

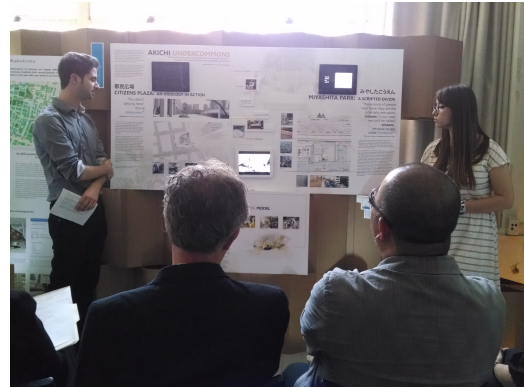
## **SYMPOSIUM NOTES FROM**

### ***ANXIETIES OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY: PROJECTS IN THE URBAN HUMANITIES***

#### **REFLECTIONS ON YEAR ONE OF THE UCLA URBAN HUMANITIES INITIATIVE AND THE UC BERKELEY GLOBAL URBAN HUMANITIES INITIATIVE**

By Susan Moffat

Project Director, UC Berkeley Global Urban Humanities Initiative



*On June 11, 2014, faculty and students from the UC Berkeley Global Humanities Initiative and the UCLA Urban Humanities Initiative gathered at UCLA's Perloff Hall to review and reflect on their experiences during the projects' first year at a symposium called "Anxieties of Interdisciplinarity: Projects in the Urban Humanities." The initiatives are two among of a growing number of initiatives funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in its Architecture, Urbanism, and the Humanities program, and the UCLA-UC Berkeley teams are meeting for joint symposia about twice a year to share notes and exchange ideas.*

What does the first year of an experiment in the emerging field of urban humanities look like on the campuses of two major public universities? At the symposium, it was described by participants as diverse, exciting, and surprisingly unsettling. The following is a summary of the day's presentations and discussions.

### **I. Structuring a Curriculum**

#### **UC Berkeley**

After a welcome by the UCLA Urban Humanities Initiative project director Jonathan Crisman, Jennifer Wolch introduced the Berkeley Global Urban Humanities Initiative. As Dean of the College of Environmental Design, Wolch is co-principal investigator of the Mellon grant with Anthony J. Cascardi, Dean of the Arts & Humanities Division of the College of Letters and Science (who participated via Skype). Wolch explained that graduate students from 14 departments ranging from Architecture to Slavic Studies chose freely among three new courses: one on research methods, another on theory, and a research studio. Each course was taught by an interdisciplinary pair of faculty—one each from environmental design and from the humanities--and gave students practical experience investigating cities using tools that were unfamiliar to many of the them, including mapping, ethnography, and video production. A few students took more than one course, but most took just one. This year, the methods course focused on ethnography and mapping, the theory course on media theory and urban theory, and the studio course on Los Angeles. In future years, entirely new courses in each category will be

created, including a methods course that will focus on building and programming urban sensors and examining the uses of data.

Outside of the courses, scholars and practitioners in the arts and humanities and urban design gathered for two large-scale symposia in the fall of 2013—one on public space, art, and cities, and another on critical approaches to mapping. The mapping symposium was associated with an on-line mapping competition and exhibit. The Initiative also supported the creation of two student-edited publications on urban pilgrimages and on participatory urbanisms in São Paulo and New Delhi.

## **UCLA**

Dana Cuff, Professor of Architecture at UCLA and principal investigator of the UCLA initiative, described the work of her group, which brought together faculty from three colleges—Letters and Science, Arts and Architecture, and the Luskin School of Public Affairs. In contrast to the drop-in Berkeley structure, a single cohort of 23 students kicked off a year of interdisciplinary, collaborative work in an intensive three-week summer boot camp taught by a 6-person faculty team. The students continued through a 5-course program of study including two seminars, a studio, international travel and fieldwork, and two electives that culminated in the granting of a graduate certificate in Urban Humanities. The electives were drawn from about 30 graduate courses at UCLA offered across a variety of departments, seven of which were either newly created or revised in collaboration with the Urban Humanities Initiative.

The students traveled to Tokyo with six faculty advisors to conduct research in the Shinjuku district and produced final presentations that drew on research and representational conventions from city planning, art practice, and ethnography—with a strong history component, reflecting the makeup of the faculty team.

Throughout the year, a series of “diptych” salons and workshops, as well as a number of courses loosely affiliated with the initiative, brought a broader audience into the discussion.

## **II. Panel/Audience Discussion of Curriculum**

In Wolch’s ensuing dialogue with Cuff, it was clear that laying a groundwork both of hands-on skills and of theoretical frameworks for students with widely differing backgrounds and goals was essential—and challenging. At both universities, students were pushed beyond their comfort zones. Humanities students accustomed to expressing themselves primarily through writing were asked to draw, make things, and learn new software, while architecture students were asked to carry out discourse in language that—as everyone soon discovered—often meant different things across disciplines. Students at home in interpretation and analysis were pushed into the risky zone of making proposals for the future, while designers were asked to reflect more deeply on the habits of their trade.

Institutional differences and logistical questions will affect how urban humanities emerges as a new “quasi-discipline,” as Cuff put it, at any given university. Because Berkeley is on a semester system, for example, graduate students take fewer courses than at UCLA, where the quarter system provides for more, shorter courses. The quarter system may provide more flexibility for an experimental project such as urban humanities.

Some excerpts from the conversation that followed the presentations in session 1:

*On discomfort in treading outside one's field:*

Wolch: We didn't expect the level of anxiety that students expressed. Doctoral students are in the process of feeling their mastery of a field. To be immersed again in not knowing is hard for faculty, too.

Cuff: We rehearsed that anxiety [of interdisciplinarity] in the dialogue among faculty. Over time, that anxiety was still reduced, but at the end there were still questions of interdisciplinary distance.

*On structuring curriculum:*

Cuff: The genius piece was the three-week immersive intensive workshop. There was no escape—we were all together all the time. It allowed us to stop and ask really fundamental questions...Faculty and students were in that experience together, so it was more like a cult than you can imagine.

Wolch: It's not clear to me whether a structured sequence is the only way to go, or are there other methods of ensuring the experience is rich and generative...You want everyone to get on something like a level playing field. Is team teaching the way to do this?

*On disciplines and translating terms:*

Jon Christensen (UCLA, Institute of the Environment and Sustainability): Is the fetishization of disciplinary control one source of anxiety?

Greig Crysler (Berkeley, Architecture): Most disciplines are a mess and constantly changing. It's more productive to have pragmatic approach rather than a grand synthesis.

Wolch: We need to be willing to say, “I have no idea what you are talking about”...after you are around the table, it's great to say to someone, “you know so much about this”—to be able to recognize expertise.

### III. Presentations by Students

Students from UCLA and UC Berkeley presented a small sampling of the projects produced from the spring research studios. The UCLA team took 23 students to Tokyo for 10 days with six faculty (Jonathan Crisman, Dana Cuff, Timothy Unverzagt Goddard,



Yoh Kawano, William Marotti, and Todd Presner), and produced projects in teams of two to three students. They produced large visual displays or “boards” typical of studio courses in architecture and planning, as well as videos and a 183-page catalog of essays, photos, maps, and diagrams. The Berkeley team made three three- to five-day trips to Los Angeles with 11 students and two faculty (Margaret Crawford and Anne Walsh), meeting with a variety of local experts, and projects were produced by individuals. Their work products included slide shows, videos, textile art, and an e-book (in progress).

#### A. UCLA: Shin-Shinjuku: New Tokyo Again

##### ***Underutilized Overbuilt: Skyscrapers and Subterranean Spaces in Nishi-Shinjuku***

This project examined the giant spaces designed for commuter pedestrian movement in West Shinjuku, including a half-mile-long underground passage that accommodates 178,000 people who walk through each day, as well as a homeless population. Students studied the vast, sterile spaces of the office towers and plazas of West Shinjuku, which stand in stark contrast to the fine-grained density of the commercial and entertainment districts east of Shinjuku Station. West Shinjuku is a designated gathering area in times of disaster, but few users of the space know where to go in emergencies. The project proposed depicting a cartoon character called Non-Everyday Boy on beverage bottles, transit cards, and other spaces to serve as a “prompt for engaging the built environment...and as a metonym for both uncertainty and resilience.” Presented by students John Leisure, Kara Moore, and Arfakhashad Munaim.

##### ***A Manual for Intimate Publics***

The warren of shacks containing 250 tiny bars the size of walk-in closets known as Golden Gai has persisted in the face of large-scale urban development since just after World War II. Students examined this enclave as a spatial and social “intimate public” with its own unique ecosystem. Students interviewed proprietors and long-term customers and wrote an illustrated set of instructions called “A Manual for Intimate Publics” that

purports to provide guidance for constructing an intimate public in other urban settings. This ironically presented document acknowledges the “preposterousness” of attempting to plan and construct such a place, but provides a record of details and patterns of the site while questioning the process of scholarly representation. Presented by students Brady Collins, Morgan Currie, and Stephanie Odenheimer.

### ***Akichi Undercommons***

This project examined conflicts arising from the renovation of public park that displaced a homeless population. The students explored the difference between language used to describe sanctioned public space and publics i.e. *hiroba* (plazas) used by *tomin* (citizens) and *akichi* (undefined open ground) as used by *hikokumin* (non-citizens, i.e. homeless people). They interviewed homeless people whose encampments had been displaced by a park and activists. The project did not include a specific proposal but in a poster presenting findings recommended resistance to control of public space that discriminates against excluded populations. Presented by students Catherine Tsukasa Bender and Aaron Cayer.

### ***Shinjuku Misguidance or: How to Identify Specific Geographic Locations for Examination with a 1.5 km radius of the Shinjuku Station***

This project focused not on Shinjuku as a place, but on examining methods of travel research and “expert” analysis of cities. The authors tried out methods of urban research in the field including measuring, cataloguing, and observing social patterns. On their return to Los Angeles, they interrogated the language typically used in the execution of such tasks. “As language is our main intellectual tool for thinking and acting in the word,” write the authors in the project catalog, “it befits the Urban Humanities project to collect, examine, and put up for display the very tools it uses to define and propel itself.” The team compiled a *Glossary of Urban Humanities* that defined and questioned 93 words including “gaze” “souvenir” and “wall,” along with a map in cavalier perspective depicting Walter Benjamin, Reyner Banham and others applying their methods to Shinjuku. “In the process of envisioning Urban Humanities as a new field of scholarly inquiry, a glossary can act as a tongue-in-cheek guide to asking productive questions and making the internal methods of the scholar visible and open for critique.” Presented by Jia Gu, Kelly McCormick and Yang Yang. Faculty advisor Jonathan Crisman.

## **B. UC Berkeley: NO CRUISING: Mobile Identities and Urban Life in Los Angeles**

### ***(Re)Cycles of the City***

In this research project, Architecture PhD candidate Noam Shoked found himself distracted from his original plan of interviewing bicycle activists (largely white and middle class) in Los Angeles by the presence in downtown

Los Angeles of a different group of bicycle users who tended to ride bicycles--often designed for cargo--on sidewalks rather than in bike lanes or the street. Through interviews with individual bicyclists in downtown Los Angeles including a homeless man named Pedro who made a living by recycling, Shoked was able to map neighborhoods as canvases for movement and culture. He combined photography, maps, and interviews to represent the itineraries of Pedro and others and to reflect the cyclists' individual experience of the area. Shoked reflected on his position as a visitor, on his subjectivity, and on changes in his perspectives over time. As part of the urban humanities approach, he emphasized the importance of the researcher locating him or herself relative to the subjects of study.



### ***Halfway Los Angeles***

Architecture PhD student Ying-Fen Chen reflected on Los Angeles by making a video about a middle school friend who years ago left their native Taiwan for the Californian city. Left behind in Taiwan, Chen, created an imaginary destination for her friend through the accumulation of images of Los Angeles in popular films. In her first visit to the real Los Angeles as part of her research for this project, Chen compared her film-fed expectations of the city with what she saw in the field. In the process of combining excerpts from films including *The Graduate* and *Rush Hour* with shots of the city that she videotaped herself, Chen reached the following conclusion: "I realized my goal was to figure out what does our nostalgia look like."

### ***A Fabulous Future: Queerifying the Los Angeles Metro Through Creative Expression and Gender Performance***

Undergraduate Art History and German major Fabian Leyva-Barragan, exploring Los Angeles for the first time, was told by local informants that there was no geographic center of Latino gay culture. He found the gay scene in West Hollywood homogeneous and white. Given the course's focus on mobility, and riffing off Jose Munoz' "Cruising Utopias," Leyva-Barragan asked, "What would queerifying public transit look like?" He advertised on Craigslist to recruit men to perform in drag on the Los Angeles Metro, and helped outfit several Latino high school students in leopardskin, heels, and professionally



applied makeup. In filming their lipsynched performance on the Metro, and the reactions of the “engaged, amused, confused” and sometimes indifferent passengers, Leyva-Barragan “crystallized my queer utopia.”

***Inverting the Status Quo: Rethinking Bus Transportation in Los Angeles***  
Architecture PhD Student Alec Stewart questioned the impact of Los Angeles’ “rail renaissance,” noting that rail transit is expensive and inflexible, primarily meeting the needs of the middle and upper-middle classes. He focused instead on ways to make buses “more comfortable, convenient, and fashionable.” Starting with the 1994 movie *Speed*, which depicted an out-of-control bus careening through the city’s freeways—and featured white protagonists atypical of city bus riders--Stewart looked at both cultural representations of bus transportation and the history of activism by low-income bus riders. Stewart proposed increasing public support for better bus service by improving bus stops with art and flexible vending spaces, and installing onboard televisions for information and art.

#### **IV. Panel/Audience Discussion of Student Projects (excerpts)**

*Why be interdisciplinary?*

Crysler: This work requires constant reflection on how this contributes to knowledge production. We take it as self-evident that we need to do this [interdisciplinary work.] But we should be suspicious. We are being asked to do combinatory work for economic and political reasons at the university.

*Humans and Humanities:*

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (UCLA): What is urban humanities? For me, it was clear. These student presentations are in different ways reinserting the human into the urban. In both initiatives, the students were making an effort to make people who have been rendered invisible visible, to bring back people who have been pushed to the margins.

Diane Favro (UCLA): Is it human or the humanities? We need to interrogate what we mean by the humanities. What I mean may be different from what you mean...some of the projects were projective about the city, but I want to be projective about our discipline—how does what we are doing move a discipline forward? How do we archive these projects?

*Systems versus anecdote:*

Crysler: What struck me is the interest in the micronarrative in the Berkeley presentations [where students produced projects individually], and an effort to situate the author [of the project]. They were examining extremely specific circumstances. At UCLA, they were working in groups, and self-situation becomes more challenging and perhaps has less potential.



Dear: I would like to see more attention on how we understand what we are doing in these various projects. In our Berkeley class on 'The City and its Moving Images' we were conscious of the distinction between transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary (there the former envisages some new fusion from the meeting of disciplines). In the projects presented today, humanistic perspectives dominated, and there was little apparent fusion. I missed seeing some coherent sense of social context, trends, process, and outcomes. I missed the social science! Fundamentally, I am concerned with understanding two things: how does transdisciplinary fusion occur, and how will we demonstrate that it is producing superior work? Until we can come up with answers to these questions, I will remain "anxious."

*Language:*

Dear: I made some notes about the terminology used during the presentations. Many terms such as 'resistance' and 'uncertainty' were so over-used that they seemed to lose all signification. Also I would recommend abolishing the term 'playful,' as a way of describing methodology. What does it mean to claim that one is adopting a 'playful' approach? I don't think it has any analytical content whatsoever. On the other hand, I was immediately intrigued when one student presenter made the assertion: "I am interested in nostalgia, not history." Now that's a more interesting point of departure!

*Creating methods with staying power:*

Favro:

Each project has a boutique feel. But could we look at how we could apply this method to look at Tokyo and then at Istanbul?

*Speculative/projective/propositional/normative:*

Jonathan Crisman (UCLA): It's useful to examine the presence and absence of analysis and speculation in these projects. Some of the projects were totally analytic and didn't provide a proposition. Others were speculative but lacked a broader analytic contextualization.

Dear: There is an imperative in environmental design to move from knowledge to action. This normative impulse is central to how a profession is constituted, and to much social science thought. Unfortunately [most] speculations on future actions [in the student projects] had little or no grounding in reality, and zero prospect of ever being implemented. Blue-sky thinking is fine, but urban humanities scholars must cross the knowledge-action divide at some point.

Crysler: "Projective" [which was discussed in the *Glossary of the Shinjuku Misguidance* group, among other places] is an architectural word that came



out of a specific moment in the history of theory. It was the start of the phenomenological turn. We need to historicize the language we use. We need to reflect on the language we're using.

## **V. Presentations by Faculty**

### **Shin-Shinjuku Studio (UCLA)**

Yoh Kawano (Urban Planning) and William Marotti (History) were two of the faculty who led the UCLA studio on their trip to Tokyo. They presented a multi-media [slide-show](#) portraying the sights and sounds and logistical and epistemological challenges of shepherding students through the gargantuan rail stations and tiny back alleys of Shinjuku. They called their work “improvisational fieldwork,” which included interviewing bar owners, being interviewed by local television crews, mapping sound, and getting feedback from experts who know Tokyo well. “We doublechecked our opinions with those with knowledge and experience,” said Marotti. It was “a serial critique and refinement.”



### **The City and Its Moving Images (UC Berkeley)**

Michael Dear (City and Regional Planning) presented on the theory course he taught with Weihong Bao (Film & Media Studies and Chinese): ‘The City and Its Moving Images: Media Theory, Urban Theory.’ “We didn’t expect people to become experts in each other’s disciplines,” he said, but rather to get a basic grounding and practice in how to work together across disciplines. Notable successes were the development of a concordance of media theory and urban theory developed by students, and a short workshop led by people who had experience of transdisciplinary work. Although the course was meant to focus on theory, the students were eager for hands-on experiences, so Dear and Bao adapted the syllabus to include the production of physical objects. Students represented their new knowledge by creating websites, installations, posters, books, and prototypes of machines. “The class was a challenge for students and faculty, Dear reflected, but by semester’s end, everyone felt that the course had delivered on its promise to provide practical experience of doing transdisciplinary work.

### **Shin-Shinjuku Studio (UCLA)**

Todd Presner, who worked with a group of students investigating the red-light district of Kabukicho in Shinjuku, reflected on “thickness as method.” He drew a line from Geertz’ thick ethnography through Appiah’s thick translation to thick mapping. “Every ethnography is a fiction—something fashioned, something made, but not false.” There is an opportunity to combine micro- and macro- analyses with stories. Thick mapping is not simply adding layers of data or objects “on” maps but rather providing for “extensibility, polyvocality, temporality, and countermapping or ghost maps.” Hyperlocal stories “are intrinsically incomplete, fragments. They must be trained onto the political, economic, social, stratificatory realities in which people live and act.”

### **No Cruising Studio (UC Berkeley)**

Margaret Crawford (Architecture) and Anne Walsh (Art Practice) gave a presentation on their course, NO CRUISING: Mobile Identities and Urban Life in Los Angeles, which included students from art history, performance studies, history of art, and architecture. Crawford said that she was surprised by the talk by other symposium participants of anxiety, as she felt little of that in her collaboration with Walsh. The students, however, did have some self-consciousness. “The MFA students worried about being scholars and the PhD students worried about being creative enough artists.” The goal of the course was “to explore human aspects of mobility by accumulating specificity, not generalizations.” “You can take 10 courses a semester dealing with social science/quantitative knowledge. We wanted to do something different.” For students in architecture and planning, Crawford said, “we wanted to de-professionalize them—no plans, no street sections; we wanted them to question representative techniques from their discipline. We wanted them to take critical and interpretive skills from the humanities and focus on speculative projects...and we wanted to get MFA students working in a collaborative environment.” Crawford said that the product of a studio are important—“the lasting record of these endeavors.”

## **VI. Panel/Audience Discussion of Faculty Presentations (excerpts)**

*Is the urban humanities approach different from other ways of studying cities?  
Is it better?*

Cuff: I’m interested in not just how do we know [this urban humanities approach] is better, but how is it different?

Crawford: I don’t think it needs to be better. This is experimental. I don’t think putting quality constraints on it is productive. It’s not ‘different’—many people have been doing something similar for a long time.

Cuff: So is the point is to put a name to something that already exists? That's an expensive naming project.

Presner: Is it different? And if so, how?

*Where does interdisciplinarity lead?*

UCLA student comment: People in my program know I drank the [urban humanities] Kool-Aid. I love the Kool-Aid. But I am anxious that there is not enough discussion about what happens for people in the program after this year. We got together and lowered disciplinary boundaries. But there isn't enough focus on what does it mean to formulate an interdisciplinary research question, and what research methods do you use. For most people they will say this was a fun year with friends... They need to have a sense they can use these skills in their own disciplines. We will return to our silos. How can we use urban humanities to break silos apart?

Jon Christensen: Ursula [Heise] and I taught a[n Urban Humanities Initiative] seminar on biocities. We had students from a wide variety of disciplines. A couple of urban planning students said, [other than in this course] we get so little chance to step back and get critical distance. PhD students relished the opportunity to work in different modes—zines, movies, short stories. Not all PhD students are going to end up as tenure-track faculty. Some of what they learn in urban humanities will serve traditional academic careers, but some of it may be useful elsewhere.

*Are we guinea pigs?*

UCLA Student: This is a question for faculty. We were told to do an urban humanities project. Typically, faculty convey knowledge to students. But do you practice urban humanities? Or are we guinea pigs?

Marotti: We're all guinea pigs. There's a value to having that worked out as a process. Next year's students won't be there at the ground level to see this worked out.

*Patterns and mentors:*

UCLA Student: Do you think there is a distance? We were given constant feedback on our projects. In that critique there is a distance; a lot of the critiques were unrealistic. It's easy to say the direction a project should go, but we don't have a pattern before us.

Crawford: Sometimes there is no mentor. I was on the edges of planning when I did a PhD in planning.

Wolch: I hear [the student] asking about project-based learning versus research-based questions where you apply specific research methods. You can compare project-based learning to pedagogy that gives feedback in a more traditional way.

*Faculty-student relationships and curriculum:*

UCLA Student: I was glad to hear the conversation on what's happening at the university that prompted this project. There's a lot more anxiety among grad students than tenured faculty. We need to focus on this anxiety. Courses need to be restructured to make it doable. Is there a different structure or approach that would challenge the faculty-graduate-undergraduate relationship, some kind of trans-mentorship? How can we work together in more relaxed dialogical space?

UCLA Student: Is urban humanities only done in a yearlong initiative? What are the institutional frameworks?

Crysler: There's a question of sequencing and staging. How are students introduced to this? At Berkeley, to drop in to one course is very demanding.

Presner: We imagined a year-long sequence starting with a boot camp experience. We gained and lost a few [students].

Cuff: How are we building a larger idea of urban humanities that builds from year to year? We are exploring a quasi-discipline. Mentorship is an important aspect. I have been as expanded in this past year in my own intellectual approach than I ever have.

*What is urban humanities?*

UC Berkeley Student: Aren't the humanities always urban? What would be the opposite of urban humanities?

Walsh: I'm not sure the Mellon Foundation is trying to establish a discipline. It's not like other fields like ethnic studies or women's studies that were new. [Urban humanities] has been going on a long time. So many artists practice urban humanities.

Crawford: It's important not to fetishize the urban. We could have focused on rural places, for example Oaxaca. Urban is everywhere. People go back and

forth from “urban” to “rural.” This is humanities urbanism, not urban humanities.

*The discussion continued over a reception and dinner at Perloff Courtyard, where several UCLA students received their certificates in Urban Humanities.*