

THE 'WALKING IN MY SHOES' *a radical oral history project* PROJECT



TITLE

'Walking in My Shoes', NYC: A radical oral history project

ABSTRACT

The 'Walking in my Shoes' project will be a living archive that aims to document, dissect and discuss contemporary urban issues as they take place in neighborhoods and communities across New York City. The architects of the archive will be myself and the students in my courses. Students will be involved through discreet, semester-long projects developed by myself such as this semester's oral history project in East New York/Cypress Hills or the urban dictionary project (more in the narrative). The underlying ambition is that the archive will serve as a publically-facing resource (or collection of resources) that may be of interest to community members or groups in their educational, policy or advocacy pursuits. With respect to teaching and learning, the project has three main goals: (1) to create avenues for self-directed and peer-directed student learning and engagement of course topics that takes place outside of the classroom, (2) to open up spaces for students to be knowers and public discussion leaders on topics of interest to themselves and their communities, and (3) to expand student's knowledge of how digital tools can assist them in their educational, civic and future professional endeavors.

NARRATIVE

The 'Walking in my Shoes' project will be a living archive that aims to document, dissect and discuss contemporary urban issues as they take place in neighborhoods and communities across New York City. More specifically, it takes on the challenge of documenting and giving public face to the thousands of New York residents facing displacement – or being threatened by processes that may bring displacement – from homes, communities, jobs, higher education, etc. The archive will be composed of narratives, images and videos from community-based work in neighborhoods on the frontlines of these issues. These narratives will be historically situated in relation to the development of the city, and the legacies of poverty, affluence and race that riddle both the past and present history of the city. As the project assembles, the archive will serve as a publically accessible, multi-media meditation on urban development and the question of the right to the city, and aims to generate dialogue and synergies amongst students and communities, and communities and communities throughout the five boroughs.

The architects of the archive will be myself and the students in my courses. Issues of urban development and change, and the right to the city, inequality and displacement are central topics in the courses I teach – Urban Studies: Poverty and Affluence and Urban Precarity at Queens College and Environmental Psychology at the New School – and are issues relevant to the lives of many if not all of my students throughout. These topics can often be depressing for students, who tend to learn about them in classrooms and are offered little if any avenues for understanding how these issues are playing out in the real world and in the everyday lives of their neighbors living across the city. In my experience, this often leaves students feeling overwhelmed, powerless, apathetic or a combination of the three. A succinct aim of this project is to provide an outlet for students to get involved in and reflect on the changes taking place across the city, and to assess how it affects students engagement in the classroom.

Students will initially be involved with the archive through discreet, semester-long projects developed by myself. For example, thanks to the help of members of the recently formed Coalition for Community Advancement, this semester my students and I will be collecting place-based oral histories from residents in East New York and Cypress Hills (ENY) – two neighborhoods affected by the first rezoning under Bill de Blasio’s new housing plan. Students will be asked to analyze the narratives independently and as a group in light of course concepts and materials, and the larger histories of the communities and New York City more broadly. These narratives, images, videos and analyses will be shared on <http://walkinginmyshoes.nyc>. In addition, we will have a ‘day of action’ wherein we will flood social media outlets with narratives, videos and images, raising the voices of long-time residents in ENY and driving viewers back to the standing website for more information, discussion and future avenues of involvement.

In the coming spring semester, I plan to continue the collection of oral histories in East New York, as well as complete a more involved community mapping project with residents of ENY. This project will be a central feature of my new course, ‘Urban Precarity,’ which will be taught through the Urban Studies department at Queens College this Spring. Though this project is still in development, I see the class working with ENY residents to continue building out the collective memory of these two communities and to facilitate discussions about a desired future for the neighborhoods.

Currently a rough sketch of this project exists, however, a fuller draft of the project – including how it will be archived digitally – will be completed before December 6th, 2016. Specific sites and groups for carrying out community mapping will be identified and contacted during December, and solidified by mid-late January at the latest. During the end of February, our class will meet with two community members of East New York/Cypress Hills and members of the

Coalition for Community Advancement who will speak with the class about the rezoning in the communities, the affects they're starting to see because of this, and how the community is responding. Oral history collection and community mapping will begin in mid-late March and continue through the end of April. Deliverables for this project will include the contribution of narrative(s) to the standing website, participation in a 'day of action' around our collective work, and the submission of a project. With regards to 'the project', while I will likely give students the option to choose writing a paper, I will also encourage them to create a digital project using course material and our work in East New York/Cypress Hills, which may be added to the standing website.

There are three additional aims related to teaching and learning that undergird this project. First, this project aims to create avenues for self-directed and peer-directed student learning and engagement of course topics that takes place outside of the classroom. Second, this project aims to open up spaces for students to be knowers and public discussion leaders on topics of interest to themselves and their communities. Third and final, this project aims to expand student's knowledge of how digital tools can assist them in their educational, civic and future professional endeavors.

Benchmarks for assessing the quality and outcome of this project will focus on gauging students' engagement and completion of the project. This will entail observations of students' over the course of the semester and assessments of how their coursework is progressing. In addition, I will need to check in with students more directly to understand how the project is going, and how it is contributing to their learning, from their perspective. Students will likely be assessed at three time periods throughout the semester – at the beginning of the semester after the project is introduced, in the middle of the semester and finally at the end of the semester. In understanding student engagement, I think it is important to keep in mind how the site is doing in terms of drawing traffic and generating awareness as it may affect how students perceive the significance of the project.

In sum, I think this project offers an excellent opportunity to get students involved in meaningful, community-based work in New York City, and during a particular political moment when coalition building and synergies seems more necessary than ever. In a more profound way, perhaps by providing students with this opportunity now, we may contribute to a very different teaching of this class in 20-50 years.