

# TEACHING THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IN THE WORLD OF VIRTUAL REALITY

by Philip C. Dolce and Rubil Morales-Vasquez



As with other institutions of higher education, Bergen Community College has become part of the emerging cyberspace world. In an effort to better serve our students, faculty members at Bergen, including the authors, are offering an increasing number of on-line courses. But these courses and the advantages that they provide do not mean that our students must become disconnected from real-world places or direct human interaction.

Technology provides an invaluable tool for accessing information, but it also has its limitations. For example, in the first major study of the social and psychological effects of internet use at home, researchers at Carnegie-Mellon University found that people who spend even a few hours a week on-line experienced higher levels of depression and loneliness than those who used computers less frequently. The study also reported that the amount of time spent on-line directly correlated with a decline in interaction with family and friends.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising. Earlier studies have shown that one of the effects of television was to reduce social interaction; as a result Americans today are less likely to join

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organizations, vote in elections or even trust their neighbors.<sup>2</sup> The point, of course, is not that students should stop watching television or using the Internet but that there is a need to affirm a sense of place—a connection between the spaces in which we lead our lives and the customs, habits, and memories by which we define ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

In the introduction to his best-selling book, *The Greatest Generation*, Tom Brokaw recounts his trip to Normandy, France in preparation for an NBC documentary on the 40th anniversary of D-Day. Brokaw was thor-

oughly familiar with the facts and figures of this momentous event: the number of men in action, the types of weapons used, as well as the tactical and strategic moves made by both the Allies and the Germans.

What he was not prepared for was the welter of emotions that he felt as he walked the beaches where American soldiers had fought, died, and eventually triumphed. The lives that these men forged after the war could not be separat-

ed from the sacrifices they endured on this beachhead.<sup>4</sup> No doubt, much of the popularity gained by this book has been due to its ability to connect memory and place. Likewise, our students need to appreciate history as something to be experienced, not just as facts to be memorized. The question is: How do we introduce “a sense of place” to our students?

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To address this question at Bergen Community College, we have introduced a project in our classroom and online U.S. history courses. Students are asked to write papers on the theme of a “sense of place,” a project that involves research, interviews, and on-site visits. Fully half the paper is devoted to student observations of the site and the people who live, work, or visit it. The paper involves the students’ interpretations of a place, based on research and personal observation, and a description and evaluation of its impact on the surrounding community. Students are also asked to explore the significance of the site—what it tells us about the culture, hopes, aspirations, or conflicts of the American people. In short, the sites chosen should explain something about the impact that places have on people’s lives.

We have been delighted by the scope and variety of the projects chosen by the students. Among the sites chosen were Radburn, New Jersey, the first planned automobile suburb; the Lower East Side Tenement House Museum in New York City; the Vanderbilt Mansion in the lower

Hudson Valley; the American Labor Museum in Haledon, N.J.; and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Those students with greater freedom to travel explored recreational sites such as Disney World (as opposed to, say, Coney Island); a company town, Hershey, Pennsylvania, and national monuments such the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. We also proposed Bergen Community College as a project so that students can (probably for the first time) think about the mission of a community college and how well our institution measured up over time. Thus, the students' expertise becomes a continuing part of the learning process in these classes because, at different stages, their research connects with the material covered in the course.

Another phase of the project allows students to go beyond the classroom to disseminate their findings. For the last two years, in the spring semester, we have held the Bergen Community College Student History Conference, in which a panel of students delivers papers before an audience of fellow students, faculty, and other members of the Bergen community.

This is a student conference in every sense of the word; the moderator, commentator, and presenters are all students. The proceedings, plus other outstanding papers judged by a panel of historians at the college, are published in our *Journal of History and Political Science* and distributed throughout the college. Our ultimate aim is to use these student papers and the conference to stimulate students' interest in research and history and to demonstrate that personal involvement by ordinary people can make a difference in shaping communities and places. We believe this project also helps to balance recent scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

Course materials are both the first and last resort for students undertaking the project. But the students are also encouraged to use a wide variety of sources. The Silverman Library at Bergen Community College is the primary venue for materials such as books, magazines, newspapers, and census information. Significantly, the librarians at Bergen work hand in hand with the professors and students in the formulation of their papers. In fact, the library has received a special grant that will enable librarians to collect printed materials on Bergen County history. We also encourage students to look beyond the walls of the college and seek materials in local libraries, historical societies, and at the sites themselves. A personal interview with a tour guide, curator, or even long-time resident

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of a community is prized as historical evidence. We want students to engage not just printed materials, but the place that they chose to write about. The heart of the paper, therefore, is the site visitation. As mentioned earlier, students have traversed sites that are both exalted and mundane. The emphasis is not on the glamour or popularity of a particular site, but rather the historical and spiritual resonance that is evoked by personal involvement with the place itself.

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A growing number of our students are recent arrivals in the United States, and their personal sense of place is often the topic of class discussion. Their stories reinforce scholarly literature, which argues that, rather than abandoning their former life, many of today's immigrants literally lead a double life, a negotiation between the place of their birth and their adopted home in America. Cut-rate phone cards, modems, fax machines, and jet airlines have helped make this possible. This

trans-national identity underlies important issues of immigration, multiculturalism, and bilingualism, which deserve attention. Students come to understand that to the ordinary immigrant the primary issues are what community to live in, where to marry, and where to be buried.<sup>6</sup> Immigrants' double lives often are "grounded in the intimacy of their community" in both countries.<sup>7</sup>

These immigrants not only live in two places, they simultaneously transform both.<sup>8</sup> This "double sense of place" emerges in student projects. In his visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one student wrote fondly of this feat of American philanthropy that included exhibits of sculptures from his native Greece. In her paper on Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, another student recounted how seeing the freshly cut flowers on gravestones brought back memories of life in Poland, where on a special day in February everyone comes to the cemetery. Yet another student, in her account of a walking tour of the Dominican community in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, showed how a new generation of immigrants has both transformed and adapted to American life. Students soon discover that, under different circumstances, a "double sense of place" is not a new historical development.<sup>9</sup> Past or present, this connection between space and society is doubly impressed in the student's mind, making history visceral as well as intellectual.

Researching and writing papers also helped many students gain a

clearer understanding of class divisions in society. For example, conference discussions based on two very different visits, one to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the other to the Vanderbilt Mansion, placed the issue of inequalities in industrial America in stark relief.

Similarly, discussions of papers written about Newark, New Jersey, and the Meadowlands Arena, the state's professional sports complex, led to a debate regarding the competitive nature of the American Dream: a better life for one community—Newark—could depend on the disintegration of another—East Rutherford—if a proposed shift of sport franchises becomes a reality. Students are generally familiar with sports and even with the finances that drive them. The juxtaposition of these conference papers made the economics of sports a point of our local history and thus all the more real. Hence, the title of the Spring 2002 Student History Conference was "Living the American Dream in New York and New Jersey."

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The site visit aspect of this history project helps students understand what is "objective" and what is "personal" by seeing different viewpoints of the same place. As early as 1741 James Boswell observed "how different the same place is to different people."<sup>10</sup> Students quickly learn that there is a vast difference between the observations of visitors and those who live in a particular environment.<sup>11</sup>

The usual view of African-American history, for example, is to emphasize how whites regulated and controlled black life. This view of black people's powerlessness highlights African-Americans "as victims of white racism or slum pathologies." An alternative model shows how African-Americans in local communities shaped a good deal of their own destiny.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the history of the civil rights movement usually is focused on national events and prominent leaders and organizations. But this viewpoint, while important, obscures the fact that there were many community civil rights movements, including those in Bergen County, that were responding to local conditions as well as national concerns. Once again, this community orientation demonstrates how the sense of place motivates individual efforts and community action.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, student papers on Newark and Asbury Park, New Jersey, help our students to understand obstacles faced by a black underclass but also highlight the ways in which poor communities have fought back against

all odds to create safer and healthier living spaces.

At our student conference two years ago, the thrust of a student paper on the Lower East Side Tenement Museum resulted in a discussion about how immigrants shaped their environment under even the most difficult circumstances. In class, we point out that many immigrant groups who settled in urban areas at the turn of the century formed organizations that helped new arrivals find jobs, provided interest-free loans and sick and death benefits. By personal action, they transformed neighborhoods into communities

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with ethnic stores, houses of worship, and streets filled with familiar faces able to speak their native tongue. This helped mitigate life in five- and six-story walk-up tenements that lacked hot water and often contained between two and five people in each room of an apartment.<sup>14</sup> These people certainly understood that there were more attractive places to live.

As one author states, people then and now choose from several possible futures of which some are more probable and a limited few are desirable. It

is “an extraordinary event if the probable and the desirable coincide.”<sup>15</sup> The object of establishing a sense of place is to make the probable as desirable as possible.

Our student historians also studied the suburbs. One student paper, for example, looked at Palisades Park, a suburban town in Bergen County and generated discussion on the changing ethnic face of suburban neighborhoods and the realization that our often stereotyped view of the people who create a sense of place applies to the American suburbs as well.

After World War II, elite critics depicted newly developed suburbs as wastelands of conformity, populated by male commuters with frustrated wives and spoiled children.<sup>16</sup> Motion pictures reinforced this literary image by visualizing the American suburbs, almost exclusively, as the home of the professional, white middle- and upper-middle-class.<sup>17</sup>

These outsider views of “the middle landscape” do not reflect the complexity and process of change in suburban life that our students found in Palisades Park, where Korean-Americans are rapidly replacing older residential groups and tensions have emerged between town residents divided by language and culture.

The struggle that Palisades Park faces is to develop a new sense of place that will give this suburban community definition and meaning. By

doing so, as a newspaper reporter pointed out, they will be fulfilling the nation's motto "E Pluribus Unum. Out of many one."<sup>18</sup>

We point out that one reason a more stable sense of place has been hard to develop is the American obsession with building new communities from scratch. The dilemma that people faced was whether to remain inside an "unattractive" environment and reform it or separate from it and start a new one. Americans seem to opt for the latter choice. The Puritans tried to create a "city on a hill" in the New England wilderness that would serve as a model for the rest of the world. In this century we have abandoned the Puritan belief that religion was the basis for community but retained the idea that new communities are best. This might mean bulldozing entire city neighborhoods for urban renewal; turning farmland into suburban subdivisions, or building planned developments. The failure of many city public housing projects and suburban sprawl will soon become subjects for this student project.

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From this perspective, students will also be asked to look at planned developments, where the hope is that architectural design acts as a powerful tool in affecting human behavior and building community. Student projects could include the Garden City Movement (Radburn, New Jersey), the New Town Movement (Columbia, Maryland), the New Urbanism (Seaside, Florida) and Celebration, Florida where the Walt Disney Company employed famous architects and designers to build a model community.<sup>19</sup>

Where do we go from here? In a Trevor political cartoon, a man sits passively watching the TV screen as a politician makes a series of campaign promises, only to be told in the end, "Your problem is you've become a spectator."<sup>20</sup>

We do not want students to be mere spectators in the world they will inherit. We strive to show students that their personal involvement can be essential in shaping reality and building community. Their ability to do so depends in part on technology, but also on being connected with specific places on this planet. As Asa Briggs has pointed out, if people acquire a "private stake" in the place there is a greater chance that they can develop a "public concern about it."<sup>21</sup>

We try to encourage students to consider the larger problem of how existing communities with less than perfect design can connect the social and spatial order. For instance, postwar automobile suburbs in Bergen

County and elsewhere are particularly difficult because they usually lack a viable public center and often have an imbalance between commercial, civic, and residential space.

The hope of some of these communities was to unite commerce and community by counting on newly developed malls to become their downtowns. Experience has proven that privately owned facilities such as malls do not easily serve as civic centers.<sup>22</sup> Yet the spirit of community survives, not by simply criticizing this commercialized culture, but by trying to work within it.

This and other experiences seem to affirm that many Americans are frustrated trying “to find a perfect community or flee an imperfect one.” We discuss with students that a more reasonable course of action is to assume more responsibility for the communities in which we live whether they are city neighborhoods, suburbs, or small towns.<sup>23</sup>

The question is how do we get our students to understand their potential power in establishing community and to become actively involved in the process? To answer this question, the final step in our project is to find a model for action—and we believe that model should be the college itself.

We hope that focusing on the role our college plays in the local community will allow us to provide leadership by example and to demonstrate that we practice what we preach. For instance, as faculty we should be able to serve as a source of expertise and assistance to local government and community groups. Students should be able to see that the college and its extensive facilities provide a vital center for community residents. We should encourage students to enroll in service learning courses or become part of faculty and college projects related to community service.

**A**s faculty, perhaps we cannot build a city on a hill but we can encourage our students to join us in renewing and strengthening a community by developing a sense of place in which their private stake becomes a public concern and a personal issue. We believe that a significant number of our colleagues in other disciplines will join in this effort to extol the importance of place. But this requires exploring new ways of doing things. As the title of this journal implies, change involves action as well as thought. 

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Scott Sleek, “Isolation Increases with Internet Use,” *American Psychological Association Monitor*, 29 (September 1998): 1, 30-31.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 15-28.
- <sup>3</sup> Eric Sandwiess, “Searching for ‘A Sense of Place’,” *Journal of Urban History*, 24 (November 1997): 89, 95.
- <sup>4</sup> Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xvii-xxx.

- <sup>5</sup> For example, see William R. Leach's *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life*. (New York: Random House 2002) which focuses on "the disintegrating sense of place in our national and individual psyche." In this view America has become a nation composed of look-alike strip malls and people disconnected from their neighbors. While Americans are no longer as defined by a sense of place as they once had been. This project reminds students that place still matters and is a fruitful tool in making history intelligible.
- <sup>6</sup> Deborah Sontag and Celia W. Dugger, "The New Immigrant Tide: A Shuttle Between Worlds," *New York Times*, July 21, 1998, B6.
- <sup>7</sup> Deborah Sontag, "A Mexican Town That Transcends Borders," *New York Times*, July 21, 1998, B6.
- <sup>8</sup> Holland Cotter, "One Museum, Five Shows, and a Million Lives and Passions," *New York Times*, August 14, 1998, B33.
- <sup>9</sup> In the early decades of the 20th century, many southern Italian villages were nearly emptied of young people who had emigrated to the United States and Latin America. Yet a large number of immigrants were able to stay connected with their native villages by the letters and money sent to parents and relatives. In the 1920s, groups of Italian-Americans even commissioned a silent film company to travel to various towns in Italy and make short documentary films that were then shown to immigrants in New York. Close to seven hundred of these travelogues were produced. Similarly, African-Americans stayed connected to the southern towns they had left before moving to urban areas. In fact, thousands of blacks traveled back and forth to their former homes. Blacks, immigrants, and white migrants, often formed clubs that emphasized their place of origin and helped bridge the difficulties associated with migration and immigration. Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. (New York: Harper, 1992), 94-99; Guiliana Bruno, "City Views: The Voyage of Film Images," in David B. Clarke, ed., *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997), 53; Earl Lewis, "Connecting Memory, Self, and the Power of Place in African-American Urban History," *Journal of Urban History*, 21 (March 1995), 352.
- <sup>10</sup> Asa Briggs, "The Sense of Place," in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) I, 96-97, 90-91.
- <sup>11</sup> Many outside observers were frightened or revolted by both conditions and the people who populated immigrant neighborhoods in large cities. Outsiders saw these areas "solely through the lens of privation, limited opportunity, and as places to escape." These words and underlying attitude negatively classified the residents of these neighborhoods and the community ties they developed. This reminds us that few people consciously move to a slum or a ghetto. They usually call the place they live home. Despite the poverty and terrible living conditions, residents once again created their own sense of place. Lewis, "Connecting Memory," 350. Andrew Wiese, "Places of Our Own: Suburban Black Towns Before 1960," *Journal of Urban History*, 19 (May 1993), 30-54.
- <sup>12</sup> Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, "Toward a New African American Urban History," *Journal of Urban History*, 21 (March 1995): 283-85.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 288.
- <sup>14</sup> Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York, Harper Collins, 1990), 26-29.
- <sup>15</sup> Eleonora Masine, "The Futures of Cultures: An Overview," in *The Future of Cultures* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994), 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), vi-2.
- <sup>17</sup> Philip C. Dolce, "Suburbs in Motion Pictures," in the *Encyclopedia of Urban America*, II, edited by Neil Larry Shumsky. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio), II, 187-90.
- <sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Llorente, "A Tale of Two Cultures: Palisades Park Grapples with Change," *The Record*, August 23, 1998, A1, A6.
- <sup>19</sup> Carter Wiseman, *Shaping a Nation: 20th Century Architecture and Its Makers* (New York: WW Norton, 1998), 373-861; Carol A. Christensen, *The American Garden City and the New Towns*

*Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1978), 45-70, 105-37.

<sup>20</sup> *Bergen Record*, July 6, 1998, A-12.

<sup>21</sup> Asa Briggs, "The Sense of Place," 99.

<sup>22</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America," *American Historical Review*, 101 (October 1996): 1056.

<sup>23</sup> Carter Wiseman, *Shaping a Nation*, 382.

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