

Making



Objects

Speak

Wisdom Paper: Urban Neighborhoods and Audio Tours

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The intent of this program was “making objects speak,” and when looking at artifacts in a museum, the concept is exceedingly rich. But it presented a particular challenge for us, in developing a tour of an urban neighborhood. In addition to figuring out which sites to include and exclude in this center of social, cultural, and historical importance, our central challenge arose from the tour’s focus on a fluid place rather than a static exhibit. Furthermore, Harlem’s original developers intended its “objects” – buildings, infrastructure, even the beautiful old trees that line the boulevards – for residents other than those who wound up making the history and culture for which the neighborhood is so renowned.

In many ways, then, the objects in Harlem cannot speak for themselves. Of course this is true for any of the tours; our task is to offer enough information so that the listener can make educated inferences about the objects. But Harlem presents a deeper problem. Slow looking in Harlem can be confusing, if not deceiving. The built environment, so well preserved for so many years simply because developers and investors avoided the area, cannot tell the uninformed viewer anything about most of the lives lived in Harlem. It does reveal some of the intentions of Harlem’s late nineteenth-century builders, and in many areas it can also speak to the reality that those visions went unfulfilled. But even in the latter case, only those who know something about the story of Harlem could read in the obvious neglect and decay the actual nature of and reasons for that decline.*

So a tour such as this must *help*, rather than *make* the objects speak, while still keeping the tourist active and engaged. How to communicate enough information for the looker to work with? How to say enough – but not too much – about the stories held in these brownstones, apartment blocks, and broad boulevards, these storefront churches and grand cathedrals, so that the tourist could then make of them something important about the lives and actions of those who created Harlem, the African American mecca?

Through quickly sketched stories, we tried to evoke the artists, the Saturday night dancers, political theorists and activists, and newly arrived rural migrants who filled the broad sidewalks and front stoops, who hawked pigs’ feet, blew bebop, and promoted warring political agendas, who danced in jazz clubs by night and worked as laundresses by day, saving money, spending money, creating Harlem as a cultural and political capital, as an American destination. As often as possible, we tried to use the words of the historical actors to describe and to characterize life in Harlem, and then point to the places they spoke of, asking the listener to imagine, to connect, to analyze and speculate, as historians do, about the evidence before them based on what they knew.

In the end, though we were daunted by what we felt was physical Harlem's loud silence about its history, we asked our audience to read these objects – homes, public spaces, houses of worship and tree-lined streets – just as they would any other primary material. As teachers we needed to give them enough information to fire their imaginations and ground their speculation. But we also needed to leave space for them to make the connections. We needed to be clear with ourselves about our own goals, to clarify but not oversimplify complex issues, and to inspire students to use what they know to make sense of what they can't yet be sure of, in order to spark both curiosity and critical engagement.

We needed to see our tour as a beginning point rather than an ending, a doorway for students rather than a treatise. Once we shifted our view in this way, the tour also opened up for us, freeing us of the need to deliver a neat package when the reality was a rich and complicated collection of possibilities and questions. The wisdom we gained was not far from that we seem to revisit every semester in classes: offer insight and information, but most importantly ask lots of questions, and be careful about when and whether you answer them.