

Transcript of Interviews with city residents by Group Material 1996
(edited)

Pittsburgh is like a big fort. Geographically it's bound by a highway which goes all around the city. So before you get to Pittsburgh you can't see it. Usually you can see a city five or ten minutes before you arrive--but not here. It's very separating.

Once I made drawings of the paths people took through downtown on their lunch hours. I would sketch these little maps to see if there was any important shape or hidden meaning in the routes people took.

Part of my experience is that some of my family lived in the city so I grew up half there and half in the suburbs--and there's a big difference between them. In the city you can get away with so much more, there's less cops and so many people just hanging out on the street corners. The ratio of cops to kids is high...they watch you nonstop. The city cops don't care what you do because they got bigger things to deal with. The city represents a lot more freedom, an in-between place where you can get away with things out in the open you wouldn't do in the suburbs.

You know the problems in big cities today--how people go out and live in the suburbs and never come back. They come here 9 to 5 but they don't come in on the weekends and this draws them back. Festivals are what every city wants to do so its' citizenry will realize the city is a good place to live and have a good time, not just a place for work. It changes downtown: they have to park, they go to stores, they go to McDonald's. Think about it, we spread out all over so they're going to walk all over downtown--the exposure is great. The city knows. Believe me, the city knows it.

City planners now they have to be a little creative about what they do. They can't simply plow over neighborhoods anymore the way they used to. They have to at least use the word community. They can't just make decisions unilaterally anymore. I don't know if actual planning has really changed that much--but the techniques certainly may appear to folks to be more inclusive.

Many cultural institutions will lose their credibility if they don't develop community-based initiatives. Art may have appeared very exclusive but it is now a way for organizations to appear to have an interest--a stake in representing community concerns. As government funding becomes scarce they have to look for support in other areas. So, suddenly these groups realized they need to develop community constituencies.

Many officials are using the vocabulary of community. This kind of thing reminds of Pat Buchanan quoting Martin Luther King. He said, something like; as a presidential candidate he "wants color blindness and this is what Dr. King wanted." So much of the language common in the sixties in the civil rights movement is now used by

conservative is now used by conservatives. It's being absorbed. Today you can justify dislocating people by using a language of inclusivity.

I want to know why all of a sudden there is all this interest in the community. Why now, at this particular time, when you were not interested in us before. What are your motives? What are your hidden agendas? Why is there this trend?

I think urban redevelopment cut off the people on The Hill like a dead arm. And if that's not enough, they go on to make Penn Circle something that would change the entire face of East Liberty. I know that they knew that would happen.

I'm a perfect example of a Pittsburgh guy of the 20th century. I'm 31 years old, went out of town for college, and came back here because it's a great place to raise a family--low cost of living, comfortable. It's a town of two and a half million people but the culture is such that people treat it like a small town.

You can see the geography of segregation. In the seventies Pittsburgh went through an integration process that was largely successful. There was non-violent, well supported integration in public schools. It was a well-designed program. Recently there was a reaction from people who wanted a community school without strangers coming in. There was a reinitiation of neighborhood school programs so that they wouldn't have the kind of districting which would impose integration.

The Northside has been given a very bad reputation by the media in the past few years--it isn't as defined as other Pittsburgh communities. People think of the Northside as a very large area so if you look at crime statistics they appear to be unusually high. This is for propaganda sake because they want to do a lot of development over there. You've got enticement there for those who are trying to convert the area. This is similar to the process of turning Downtown into someplace more hospitable. So they make it worse than it actually is. Then there's some tax incentive to clean it up.

The mission is to attract and create special events for the purpose of creating vitality in downtown Pittsburgh with a long-term goal of having Pittsburgh recognized as a tourist attraction. This is funded by the county hotel/motel tax...the goal is heads in beds. The idea is you want to develop multiple days events that would bring people in, that can be marketed in advance. They should be reoccurring so that they're predictable.

I think the Three Rivers Art Festival is a way to get more people downtown. To utilize the space and utilize the Point. People respect it as a cultural happening in the summer. I don't know if I would view it that way. It seems to focus more on having marketplace where local artists and crafts people can sell their goods. I guess it's just some way to create a sort of community in Pittsburgh, as well as trying to bring some artists from outside into the area and incorporate local artists into some sort of larger art scene.

They have really good food. We go to the festival for the food. Usually my wife buys something for the house. We have a new house and we have nothing, no paintings on the walls. So we are trying to put something up.

There is no obligation for private institutions to be involved in public culture. As private people they can choose to do whatever they want. Anybody has a right to choose. You can choose to do anything you feel like--that's the thing about living in the U.S. But in terms of whether or not you want to go into public things: that's why you can vote. For instance you are for the NEA or you are against it. Some cities have a certain percentage of taxes allocated for art and others don't. That's what America is all about: you get the choice.

We use all kinds of private places. They are kind enough to let an artist show his or her work in their lobby. It's private property. If they've got an issue or problem with the art, they we don't show it, because it's their property. They have the right to say what will or will not be shown there. You've just got to be realistic about that.

Pittsburgh changed a lot. This used to be a steel city--you know, smoky. Since they got rid of the mills it's more high-tech. They changed downtown. They changed the buildings to more high-tech. There are a lot of families that were families in steel business and in mining. So now you see a lot of unemployment. If you are not up with high-tech and computers and all that other stuff you find yourself out of work. The buildings changed, but the employment is what's most important. There are hardly no jobs here, no jobs at all.

Downtown never was a social space.

How many times has Pittsburgh been saved? Each one of these renewals is like a repetition in a way. You can read about that in the history books.

I only take the Parkway.

When you're in High School you're taught that your community is basically your neighborhood. It's a bit more complicated than that now with every new group that comes along. Obviously there is a new concept of what a community is. For one thing, there is a non-geographic concept of what a community is.

We used to say "meet at the pit, or the gully next to the main sewer pipes," or a place in the woods. It was dirty but we didn't care, we were young, we were boys. We would make up code names for the places we'd go--like one place in the woods we called Hawaii. And we'd say "let's all meet there tonight and do a party." Later we'd disburse [sic] and go out into the public or whatnot, but we had our private little spaces. the cops knew that's where we went, but because there were woods, they really couldn't do anything. Cars couldn't go there so they'd have to patrol it on foot

and we'd see their flashlights. Usually only your friends and people you knew would be there.

We were hanging out in the park and the whole community banded together and said we were dangerous when actually we kept the park clean for other people. We went there to meet--as a place just to hang out, not to do drugs. But the community actually got together to have a town meeting to kick us out and ban us. They were thinking about putting up a fence with barb wire and all. We said well "where do you want us to go, we don't have anywhere to go," so they gave us a community center but it had police in it and parents as well. So they never solved the problem. They always said "we're going to give you some space to meet" but they wouldn't do it, or if they did, it wasn't conducive to kids meeting there.

There was a small gay pick-up area down near Craig Street and Forbes but what they did was to thoroughly repress it. Now there are signs that say you can not drive down this street between one and six in the morning. They actually have curfews for when you can drive there. There's nothing there anymore.

Our meetings were always secret so we had to go to a part of the city that we normally wouldn't frequent. For a while Squirrel Hill was our terrain and then East Liberty. Each time we found a new place it was as if it was built and designed for us; it was as if the whole city was our home. Perhaps it was the necessity for secrecy that made the strange streets and restaurants feel like ours.

Pittsburgh is a very neighborhood-oriented place...very sort of provincial. There are different neighborhoods that have their own business district. If you wanted to, you could really stay in your neighborhoods and do all your food shopping there, go to restaurants, go to bars, and that's really the way the city was set up. There were industrial pockets, and the neighborhoods would grow up around that, needing to sustain itself. In Pittsburgh it's like you have a lot of small downtowns.

I often walk through the cruising area of Schenley Park because I feel safer there. You rarely see anyone, but you know people are around.

Sometimes an area becomes suddenly popular. Attractors appear: it might be the proximity of a new, or even a rumored highway, beautiful nature, or comfortable neighborhoods. Attraction is translated into building. Sometimes the nature of the attractor remains a mystery; seemingly nothing is there (that may be the attraction!)--it might be the building itself. Suddenly clumps of office and residential towers spring up, then a church, a mall, a Hyatt, a cineplex. Another "center" is born, stretching the city to apparent infinity.

To be lost. How frightening. To be safely lost. How wonderful. We have begun to build cities that are too easily solved. There is no mystery, no imaginative lure, no texture in the blank facades, the empty and expressionless faces of banks or other corporate structures. This plus no candy, book, or sweet shops means that when the

bank shuts and the IBMers gas on home, the city drops dead. You can skate through those places at 50 miles an hour, for there is nothing to see, nothing to wonder or linger over. There is no bafflement.

When they sing "This Land Is Your Land" at the Civic Arena it just brings tears to my eyes. Wow. You know we just all have so much to get from each other, if you just look around wherever you are and decide to interact--that changes your life. Just these things when we are all together somewhere can change your life.

It's up to an individual to enjoy the crowds. Only certain people can get into it I think. You can't ask the city to do it for you.

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below, below the threshold at which visibility begins. They walk--an elementary of this experience of the city; they are walkers, whose bodies follow the thick and the think of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations it remains daily and indefinitely other.

My Uncle John walked through the city day after day looking for work. This is how he learned every street and alley way around. My Aunt though never figured her way around. It was her memory. When she would tell him of an incident of her youth, the story would be vivid. At the same time, she couldn't remember what she had for dinner the night before.

When I follow people I think more about where they might be going then who they are. I make a note of and describe each object they select or reject shopping. I record every gesture and the times they happen. I remember each street they follow, each turn they make and each hesitation. The stranger walking down the Boulevard of the Allies could be me if I watch them long enough.

The city that most people want is in Orlando, Florida and its called Disneyland.

Sometimes it's important to find out what a city is, instead of what it was, or what it should be.