New York: Rebuilding the History of a City

Jeffrey Burden PhD
Jason Montgomery RA CNU

Macaulay Honor College, CUNY
New York City College of Technology, CUNY

Cities faces myriad challenges today, including questions of history and heritage. Urban places are a repository of changing landscape, population, environment and tectonic form that hold stories of process in urbanization and wealth creation, population growth and social displacement, environmental degradation and restoration. Bringing these stories to light reveals a hidden heritage that must be addressed as we shape and refine the continual evolution of urban scholarship.

At City Tech, students in the course Learning Places dig into the city’s repository to reveal history and heritage. The goal is for the students and faculty to explore historical and contemporary topics in real time, documenting and telling new stories of place. These stories are conceived by the students, representing a lived experience and perspective that must be given voice to add to, challenge, or tweak accepted historical representations.
Critical to this place-based seminar research is a digital platform that we call a Building History model – an accurate tectonic model that structures the exploration and collates the documentation by the students, creating what amounts to a virtual excavation of a particular place or building within the city of New York. This tectonic modeling process is able to take the research from the scale of an object in the space to the building itself and all the way up to the scale of a neighborhood or the larger urban context.

As we restructure our understanding of urban history, the Building History Project, with its unique modeling process, is a fundamental tool to using cities like New York as a laboratory. We not only give voice, but we “record” what in truth are a sequence of – much like a chain of DNA – a rich variety of histories and heritages and how they interact with each other to form the biography of a city.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Jeffrey Burden is the former Architectural Historian of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Trained as both an architect and archaeologist at Berkeley, he has built a career developing place based academic programs in Historic Preservation. His research focuses on the history of craftsmanship and the role it plays in defining the character of a city. As a Fellow of both The American Academy in Rome and The American School of Classical Studies, he has published extensively on sites spanning a variety of periods ranging from the Antique, the Islamic world, the Modern European city as well as America’s more recent past. Today Burden splits his time between the historic city of Charleston, SC and New York, where he directs The Building History Project at Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York.

Professor Jason Montgomery is an architect, urban designer, and educator who has worked in a number of international practices where he led design projects in Morocco, Costa Rica, England, and Egypt and the US. These projects include the extension to Selwyn College, Cambridge, the Columbia School of Social Work, and the site analysis for a New Residential College at Yale University. His work focuses on the nature of place, building tectonics, rural and urban space. Professor Montgomery’s teaching experience is diverse including appointments at University of Notre Dame’s Rome Program, Yale University, and Andrews University. His is currently Associate Professor at the New York City College of Technology and a Futures Fellow at the CUNY Grade Center.

His research reflects his broad interests in architecture, education, and research methodology. He was a contributor to a recently published monograph by Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis, Bayt Farhi and the Sephardic Palaces of Ottoman Damascus. He recently published book chapters on text-based learning in architectural education, undergraduate research, and place-based learning. He holds a Masters of the Arts from
University of Wales at Cardiff, Graduate Diploma from the Prince of Wales’s Institute for Architecture, and Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Notre Dame.