ReMapping the City: Palimpsest, Place, and Identity in Art Education Research

Kimberly A. Powell

The Pennsylvania State University

The built environment has a long history of study within the field of art education as the site of material and visual culture that is reflective of, and constructed by, cultural values, traditions, and norms. As our understanding of place is challenged by postmodern theories of culture and identity, art education research and curriculum must consider methodologies that document and account for multiple narratives and viewpoints of place. Drawing on a visual ethnographic study of Panama City, Panama, I examine the figurative concept of the palimpsest as a means to analyze the ways in which built environments embody social, cultural, and historical narratives of place, highlighting the involuted relations between material, visual, cultural, and social experience. I discuss the implications of visual and arts-based methods in terms of the ways in which they might address postcolonial and postmodern concerns with such issues as hybridity, representation, and identity.

The built environment has a long history of productive study within the field of art education. Urban landscapes have been studied as sites of material and visual culture and analyzed as an extension of cultural and social life (Chapman, 1978; Guinan, 1999; Guilfoil & Sandler, 1999; McFee & Degge, 1980). Yet the study of built environments has been somewhat marginal to art education curriculum. In this article, I examine the figurative concept of the palimpsest as a means to analyze the ways in which built spaces embody social, cultural, and historical narratives of place and identity, thus drawing attention to the critical importance of built environment study in art education. Drawing on a field research study conducted in Panama City, Panama, I relate the palimpsest's structural and aesthetic qualities—layers of text that have been rewritten over each other—with its metaphoric qualities of reinscription, relationality, and hybridity in order to discuss contemporary postcolonial issues of identity, history, and culture and their implications for art education research.

Palimpsest as Knowledge and History

Early uses of the term *palimpsest* referred to the reading and publication of ancient manuscripts, in which scholars sought to uncover, examine, and piece together the layers of rewritten text. During the medieval period of monastic Western Europe, erasure of existing text for the purpose of recycling parchment for newer texts was common practice. A chemical mix, however, between the erasure process and oxygenation resulted in the ghostly reappearance of original text (c.f. Dillon, 2005). Beyond the specific scholarly context of reading manuscripts, the metaphoric use of palimpsest was found in the work of Thomas De Quincey (1845). De Quincey defined the surface structures of layered texts as involuted, in which previous drafts, languages, and thoughts are evident amidst newer rewrites. De Quincey defined involute as "the way in which our deepest
thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combinations of concrete objects… in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled” (cited in Dillon, 2005, p. 245). Knowledge, in other words exists in a web of relations, embodied in unrelated experiences that nonetheless continually inhabit and disrupt each other.

The term palimpsest has been used in disciplines such as literary theory, architecture, geography, media studies, and technology, evidence of its metaphoric prowess and possibility. Post-structural uses of the term have underscored palimpsest as a metaphor for the reinscription and legibility of discourses situated within institutional power structures, and for the reexamination of subjectivity. Scholars, for example, have variously aligned notions of the spectral subject, temporality, “living on” with the palimpsest, and of su nature (under-ereasure) in which the written word is crossed out rather than erased (Dillon, 2005; Gerber, 2003), thus eliciting the ways in which layers of time and subjectivity inhabit each other in an involuted manner.

Sarah Dillon (2005) has argued that Michel Foucault’s concept of genealogy is a form of palimpsestuous reading that does not focus solely on the underlying text but, rather, the relations between texts. For Foucault (1980), the challenge of the historian was to act as both archeologist and genealogist, uncovering layers and “making visible what was previously unseen” by examining the details up close and bringing them to light: An archeologist potentially unearths knowledge that may have been previously disqualified as inadequate while the genealogist traces “strategic connections” (Foucault, p. 38) among these knowledges and discourses that are brought to light. Dillon emphasizes palimpsestuous v. palimpsest reading, phonetically linking the term with incestuous: “The palimpsest is an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other” (245). Because those texts might have little relation to each other, she writes, “Palimpsestuous reading is an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none” (254). The term palimpsestuous, therefore, has described a textual relationality embodied in the palimpsest, an interaction between the layers of underlying text and the resulting product consisting of these layers.


These calls for the revisioning of curricular principles, lesson sequences, and structures (Gude, 2007) have created a need for research methods and methodology that are similarly aligned. Theoretical concepts such as the palimpsest have allowed for an analysis of history, human experience, and culture that...
continually interact and are embodied in the present, congruent with art education's concern for plurality. I have situated the concept of palimpsest within these contemporary conceptions of art education in order to uncover and re-examine the intended and unintended relationships embedded in the built environment of a postcolonial urban life. Specifically, I have applied a palimpsestous reading to a research study conducted on the lived experience of the built environment, highlighting the involuted relations between material, visual, cultural, and social experiences of space and place. While the term palimpsest could be used to describe any number of layers that comprised the research, I have focused on two student research projects that lend themselves to an effective analytical treatment of the palimpsest: (1) a collage mapping project as a means to account for the lived experience of space and place; and (2) a socio-geographic mapping project involving citizen definitions of space and place. Each student project has critical implications for visual methodology in art education research.

Background and Context of Study

The study was the basis of a 2006 interdisciplinary field research course that I co-taught with Peter Aeschbacher, assistant professor of architecture and landscape architecture at the Pennsylvania State University. We focused on the analysis and design of development strategies for the El Chorillo neighborhood in Panama City, Panama. In previous years, architecture professor and program director Bret Peters and his students had designed an overall urban design plan for Panama City, recognizing El Chorillo’s role in maintaining a socially diverse and affordable community. Further work developed recommendations for public space and affordable housing types. Much of this work was schematic and focused on creating an overall legibility of Panama City, documenting and mapping streets, buildings, roads and other structures in the environment.

These efforts provided a foundation for understanding the physical structural dynamics of place and space. Missing, however, were the invisible dynamics that manifest themselves in a neighborhood identity and form the basis of sustainable community development. As a basis for appropriate future action, we sought to document the lived experience of space and place—the way in which people construct meaning of space and place through personal experience and everyday activity.

Ten students—4 graduates and 6 undergraduates—constituted our class and represented a variety of academic disciplines, including art education, geography, landscape architecture, architecture, and integrative arts (an interdisciplinary undergraduate major at the university). For the first 2 weeks of our month-long fieldwork, our class worked with 20 architecture students from the United States Military Academy University in Panama, meeting regularly and conducting neighborhood surveys. The course consisted primarily of two parts: (1) a mapping survey of El Chorillo as a means of gathering data about physical features of buildings, public and private spaces, and social behaviors in relation to space and place; and (2) individual student projects designed around their specific interests. This work culminated in a final exhibit and a subsequent fall course in which we compiled information across student projects to present in a final report to both our funders and the Oficina de Antigua, a government-
ReMapping the City

Four questions initially guided our field study: (1) How do we define a site?; (2) How do we gain site knowledge?; (3) How do we (re)present site knowledge?; and (4) How does site knowledge affect design? Students were then asked to formulate their own research questions that would direct their individual studies based upon our initial fieldwork. Ethnographic methods involving interviews, fieldnote observations, and document collection were employed. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and/or grounded theory methods of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), congruent with our desire to build theory out of specific, lived experiences of place. Because the emphasis of our course was on visual representation, both as method and as product, students were encouraged to engage in visual research and arts-based methods such as photography, mapping, conduct sound recording, sketching, drawing, and other artistic forms of data rendering as a means to document aspects of their study. Additionally, students documented personal reflections that were figured into analysis and final presentation of data.

Panama City's El Chorillo

El Chorillo (“little spring”) has lain on the fringe of Panama City, nestled between the city’s old town, Casco Viejo—a World Heritage site of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that has recently undergone urban renewal in terms of commercialism, residency, and tourism—and the Canal Zone, returned to Panamanian control by the United States in 2000 (see Figure 1). Due to its location between these two major points and its proximity to waterfront views, El Chorillo has been an urban zone of interest for commercial redevelopment.

El Chorillo is perhaps best known in the West as the site of the 1989 U.S. invasion “Operation Just Cause.” This confrontation, precipitated by then U.S. President George H. W. Bush, deposed General Manuel Noriega, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who was formally charged by the US for drug trafficking, money laundering, and corrupting a national election in 1989. The dominant narrative in the US has generally depicted a swift, efficient, targeted invasion of Panama. Research into the US media coverage of the event, however, revealed scant information on the details of the attack, leading some to suggest a cover-up of the excessive force, mass graves, and acts of violence against civilians, as accounted for in the documentary film, The Panama Deception (Trent, 1992). Indeed, during our visits in the neighborhood, we were shocked into awareness when a long-term resident of the neighborhood shared the photographs he took during and after the invasion, showing the ongoing fires and leveled blocks of houses. It was to be one of our first encounters with reinscription as we stood at the very point that he had snapped the photos nearly 17 years ago. As first-time visitors to the area, all of us were surprised to learn about the prolonged violence and devastation that ensued after the invasion.

Except for the U.S. invasion, little is actually written about El Chorillo. Architectural historian Eduardo Tejeira was our collaborator on the research study and the only scholar who has written a comprehensive history of the neigh-

2 These research questions were drawn from Site Matters (Burns & Kahn, 2005).

3 At the time of our visit we did not know about this film or any other media source that conveyed such an alternative viewpoint. We first learned of the film when filmmaker Barbara Trent (1992) visited our university and gave a lecture and viewing of her film. Beyond the film’s extensive indictment of the large-scale violent attack on Panamanian civilians during Operation Just Cause, the invasion and subsequent policies affecting Panama have been worth noting, even while space is limited in this article in order to focus on student research. Sources other than the Panama Deception have corroborated with the large-scale devastation. A public record of a meeting held by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1993) has outlined a disparity between the government’s claim that “3,000 persons had been affected by the bombing in El Chorillo and all (continued on p. 10)
other sources available which placed the figure between 12,500 and 20,000.” Another concern raised by the committee pertained to the forcible removal of civilians from their homes in the early 1990s: “the justification for the actions carried out by the Panamanian and United States forces in Tocumen, San Miguelito and Panama Viejo in early 1990, which had affected over 5,000 persons, was unacceptable under the terms of the Covenant as a ground for forcibly removing people from their homes, public transportation, the overall poor quality of the new housing provided and the fact that many persons had yet to be rehoused.”

4 Alternative census data has existed that configures ethnicity differently, such as the Asian (predominantly Chinese) population (e.g., Lahmeyer, 2007) inhabiting Panama City’s Chinatown. There has been no official census data collected by the country of Panama that configures racial and ethnic categorizations.

5 Up until 1977, a U.S.-Panama treaty granted the United States canal territory (a 10-mile wide

(continued)
ReMapping the City

has been generally divided by rival gangs, the extent of which was revealed by our mapping of the neighborhood and interviews with residents as well as one former gang member. Violence and poverty were prominent features, and we were continually warned about the dangers of walking alone or venturing into certain neighborhoods. Our field visits were escorted by local police who refused to escort us into certain parts of the neighborhood based on their own fears of being shot.

Indeed, a recent internet and library search for scholarly writing revealed two categorical mentions of El Chorillo: references to Operation Just Cause; and references to a dangerous, decrepit slum. A blog posting on virtualtourist.com exemplified common sentiment about the neighborhood:

On the west side of Panama City lies a very dangerous neighborhood. The paint all but stripped off the buildings. … Prostitutes [sic] line this road, but they are not women, but men. (Local name is quekos) The song “One night in Bangkok” is very fitting. The people here are very poor, so they have nothing to lose by robbing you. This include if you are just sitting in your vehicle in traffic. I made a habit of bringing a knife and some mace if I had to go through here.

Our research projects were set against these narratives of El Chorillo as a dangerous, decrepit, poverty-ridden slum and as the infamous site of the U.S. invasion. In the following sections, I have highlighted alternative narratives developed by two students involved in this research study. Applying a palimpsest reading to both student projects, I have examined the students’ methods, analysis, and data representations and their implications for curriculum and research that is congruent with a 21st-century art education.

"Zooming in on El Chorillo: The Lived Environment, Elements, and Textures"

Early on during our walking tours of El Chorillo, Gillian, an undergraduate major in integrative arts, became interested in the textures of the city. Panama has been a city ensconced and revealed in material layers. Gillian became fascinated in the ways these textures engaged in interplay: sometimes on top of one another or sometimes juxtaposed next to each other. Although at the time she was not sure where the fascination would lead, Gillian, with our encouragement, began to take photographic close-ups of buildings, floors, the street, and objects as a means to “zoom in” and document these textures.

Contemplating our mission, which was ultimately to inform Panamanian officials of effective public space design, Gillian became interested in residents’ perspectives of architectural spaces, and how people defined space in and around their homes. Her final project consisted of collaged maps and a booklet that depicted textures with descriptions of where they were found as well as her own experience with encountering these aspects of the city—a hybrid document that was part encyclopedia, personal journal, and artwork. The collages served two purposes: as a visual index to the booklet, with numbers serving to orient the reader to specific sections within the booklet (see Figures 2 and 3); and as maps that depicted a physical sense of place (e.g., wood structures are found in the eastern part of the neighborhood, the shoreline is found on the south side of the neighborhood) as well as the subjective, lived sense of place. These
collaged maps overlaid a standard grid map of El Chorillo that occasionally pokes through the surface of her photographs.

Gillian’s examination of the built environment was infused with her subjective experience of the neighborhood. She wrote the following as part of her research statement and final paper:

I chose collage as a way to depict a visual interpretation of the subject matter. Collage allows me to show the confusion I felt as an outsider observing the community. Later in the booklet I take these collages and code them in a way that I began to understand and orient myself with El Chorillo. I see collage as a way to represent a densely populated area while forcing the viewer to look closely at each fragment of the image. If the viewer simply glances at the image they will see overlapping photographs that may not make sense, yet, if they engage the image and look at each photograph they can begin to make observations…. I call my project ‘Zooming In on Chorillo,’ reflective maps and a booklet of how I came to know the buildings and individuals of the neighborhood.” (Speers, 2006, pp. 1, 3)

These reflective maps were built from a selection of photographs depicting textures, building structures, and design elements in various parts of the Chorillo neighborhood. Gillian described her mapping project as involving multiple visual angles:

The first map is like a camera positioned in the sky above Chorillo showing the buildings that I have turned into symbols for different streets and styles of living combined with the individuals I met living there. The next map zooms the camera lens in on the buildings to

Figure 2. Collage Index of the Lived Environment of El Chorillo. Numbers index the following places in Gillian’s booklet: 1. The Wooden Houses; 2. Parque Armador; 3. Barraza; 4. Salamones; 5. Iglesia de Fatima.
Due to our collective, limited proficiency in Spanish, we identified strategies and sites for conducting interviews with local residents, among them a local neighborhood church, Inglesia de Fatima, which offered English classes to residents and encouraged us to visit and talk with community members.

In addition to her photographs, Gillian wrote fieldnote observations of textures—where the wooden structures were located in the neighborhood—and reflections on these observations. She also interviewed 15 women (all of whom invited Gillian into their homes) whom she met through one of our site visits to an English speaking class held in a local church. While our project initially consisted of surveying and documenting public spaces and the exterior landscape of El Chorillo, Gillian soon found herself immersed in its interior, domestic landscape:

Instead of observing Chorillo as an outsider these women gave me the gift of experiencing it. They took me in and out of their homes, their friends’ homes and all the surrounding spaces. I met their children, saw how residents use their courtyard I only saw on maps, and danced the salsa and merengue with them. My project began to evolve as I experienced. I evolved as I experienced. (Speers, 2006, p. 2)

A significant event occurred in the midst of our month-long field study: the slaying of a prominent community member, reputedly a retaliatory act for the slaying of a prominent gang member just days prior. By chance, Gillian was among a few students who were scheduled to be at the church to interview more residents the day that the funeral was scheduled. Encouraged by the church rector,
she and the other students attended the funeral to pay their respects. Their initial trepidation at the thought of attending the funeral as outsiders, in which violent retaliation at such an event was a real possibility, was allayed as they received warm embraces and expressions of gratitude from many of the funeral attendees. Reporting later on this event, Gillian and the other students were struck by the positive reception they received from the funeral congregation, noting two sentiments in particular that stood out for them: “You are the first Americans we’ve seen since the invasion;” and, “Don’t forget about us.”

These experiences guided Gillian to the development of her collage maps, an arts-based research project that she conducted in order to express her sensory experience via visual means while visiting residents’ homes. She sought to connect the visual with the cultural by tracing, stitching, and juxtaposing aspects of lived experience found in the women’s houses, stories, and interactions. She confessed that, while at first she was “unsure that something so subjective could be used as a tool for designers,” she ultimately felt that her intimate experience with community members might not only help community designers but also connect residents “with the future of their neighborhood” (Speers, 2006, p. 3). Her collages examined the ways in which people present their homes as a means to convey such things as social space, economic means, neighborhood and personal identity.

Palimpsestuous reading has applied at several levels of Gillian’s project. First, her documentation of textures revealed the literal layers of building materials, sometimes placed on top of one another, or sometimes built next to one another, indicating in a very direct way the changes in building materials over time. Of a much more profound nature, however, were decorative additions such as the painting of stones on flat, concrete surfaces to give them a faux stone-like appearance. During our first encounter with this trompe l’oeil we were puzzled by its meaning, as none of the buildings in El Chorillo were built from stone. Gillian and others learned through interviews with residents, discussions with a local architectural historian, and our architectural program director that these stone-like textural additions signified an older section of Panama, Panamá Viejo, established in 1519 by the conquistador Pedrarias Dávila. Situated far across town from El Chorillo, Panamá Viejo has been the original site of Panama City and has been credited with being the oldest European settlement on the Pacific coast of the Americas (UNESCO, 2007). Now a UNESCO world heritage site, its original stone buildings are visible in fragmented form. Gillian’s project suggested residential identity with a historic past, roots configured within colonial history and international tourism while juxtaposed and reappropriated in a completely different context. Many of the residents of El Chorillo have never left the neighborhood or been to this tourist site. The appropriation of Panamá Viejo’s built environment within El Chorillo has been one significant symbol of connection with a historically recognized and sanctioned national identity, a Spanish colonial identity juxtaposed with American occupation and its history of labor, exploitation, and poverty from the Canal project era that commingle with local neighborhood identity.

Second, Gillian’s choice of collage as the principal medium to interpret and (re)present her data has been an art form based on juxtaposition, fragmentation, and layering, creating relationships among discrete and sometimes...
disparate images. As such, it served to compress time and space, in which past and present commingle and beginnings and endings disappear as a point of orientation. Collage has been regarded as one of the salient, identifiable art forms of the postmodern era, embodying, for example, theories of self and society congruent with postmodern notions of fractured time, contradictions, and multiple readings (Efland et al., 1996; Garoian, 1999). Gillian’s three maps have allowed the viewer to visually trace connections among the oldest wooden structures built for canal workers on the east side of the neighborhood to the newer, modern structures that exist further west, to the *barraza*, the tall, high density housing structures that visibly mark El Chorillo from a distance and familiar to the Western eye as urban housing projects. By “zooming in,” she juxtaposed the history of these buildings with personalized markers of place and space—laundry, family photos, decorative building finishes, and landscaped touches—that rupture linear notions of time, from exteriors to interiors. Gillian’s collages have disrupted our typical gaze of what constitutes a photographic subject, suggesting a spectral subject (Derrida, 1979; 1994). One might feel lost in the midst of close-ups and decontextualized images as the eye traverses her collages, which highlight the palimpsestuous notion of involution, forcing us to examine the entanglement of textures and texts and the way in which they inhabit, invent, and disrupt each other.

Third, Gillian’s interviews and socializing with the women residing in the neighborhood informed her collages and created a space in which colonial history and subject interact with contemporary postcolonial identity and lived experience. The palimpsest in postcolonial theory has been used in order to discuss the interaction between colonized and colonizer discourses. Gayatri Spivak (1988), for example, argued that the notion of palimpsest is important to an understanding of imperialistic narrative in order to examine how such explanations become normative. Gillian’s project reinscribed an imperialistic narrative—in which the mention of El Chorillo in Western scholarship and media is in relation to the US invasion—with a complex narrative associated with “old” Panama, personal experience, and neighborhood identity. Within and across all three maps, Gillian revealed the ways in which textures, images, and materials signify a community identity that exists within a third space of culture (Bhabha, 1994), the liminal negotiation of cultural difference. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha suggested that the negotiation of cultural identity involves a continuous exchange of performances (discursive and non-discursive), a hybrid space for the production of cultural meaning. Such spaces have been further explored in the next student project.

(Re)Mapping the Street: Citizen Inscriptions of El Chorillo’s Calle Ocho

During our initial neighborhood mapping surveys, Thomas, a graduate student in geography, became interested in the formal and informal street economy of El Chorillo and the ways in which public and private space blurred. One street in particular caught his attention: *Calle 27* (27th Street), considered by residents and the larger Panamanian public as the main street of El Chorillo. Calle 27 has been renamed by local residents “Calle Ocho” (8th Street), referring to Miami, Florida’s popular Cuban-based neighborhood located in Little Havana. Home to an annual Carnival, Latin street festival, and numerous
Cuban restaurants, The Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau website (2007) proclaimed that “Calle Ocho is best known as the biggest street party in the country.” El Chorillo’s Calle Ocho also has been the hub of nightlife activity, with an emphasis on food, dancing, and socializing, but strikingly different in terms of its built environment and purpose. Historically (according to residents whom we interviewed), Calle Ocho has attracted people from all over the city, famous for its fish fry at many establishments. In more recent years, however, the street has served the local residents within El Chorillo, bearing no relationship to Miami’s touristic Calle Ocho. Our surveys, observations, interviews, and conversations with local residents, Panamanian residents, and police cumulatively revealed a sense of fear related to the dominating presence of gangs, poverty, crime, and poor living conditions associated with El Chorillo’s Calle Ocho. Thus the palimpsestuous reinscription of El Chorillo’s Calle 27 with Calle Ocho reveals the intricately woven texts of two disparate histories, two cultures, two contemporary realities that, while unrelated in a physical sense, nevertheless inhabit each other—a desire, perhaps, to identify with successful and popular Latin American street economy.

Initially, Thomas set out to document and analyze the informal street economy that seemed to mark Calle Ocho. Numerous kitchens lined the street—tables, grills, tents, shacks—accompanied by corresponding formal and informal beer vendors. Thomas decided to interview residents on-site during a busy Friday night. In addition to the interviews, he chose to conduct a hybrid cognitive mapping activity based upon elevation maps. Kevin Lynch (1960) developed the cognitive mapping tool as a way to represent how persons perceive the relationships between space, place, and social and physical features of the physical and built environment. As a method, it has been used to geographically record a person’s memories and perspectives of a particular place. Since cognitive maps have been highly subjective, there are no right or wrong maps. We discussed and conducted cognitive mapping as part of our preliminary training and onsite analysis and encouraged Thomas to use such techniques in his field study, as cognitive mapping has been used as a critical tool for understanding spatial literacy, sense of place, and the built and social environment (e.g., McFee & Degge, 1980; Seyer-Ochi, 2006). Thomas constructed an elevation map from photographs taken of buildings on the street, resembling a panorama of buildings on each side of the street so that the physical streetscape was depicted (sized 11” x 34”). Relatively fluent in Spanish, Thomas interviewed 11 residents—2 male, 9 female—living in El Chorillo. Handing out maps and markers, Thomas asked each person to mark activities, shops, music, smells, danger, and any other human or physical elements that they could identify on Calle Ocho. In total, Thomas was able to collect seven maps completed by people working either alone or in pairs.

The resulting maps are a visual reinscription of place (see Figure 4). Literally writing over the photographic street maps, participants reconfigured spaces and places of citizenship and economy—where they ate, drank, danced, purchased groceries, and socialized. After conducting a preliminary analysis of the street economy, Thomas extended his analysis and interpretation of data within the framework of citizenship. Encouraged by course readings—particularly by those concerning citizenship and space—Thomas became interested in decon-
structing notions of citizenship using a critical framework to analyze and discuss “a grass-roots approach to statehood, whereby citizen action necessarily defines citizenship” (Sigler, 2006a, p. 1). He analyzed his maps according to human and physical elements that interviewees had drawn and marked, coding further categories of formal and informal venues, specific locations, and general locations. Frequency counts and emergent themes were then marked on subsequent maps that Thomas created as a means to visually summarize and represent these reinscriptions.

When presented as a final project, the layers of (re)marks reconfigure space-time. Noting the modernist planning, architecture, and monolithic high-rises that typify housing projects in inner-city slum areas, Thomas argued that the “space in and around the buildings is programmed to fit a certain ‘normative space-time ecology’ (Graham, 2002) that is not necessarily the one identified with by the residents” (Sigler, 2006b, p. 10). Thomas also noted that, despite the nighttime activity in Calle Ocho, there were few formal establishments for dining and drinking. Indeed, as marked on the photographic streetscapes by the people he interviewed, several of the bars and restaurants are established in people’s houses, “informally carved out of residentially programmed space” or built out onto the sidewalks, blurring modernist notions of public and private space and adding layers to the built environment. Thomas’s research revealed the ways in which democracy is rescaled “so that community norms apply more so than national standards” (Sigler, 2006b, p. 12):

While informal vendors appropriate ostensibly public space for private purposes, this is played out in various forms throughout the community. Distinctions between public and private spaces are nearly impossible for the outsider to understand, and the use of any given space is constantly being renegotiated. Locally established conventions regarding how and when spaces may be used for what, and by who, are played out in stark contrast to the rigidly defined public/private dichotomy. (Sigler, 2006b, pp. 12-13)

Geographers have been increasingly examining space as sites through which “identity politics, citizenship, and alternative political agendas are articulated or struggled over” (McCann, 2002, cited in Sigler, 2006b, p. 13). Thomas argued

Figure 4. Example of Participant Remapping of Calle Ocho’s east and west sides of the street.
in his study that conceptualizations of one’s right to space are a fundamental determinant of citizenship. Space-time represented in the residential marked-up maps and in Thomas’s final representation of the data configured a more complex relationship, one that reveals the invisible manifestations of democratic participation. His project revealed that while citizenship is marginalized through the type of available government housing versus actual housing and business needs, the residents of El Chorillo reappropriate spaces and places and thus redirect action and agency. Such acts have reminiscence of Brown’s (1993) conception of “street architects” in her study of New York City’s homeless. In El Chorillo, Thomas wrote, “citizenship has been reinterpreted and redefined by residents to be more local, inclusive, and participatory” (Sigler, 2006b, p. 14) aligning his work with theories about citizenship as rescaled and reterritorialized (Purcell, 2003).

This conception of citizenship, which has taken into consideration the interplay of existing capitalist assumptions about market economy, space, and structure as well as local reterritorialization and reinterpretations of the same has aligned with hybrid notions of identity as discussed in postcolonial theory. Daniel Cooper Alarcón (1998-1990) examined notions of identity and history, in which colonizer and colonizing discourses are interwoven, involuted palimpsests, thus avoiding—or perhaps, preventing—a dominant voice silencing others. Discourses, as played out through the building structures and market economy on Calle Ocho, have interlocked and embodied the potential for future reinscriptions that might entertain “shifts in the balances of power and force” (Dillon, 2005, p. 255). While the built environment of the street has revealed the visible layers of building additions and reterritorialized sidewalk spaces for vending, the hybrid maps of Calle Ocho have made visible a third space of culture wherein residents map the the palimpsestous relationship between sites, structures, and activity, reinscribing the street through their own agency. As Bhabha (1994) argued, this liminal space is a hybrid site that witnesses the production—not just reflection—of cultural meaning produced by colonizers and colonized, of oppressors and oppressed, of politics and aesthetics.

ReVisioning the Palimpsest for Art Education

The above two examples of student research into the visual, material culture and built environment of Panama’s El Chorillo raise important considerations for the teaching of art in contemporary cultural contexts. The built environment as a site of visual and material culture studies offers enormous potential for the cultural and social analysis of art in everyday life. An argument for the study of the built environment is not new; it has enjoyed a fairly long, albeit marginalized, history of study within art education. Community-Based Art Education advocates have supported ethnography as an approach to art education as it encourages students to learn about theirs and others’ communities in relation to place and culture (Blandy & Congdon, 1987; Desai, 2002; Gude, 2004, 2007; Neperud, 1995; Ulbricht, 2005). “Attentive living” and “encountering difference” (Gude, 2007) requires students to study the natural and built environment in order to understand the complexities of diversity within contemporary culture and across historic time. While cognitive mapping has been used by art educators as a means to understand the psychological impact of space

7 In their book, Art, Culture, and Environment, McFee and Degge (1980) proposed questions for a curriculum based on the study of cities, such as what makes a city work? What do cities tell us about people? Can you read your past in a city? What things divide cities?

Kimberly A. Powell

Studies in Art Education
and place (Langdon, 1999; McFee & Degge, 1980), this article explores the development of alternative methods of mapping psycho- and socio-geographic spaces that are appropriate for a contemporary multicultural conception of art education. With the growing acceptance and practice of arts-based research, the development of methods and analytical frameworks that accurately reflect postmodern concerns with difference, representation, and identity can only flourish.

Second, through a palimpsestuous reading and analysis of these research projects, I’ve traced the live(d) connections among the past, present, and future that are situated within multiple narratives, materials, and images, pointing to a cultural framework of hybridity. There is a call within art education and within general education for the dissolution of culture as a fixed, discrete category for analysis (Gonzales, 2004; Mason, 2004; McDermott & Varenne, 2005; Stuhr, 2003). The narratives presented in this article confront monolithic, stereotypic views of culture and history, as they make visible the lived experience of the built environments that are *always* in discourse with larger colonial narratives, even as they seek to articulate local meanings and action. Flavia Bastos (2006) advocated hybridity as an approach for inquiring into contemporary artworks, offering hybridity as “not only a condition of contemporary artworks, but also an empowering position from which to speak” (p. 115). Building on this position, I argue that hybridity is a condition of the contemporary built environment, offering citizens an empowering position from which to speak through reappropriating, rescaling, reterritorializing, and relocating images, materials, and building sites. Both Gillian’s and Thomas’s projects reveal the involution of knowledge(s), experiences, discourses, and activities. A postcolonial hybridity questions the location of culture and history, and the palimpsest is a powerful metaphor and tool for analyzing hybrid discourses embedded in time and space.

Finally, questioning culture as a fixed category offers a challenge to art education research. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of a concept such as palimpsest is that, beyond being a metaphor for cultural diversity, it necessitates an approach to methodology and analysis that requires scholars to examine the relationship among disparate or seemingly unrelated details, whether those details are located within the environment, culture, and/or the self, thus reopening historical and cultural inquiry. Alarcón (1988-1990) suggested that the palimpsest enables the critique and understanding of cultural history and identity both at the specific, local level of study and more generally for encouraging a scholarship that recognizes diversity. As scholars, we should be called upon to listen to previously silenced or oppressed voices and also to analyze the ways in which these voices are interwoven with, speak through, and affect dominant narratives—the ways in which voices “live on” in the traces of our built, material, and visual cultures.

References


