Broadway as a Memory Site

Broadway knows that every footfall is its heartbeating, that it keeps its heart beating, that it needs suckers and citizens to keep its blood flowing. Broadway knows that if this secret ever got out it would be empty, so periodically it offers of glimpses. Colonel Whitehead, The Colosseum of New York, 84-85.

The long, well-trod line of Broadway stretches 17 gregarious miles, nearly from one tip of Manhattan to the other. It is easy to see Broadway simply as a foil to the grid, the line departing from the rational logic of the 1811 plan. Broadway does indeed create interesting moments in the plan of the city: in various locales it is the bustling main street, a generous boulevard, creator of triangular blocks and "squares." Beyond its plan-making function, Broadway is a rich memory site. Displaying both remarkable continuity and dizzying transformations over the centuries, Broadway represents the historical depth of the island's development and enables any number of memorial readings, placing this long road's idiographic synct with the center of the city's everyday life.

Broadway predated the grid, of course. The earlier roads incorporated into what we now call Broadway—High Street, Bloomingdale Road, the Boulevard—give the street historical value. Regarded as cultural landscape—not a line—Broadway comes into focus as a significant repository of historical memory, a place as deeply connected to island geography and history as it is intensively traveled in daily life.

As the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argued, collective memory requires cultural landmarks, as well as cultural and social institutions in order to flourish. We remember not just individually but in social groups ("New Yorkers"), and our memories are inseparable from actual spaces and geographies. Against this, Broadway and the grid present two distinct frameworks for remembering New York's past, playing off one another.

Memory Sites, Living and Dead

Cities have different sorts of memory sites. In some instances, they are places left behind, artifacts of bygone forces of landscape-creation. Memory sites are also carefully designed—selectively preserved and rebuilt in order to retain or manipulate historical and cultural value, as testament to a contemporary value (as real estate, public space, transportation corridor, etc.). What they all share is the historical and archaeological value, the presence of deposits and erosions, enabling easier readings of the city's past and lending the past a presence in contemporary urbanism. Memory sites are typically dead, or nearly so; a few partisan preservationists struggle to keep them alive. They are usually named "historic sites," signaling that their usefulness has been narrowed, their meanings more or less fixed. These places too often resemble taxidermy and smack of nostalgia. They are predictable and represent fixed points in the past.

Broadway couldn't be a more different kind of memory site. It is intensely alive and archaeologically rich; it is as central to the life of Manhattan historically as it is today. We inhabit it. And this contemporary use gives Broadway greater relevance as a memory site.

One could argue that every public space has this aspect—City Hall Park, Union and Madison Squares. Indeed, the public nature of public space stems in part from a history of shared use. Broadway is perhaps first among them when it comes to Manhattan's infrastructure of memory sites because it is partly a product of the island's pre-contact geography (the natural ridge that became the line of lower Broadway), partly a product of New Yorkers' city-building.

The grid presents a version of public history celebrating foresight, efficiency, confidence in growth, and rationality. Broadway presents an alternative strategy, literally following and otherwise suggesting idiosyncrasy, topographical features, like the line traced by a stream or a ridge following an outcrop. Broadway presents a logic before the grid, before urban dreams or even colonial implantations. It began by following a ridge past the Commons and, as Bloomingdale Road, connecting settlements and sites in organic fashion. This creates the natural logic of Broadway is deeply embedded by a city otherwise consumed by grid. The natural aspect of Broadway indulges a human need for idiosyncrasy, continuity, and unpredictable—wildness. It is wilderness, as the historian William Cronon has put it. In blending some natural traces among the urban artifacts, Broadway relates (at the scale of the whole island's plan) to the great naturalistic yet urban parks of Olmsted and Vaux.

In a literal sense, Broadway is a palimpsest—with many partially visible layers, representing both preservation and its opposite—the perfect metaphor for the complex and constantly evolving urban landscape. As we continue to use and remake Broadway, we keep adding new layers onto the subway, new street patterns, new buildings, the preservation of old buildings, the creation of new memories—that deepen the memorial value of the place.

On the Street, from the Air, Underground

Memory sites reveal earlier geographies and histories, enabling citizens and visitors to connect to the past and construct their own historical memories. Three modes of travel highlight Broadway's unique ability to do this in Manhattan.

Broadway opens the possibility of connecting today's walker to earlier walkers by the stage. Take a saunter (as Thoreau would call it); start from the Battery, imagine it as a beach (if you're having trouble picturing the beach, look at Eric Sander's masterful Manhattana, a work at once deeply scientific and wonderfully imaginative). Urban development has obscured many traces of pre-New York terrain, but Broadway has preserved some of it for us. To sense the original topography, walk up lower Broadway and feel it rise from Bowling Green up to a higher, level ground stretching at least to City Hall Park (the old commons). As you walk, look left and right down the small streets—Morris, Exchange, Rector—and you'll see the ground all away to both sides. You are on the old road following the ridge, laid out by natural forces and reinforced by centuries of building and destroying and building. Would you be high enough to see both the North and East Rivers, and sense Manhattan as an island, so important to its early inhabitants?

Flying low over Manhattan, on the way back to LaGuardia on a clear day, I am reminded of McLaughland's farmlands. Flying cross-country gives one the bird's-eye view of gridied Ohio or Indiana towns. These are the most beautiful and interesting cultural landscapes because the different logics, accumulated over time, are so clear. One sees the remnants of natural logic marked by meandering rivers and rolling forests; the grid of property lines and roads set down by early national ambition and real estate rationality; the nineteenth-century railroads, sometimes following river, sometimes grid, whatever paid; and the microlongics of the dozens of commercial landscapes within the town—whether it displays backyards pools, metal barns, or strip shopping centers and other landscapes of automobile. To see the river resist the grid is worth the price of the ticket, and puts the grid in context as a human construct, a latter-day and overpowering effort to discipline and remake an earlier reality. From the air, Broadway brings this same appreciation of the process of making cultural landscape, or putting down new layers that partially erase the old.

Memory sites, by their very nature, create stories, add sense of Broadway's memorial richness. Or is there? It takes some imagination. The original IRT, opened in 1904 and ending at City Hall Park, installed subway lines under Broadway.

By cut-end-cover method, designers reinforced the use and memory of Broadway as the main spatial narrative of Manhattan. The advance of this modern technology reinforced the centrality—the permanence—of Broadway in the New York mind and in everyday life. While the subway transformed New Yorkers' mobility and sense of place, it also was a grand act of memorialization (not just metaphorically: the ceramic plaques in the original IRT stations commemorate local histories like beavers at Astor Place and tulips at 110th Street in old Bloomingdale).

Keep Remembering

The continuities attaching today's Broadway to the grid and myriad other layers of Manhattan's history offer great possibilities for collective remembering. Besides the historical significance found in a particular building, block, or event, Broadway's island-spanning landscape touches a deep memorial susceptibility to nature and contingency.

The moments of Broadway's wandering up and down the island—in the reaches where it is not pulled into the grid in the guise of a boulevard—are analogous to the basic human need for narratives and stories (not only facts and figures) to construct meaning. As effective, efficient, and rational as the grid may be, as inevitable as it seems today, it doesn't give us enough to tell the full story of Manhattan and ourselves (a potential beautifully expressed by Colson Whitehead in the epigram above). Where history may seek the certainty of facts and grids, memory seeks the idiosyncrasy of stories and nature and the continuing thum of re-membering in the present.

Memory, by its nature, is changeable, shifting, fleeting. As professional historians, designers, and preservationists, we tend to respond by resisting this with bronze and stone monuments, professorial monographs, and tough regulation of prized historic buildings. Broadway offers an alternative to fixing memories in the form of memorials. By traveling Broadway we indulge the chance to wonder about the past, imagine what other landscapes and lives we have succeeded, to regard the past as a territory of imagination.

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