

soundings issue 3 Summer 1996

# Whose Heroes Does A City Remember?

Cynthia Cockburn

Cynthia Cockburn *reviews* The Power of Place:  
Urban Landscapes as Public History *by Dolores  
Hayden (The MIT Press, 1995)*

When I was a child and my mother took me shopping in town she'd point *to* the bronze statue of a stout gentleman in Victorian clothes, commanding the intersection near the local businessmen's dining club. 'That', she'd say, 'is one of your great-great-uncles.' I never learned any more about this man. But in a way I didn't need to. The presence of the statue was enough to tell us all: he counted. About the women of my family, of course, I have been able to learn even less: they didn't count.

In such ways is a place selective about its heroes and its history. The city fathers and captains of industry build monuments to men in their own image. And historians usually single out as important the buildings and areas where money has been turned to stone, neo-gothic, neo-classical or rococo.

Dolores Hayden has an alternative idea about the people and events that places could memorialise. She is an architect who moved from Massachusetts to Los Angeles in 1979. For five years she struggled to get to know and understand the city. And she had the luck, or the wit, to meet groups of working women and men of different ethnic groups who had their own take on Los Angeles and its past.

Hayden launched an initiative she called *The Power of Place*. It involved a small nonprofit corporation that had the purpose of 'situating women's history

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and ethnic history in downtown, in public places, through experimental, collaborative projects by historians, designers and artists.' The book of the same name is the story, and analysis, of a series of projects that resulted.

*The Power of Place* asks the question: behind the self-presentation of the owners and their architects, what can we still see of the unremembered makers of this place, the great majority of its past inhabitants? Which of their landmarks are still visible, in spite of savage redevelopment.<sup>7</sup> How can women and 'people of color' recover and give a pride of place to our own past?

**T**he initiative worked with collaborative teams of historians, artists, architects, planners and local organisations to find, as Hayden puts it, 'ways to rebuild public memory in the city around different sites and buildings'. The book focuses on three exercises in what she calls 'a politics of place construction, redefining the mainstream experience' while bringing into view something formerly unseen.

One piece of historical research identifies the work and workplaces of the women, children and men who were the labour force of the city from the earliest settlements until World War Two. A practical project that arose from this involved the 'reinterpretation' of the Embassy Auditorium, a union hall used by Latina and Russian Jewish garment workers. A second exercise recovered Little Tokyo, a historic district of small businesses launched by Japanese American immigrants.

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The third put Hayden on the trail of a woman slave known as Bidy Mason, and this project illustrates well the way artists' as well as historians' imaginations were able to redefine and re-present the heroic in an urban redevelopment.

Bidy Mason was born a slave in 1818 in the deep South of the USA, and like other slaves was forbidden to learn to read or write. But life gave her a good knowledge of herbal medicine and nursing, and she became valuable to her owners as a midwife. She was granted her freedom by a California court in 1851, at a time when Los Angeles housed no more than 1600 people, only twelve of whom were African Americans. By the 1890s, when she died, the city was three times the size, had a black population of 1200 and was on the way to becoming an industrial city.

Bidy Mason became one of the growing city's leading citizens. She reared her

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three daughters alone. She became famous as a midwife, delivering hundreds of babies of both the rich and the poor, white and black. She helped found the Los Angeles branch of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church, owned real estate and used her homestead to help her family into business.

The *Power of Place* project was at first demoralised to find that the site of Bidly Mason's homestead at 331 Spring Street was today an expanse of asphalt. But a redevelopment of the parking lot was due: the plan was for a ten storey garage with commercial space on the ground floor. The agency responsible for the design invited the *Power of Place* group to include some kind of commemoration of Bidly Mason.

'Perhaps they had a bronze plaque in mind', Hayden says. What they got was something more complex and more beautiful. As project director she recruited a team of artists. Susan E. King, a letterpress printer, produced a limited edition large-format book commemorating Mason, titled *HOME/Stead*. Sculptor Betye Saar transformed one corner of the pedestrian area with a photo-mural representing Bidly Mason's house and family, and an installation of a window frame with a portrait of Mason herself.

**T**he largest and most complicated of the memorials was Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's 81-foot long wall entitled *Bidly Mason: Time and Place*. Decade by decade, the wall tells the story of the development of Los Angeles from an unimportant little Mexican town, in synchrony with Mason's own journey through time. In the plaster are impressions of Mason's obstetric instruments, the waggon wheels, her freedom papers, the homestead fence.

I like this idea that heroes can be deconstructed, that they don't need to be individualist dragon-slayers. Bronze Bertie and his kind can be knocked off their York stone perches in the middle of traffic roundabouts and replaced in the collective memory by movements, groups, and even, heaven knows, black women. It makes you realise that the people you really admire in history often don't have a photograph, let alone a statue, to their name. And if you met one of these great white male heroes he'd look straight through you, and should you have the misfortune to find yourself sitting next to him at a municipal dinner you wouldn't have anything to say to him anyway.

Dolores Hayden's book makes me feel a little more patient with the continual naming and renaming of city places. I used to feel: what's the point of changing St Petersburg to Leningrad and back again? But all it is, after all, is a way of enlisting

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a reading of history into today's political struggles. Having Bidy Mason immortalised on a Los Angeles wall says less about Bidy herself than it does about black women in Los Angeles today. To them it says: look, this black woman was deemed significant. And everyone who looks with admiration at her marks in this place can look at you with the same eyes.

There are two formulae for the hero. There's the boring, immanent one, hero as worthy role model: see, you could do this too. And there's the transcendent one - the Jungian archetype who emerges from obscurity, overcomes obstacles, impales evil on his sword and marries the king's daughter. But a satisfactory hero doesn't have to be either of these. The best hero is simply a life lived before you that somehow affirms the potential value of your own.

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*from the Editors*

We said in Soundings No.1 that future issues would have 'theme' sections, usually compiled by guest editors. You have now seen *Law and Justice*, edited by Bill Bowring and *Heroes and Heroines* which we edited ourselves. Our plans for the next three issues are:

No.3 *The Public Good*, to be edited by Maureen Mackintosh

No.4 *Democracy and the Media*, to be edited by Bill Schwarz and Dave Morley

No.5 *'Young Britain'*, to be edited by Jonathan Rutherford.

{Of course, this order of things might have to be changed if there's an early election!}

The *Soundings* editors are responsible for compiling the front, more general, part of the journal. These sections will include articles by Grahame Thompson and Paul Hirst, Mike Kenny, Anne Phillips and Robin Murray. We'd be happy to have your suggestions for themes, authors and topics.

Subscriptions so far have exceeded our expectations - up by 12 per cent. We're pleased with progress, and hope you are too. If you'd like to lend a hand, you could:

- Introduce *Soundings* to friends
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- Persuade your library to take out an institutional subscription
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*Soundings* is an independent, non-profit making organisation. If you would like to make a financial contribution towards the promotion of the journal, we'd be glad to hear from you.

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