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Symposium: “Ethnographies of Place: the Historical Archaeology of Slumland”

Ethnographies of Place

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Abstract

This symposium addresses vanished inner-city communities: working-class neighbourhoods that have been so radically transformed by urban redevelopment that they now exist only in memory. The archaeological sites which will be considered in this symposium attest to the magnitude of change over the past 100 years: they are today betwixt-and-between places, with parking lots where communities once lived. Freeways or high-rise towers have transformed the local skylines. We can now only imagine these neighbourhoods as they once were.

It was imagination, too, which made possible the destruction of these communities. Slum stereotypes — imaginary constructs fashioned by bourgeois entertainers and social reformers — so skewed public knowledge about these supposedly debased communities of outcasts as to legitimate slum-clearance programmes and redevelopment schemes which, between the late-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, largely destroyed these neighbourhoods. And it was imagination, as well, with which the inhabitants of these maligned precincts invested their belongings, households, and neighbourhoods with idiomatic meanings and associations which thereby rendered these city spaces into familiar and useable places.

How should we now approach these reworked spaces and imaginary places? History has thus far treated slums as material reality. This can no longer be sustained. But to acknowledge the ‘slum’ as a myth fashioned by outsiders enables us to explore only the outsiders’ cultural frameworks, not those of the neighbourhoods to which the myth was applied. We need to mesh history with

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archaeology in order to study these vanished communities from the inside. Such interpretation begins by overlapping life stories, woven from threads of memory and the documentary record, with archaeological tracings from the past. But how far can one apply historical imagination in order to extend the interpretations? Such imaginings must be grounded in hermeneutics rather than in the pretence of empathy. They must relate documents and artefacts to the past contexts in which they were anchored, in order to open up thereby past social and cultural horizons. Susan Lawrence and I have termed this approach an ethnography of place.

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In a handful of innovative research projects, archaeologists and historians are probing within the forgotten local horizons of inner-city neighbourhoods that have hitherto been obscured by distorting 'slum' stereotypes. Their focus is the urbanization 'spurt' which, beginning in Britain late in the eighteenth century, transformed both the parent society and its New World territories during the following two centuries. Mary Beaudry and Stephen Mrozowski lead an on-going investigation of the Boott Mills at Lowell in Massachusetts, which probes beyond the slummer-epithets that cloud historical understanding of immigrant textile workers' lives during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.[1] Rebecca Yamin, principal archaeologist at the recent excavation of Foley Square in New York City's lower Manhattan, offers vignettes of early nineteenth-century working class life which fly in the face of Dickensian characterisations of Five Points as a notorious slum.[2] A joint archaeological and historical investigation of a large site in Sydney's 'Rocks' precinct challenges conventional historical representations of the 'Rocks ... as a pestilential "slum" in which poverty, disease, filth and immorality went hand-in-hand'.[3] Similar projects are under way in Melbourne's 'Little Lon' (to be discussed in this symposium by Tim Murray) and Cape Town's District Six (to be discussed by Elizabeth van Heyningen).

Such urban digs fascinate the general community. The excavations seem to bridge past and present. Modern cities have often been likened to palimpsests. And as a corollary, the integration of history and archaeology has frequently been urged in order to explore the hidden layers of this urban past. In practice, however, the material traces of past places have too often been erased, denied, and trivialised. Neighbourhoods have been bulldozed, 'renewed', or selectively commemorated according to skewed taxonomies of historical significance. Memories of place have been lost or fragmented. In consequence, city dwellers today are sometimes said to live in 'a wilderness in both time and space' without an abiding sense of their urban past.[4] Too often, as well, hopes for the effective integration of urban history and archaeology have been disappointed. These paradoxes are highlighted by the misunderstandings which cloud public knowledge of central-city neighbourhoods that endured as centres of working class work and residence well into the twentieth century. The complexities of such places — their pastiche-like variety of social worlds (demonstrated, for example, by John McCarthy's study of late nineteenth-century Minneapolis), and their complex patterns of continuity and change through time — are obscured by the homogenising, universalising, and changeless qualities of the slum myth.

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[1] See Stephen A. Mrozowski, Grace H. Ziesing, and Mary C. Beaudry, *Living on the Boott: Historical Archaeology at the Boot Mills Boardinhouses, Lowell, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), and note the guide to additional readings on p. 88.

[2] Rebecca Yamin, 'New York's Mythic Slum: Digging lower Manhattan's infamous Five Points', *Archaeology* (March / April 1997), pp. 45-53.

[3] Godden Mackay Heritage Consultants, *Cumberland/Gloucester Streets Site Archaeological Investigation* (Redfern: Godden Mackay Pty Ltd, 1996), volume 1, p. 24.

[4] S.B Warner Jr.,*The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) p. 4.

Slum stereotypes underpinned slum-clearance programmes and redevelopment schemes which, between the late-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, largely destroyed these neighbourhoods. The archaeological sites upon which this symposium is based attest to the magnitude of change: they are today betwixt-and-between places, with parking lots where communities once lived, and freeways or high-rise towers have transformed the local skylines. Moreover, the slum myth hinders even historical understanding of these vanished places.

Slums are 'constructions of the imagination': a stereotype that was fashioned between the early-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries by bourgeois entertainers and social reformers, and which obscured and distorted the varied spatial forms and social conditions to which it was applied'. Historians have perpetuated this slum myth. Mesmerised by the dramatic intensity of the slummer caricatures that are embedded in the documentary record, they have insisted that 'the essence of slums was their "environmental reality".'[5] Archaeologists have not demurred. Until recently they have largely ignored modern-city sites, or they have corroborated the prevailing flawed interpretations about slums.

This failure of the historical imagination can be traced in part to methodological inadequacies among both historians and historical archaeologists. Historians, preoccupied with the documentary record, have tended to regard archaeological evidence as being at best 'merely illustrative to what they consider the major issues in historical inquiry.' Their tunnel vision has not effectively been challenged by historical archaeologists. Some archaeologists concede that 'artefacts excavated at the site confirm and illustrate the historical record', and thereby strive to ensure that the 'archaeological evidence properly reflects the documentary record'. Others refuse altogether to engage, claiming to 'find the documentary record helpful as corroborative evidence' and as 'providing a chronological framework for the archaeology'. Beaudry concedes that 'the tautological nature of much research in historical archaeology is part of the reason that historians often find little merit in the field.'[6]

The onus lies upon archaeologists to present a compelling case for methodological innovation in history making, by demonstrating the advantages of integrating interpretations that draw upon a broader appreciation of the historical record. This interweaving documentary and archaeological evidence is not so much 'intended to "fill the gaps." It is intended to identify anomalies that will lead to further questions.'[7] It carries a heightened sensitivity to the potentialities flowing from context-driven readings of this broader historical record. As Carmel Schrire remarks, the issue is not ultimately 'what new facts were revealed but rather what new emphases were stressed.'[8]

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[5] Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation In Three Cities 1870-1914* (Leicester University Press, 1993), pp. 1-2.

[6] Mary C. Beaudry (ed.), *Documentary Archaeology In The New World* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), pp. 1, 43. Helen Proudfoot, Anne Bickford, Brian Egloff, Robyn Stocks, *Australia's First Government House* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin & the NSW Dept of Planning, 1991), p. 159. Patricia E. Rubertone, 'An Approach to Archaeology of the City: The Roger Williams National Memorial Project', in Dickens, *Archaeology of Urban America*, p. 22.

[7] Barbara J. Little, *Text-Aided Archaeology* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1992), p. 4 .

This symposium rebuts the taunt that historical archaeology entails 'digging rather than [drawing] any analytical conclusions'.[9] Yet it must be conceded that to date historical archaeology has produced discrete data inventories rather than synthesising interpretations of urban sites. The archaeology of modern cities has developed without a compelling intellectual framework for enquiry. Urban historical archaeologists — in the main consultants and cultural resources managers — respond to the work briefs offered to them, and the scope of their work is often further constrained by limited time and money. University-based archaeologists, meanwhile, have largely ignored historical archaeology. Until recently, very little academic research on modern cities has been attempted.

These methodological impediments to integrated analysis of urban working-class life have endured because neither archaeologists nor historians have until now developed a conceptual framework which recognises material and documentary records together as being idiomatic to the particular contexts of their production and use, and the reading of them as providing a key to cultural worlds in the past which have hitherto been obscured by the hegemonic influence of elite-driven stereotypes. We have not known how to proceed beyond the threshold of deconstructing slum myths, and compiling descriptive artefact inventories, in order to explore the local horizons of homeplace and neighbourhood, and the enveloping social and cultural milieux of vanished inner-city communities. Judy Birmingham and Tim Murray conceded a decade ago that:

> A great deal of material data emerges during the excavation of most historic sites and by far the greater proportion of them are remarkably undistinguished. Broken kitchen china, glass grog bottles, and innumerable tonnes of building debris, nails and plaster samples are sources of social and economic information rather than cultural and aesthetic values. One challenge on such sites is to translate this assemblage of refuse and discarded material into a valid database for social and cultural interpretation.[10]

That challenge is met in this symposium by relating such assemblages to the local horizons of particular places, and the life stories of identifiable households and even individuals. Yamin remarks that the diverse domestic artefacts recovered from Five Points 'are evidence of daily life in a place that until now has been portrayed as a living hell.' [11] This material culture, she stresses, is 'mundane': in all these sites, we find cheap and mass produced homewares and domestic nickknacks. It is idiomatic to the everyday lives of the inhabitants of these vanished communities. These objects — a decorated plate, for example, or a moulded clay pipe — are simultaneously functional and symbolic. They express local identity. They exude a pride in self and place that is at variance with outside constructions by elite observers and later historians.

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[8] Carmel Schrire, *Digging Through Darkness. Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 111.

[9] Helen Temple, 'Issues in Historical Archaeology', in NSW Department of Planning, *Urban Digs: Historical Archaeology Guidelines* (Sydney, 1989), p. 5.

[10] Judy Birmingham & Tim Murray, *Historical Archaeology In Australia: A Handbook* (1987, National Estate Grants Programme, project no. 24), p. 91.

[11] Yamin, 'New York's Mythic Slum', p. 47.

The participants in this symposium thus apply a materialist perspective on the past in order to piece together the traces of people whose surroundings were familiar places rather than abstracted badlands. Eschewing the generalised caricature-types of the slumland genre, this approach accumulates the fragmentary life traces of individuals who knew these places idiomatically 'from the inside', overlapping threads of memory, the documentary record, and material culture. This approach necessarily begins by acknowledging the enduring influence of the slum genre, which 'crated' real neighbourhoods as grotesque underworlds in public imagination, and it probes the potent narrative tropes of exploration which visualised these imaginary places. It proceeds, however, to unravel these outside constructs by presenting the local horizons of place in narrative vignettes that are as compelling to readers today as the slum genre was in the past.

Far from denying inequality, these studies focus upon the ignored material residues of inequality on the edges of mainstream history making. We apply James Deetz's dictum, that 'in the seemingly little and insignificant things that accumulate to create a lifetime, the essence of our existence is captured.' These objects of everyday life, says Deetz, come 'freighted with both social and symbolic significance'.[12] It follows, as Rhys Isaac contends, that in studying material culture, 'we are challenged to inquire into the ways past peoples have understood or imagined the environments they have fashioned as habitats for themselves, and into the meanings and desires that they have invested in the artifacts with which they have both transformed and furnished their shaped environments.'[13]

Any human site is necessarily invested with meanings simultaneously as the physical forms of its parts are made, reworked, and aggregated. Thus are the spaces we occupy invested with a human 'feel', and thereby rendered into familiar and useable places. Perceptions of place originate in the cultural self-identifications of those who inhabit that space. Individually and collectively, we fashion overarching mental templates which give coherence to our material surroundings, making them intelligible and knowable, and which guide our efforts to modify those surroundings. Thus it is, says Simon Schama, 'our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.' Herein lies the distinction between what sociologist Herbert Gans called a 'potential' and an 'effective' environment: the intervention of human artifice whereby — in Michel de Certeau's words — space is fashioned into 'a *practiced* place.'[14]

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[12] James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 161. Foreword by James Deetz, p. xix, in Anne E. Yentsch, *A Chesapeake family and their slaves. A study in historical archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[13] Rhys Isaac, 'Imagination and Material Culture: The Enlightenment on a Mid-18th-Century Virginia Plantation', in Anne E. Yentsch & Mary C. Beaudry (eds.), *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology: Essays in Honor of James Deetz (*Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1992), p. 401.

[14] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 10. Herbert J. Gans, *People and Plans. Essays on Urban Problems and Solutions* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 4-11. Michel de Certeau (trans Steven F. Rendall), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California

The particular neighbourhoods that will be described in today's session were imaginary landscapes as much as palpable assemblages of tangible material forms. They were place-centred pastiches of accumulated local customs, daily rhythms and memories. Any building or site necessarily 'inhabits imaginary space just as thoroughly as it does physical space.' It therefore follows, writes Dell Upton, that historical sensitivity to place must fuse 'the physical fabric of the city and the material culture of its residents with the imaginative structures that urbanites use in constructing, explaining, and representing them.' In a city's diverse physical fabric are located the roots of an all-encompassing and vernacular cultural milieu: a mosaic of imaginary landscapes. These mental and emotional constructs form the 'glue' of community life, providing the matrix for neighbourhood identity and interaction.[15]

It requires an act of historical imagination to strip away the overlays and access those roots. As David Lowenthal aptly remarks, 'we can no more slip back to the past than leap forward to the future. Save in imaginative reconstruction, yesterday is forever barred to us'.[16] How far can this materialist imagination extend? Clifford Geertz cautions that:

> We cannot live other people's lives...[;] it is with expressions, representations, objectifications, discourses, performances... that we traffic... Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness.[17]

Archaeologist Richard Mackay remarked that investigation of the Rocks site in Sydney had required a 'leap of faith' that took him beyond the positivist and empiricist framework of his formal training. At Five Points, likewise, Rebecca Yamin applied the hypothesis that unpacking meanings requires one to move beyond the directly observable, measurable, and countable. Schrire concludes that past landscapes and their embedded meanings must necessarily be imagined in their reinterpretation today. 'Palpable though the documents and artifacts may be', she writes, 'in the end their deeper messages can only be read through acts of imagination.' Janet Spector similarly uses imagination to 'stimulate curiosity' and to 'avoid the rhetoric of archaeology that frequently obscures the people being studied'.[18]

Press, 1984), p. 130.

[15] Anne E. Yentsch, 'Legends, houses, families, and myths: relationships between material culture and American ideology', in Beaudry, *Documentary Archaeology In The New World*, p. 11. Dell Upton, 'The City as Material Culture', in Yentsch & Beaudry, *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology*, p. 53. See Alan Mayne, 'City as Artifact: Heritage Preservation in Comparative Perspective', pp. 154-5, in Martin V. Melosi (ed.), *Urban Public Policy. Historical Modes and Methods* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

[16] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*(Cambridge: CUP, 1985), p. 4.

[17] Clifford Geertz, 'Making Experiences, Authoring Selves', p. 373, in Victor Turner & Edward M. Bruner (eds.), *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1986.

[18] Richard Mackay, 'New Perspectives from the Rocks', Department of Archaeology seminar, La Trobe University, 4 September 1997. Yamin & Metheny, *Landscape Archaeology*, pp. xiii-iv. Schrire,*Digging Through Darkness*, p. 5. Janet Spector, *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1993).

Anne Yentsch pushes the limits of historical imagination still further. Her goal, influenced by Geertz, is ‘to see the people through the things they left behind.’ Without people, she says, ‘archaeological artifacts are meaningless lumps of clay, bones, stone, and brick’. However, since only the material residues of past peoples are left to us, she reasons that ‘interpretation requires the imaginative reinsertion of people from the past’. Yentsch challenges us to ‘reach beyond data to men, to women, to humanity in its full and complex array.’ She urges us to make ‘the imaginative effort to feel’ as people in the past once felt.[19]

Yentsch’s goal to ‘feel’ at one with people and places in the past is as dangerous as it is potent. Historical imagination must be grounded in hermeneutics rather than in the pretence of empathy. One cannot dodge the hard hermeneutic slog of painstakingly reading the entire assemblage of material and documentary evidence. Rigorous analysis of the particularities of households and neighbourhoods demands intimate collaboration between historian and archaeologist, in which site-specific historical research is driven by the particular data to hand from the excavation, and is capable of being changed by active engagement with the material culture. For example, are there any material cultural correlates of class, gender, and ethnicity at these sites? What consumption patterns are there through time as new methods of mass production and distribution flooded urban markets with consumer goods? Are there arrangements of domestic space that are generic to ‘poor households’? [20]

Herein lies the pathway for achieving an ‘from the inside out’ rather than a contrived ‘bottom up’ perspective upon the past.[21] As Geertz explains,

> The truth of the doctrine of cultural relativism is that we can never apprehend another people’s or another period’s imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can never therefore genuinely apprehend it at all. We can apprehend it quite well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours, but we do so not by looking *behind* the interfering glosses that connect us to it but *through* them.[22]

Yamin describes this hermeneutic circle as ‘a manner of reasoning ... that moves back and forth between past and present, between different categories of data — archaeological evidence, oral history, written sources, ethnographic data, anthropological theory, human experience — until the part and the whole begin to make sense’.[23] In so doing, one strives constantly to anchor the embedded artifice of document or artefact in the context of its past production and use. For as Beaudry and her Lowell co-workers contend, recovery of ‘meaning is predicated on recovery of context’. Objects alone, they say, ‘cannot tell us very much about the past; it is only through their context that we can learn something.’[24] Eschewing the Siren-lure that one can ‘see things from the native's point of view... [through] ... some unique form of psychological closeness ... with our subjects', hermeneutics takes as axiomatic that the 'only way to discover who people actually are is through their expressions, through their symbolic systems.'[25]

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[19] Yentsch, *A Chesapeake family*, pp. xxii, 294, 330.

[20] See R. Paynter and R. McGuire (eds.), *The Archaeology of Inequality* (Blackwell, 1991); also Dickens, *Archaeology of Urban America*, p. xx; Mayne and Murray.

[21] See Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 86.

[22] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays In Interpretive Anthropology* (Basic Books, New York, 1983), p.

[23] Yamin & Metheny, *Landscape Archaeology*, p. xiv.

[24] Mary C. Beaudry, Lauren J. Cook, Stephen A. Mrozowski, ‘Artifacts and Active Voices: Material

This hermeneutics-enabled imagining, and the narratives growing out of it, are therefore necessarily grounded in ethnography. It is no longer credible to misrepresent ethnographic method as mere description, since — as Ian Hodder remarks — 'in many ways, explanation *is* description and description *is* explanation.'[26] Decoding past contexts by reading through, instead of imposing upon, the available evidence, ethnographic interpretation 'begins with the most difficult thing of all to see: the experience of past actors as they experienced it, and not that experience as we in hindsight experience it for them.' It follows that such interpretations must acknowledge the active role played by those 'past actors' in creating meaning, and thus the multivocal, contested, and dynamic nature of the past, if we are 'to enter into the experience of those actors in the past who, like us, experience a present as if all the possibilities are still there.'[27] This is not empathetic pretence. Emic-driven historical imagination 'allows human beings an active role in creating meaning and in shaping the world around them; they are seen to interact with their environment rather than simply react to it.'[28] It enables 'an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface.'[29]

To apply imagination to historical interpretation is to risk scorn for having adopted spurious post-structural fashion, or for having chosen a methodological soft option in place of rigorous research. Yet advocating, as we do, the exercise of historical imagination in order more fully to tease meaning from fragmentary traces of the urban past, our interpretations are necessarily grounded in, and are conditioned and sustained by, data. Indeed, we would argue that our interpretations harness data that have hitherto been left out of interpretive models because they appear too idiomatic, too mundane, and too fractured to reflect usefully upon broader socio-

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Culture as Social Discourse', p. 160, in Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter (eds.), *The Archaeology of Inequality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Mrozowski, Ziesing, and Beaudry, *Living on the Boott*, p. 13.

[25] Clifford Geertz,'"From the Native's Point of View": On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding', in Geertz, *Local Knowledge. Further Essays In Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: *Basic Books*, 1983), p. 56. Greg Dening, *The Death of William Gooch: A History's Anthropology* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), p. 157.

[26] I. Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, second edition (Cambridge, 1991), p. 147.

[27] Ibid.; Greg Dening, *Performances* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), p. xvi.

[28] Mary C. Beaudry, 'Public Aesthetics vesus Personal Experience: Worker Health and Well-Being in 19th-Century Lowell, Massachusetts', *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1993), p. 91. See Mary E. D'Agostino, Elizabeth Prine, Eleanor Casella, & Margot Winer (eds.), *The Written and the Wrought: Complementary Sources in Historical Anthropology*, Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers, number 79 (Berkeley: Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley, 1995).

[29] Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p. 14.

economic systems. By relating data to the particular contexts of their production and use, and thereby to thought and action in the urban past, one can tease out the dynamic complexities of vanished social worlds. Historical context, however, is not simply the aggregate of expanded — although still incomplete — data sets. Context is created as one strives to explain meaning from data. It involves the experimental mixing and matching of parts to wholes: a dialectical back and forth between evidence and plausible context. As Henry Glassie argues provocatively, 'Scholars ... need imagination to enter between facts, to feel what it is like to be, to think and act as another person.'[30]

The approach we advocate is, in essence, an ethnography of place.[31] It is alert to a doubly-nuanced stratigraphy: layers of things, and layers of meanings. It is necessarily pursued via two converging pathways: an archaeology of material forms, and an archaeology of knowledge and imagination. Our ethnography of place takes material and documentary records as being idiomatic to the contexts of their production and use, and the reading of them as providing a key to cultural worlds in the past. The task of reading cannot be confined to, and should not privilege, the documentary record but must mesh these word-constructions of past worlds with the archaeological signatures of those who actually lived there. Through this integration, it possible to apprehend the supposedly historically-inaccessible spheres of household and neighbourhood in these vanished cityscapes, and in so doing to reveal the complicated patterns and processes of local life in such once vibrant inner-city communities.

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[30] Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, p. 12.

[31] See Alan Mayne and Susan Lawrence, 'An Ethnography of Place: Imagining "Little Lon"', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 57 (August 1998).