Retrofitting Washington's Past: An Ethnographic Analysis on Modernist Parcels through Urban Spatial. Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the Garden City Movement into the mid 20th century, parcels of gargantuan scale emerged as the venerable planning technique of the Modernist era. In analysis of their demise, through historical and ethnographic research, I sought to analyze the retrofitting of these sites into modern society, alongside my advisor Professor Andrew Gardner, through observation of three historical Washington case studies - the former sites of the Satsop Nuclear project, Northern State Hospital, and Expo ’74 in Spokane. Through studying each’s resuscitation, or lack thereof, we observed these sites through application of urban spatial discourse, generating a local analysis that could potentially be more broadly applied to global parcels of the past to discover if their legacies have a place in dominant society today.

OBJECTIVES

Since their original purposes ceased, very little research has been conducted on our sites since their zenith. In observation of historical conditions, social norms, and new peoples in these spaces, we strived to conduct an urban ethnography that illustrates the potential resuscitation of dying spaces and answers questions about their present form, such as:

- What are the new spatial roles of these case studies in urban discourse today?
- Which retrofitting design tactics have led to the most successful adaptation of these parcels today? (Durham-Jones and Williamson; 2011)
- How do discrepancies in urban and suburban locale affect resuscitation?
- Why do some parcels find contemporary success while others remain forsaken?
- What role does the immediate community play?

METHODS

In conducting this research, we used standard ethnographic methods, such as informal, unstructured interviews within the local communities of each case study, presenting an organic opportunity to engage with the discourse present at each site today. In addition to these conversations, I traveled to each site to conduct field observations, as well as literary and content analysis on newspaper articles, spatial planning and renewal theory, and other various sources relevant to each site.

EXPO ’74

Building a railroad empire on the largest urban waterfall in the country, the city of Spokane emerged during the second Industrial Revolution, the riverfront becoming the epicenter of the urban landscape. By the mid-20th century, however, as the rail industry slowed and Spokane found itself victim to urban blight, local business people sought to save their dying core through urban environmentalism and renewal. Acquiring the 100 acres of riverfront property from the railroads, community members gambled their own earnings as seed money to host the first environmentally themed world fair in 1974, an exposition visited by over 5 million people and an acclaimed thematic, economic, and critical success.

Successfully returning natural beauty to and mobilizing capital into their city, Spokane transformed this newly reacquired spatial treasure into Riverfront Park, an initial success that in 2018 was unveiled once more as the premier attraction and epitomic heart of the riverfront property from the railroads, community members gambled their own earnings as seed money to host the first environmentally themed world fair in 1974, an exposition visited by over 5 million people and an acclaimed thematic, economic, and critical success.

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NORTHERN STATE HOSPITAL

Chosen for its beautiful farmland, Washington State’s third inpatient mental hospital was designed beside the small Cascade town Sedro-Woolley. Opening in 1912, the 820 acre, Northern State Hospital quickly became the state’s largest, revered for its protected environment, fully functioning farm, and occupational therapy. Providing for itself and its community, Northern State was a cherished and principal economic asset to Skagit County. As new mental health practices emerged and institutions fell, however, against massive local uproar, it closed in 1973.

Abandoned by the state with a crumbling campus, Sedro-Woolley’s community has struggled to retain sufficient funds for modern uses of the space, but fights egregiously to preserve a positive legacy for Northern State. Its giant footprint presently occupied as public recreational sites, a private job corps, and more, the community continues to brainstorm multi-use purposes for the site and its deteriorating buildings to benefit local discourse today.

REFERENCES


Acknowledgements

Special thanks this summer for aiding with my research to Professor Andrew Gardner, the University of Puget Sound Summer Research staff with special thanks to Elize Helman, Nick Kontogeorgopoulos, Andrea Ryn, Jilliana Pictford at the Elma Visitor Center. Sharon Howe at the Sedro-Woolley Museum and local research library, Visit Spokane visitors center, all my fellow research students this year, and especially my friends and family for getting me to turn a small joke about my fascination in urban planning into a full blown project.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

URBAN GREENING & ENVIRONMENTAL RENEWAL

SOCIALLY DESIRABLE

MULTI-USE

COMMUNITY INTEGRATION LOCALLY ACHIEVABLE

ZONING SPACE REVISIONS

Achievable local capital, community accessibility, and spatial greening appear pivotal for resuscitation of these Modernist spaces; when these factors are employed, these spaces appear to find success

- Organic advantage of urban locale over rural in Spokane
- Repurposing into multi-use operations appears more tangible than Satsop’s one monopolizing authority
- Satsop, Northern State are not equipped to retrofit spatial giants independently
- Local involvement and pride, found at both Northern State and Riverfront Park, are utmost crucial
- Why does this matter? As we encounter dying spaces (ie: shopping malls) globally, through ethnographic research such as ours we may discover keys to bringing these spaces from the societal fringes into the future.

EXPO  ’74

Overhead view of today’s Satsop Business Park and its surrounding space

NORTHERN STATE HOSPITAL

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Successfully returning natural beauty to and mobilizing capital into their city, Spokane transformed this newly reacquired spatial treasure into Riverfront Park, an initial success that in 2018 was unveiled once more as the premier attraction and epitomic heart of the city’s urban spatial discourse. A physical manifestation of a dream fulfilled, Riverfront Park represents a modernist reclamation of a landmark by gargantuan ambition through constant adaptation, local involvement, and environmental renewal.

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