BUILDING BIOGRAPHIES:
TO KNOW CITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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*D*oing fieldwork has long been associated with a career in geography. But that tradition of working in the field is threatened by a number of armchair alternatives, including obsessions with the information explosion and social theory. The danger in theory and computer-data mining, as in many other sedentary approaches, is their saturation with packaged interpretations that miss the random and often contradictory encounters that define a complicated and messy world. After all, the information explosion is really a "stuff" explosion, and considerable effort is required to convert such stuff into valuable information. There is a temptation to give credence to existing data sets and information sources, even in the absence of personal field observations and experiences.

This temptation, of course, has been around for as long as libraries, data sets, and computers have. But as the World Wide Web has made immense quantities of "stuff" available instantaneously, the problem has grown. I tend to agree with the geographer John Borchert that we are being buried by a kind of information overload and that "a temporary but probably protracted ignorance explosion has accompanied the information explosion" (1991, 230).

Heavy reliance on theory, absent the rich contradictions of place-based research, can also generate prepackaged interpretations. As temptations increase to critique the world through the lens of a particular theory, we run the risk of being ever more distanced from actual people and places. If we use an abstract conceptual framework to examine place characteristics that are themselves abstractions (inner city, class divisions, urban sprawl) we pile up sophisticated analyses that are far too internally consistent to capture the chaotic real world. For example, the planner-geographer Ed Soja's assertion (à la Frederick Jameson) that Los Angeles's Bonaventure Hotel is a "heterotopia," an "evocative countersite in which all other real sites within the synchronous culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1995, 20), with its best Bauhaus-evoking bluster, channels observations by zealous theoreticians into a kind of intellectual Los Angeles River: all concrete, with no chance for deviating meanders. Fieldwork can and should be carried out, encouraging varied perceptions of reality. Theory can then be used productively, and with a grain of salt. Without fieldwork, everything is boilerplate.

Having stated philosophical reasons for valuing fieldwork, I feel obliged to point out that these play only a partial role in my enthusiasm for spending a lot of time in the field—or, more accurately, on the street. We all have different reasons for wanting to do fieldwork, and many of them have as much to do with idiosyncrasies as with

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academic philosophies. In my case, I love to move through space—to run, to climb, to crawl, and, most of all, to walk. I love doing fieldwork because it constitutes a kind of aerobic academics. As a result, I've often been able to cover a good bit of territory between bouts of writing, interviewing, library research, and the like. I learn by walking and lurking because each time I experience a setting, especially at odd hours like midnight in the rain, new questions, moods, and strategies are inspired that usually prove useful when I return with a more structured approach. I make notes and sketch maps continually and, at least during daylight hours, take photographs of whatever strikes me as interesting. I like to think on my feet. But crosswise observation is foremost: I love to lurk.

I can't say that spending long hours hiking 10 or 15 miles back and forth through the field is for everyone, but I really enjoy it. I couldn't argue, in good conscience, for the value of doing fieldwork without first admitting how much fun random encounters with people and places are (Figure 1). Because I'm almost always looking at urban neighborhoods, such encounters can sometimes be exciting. It also means that I seldom talk only to the people I've lined up as important respondents or looking just at the things I want to investigate. I rarely know beforehand exactly what I'll eventually write about.

Of course, fieldwork involves a good deal more than long walks and random encounters. I guess that's the point: It involves being open to new ideas and new avenues right in the middle of things. It helps to have a Plan B and even versions C through Z in a back pocket in trying to make sense of complex and ever-changing observations, even if that means greatly modifying a literature review.

Consistent with the ancient dichotomy between regional and topical geography, field-workers may be divided into two strains. On one hand are people who seek to become experts in a particular place or region and to know a lot about a lot of things. For many, it also requires a long time to become fluent in the local language(s) and to develop long-term contacts that will assure "permission" to do certain types of research. For these researchers, fieldwork usually involves several years on-site. True expertise in a region, especially in one that is different from one's own, doesn't come easily or quickly. Gaining the trust of respondents can also take a long time when sensitive issues are addressed.

Topical fieldwork, on the other hand, is often focused on a narrow range of problems, and it benefits as much from related work in other regions as from total familiarity with one place. Although focused fieldwork is vital for deep understanding of place-specific patterns and problems, it can sometimes be accomplished in a matter of months or even weeks rather than years. Value, therefore, is more than a matter of time in the field (or even number of miles walked). Of course, many types of field experiences fall somewhere along this fuzzy topical–regional continuum, and I'll tell you about one of them in this essay: How do we decide just how much space and time we can cover when we begin our field experience? Where do we start? How do we focus? My own style usually involves a continual swirl of visiting, learning, and writing, followed by revisit-

ing, learning, and writing over and over, both in the same places (regional field-work) and in similar places (topical fieldwork), in order to achieve some combination of depth and comparative context. For me, fieldwork is never finished. Every endeavor is just a bite out of the big pizza of place. I often start with buildings, because the biography of a particular building can serve to focus and clarify the processes that affect a place.

Lurking in Buildings for Fun and Insights

A primary research interest of mine is architecture and its ties to the spatial organization of cities. Urban morphology, I'd argue, is best analyzed in conjunction with studies of the built environment. Much of the work on modeling city structure, downtown morphology, and neighborhood typologies downplays the role of the built environment, favoring instead data sets on land values, population characteristics, and transportation networks. On the other hand, work by land-scape geographers, art historians, and architects sunders buildings from their context. My fieldwork merges the two traditions, fleshing out generalizations about spatial patterns and urban form with stories about particular buildings. In the field I use buildings to focus my interest in urban processes (as in Ford 1994, 2000).

By studying individual buildings as planned, designed, built, used, maintained, and even destroyed, I understand the processes that shape urban form, in its large sense. The big-picture generalizations that are often used to describe the dynamics of urban spatial organization can be given a beams-and-bolts reality by working outward from the singular experience of particular buildings to the cross-city scale. The list of valuable respondents then balloons almost automatically: Building managers suggest architects, architects suggest redevelopment firms, and so on, until a long list of developers, planners, preservationists, code enforcers, neighbors, neighborhood groups, occupants, mafiosi, local historians, and everyone else involved in the making and breaking of a particular building or group of buildings evolves. Problems and controversies surrounding the creation and maintenance of a particular building are usually well documented, but they do not often fit easily into the usual theoretical frameworks. Conflict, for example, does not allow for easy categorization according to social or class divisions. Often elites battle elites, as in the cases of architects versus lenders and preservationists versus developers, or poor battle poor, as in the case of occupants versus neighbors in public housing. Different small businesses can muster conflicting views of what's happening in and around a particular building; janitors don't always agree with secretaries.

By connecting insides (studies of buildings) and outsides (observations on walks through the city) to the literature on city structure at a more abstract level, I use fieldwork to nail down what often appear to be vague processes, such as redlining and gentrification. The story of the city seems richer when it includes the struggles of actual people to create, occupy, and maintain a specific building in the face of changing neighborhood contexts or municipal priorities.

SKYSCRAPERS, CITY STRUCTURE, AND URBAN GROWTH

For more than thirty years I've done fieldwork in cities. Picking case studies that illustrate what has been an amorphous and constantly changing set of attitudes, approaches, alternatives, and alliterations isn't easy. So let's start at the beginning:
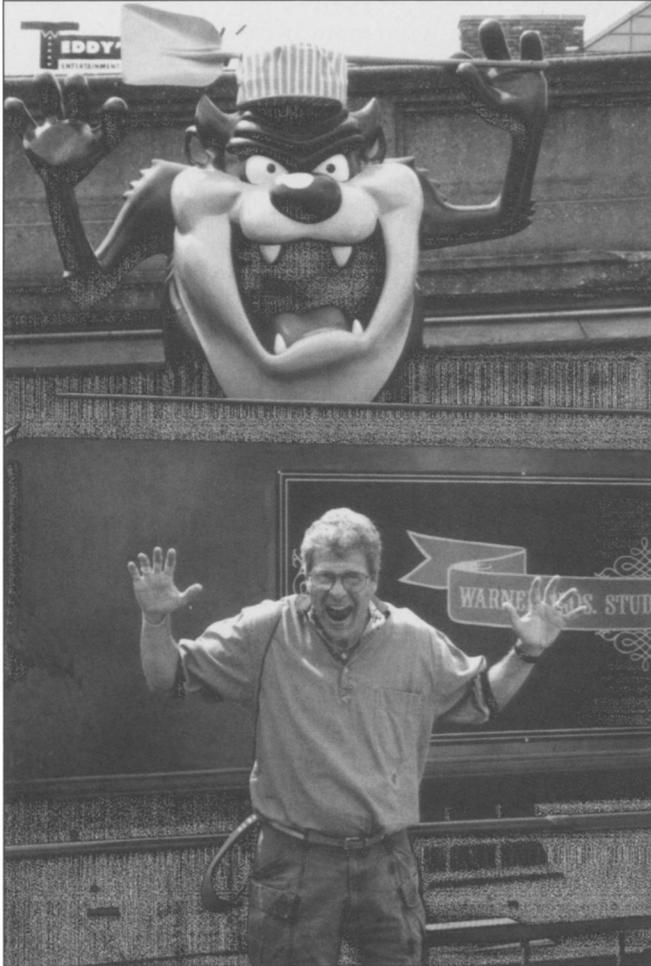

FIG. 1—Larry and Taz prepare to explore the complexities of underground Atlanta. (Photograph by Jan Ford, June 1995)

During my dissertation research in the late 1960s I gradually developed a working scheme for gathering building information at home and abroad. My subject was the role of skyscrapers in shaping urban form in Anglo- and Latin America (Ford 1970). After spending much of my youth going downtown and exploring —sneaking into—office buildings for fun, I was eager to try to make sense of what I had absorbed.

Reading everything I could find on North American and Latin American city structure in urban geography and its cognate disciplines, and on high-rise buildings in architecture and city planning, I set out to investigate as many buildings as I could get into: I was a serial lurker. My study areas were the eastern Midwest of the United States and the Argentine Pampa. Back then, before a pervasive wariness of terrorists and enraged day traders made life difficult for those who roamed through buildings, access was usually easy. On many occasions, kindly office workers helped me locate windows with ideal views of a city or regaled me with the details of remodeling or reorganizing entire floors of office space. I explored basement storage areas, computer rooms, cafeterias, stairways, and even rooftops. Later, when I examined the reasons firms gave for locating in a particular building or for moving to a different one (or to the suburbs), I could ask detailed questions about everything from lighting, heating, and ventilation problems to access to parking, bus lines, and nearby restaurants and shops. When I interviewed architects or read old accounts of, for instance, the goals in a building's design or problems associated with its modernization, these details jumped out. I put together my ideas on downtown morphology and functional organization, keeping in mind what life was like in real buildings. I knew which lobbies were elegant and which restrooms were dingy.

The study of buildings proved a good way to meld a vast domain of disparate data. By examining the original plans and designs for a skyscraper, as well as its construction and the changes in its occupancy and interior design over several decades, I could use one building to give focus to a wide variety of urban processes and bring together diverse elements: the history of local corporations, the roles of business leaders in city boosterism, changes in city-planning regulations and infrastructure, changing levels of office rent and types of downtown occupants, and even a little about lending policies and engineering. All of this came together in the skyscraper. Later on, I could generalize my findings with the help of a more general urban literature, while still feeling anchored by the experiences of actual people and buildings.

The study of skyscrapers sparked an initial interest in comparative urbanization. In North America the threshold size for tall buildings was very high. Cleveland, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and other metropolitan areas with more than 1 million people had downtown office towers of forty-plus stories. These skyscrapers were usually built by retiring company presidents as monuments to their hard work and as gifts to the respective cities. Very often, outside architectural and engineering firms had to be called in, so the story of the construction of a building usually led to interesting insights into information flows along the urban hierarchy. In big cities the (perhaps) irrational desire for larger-than-necessary office towers frequently led to sterile, one-dimensional central business districts.

Small cities, on the other hand—those with, say, 50,000 to 100,000 people—rarely had much more than a twelve-story hotel on their skylines. In fact, many small-town respondents told me that they never intended to go more than three stories above the ground and that no city had a residential tower. This was definitely not the case in Argentina. In the larger cities of Argentina, such as Buenos Aires, Rosario,

and Córdoba, and in the smaller cities dotting the Pampa, the tallest buildings in the skyline were apartment towers. By the late 1960s cities with 30,000 people, such as Olavarría or Azul, had dozens of ten-to-twenty-story residential towers, all set within a few blocks of the *plaza mayor*. That even the larger cities did not have enough demand for office space—or sometimes enough megalomania in the ranks of company presidents—to support huge office towers was an interesting sidelight. The processes that affected urban form, including investment strategies, lending policies, urban-renewal procedures, and infrastructural capacity, were very different in the two contexts. Latin American downtowns were for shopping and housing.

I had read that Latin Americans, stereotypically, liked to live in the city center rather than in the suburbs, but the scale of development was surprising. I dropped off questionnaires with building managers and interviewed a number of residents in search of answers as to why. I was invited to dinners and parties and spent quite a few hours sipping coffee in ground-floor cafés. I strolled with people heading out of the towers bound for shopping or a Sunday stroll. I watched buildings being constructed and talked to engineers and planners about infrastructure, taxes, garbage pickup, and the like. I also explored suburban tract-house options and studied the problems encountered there with the provision of basic services (gas and electric hookups, telephones, street paving) and public transportation. By pretending to live in and take care of sample buildings, I felt much more at home with the variables affecting Latin American city structure and the nature of residential choices than I did reading about "culture," "housing," or "cities" as abstractions. Of course, most of the insights I uncovered don't seem so earth-shattering today, thirty years later, but fieldwork made me feel comfortable with discourses of a more abstract, theoretical nature (Griffin and Ford 1980). Cultural values and landscape tastes often have as much to do with the particular types of buildings available for home and work as with more general notions of space or location.

I've continued to look at skyscrapers over the years, both in the United States and in other countries, especially in Asia. In 1997 I interviewed several American architectural firms involved in building Asian skyscrapers to understand globalization as expressed in the construction of particular buildings. The international exchange of architectural and engineering services makes more sense when there are (reinforced) concrete examples. The design and construction of the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur involved an Argentine-American architect (Cesar Pelli) who designed an Islamic-inspired building for a giant petroleum company using Korean construction firms, Malaysian foremen, Bangladeshi and Indonesian workers, and materials imported from all over the world. Not only are the world's "tallest twin towers" famous, they epitomize an interconnected global economy. Accounts of other towers offered similar insights into the international flows of capital, expertise, labor, and materials. In 1998 I visited several Asian cities in order to investigate the impact of the economic collapse of 1997 on skyscraper construction. By then, new professions had come into being, including firms that specialized in the "capping" of towers at a lower height in such a way that they could be completed as

originally designed at a later date. I read a great deal about the Asian Crash, but it was more fun to look at it building by building. It is even more fun now that the region has begun to recover and new towers are going up (Ford 1998).

SKID ROWS, HISTORIC DISTRICTS, AND URBAN DECLINE

Just as a skyscraper provides a focus for studying urban growth and development, so a typical skid-row building aids understanding of urban decline. After I moved to San Diego in 1970 I quickly became involved with preservation groups seeking to save "historic" downtown buildings from destruction. My radical activities were modified somewhat when I was appointed to the city's Historic Site Board in 1973 and had to rule on the validity of claims about particular buildings. I wore two hats. In the process I came to know building owners, tenants, architects, engineers, planners, fire inspectors, interior designers, and a whole range of people both for and against preservation. I also had the chance to investigate numerous old buildings in detail and listen to a great many arguments. I tried, often unsuccessfully, to be unbiased.

Sometimes the combination of structural problems, interior arrangements, and location in a very high demand setting meant that saving even an interesting building did not make sense. More often than not, however, a combination of arbitrary and/or aggressive code enforcement, redlining by lenders and insurance companies, and disinvestment in nearby civic infrastructure led to premature decline and abandonment that could be remedied by enlightened decisions somewhere along the line. I learned to use the detailed story of an individual building to summarize the processes that led to urban decay and the making of a less-than-desirable inner city. Often specific dates and decisions could be identified that led directly to a building's designation as "old" or "obsolete." The story of a particular skid-row building and the people who shaped its destiny added real faces and places to studies of the process of urban change.

I've also looked at the increasing popularity of historic districts in cities all across America (and the world) to better know the political, engineering, and artistic breakthroughs that allow particular buildings to survive and even become vibrant centers (Ford 1978, 1984, 1985). Crawling through a threatened building, I could learn enough about structural bracing, wiring, performance standards, sprinklers, shared fire escapes, and building permits to understand that many structures could be saved if the political context and cultural perceptions were amenable. Sometimes I listened to discussions about building renovation while standing inside the place being evaluated. These discussions loom large in my thoughts and writings about the grander themes of urban revitalization, gentrification, displacement, deindustrialization, and the like. It's not easy to change cultural values and perceptions, and change often occurs step by step and brick by brick.

NEW BUILDINGS, THEMES, AND LANDSCAPES

In recent years individual buildings have become ever more important in the shaping and reshaping of urban areas. Baseball parks, massive convention and hotel complexes, waterfront festival marketplaces, and museum/cultural facilities can single-

handedly provide urban districts with new images and identities. This may be especially true in Japan, where a number of highly unusual buildings have gone up over the past two decades. Some, like Umeda Sky Tower in Osaka, seem to offer the kinetic experiences of a world's fair pavilion or an amusement-park ride as visitors and tenants ride through glass tunnels hung precipitously thirty stories above a garden. Close examination of the motivations, aspirations, and public statements of those who seek to build such monuments can sometimes be as fascinating as their actual design.

Perhaps the most "geographical" modern building I've encountered is the massive new Kyoto Train Station. It is a quarter-mile long and fourteen stories high and contains several train stations, a mall, a department store, a hotel and convention center, a movie theater, and a wide variety of restaurants and amusements. Its open concourse flows from street level to the rooftop via a series of long escalators. Not only is it a city within a city, it is a place of some magnificence. Hiroshi Hara, the architect responsible for the structure, submitted the following statement in the design-concept competition:

> History can be understood from a geographical perspective. For example, Heran-Kyo [old Kyoto] is carved out in the present-day urban fabric. The architecture of Kyoto Station is intended as a formalization of this statement through the realization of the geographical perspective, the primary expression of the gate. Each day, people will travel the 27-meter wide, 60-meter high, 470-meter long concourse as if traveling down the side of a mountain into the valley basin. The glass shelter over the concourse represents the traditional Japanese aesthetic of a boundary, yet not a boundary. The station will recollect the sky. The formalization of the gate is like designing Kyoto's sky. (From a wall plaque in the Kyoto Train Station)

I'm not exactly sure what all this means, but I'd sure like to try to find out. Perhaps Jesse Clark, the creator of Ohio's first skyscraper, summed it up best in his 25 May 1913 statement to the *Cincinnati Enquirer:* "We figure to ourselves the thing we like and then we build it up, each temple nobler than the last. So build we up the beings that we are."

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