11 Fieldnotes from home

Anthropology and design on exhibition[1]

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House/Home

This article focuses on an exhibition entitled *House/Home*—an exhibition about Strachan House. The exhibition was mounted in the spring of 1999 in the Photo Passage at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, and was part of the third annual Toronto's Festival of Photography, known as Contact '99, featuring more than 130 exhibitions and educational programs. Harbourfront Centre itself is a very high profile cultural, educational and recreational center in Toronto and presents hundreds of events and activities to the public annually. Latest attendance figures cited over 4 million visitors yearly. At the time of writing this chapter, arrangements were being made to have the exhibition tour several other galleries at design institutions, and the exhibition was to be donated to the collection of the City of Toronto Archives (Figure 11.1).

Figure 11.1 *House/Home* exhibition presentation.

The article discusses some of my reflections about *House/Home*, an exhibition of architectural drawings, photographs and fieldnotes. The exhibition represents acts of collaboration between architects, photographers, an anthropologist, and staff and residents of Strachan House. Addressed in this chapter are a set of issues that I feel are fundamental to engaged anthropological and design practices, that is our social responsibility for accommodating diverse needs and designing with disenfranchised groups. The article explores three major themes arising from my experiences of participating in this exhibition. The first looks at expanding the horizons of what engaged urban anthropology can be. The second accosts experimental ways of representing what we do as urban anthropologists and design professionals. The third considers how researchers and designers may fruitfully collaborate to share the results of their different perspectives and knowledge bases with the general public.

Strachan House offers a unique self-government form of housing that has attracted international attention since it opened in December 1996. Developed by the Homes First Society, and following from the first generation model of StreetCity, which opened in 1988, Strachan House was designed by Levitt Goodman Architects and was created to respond to the specific needs of chronically homeless women and men. In an abandoned turn-of-the-century timber and brick warehouse owned by the city, the architects designed a series of "streets" connecting "houses" to lodge 70 residents. The houses have 5 to 7 private bedrooms each and shared kitchens, bathrooms, living rooms and front porches. All the streets lead to a three-storey central space, organized around an existing and dramatic smokestack. The area is known as the Town Hall, and residents and staff meet here bi-monthly to air grievances, create policies and celebrate events. Levitt Goodman Architects recently received a 1999 Governor General's Award for Excellence in Architecture for their work on Strachan House.

Photographers Debra Friedman and Robert Burley began documenting the construction of Strachan House in the spring of 1995. Their goal was to create a photographic record of the project from the initial phases of construction through to its inhabited state (residents moved into Strachan House December 1996). Burley documented the architectural components of the project, while Friedman concentrated on making portraits (Figure 11.2). Their combined photographs not only document the structural evolution of Strachan House but also explore the ways in which the residents have created homes for themselves. The diptychs created by Friedman and Burley are meant to blend environmental portraits with a record of the developing environment itself—a technique commonly employed by editorial publications that cover "home decor." This strategy presents the home and inhabitant as inseparable (Figure 11.3).

The photographs in and by themselves provide a wealth of data to be analyzed, not a task I will undertake here. Suffice it to say that the angles and perspectives shift with each set of photographs. The two different photographs, although apparently united within one frame (an intimate juxtaposition) present different kinds of information, and evoke different kinds of relationships. Running beneath the diptychs is a series of pages from my fieldnotes (Figures 11.4 and 11.5).

Figure 11.2 *House/Home*, an image by Debra Friedman and Robert Burley.

Figure 11.3 View of the exhibition.

I have been documenting the life histories of StreetCity, Strachan House and Savard's since 1995 (Anderson 1997; Bridgman, 1998a, 1999, 2000).

Figure 11.4 Photos by Debra Friedman and Robert Burley and fieldnotes by the author/1.

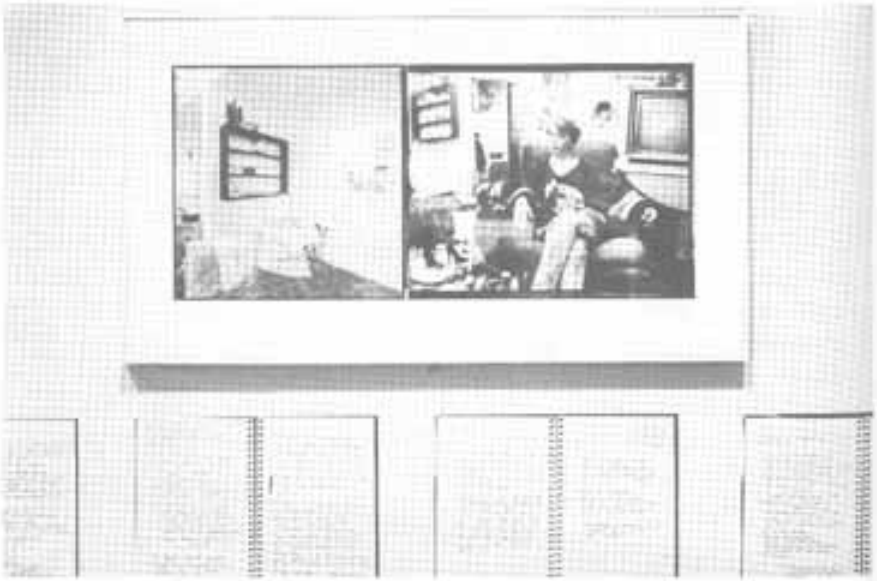

Figure 11.5 Photos by Debra Friedman and Robert Burley and fieldnotes by the author/2.

My focus has been on the everyday processes involved in designing, developing, building, and living and working within these three innovative housing projects for those who have been chronically homeless. In *Journeys Home: Fragments from Fieldnotes, Strachan House, 1997–1998*, I drew together excerpts from my fieldnotes—archives, interviews and conversations with residents and staff, and notes taken during Town Council meetings at Strachan House. Many of the excerpts speak about different meanings associated with the word home. They also speak about balancing the needs of the individual with the needs of the community in this self-governance model of housing, attempting to provide a larger context for the place of this project within best practice models to alleviate homelessness. The notes are chronologically arranged. The effect is one of deliberate fragmentation to convey some of the processes involved in undertaking long-term ethnographic research.

Experimental ways of representing what we do as engaged practitioners

The fieldnotes in the exhibition are not fieldnotes in the truest sense, for they are at one further refined remove from my original fieldnotes, those records of the mundane, the quotidian, the inchoate, the barely understood at the time it was written. The notes had to be written so that people could read them (my handwriting is notoriously difficult to read). They are selected, fragmentary, and are highly ordered and organized. In this sense they are not "real" "authentic" fieldnotes—I have been careful to call them fragments from fieldnotes (Figures 11.6, 11.7, and 11.8).

As a writer I have employed what have been identified as five basic strategies: pulling the reader into the story being told; recreating the immediacy of experience within the writing; including elements of surprise; reconstructing experiences through "written images"; and creating a sense of closure on the story, presenting a finished piece, a product if you will, even while recognizing the work as part of an ongoing process (Mitchell and Charmaz 1996: 144–5).

The opportunity to participate in this exhibition has drawn together my two careers, one as anthropologist, one as visual artist. I was inspired by "The Vellour/velvet/vellum Notebook" by bp Nichol (1998) reprinted in the journal *West Coast Line*—a notebook of jottings, musings, fragments of word play—it reminded me of my own fieldnotes, and pushed me to consider further how those moments I have witnessed and those excerpts from interviews could be shared through more than prose. Using residents' and staff's words—and listening carefully to their cadences, emphases, where the breath is drawn, and other rhythms—leads to poetry, leads to "touch[ing] us where we live, in our bodies, and invites us to experience reflexivity and the transformational process of self-creation" (Richardson 1996: 8).

Figure 11.6 Fieldnotes book by the author, pages 1 and 2.

Figure 11.7 Fieldnotes book by the author, pages 9 and 10.

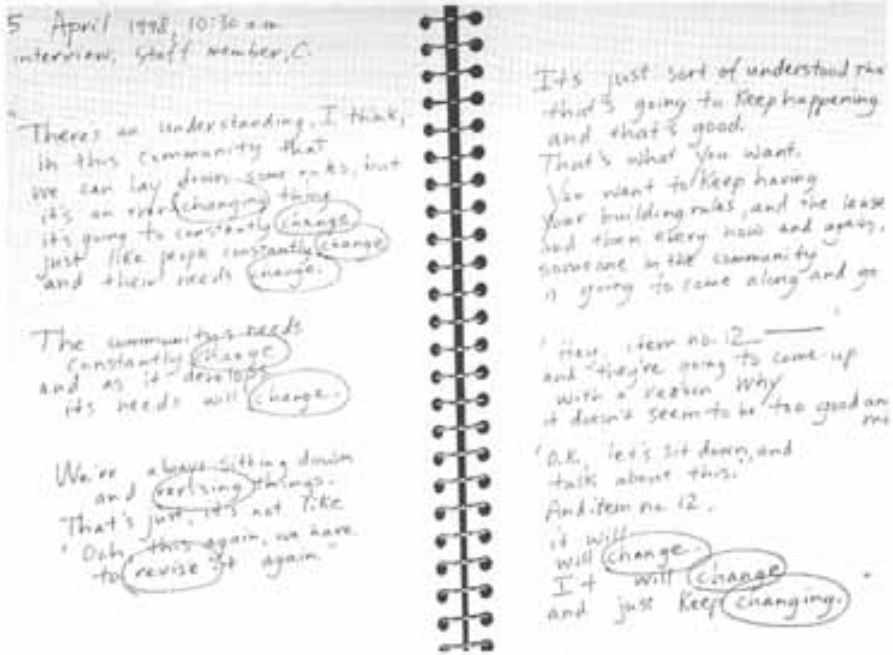

Figure 11.8 Fieldnotes book by the author, pages 33 and 34.

After reading through bp Nichol's work, I realized that I did not want to present an authoritative piece of linear writing about the project. Rather, I wanted to impart a sense of what it is like to undertake long-term fieldwork, what a fragmentary and painstaking process it is to witness and to "hang out" (Rosenthal 1991).

Audience response was very good. One of the photographers spoke about how she appreciated the fieldnotes for giving her a greater depth of knowledge of the history of the project, for she had really only visited Strachan House relatively briefly. Others have appreciated the separate yet parallel echoes as the text runs under the photos, when the text does not refer directly to the photos but does connect in subtle ways.

Still others seem to have appreciated the ways in which a sense of process is shared. Most exhibitions do not share a sense of process, of how work came to fruition. This is true of most architectural design practice in which glossy pictures (most often without people) publish buildings as finished products. We seldom are able to share in the knowledge of how the project came to fruition, and how it has become actively inhabited. A key part of engaged practice should seek out opportunities for sharing these processes. The fieldnotes and photographs attempt to convey a number of difference processes at work—research processes, design processes, habitation processes, community development processes.

The photos are printed full-frame, with the black border of the negative clearly outlined. This is echoed through the black outline of the notebook pages. The full frame implies that there has been no act of cropping, no act of deletion, no act of selection, but in fact the processes of framing and selection become all the more intense. The notes require the engagement of the viewer to take the time to read them and to reflect on how they relate to the photographs above. That engagement can be relatively brief, for these are just fragments. Other viewers devote fifteen minutes or more to reflect. This is interactive ethnography/photography, where the anthropologist's mission, the architects' mission, and the photographers' mission are to help others feel a sense of "ethnographic 'truth' and thus to become more fully immersed—morally, aesthetically, emotionally, and intellectually" (Bochner and Ellies 1996: 4).

Expanding the horizons of engaged urban anthropology and design practices

How do we share the work that we do? How can we fruitfully work with urban others on complex issues? Applied anthropology is most often understood, I think, as being an anthropology concerned with problem-solving, with recommending and acting on interventions that are meant to address perceived problems. The same could be said of design practices in other contexts. Engaged researchers and designers, I would suggest, are both concerned with working towards a better world, a utopian impulse if there ever was one.

Employment of the word "engaged" is inspired by an article by Jeff Halper and Anita Nudelman (1993) in which they distinguish between applied, practicing and engaged anthropology. Halper calls "engaged" anthropology "that borderland between practicing and applied anthropology (which have an identifiable and accepted place within the profession) and those activities which are informed by anthropological views, concepts, and concerns but go beyond disciplinary boundaries" (Halper and Nudelman 1993: 4). Engaged anthropologists explore roles played out in wider public activity.

Engagement for the researcher need not always happen through the usual means associated with applied anthropology of policy analysis and working towards change at this level. Engagement for the designer need not always happen just through the object designed. Engaged, for me, implies a larger mission of engaging multiple senses, helping others to make a shift in their perceptions of homelessness as a problem, and by corollary the homeless as a problem, who are perceived as unable to participate in working on their own behalf towards solutions to homelessness. Bringing work to public scrutiny in such a way as this exhibition does reaches a very broad audience—who may not necessarily be expecting to be confronted with such work, on their way to the local cafe to get lunch! Engaged practice requires working actively to bring forth the voices of those who have been marginalized by society-at-large.

The last set of fieldnotes depicts a blank page (Figure 11.9)—reflecting the nature of fieldwork as a never-ending process, and the dialogue between research and design as involving an open-ended process, an unwritten page. . . .

Figure 11.9 Fieldnotes book by the author.

Note

1 This article represents a revised version of a paper originally delivered at the annual meeting of the Canadian Anthropology Society/Société canadienne d'anthropologie, Universite Laval, Quebec, 15 May 1999. Gratefully acknowledged is the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their support of this work through a Strategic Grant (Women and Change, 1995–1998). The photographs are by Robert Burley and Debra Friedman/Design Archive, reproduced by kind permission of the authors.

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