Research, Representation and the Digital History of Lower Manhattan

There are two lines of thought that I’d like to examine from the post-presentation discussion of the Lower Manhattan digital history project: pedagogical tools and historical representation. I will try my best to ground these issues in the particularities of Lower Manhattan. What I’ve come to realize is that the digital project was not merely an exercise in data collection and analysis, but rather an opportunity to examine the process and problems of urban historical representation with particular attention paid to the issues of Lower Manhattan. Taking Lower Manhattan as the model, each group confronted problems in the procedures of research and representation. Though we aimed towards a rich, multi-layered representation of Lower Manhattan’s history, it became clear that this is no small task. In the end, the digital representation of Lower Manhattan’s history should be a tool for students, historians and anyone with interest. I use the term tool rather than resource because a website has the potential to be more than a depository of information that integrates various media of representation. It has the potential to be an instrument for a collective critical history. It is more than a place to access the data of history, it is place to question how Lower Manhattan functions as well as what it represents.

There are two pedagogical tools that require attention: the group project and the visual aid. I use the term ‘visual aid’ as opposed to ‘visual representation’ in order to make a crucial distinction. The visual aid is a document that assists the historian in the process of telling a story. The visual representation is an historical subject. While the visual representation may be treated as a visual aid, it is necessarily subjective and
incomplete. Every visual aid is a visual representation, but not vice versa. For an art history student, visual representation is the subject of inquiry and it is absolutely necessary to have a visual aid. Yet, slides never tell the whole story because they are documents; the visual aid only acts as a point of reference in the process of analyzing a work. Whether it is a detail image or an installation shot, the art historian uses the image in a denotative manner. Each work considered is a node in the representation of history. Tentatively, I would argue that this is a distinction between denotation and connotation. That is to say that it is a distinction of use; and the reason that I make this distinction is for the purpose of looking at how our representations of Lower Manhattan may be used for the study of history.

The group project is a standard pedagogical technique; but what are the benefits of this method in the case of the digital history of Lower Manhattan. Each group member brings special talents to the table. This is especially helpful in a situation where the project requires the use of special tools such as the computer. There is also the benefit of allocating the workload for efficiency. Different groups had different methods of allocating the work. In certain cases, the material dictated the method. For the transportation group, it was useful to distribute the topics (i.e. roadways, ferries, subways) among the group members so that each member worked on a single subject. For the land use group, the process of data collection required group members to work in pairs, if not all together. The exchange of ideas and consensual decisions that come from working in a group can make for a more focused, more efficient, and more comprehensive result.
After the first day of class, each student selected a single topic to investigate for the entire semester. This in itself was different from most other seminars and it is unheard of for a lecture. Though students regularly choose a single topic for a paper or presentation, it is rare that we work on a singular theme for an entire semester. This investment allows for a more nuanced reading of the subject. There is an additional value to this method that is apparent in the digital history project and similar to writing a thesis. By investing ourselves in land use, for example, we confronted the nuances of research and representation for this particular topic. While research methods are fairly standardized, each topic requires certain unique questions.

From a purely practical standpoint, there are two questions in regards to research. The initial question is, how do you assemble the material of urbanism into a visual representation? Once you have a model for presenting the material, the second question is, how do you show the historical progression of these urban phenomena?

Each group fashioned images to represent the material of Lower Manhattan’s history. In the end, we had five different models for representing historical data. The three groups that used maps to represent information came up with three different methods of presenting the information in visual form. Of the three, the land use and buildings groups sought to create a representation based on quantitative data. In contrast, the transportation group composed maps based on other maps and textual material. This is not to suggest that one method is more accurate than the other; rather, these are simply two different modes of interacting with source material. In all three cases, while the maps are abstract in form, they aim to provide a realistic portrait that lays over a base image of the ground area. Speaking from the experience of the land use group, our
original ideal was to have a photographic image (in as much as the photograph is a realist medium) of the area. Not only is this impossible without the aid of satellite technology, but it was not the nature of our task. Rather, like historians, we had to make choices about the image that we wanted to create. These choices, of course, inevitably affect the final representation. The infrastructure group chose another method altogether because infrastructure material does not lend itself to a visual format. The timeline was more a chart than a picture of Lower Manhattan’s history. This relies more heavily on text than do the other methods, but it exemplifies an alternative method for historical representation. What is clear from the visual part of the project is that we were creating a representation of Lower Manhattan with accurate information, but not a complete document of urban history.

Keeping in mind that these are representations, thereby subjective and incomplete, there is a follow-up question: are these images useful for historical representation? The written word was the fifth mode of representation. While this is the most conventional of methods, it must be considered as representation. Is text more useful than images for historical representation?

Finally, then we come to the question of historical representation. Two modes of historical representation came up in the post-presentation discussion: Narrative history tells a story of events and changes over time; analytic historicism seeks to interpret those events and changes. But, there is another mode of historical representation that did not arise in the discussion – the critical history. Walter Benjamin called this approach ‘historical materialism’ and Theodor Adorno defined it as ‘coming to terms with the past.’ Leaving their Marxist approach aside, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno
propose a method of examining history that not only examines how events and changes
occur, but also what those events and changes share with contemporary society. That is
to say, the critical historian looks past the chronology of events in an effort to find the
relationship between history and contemporary life.

To tell a story of Lower Manhattan’s development, one could take any number of
positions. In fact, each of the groups told a particular story based on six dates. There are,
of course, limits to this way of recording history. That we chose 1875 rather than 1865
suggests a considerable elision in our story. While we might be able to speculate about
the impact of the Civil War, without data from 1865 or 1866 it is difficult to lay claim to
a direct consequence of the war on urban development. Not only would it be interesting,
but it is almost imperative that we address changes to urbanism wrought by the Civil
War. Indeed, the dates that we chose to examine were somewhat arbitrary. This is not to
say that our chosen chronology did not have value; but with the exception of 1930, the
dates that we chose do not correlate with significant events either in the United States nor
in New York City. For example, just as the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 had
immeasurable impact on the shape of that city, so there are several urban conflagrations
that altered the shape and progress of New York City.

Of course there a number of ways to examine historical development and each
method has its pros and cons. However, one alternative to the thematic development
would be to have each group examine a number of themes corresponding to certain dates.
For example, had we collected data from 1865 and 1875, we could then make tentative
propositions about how the Civil War affected changes in urban development. This
would have allowed us to focus the data collection around certain periods in order to
assemble, analyze and critique the effects of certain events. While I am wary of falling into the trap of a monumental historicism that only accounts for the noted events in history, the digital picture of Lower Manhattan would be very different had we chosen dates such as 1776 and 1865 over 1800 and 1875.

We want to make it possible to analyze the history of Lower Manhattan. This leads to the second mode of historical representation that came up in the discussion, that being an analytical approach. For the most part, our projects sought to capture the quantitative data of Lower Manhattan’s development. Through the course of our research, we noticed trends in the evolution of Lower Manhattan. With some analysis and cross-referencing, each group made provisional conclusions from the trends. For example, improvements in transportation increased regional development. While this may be a well-known circumstance, the transportation group presented the data that shows how this change in the urban fabric occurred. The present goal was not to present a critical investigation of Lower Manhattan’s history; rather, we sought to construct a point of departure for historical analysis. The critical history is the next step in the process of examining the history of Lower Manhattan.

The mode of historical representation that did not arise in our discussion was the critical history. In his crucial essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ Walter Benjamin differentiates between historicism and critical history in the following paragraph:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is, for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point
of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.

Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.¹

The goal, then, is to produce a representation of history that refrains from dictating a certain interpretation while offering suggestions and useful information for the user. What is most valuable about the internet and what differentiates the internet as a pedagogical resource, is its usability. I’m thinking here of the work of Michel de Certeau, whose writing bears particular value for a course on urban studies. Keep in mind that the term for one who works with an internet site, or even a computer for that matter, is a ‘user.’ It is important to go beyond making information accessible. The internet site must make the information useable. It would be perfectly valid to assemble the material information under a single location. The website could be a cornucopia of historical information with richly layered representations. But, I feel that the internet offers more potential as a communal tool, one that can be used for investigation and critical discourse.