too often when I feared the conversation could drift. For me, such memories are inseparably connected to the space in which I experienced the research, and the physical details help me remember the facts and the content of a conversation. This way, there is much more engagement included in the research process that help me make the topic more personal. Moreover, I have a clear sense of what matters to my interviewees, their priorities and reasons of why they were involved in the events that I'm trying to find out more about.

When I contrast this experience with the interviews I carried out virtually, I don't recall any distinct impressions because I didn't even have to leave my home. While remembering one of the online interviews I did, I don't see my interview partner and me in a room, or remember any background noises or the interior, I rather only see myself in my living room in front of a screen. It is a fairly one-dimensional memory and a different experience that feels less engaged.

Larger Truths

Efficiency is not everything. Research develops over time in a variety of spaces. As much as I appreciated HathiTrust's seemingly limitless resources, it can make us stuck in a particular state of mind that only superficially pleases our search motivation. Yet, for my research process it has been important to care about the variety of experiences, sources, and the skills and methods that I'm using. Finally, developing one's ideas and hypotheses takes and needs time. Physical experiences, changes of scenery, transit between research sites,

unexpected findings, and coincidences are fundamental in order to study and develop the manifold aspects of a topic. In downtown Chicago, for instance, the architecture of the Loop is dominated by the masonry of the solid stone and brick buildings from the turn of the twentieth century. I was fascinated by the older high rises and the monumentality that exudes from these buildings. Several different materials such as limestone and granite, as well as terra-cotta, adorn its ornamented facades. The Monadnock building, built of dark purple-brown brick and the smooth surfaces of its one side, always felt like an anchor in the density of the surrounding high rises. The open train tracks of the El train contribute to the slightly dark environment of the historic Loop. These impressions only occur when you are on site, able to place your body in relation to these enormous and seemingly eternal high rises.

This atmosphere fit perfectly to the readings of Bertolt Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, that I had assigned to my students. (The play takes place in Chicago and explores the strike of the workers of a meat processing plant and crisis of overproduction caused by monopoly.) When I stopped by the Chicago Board of Trade Building, I had the heroine Joan Dark and her struggles against the mighty and destructive powers of capitalism in mind.

Arriving at one of my case studies, the Harold Washington Library Center, I was thrown back into the late twentieth century. Its postmodern façade, however, deploys several allusions that reference Chicago's early modern buildings. When I walked over to the first and still-preserved building of the Chicago Public Library, the Cultural Center, I visited the eye-opening exhibit "Decolonizing the Chicago Cultural Center" that was conceptualized by the Settler Colonial City Project.¹ The exhibit contextualized this historic library building within the history of settler colonialism and explored how the building was constructed on seized land that had been occupied by the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi for millennia. Further, it was built through extensive exploitation of labor, to quarry and assemble the marble for its design. I discovered this exhibition coincidentally, but it confronted me with the complicated and disturbing past in a constructive way. Since then, the exhibit's lessons inform my thinking about Chicago's downtown architecture and the library's history. Such discoveries could clearly not have been made during lockdown. In other words, this exhibition added to my impressions of the architecture, enhanced my understanding of the context of its construction, and made me aware of the selective histories that had obscured the circumstances in which this architecture emerged.

When traveling to Seattle, I experienced a different atmosphere of downtown and its architecture. I found myself in a city that is in the middle of a building boom. Its buildings signaled to the visitor progress and sustainability mixed with playfulness. In contrast to Chicago, where materials like stone and brick shape buildings' monumentality, materials like glass and wood dominate Seattle's downtown architecture. When I studied the documents of the second Seattle Central Library building, which was demolished to make way for the current Koolhaas building, I was reminded of how Seattle's idea of technological progress dominates Seattle's downtown. This concept of progress goes as far back as the Century 21 Exposition in 1962, the Monorail, and the Space Needle.

Today, progress in Seattle's architecture is expressed by the extensive use of lush landscape vegetation, sustainable materials such as wood, and through organic forms, as one can observe on newer Amazon buildings, such as Amazon Spheres. That said, these shiny, modern, and innovative-looking buildings house one of the biggest capitalist monopolies of our time. During my bus ride to the archives, I was stunned by the building boom and the amount of new office buildings that grew out of the land. Many of them contained boutique coffee shops that were frequented by business people whose fancy clothing was perfectly complemented by the architecture. Yet, at nearly every bus stop I saw homeless people sleeping on the street and drug addicts and mentally disabled people, who seemed to be suffering psychoses.

As for my case study of the Cambridge Public Library, I had to make the sacrifice of not being able to work on site. Now, writing about the Cambridge Public Library is very different because I couldn't visit the place in person. For me and my understanding of research, developing a sense of place has always been a major aspect of research trips. Seeing archival materials, looking at the pages and making unexpected discoveries, rather than focusing on just relevant findings is a more engaging research process that leads to different interpretations of materials than a research process with the efficient results that I had found through just a couple of clicks. However, within a physical, more engaged process, time plays an important role. Moving through the city in which the building stands, getting a sense of the people, the atmosphere and digesting the materials that I have read in the archive in the time between one day in the archive and the next day is essential for the research that feels personal. Without this experience, writing about this case study feels more distant.

Writing about library history outside of a library has probably been the hardest sacrifice that the pandemic has imposed on my working process. As I'm researching public engagement and perceptions of architectural history and collective memory, it is crucial to experience public places "in action." It is important to me to keep this connection in mind in order to create a vivid narrative. By being in a space outside my home or my office, I'm constantly reminded of my topic and the danger of drifting and writing in too academic of a tone is less present. This is particularly true as I'm writing a history of public library architecture that strives to connect our current buildings with their institutional history. All the more so as this was one of the few opportunities where I could write about my subject while being present there. A historian of sugar would hardly be able to write his monograph in a sugar plant and a historian of military history cannot write about a battle while attending one, but as a historian of library architecture I could have written about this field of study in a library. This helps me see how libraries function, how these places are used, and what role the architecture plays for the user.

Facing the sacrifice of not being able to write in a library about libraries make me think about my topic in a new way. With the breaking off of this opportunity, I have been forced to think even more about public spaces and writing for the public, not just about the public. The latter task seems easier if one is surrounded in a private space. Public history projects show how people are engaged and a part of historical research. After my pandemic-related experience, I feel motivated to reflect critically on how my research connects to political and societal challenges and to communicate outside of academia.

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NOTE

1. "Decolonizing the Chicago Cultural Center," Settler Colonial City Project, <https://settlercolonialcityproject.org/Decolonizing-the-Chicago-Cultural-Center> (accessed May 20, 2021).