SARAH LOPEZ

A Personal Reflection on People as "Subjects" for Built Environment Research

As a historian of the built environment, I began talking to people "in the field" almost twenty years ago, when researching my master's thesis at the University of California Berkeley. Human stories and experiences have been a critical source of primary evidence in my research since that time, and I continue to seek clarity and resolve about my own research methods. Here, I offer questions and reflections on my working process, as well as thoughts about how our discipline can further refine methods for engaging humans in built environment research. While my methods are *not unique,* I have developed working strategies from the ground up through the mistakes, awkward encounters, and surprising rewards that occur in the field. As a scholar who engages with living subjects, I am not only learning the terms of such engagement but also who I am as a subject in a shared field.

Learning from Oral History and Ethnography

Historians of the built environment who engage human subjects as a source of evidence advance the insights and methods of material culture scholars interested in social history, a discrete but enduring subset of architectural and urban history at large.[1] J. B. Jackson, founder of the magazine *Landscape* and longtime lecturer in both the Berkeley and Harvard design schools, made notes in his journals about engaging people. Entries such as "Interview with gas station attendant" would be accompanied by scant notes about daily life at a filling station in rural New Mexico.[2] While his published writings and unpublished field notes are littered with commentary and observation about how humans use landscapes, his engagement with human subjects as a primary source of evidence was nonetheless limited.[3]

Energized by the work happening in architectural and urban history, as well as by changes afoot in the realm of preservation in the 1990s, Dolores Hayden challenged scholars to research the power of places as they related to issues of marginality, power, class, gender, and race.[4] In addition to archival sources, interviewing people who transformed cities like Los Angeles and Chicago, including people of color, people from other countries, and women, was a key part of her provocation. Within the Vernacular Architecture Forum, Hayden's call not only resonated (such scholarship was already taking place) but also buoyed emergent scholarship. One need look no further than the titles published in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture,* which commenced in the 1980s, to get a sense of the organization's intellectual scope. Archival evidence paired with oral and observational evidence is a key method for scholars and activists researching the social dynamics of place-based histories, particularly those of people marginalized in the dominant discourses found in aesthetics-driven architectural history.[5]

Moving into the twenty-first century, now is a good time to ask how scholars have not only built on previous scholarship but also how our methods have evolved to meet the challenges of our time. How might we broaden the scope of research conducted and how might an intensive engagement with living human subjects help us meet such goals?[6] Perhaps more importantly, how

can the specific insights of built environment researchers be applied to the art of observation and situated engagement with living human subjects? Our historical moment is one of flux; our context is one that leaves us asking old questions anew as previous answers no longer satisfy current concerns. As scholars of the world's most material and concrete (quite literally) forms of evidence, we are beholden to ask of our research: for whom and by whom? We seek relevance in our research amidst a time of environmental and societal precarity. I believe that the wisdom embodied in people is an invaluable and critical source of built environment evidence that creates intellectual and emotional connections between our work and our audience; [living] people-centered built environment research also has the potential to reach new audiences who may find themselves represented in emergent work. People envision places, people build places, people experience places (sometimes the ones they constructed!), and people find places personally meaningful. These perspectives and experiences must be captured fully in our studies of the built environment. While archival sources already contribute to these narratives, living witnesses and participants wait in the wings to fill future archives, and material culture scholars can and must be stewards of that project.

Figure 1. When I was conducting research for my dissertation in 2008, I informally interviewed men such as Don Tonio Ortiz, San Miguel's first bracero to return and build a house with U.S. dollars. Don Tonio stands in his entryway next to the moto (also purchased with dollars) that replaced his horse. He drives his moto to and from his agricultural fields every day. Photograph by Sarah Lopez, 2008.

As a student of Paul Groth in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was taught how to read architecture and a wide range of material culture as evidence of social life. But to what extent was my toolkit—amassed in the spatial disciplines—adaptable for an engagement with, and interrogation of, the evidence provided by living informants? Where is the overlap between building analysis and human analysis, if any? In addition to the architecture and landscapes they produce, the main subjects of my work are living people—Mexican nationals, predominantly men, ages twenty to seventy (Figure 1). In my book, *The Remittance Landscape,* I researched material transformations in Mexico financed by Mexican migrants working (and earning) in the United States. I framed my investigation around a building's life cycle: how particular building projects were conceived of, how project ideas changed over time, what projects meant for geographically fragmented diasporic groups of people, how projects were implemented, and ultimately how they were experienced by individuals and groups (Figure 2).[7] To amass this research, I lived in Mexico for approximately one year and returned periodically for an additional four years. I interviewed dozens of individuals along a spectrum of social contexts from initial conversations that took place in various locations about the town to tape-recorded, transcribed, formal interviews at tables. I also—to a certain extent—immersed myself in the life of the towns, and repeatedly visited building projects so I could better understand how the buildings were used at discrete times of day, days of the week, weeks and months of the year; buildings and landscapes that were punctuated by large and small events, as well as periods of stillness, quiet, and even abandonment (Figure 3). While interviews were critical to my project, what I describe above does not neatly map onto methods used by historians conducting oral histories.

In general, the principle aims and objectives of historians using oral history methods cohere with those of built environment historians.[8] Taking hold in the 1960s within the discipline of history, oral history became a critical method for including marginalized voices in grand historic narratives, as well as challenging the idea

of the historian as expert and author. Putting a subject's voice into research findings and decentering the singular expert voice of the historian allowed histories of early immigration to the United States, migration from Mexico during the Bracero Program, and incarceration during Japanese internment—to name but a few episodes—to enter the historic record in new ways. But as a method, oral histories use time—specifically, the long duration of one's life—as a structuring device to gain insight into a specific historic context or event or set of experiences. One's life history, one's accounting of their own story—an unfurling of moments in time—is recorded, transcribed, and systematically deposited in archives as newly created sources of primary evidence.[9] This may differ from a built environment scholar who, as in my case, uses space and place as a structuring device in interviews rather than time. However, what I do does not neatly fit into typical social science interview techniques on predetermined topics either; a participant's life story is still, if obliquely, a key goal of my historic inquiry.

When interviewing and informally engaging my project informants, I did not solicit a comprehensive history of their life (or even a comprehensive accounting of a period of years). My engagements were more targeted and circumspect. While this could be seen as a shortcoming or limitation of my research and book, it was a necessary one. Most of my participants, at some point, crossed the U.S.-Mexico boundary, and many crossed without the proper authorization, which is commonly referred to as "illegally." A person's experience crossing the border and their reflections on their legal status as a "migrant" is relevant in my research on remittance landscapes and yet I never interviewed a subject in a linear fashion. I never asked about their immigration status in the United States or their potential experience at the "border." Such a topic is too important, too intimate, and potentially harmful to the interviewee to be incorporated into the margins of my research or other studies of similar scope. Such a topic deserves and demands focused treatment and specific preparedness.[10] Interestingly, while I never solicited stories about immigration status or crossing experiences, discrete aspects of related stories were sometimes offered. Throughout time, repeated engagements with the same people allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities they faced—of which immigration status is one—which informed my overall findings. My method for conducting interviews is to start with the material world and circle back to it even as I become increasingly interested in migratory practices and

Figure 2. While expanding upon my dissertation research for my book in 2012, I focused more on the processes and methods of construction. In Jalisco, Mexico, an *albañil* (vernacular builder) is holding a photograph of the suburban U.S. house that a *norteño* (person from Mexico living in the United States) asked him to copy. The house he is constructing in its likeness looms behind. Photograph by Sarah Lopez, 2012.

Figure 3. It is not only the exteriors of remittance houses that display idiosyncratic flourishes and embellishments. After spending time getting to know a family of restaurateurs in Chicago, they welcomed me into their remittance home in Jalisco. Note the men engaged in casual conversation at the dining room table. Photograph by Sarah Lopez, 2012.

experiences. My anchor is the built environment, my training is the material world. If my interview questions stay nested in that realm, I am confident that I can "make good" on the promise of the interviewees' time and trust.

This credo—structuring my interviews and engagements with people around the built subject at hand—was subsequently tested in my ongoing project about the history of migrant detention. For months, I volunteered at an Austin immigrant shelter working with migrants, advocates, and legal aids. I read extensively about Texas "detention centers" (a euphemism for prisons), migration processes, and incarceration. To learn about the architecture, I solicited Freedom of Information Act requests, repeatedly contacted the private prison corporation's public outreach division, conducted site visits, and visited the National Archives in Texas and Washington, D.C. Nonetheless, specific information about the building's layout, interior details, and programmatic use remained elusive.

When I was ready to begin interviewing people, I designed a cognitive drawing exercise structured around two maps: first, participants would draw points and write place names that started with their hometown and ended with Austin, Texas, to illustrate their journey to the United States; second, they would draw their room/cell/pod in the detention center—the material form of their incarceration (Figures 4 and 5). The migration journey in this case—unlike my previous study—*is* a story of detention, an experience in which one is immobilized amidst movement toward a new and different future. Detention, I also believed, *must* include the experience of persons subjected to the buildings that do the work of detaining. After discussing my research objectives, some individuals (mostly men) I knew from the shelter were willing (some even eager)

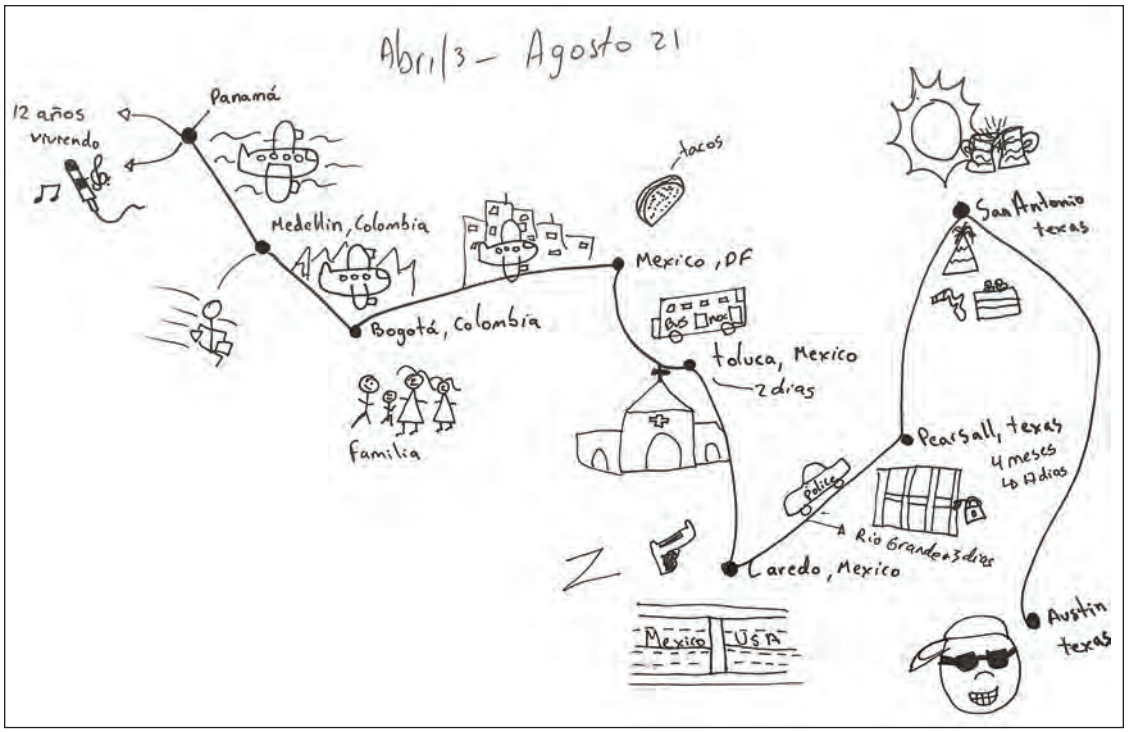

Figure 4. A man's journey from Panama to Austin, Texas, is illustrated here. Due to extortion, the man fled his homeland and sought asylum in the United States after enduring several hardships. Drawing by participant, facilitated by Sarah Lopez, 2015.

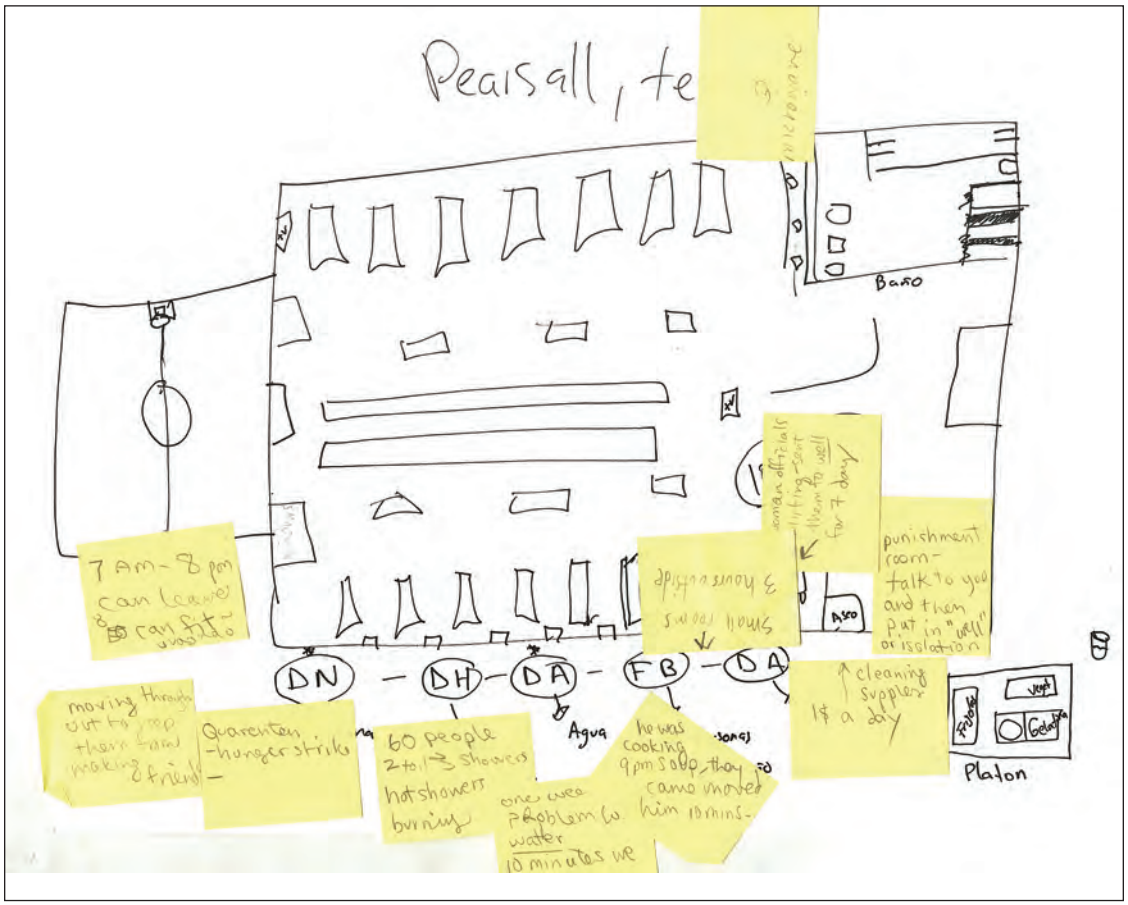

Figure 5. A person detained in an all-male detention center in Pearsall, Texas, drew his "pod," illustrating the walls, beds, communal tables, and more. The author scribbled his description of the space as (and after) he drew on yellow sticky notes. Drawing by participant, facilitated by Jessica Carey-Webb and Sarah Lopez, 2015.

to discuss these matters. The maps and stories that emerged were astonishing. They not only contributed to scholarly articles and installations, but also became experimental forms of legal evidence for advocates and lawyers who campaign against the injustices of detention.[11]

Three years after my first interview, however, my perspective on my method changed. After knowing her for several months, a woman I met at the Austin shelter agreed to do an interview. Her cousin was detained in Houston, and she wanted her story to broadcast what was occurring in Houston's facility and beyond. As with all of my projects, I had completed the university's mandatory Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, established protocols for my engagement and for how I would treat and process the materials I produced. In a private setting, as she drew the first map, she traveled back to her homeland of El Salvador, moving forward through a migration journey that lasted several months (Figure 6). As she drew her second map, one containing the walls of the rooms where she was detained and the location of the chairs, beds, tables, and doors, it conjured up in crisp, situated, and caustic detail her daily life "inside" the facility (Figure 7). Remembering how the officers treated her—the handcuffs that constrained her on the bus trip between facilities, the loss of her name which was replaced by her bed number, the room's bright florescent lights that were kept on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—she began to relive humiliation and pain. More so than in my previous interviews, the exercise caught her by surprise: most notably, recollection of the traumatic experiences rendered her extremely vulnerable as the distance collapsed between her story of incarceration and her experience of it. Not only was I unprepared to help her heal, but I too was caught off guard. I witnessed her, hugged her, sat with her in silence as she regained strength, and have not conducted another cognitive exercise focused on detention since. I crossed (and asked her to cross) a boundary that I was ill-equipped to handle.

While her story remains important, and while

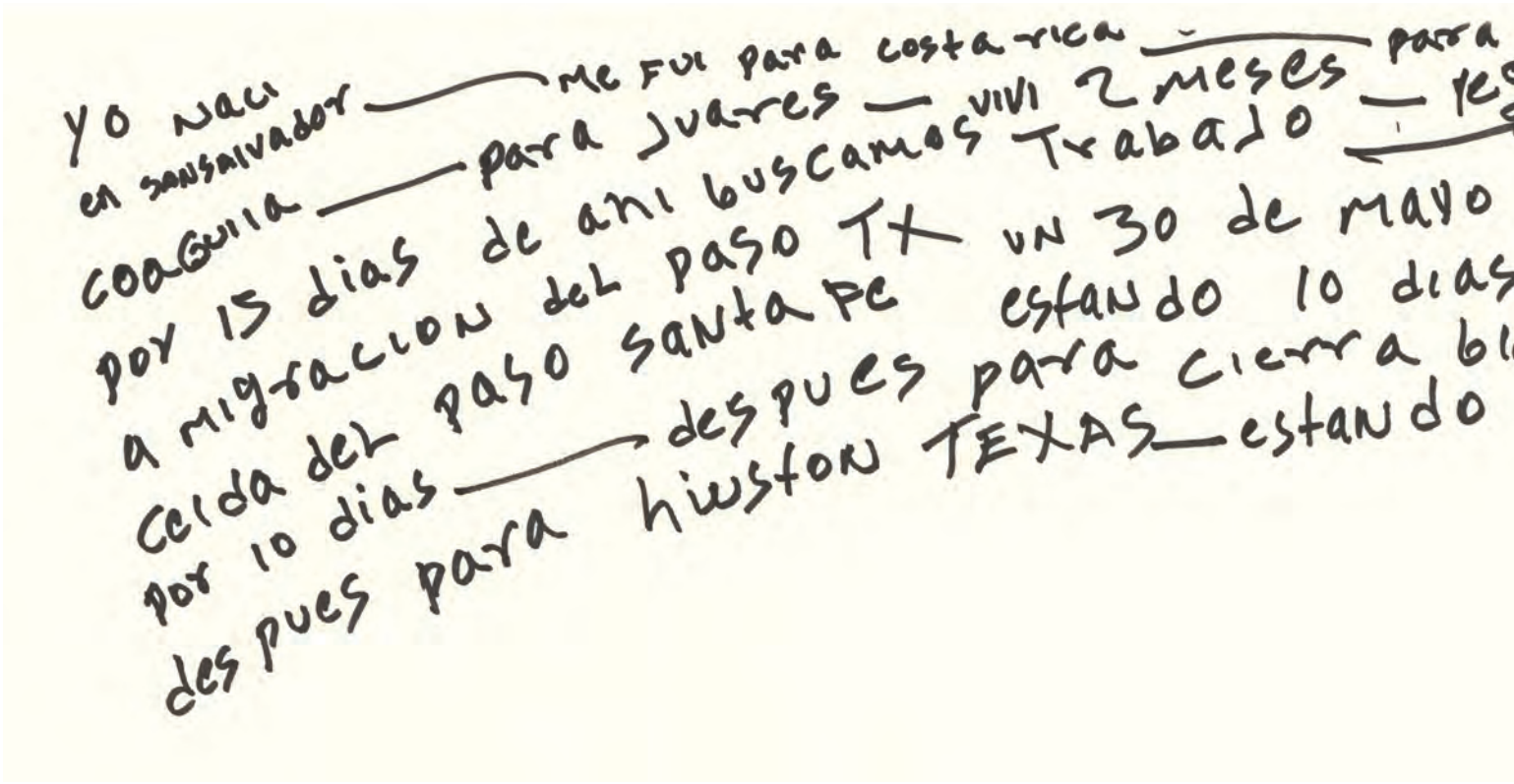

Figure 6. This is a cognitive map conducted by a woman from El Salvador of her journey. At the end of this harrowing journey, she (like many asylum seekers and migrants) was unjustly detained for months in a Texas detention center. Drawing by participant, facilitated by Sarah Lopez, 2019.

it should be published far and wide in both scholarship and public media, I now understand that asking somebody to revisit trauma should not happen in the absence of a long-term plan aimed at supporting the person's mental and emotional wellbeing as he or she builds incremental resilience. And while IRB helped me design methods to protect her in certain ways and secure consent, the project's focus on architecture mistakenly led me (and perhaps the reviewers) to shift the focus from potential peril to a defined and delimited investigation of architectural evidence. Something may trigger trauma for one person but not another: my previous mapping exercises had different outcomes. While these costly insights were important, they do not answer the question of how to conduct research on emotionally challenging subjects centered around violence and injustice. Rather, they raised a gap in the discipline of architectural and urban history: what are the ethical guidelines and boundaries of architectural history research? This is a question that must be engaged collectively. And moving forward, I must continually interrogate and revise my methods which are, at best, methods-in-progress.

Ethnographic methods—alongside interviewing—have proved equally important to my field research. Based in the social sciences with deep roots in anthropology and sociology, ethnography has been utilized by those in other disciplines with mixed results.[12] Much criticized for the reproduction of asymmetrical colonial power relations, the outdated mantra of a researcher "going native" has been updated by ethnographies that attempt to more fully engage the life-world of particular people as coproducers of new knowledge and key informants of critical questions.[13] Power and power relations are central to these discussions. Who has the power to speak—the famous subaltern—is here twinned with who has the power to conduct research—the storied ivory tower professor. Class, race, and gender, among other facets, are omnipresent when one attempts to immerse oneself in another place and another people.

While I still grapple with these issues, select ethnographic methods (not comprehensive

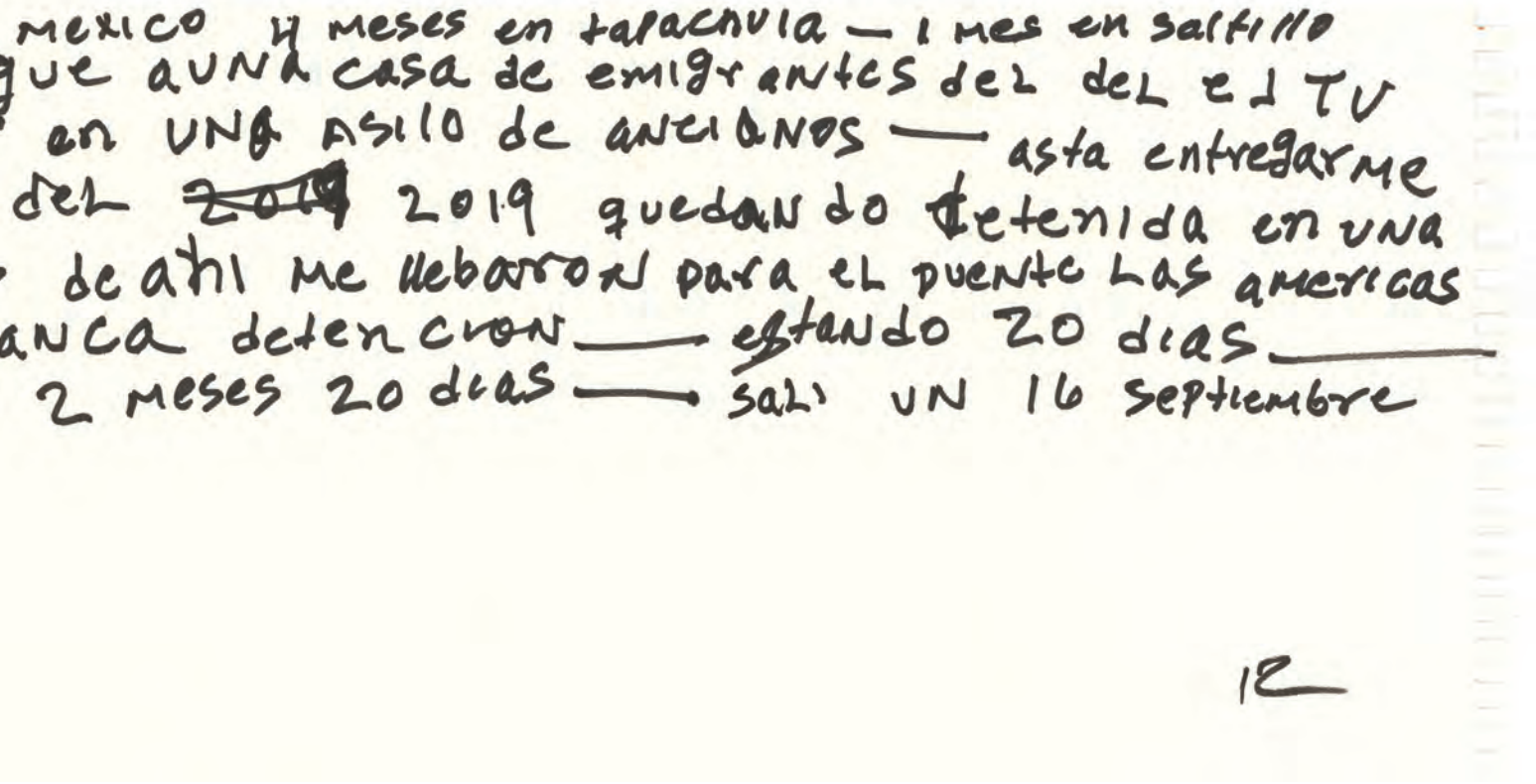

Figure 7. This is a cognitive map of one of the detention centers where a woman from El Salvador was detained. Drawing by participant, facilitated by Sarah Lopez, 2019.

"ethnographies") such as extended observation, sustained and long-term participation in events and daily happenings, and the building of human relationships, are all important tools for built environment historians and scholars.[14] Sociologist Michael Burawoy's dictate to "follow the person, place or thing," as well as his call for extended case study methodologies have also proved instructive for my work.[15] But built environment scholars also bring important tools to ethnography: our observation of human behavior is enhanced by our understanding of the production of material worlds and their varying contexts. We view the material world—the city, the street, the house—as a charged interlocutor in the production of human behavior. We witness people in not only a historic context, but also a spatial one; practices and rituals are not suspended, they are situated. We can compare what people say against what they do against what they build, elisions therein providing critical insight into distances between stated aspirations and material constraints, between social goals and societal outcomes. Ethnographic methods complete the processes by which built environment scholars bring places to life. Conversely, built environment scholarship completes the ethnographic project. This brings us back to the question of who has the power and privilege to do research that solicits both time and embodied wisdom from living subjects, as well as the ultimate goals of such research.

Learning from My Point of View

As academia's ranks expand to include more women and scholars of color, ethnographic methods are sometimes used to tell the stories of people that are connected (often in personal ways) to one's own situated forms of knowledge. I am one such scholar. I am the product of several intragenerational migrations. My grandparents fled anti-Semitism in Belarus and Moldova in the 1930s to build a Jewish life in Cuba—only to flee again in the 1960s due to physical and social

violence inflicted by Castro's regime, which they initially supported. My mother was a refugee (I use this term in the legal sense, as descriptive of her migration status); a seventeen-year-old alone on a plane to New York City, wondering if she would ever see her parents again. My father was raised in the Mojave Desert in California; his parents and grandparents were itinerant farmers and then miners, migrating for generations through Mexico to Texas to California. Beyond "Mexico," my father's family is not "from somewhere." We cannot trace our family lineage back to a time of stasis and stability linked to sedentism in place. I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I do not have personal knowledge of the experience of migration, of coming from Mexico, of sending remittances, or being detained. As somebody who became an academic, my "professional status" and "class" is markedly distinct from *some* (not all!) of my informants, as is my U.S. citizenship. Despite these divergences and potential asymmetries between myself and my informants, I feel compelled to pursue specific questions, and indebted to the rewards of an ethnographic approach. Understanding migration processes and migration experiences beyond those of my immediate family is foundational to my intellectual and emotional life-project. While I do not research my family history, my family history has, in essence, researched me; my commitment to Mexico is in a ghostly way my commitment to belonging to a past. Furthermore, the people who have served as the building blocks of my research have rich stories and complex lives that greatly contribute to the shape and experience of built environments; stories that should be heard.

As a field—of architectural and urban historians, of preservationists, of planners—we have an opportunity to refine how and why we might include living human subjects into spatially oriented research. We understand that places imprint peoples' lives; that the built environment creates conditions that influence what is and is not possible for people to experience, become, and imagine.[16] Built environments and material worlds are inherent to the human experience, and social histories that cast them aside remain incomplete. Architectural historians may not be trained in the art of conducting oral histories or ethnographies, but these methods, so relevant in the work of social scientists and historians, have implications for our research. These concerns are so pressing that I repeat: how can the insights of built environment researchers be applied to the art of observation and situated engagement with human subjects? How can we harness our discipline's methodological strengths and create our own versions of interviewing, observing, and engaging? Our attention to detail, our desire to unravel the palimpsest that is the layered city, and our relationship to fieldwork must be harnessed as we refine and develop our own people-centered built environment approach.

In other words, a central overlap between building/landscape analysis and human engagement/analysis is that both happen in the field. As noted by Henry Glassie, "fieldwork is the thing that grants me an engagement in the dialectic of reality" and "undergirds my sense of responsibility" as a researcher.[17] Whatever "the field" is, however one defines it, the field is the arena where learning takes place. Field research requires slowing down as well as paying attention. Built environment scholars are masters of this slowing down and paying attention when it comes to material worlds; similar sensitivities are required when engaging with people. For those focusing on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we must move beyond the limits of the archive and enlarge the historical record with new evidence. Informal and formal interviews, observation, extended engagement with one case study over a long period of time, participation in events, and hierarchical dynamics yoked to our insights about place and space can fill gaps. People in our midst whose lives stretch (in some special cases) back to the 1930s or '40s are contributing to emergent architectural and urban histories, labor history, user history, migrant and diasporic history, LGBTQ history, anarchist, alt-right, and everything normative in-between history, as specifically related to the construction of our material world, culminating in a cicadean roar within which one finds the messy, ample, and beautiful social history of our everyday surroundings.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Lopez, a built environment historian and migration scholar, is associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design. Her book, *The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA*, won the 2017 Spiro Kostof Book Award from the Society of Architectural Historians. She is a 2023 Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA) at the National Gallery.

NOTES

1. While I write this from the narrow perspective of an architectural historian, "built environment scholarship" is a much larger umbrella that includes geography, folklore studies, American studies, planning, preservation, and more. I cannot speak to how an engagement with human subjects entered these related fields, but I hope that this reflection will nonetheless evoke useful cross-disciplinary conversations.

2. Helen Horowitz, *Traces of J. B. Jackson: The Man Who Taught Us to See Everyday America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 123.

3. Foundational scholars in adjacent fields such as folklore studies warrant attention in architectural and urban history. For example, Henry Glassie has a robust body of work that engages human subjects in the field. While the VAF is composed of an interdisciplinary group of scholars that ranges from folklore studies to American studies to architectural history, scholarly organizations like the Society of Architectural Historians and the Urban History Association, as well as many architectural history programs in the United States sideline methods cultivated in material culture and folklore studies. Furthermore, one's period of study influences one's methods. In history and architectural history, Dell Upton, Sally McMurry, Paul Groth, and Catherine Bishir (to name only a few) demonstrate how rich social histories dialectically bound with the material worlds of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and mid-twentieth centuries can be culled from the archives. Scholars working on the second half of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may capitalize on the promise of working with living subjects.

4. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

5. Consider, for example, Rebecca Ginsberg, *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

6. Many dissertations experimenting with human subjects in built environment research push these methods forward. Arijit Sen, Jennifer Mack, Marta Gutman, and Esra Akcan's published scholarship provide good examples of innovative methods that include interviews and observation. A critical text that addresses these questions is Arijit Sen and Lisa Silverman, eds., *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

7. Sarah Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Articles that argue for expansive architectural history methods include: Dell Upton, "Architectural History or Landscape History?," *Journal of Architectural Education* 44, no. 4 (August 1991): 195–99; William Whyte, "How Do Buildings Mean? Some Issues of Interpretation in the History of Architecture," *History and Theory* 45, no. 2 (May 2006): 153–77.

8. Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, Deborah van der Plaat, eds., *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019).

9. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader: Third Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

10. Anthropologist and author Jason de Leon's book, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), provides an example of this focused engagement.

11. For an example of my scholarship on this topic, see Sarah Lopez, "From Penal to 'Civil': A Legacy of Private Prison Policy in a Landscape of Migrant Detention," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2019): 105–34. Also see the Humanities Action Lab's exhibition website, http://statesofincarceration.org, for an overview of the national project that my students and I participated in. Our portion is found at: https://statesofincarceration.org/states/texas-spatial-stories-migration-and-detention.

12. The disciplinary tools of anthropology and sociology (focusing on singular individuals, families, and communities through sustained engagement on the one hand versus surveys, samples, and statistical

analysis of societal trends on the other) can provide a useful point of departure for built environment historians wanting to expand their methods.

13. Examples of this include Ahiwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); and Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

14. Sociologist Robert S. Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1995) is an illustrative compendium of interview techniques and related ethical issues.

15. See Michael Burawoy et al., *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Burawoy et al., *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Burawoy, *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

16. I will forever be indebted to Dell Upton's writing on landscapes as construed and constructed, and his people-centered approach, found throughout his many published essays and books.

17. Henry Glassie and Barbara Truesdell, "A Life in the Field: Henry Glassie and the Study of Material Culture," *The Public Historian* 30, no. 4 (Nov. 2008): 74.