

# Technologies and Narratives of Urban Archaeology at the Kelsey Museum

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Urban Biographies, Ancient and Modern: Italy, Greece, Turkey, and the USA. Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 24 August 2018–6 January 2019, curated by Christopher Ratté with co-curators Lisa Nevett, Nicola Terrenato, and Kathy Velikov.

The study of the city often feels as old as the city itself, and the historiography of urbanism, not only urban space, displays its own characteristic density and weight. It was thus welcome to find this small show at the Kelsey Museum, *Urban Biographies, Ancient and Modern*, trying something new. Rather than make yet another attempt to define the city, or to delineate urban commonalities over time, the main aim here was to present state-of-the-art technologies and methods used in the archaeological recovery of city life. The show further argued that similar methods can inform our understanding of modern urbanism. The exhibition started with three ancient sites: Gabii in central Italy, Notion on the coast of Turkey, and Olynthus in northern Greece. All three are locations of ongoing fieldwork sponsored by the University of Michigan and the Kelsey Museum, which was thus able to showcase its position as a leading academic institution for archaeological research in North America. The three sites were juxtaposed with contemporary Detroit, the large modern city near the museum and the University of Michigan's Ann Arbor campus. Both this comparison and the show's foregrounding of archaeological practices led to some interesting connections between past and present cities, while it also raised questions about how museums involved in cutting-edge archaeological research can best display their results in a gallery setting.

The exhibition was installed upstairs beside the Roman galleries in the William E. Upjohn Wing, the 2009 addition to the Kelsey's original home in the 19th-century Romanesque structure of Newberry Hall. The Upjohn Wing makes the permanent collection available to the public in new modern galleries, while the expansion has also made room for a wider selection of objects (online fig. 1, on AJA Online, [www.ajaonline.org](http://www.ajaonline.org)). There are not only highlights, but also more mundane or quotidian items like agricultural tools, coarse wares, colorless glass vessels, and amphoras, many of which were collected from the museum's field projects dating back to the early part

*American Journal of Archaeology*  
Volume 123, Number 3  
July 2019  
Pages 523–29  
DOI: 10.3764/aja.123.3.0523

[www.ajaonline.org](http://www.ajaonline.org)

of the last century. From its origins, the museum has had a didactic purpose, and there continues for that reason to be a comfort in the galleries with the display of modern copies of antiquities. We find copied fragments of marble reliefs from the Roman temple of the *gens Flavia*, some of which are now in Rome, integrated with matching original fragments, while the museum also boasts excellent and almost life-sized watercolor replicas of the famous frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Below many of the vitrines are drawers, which visitors are encouraged to open, often containing excavation ephemera like field journals, photographs, or drawings and plans. For its size, the Upjohn Wing presents the visitor with a considerable volume of material, ancient as well as modern, and the galleries do not normally feel crowded, with the possible exception of the epigraphic collection hung along the wall of a staircase between the wing's two floors.

By contrast, then, to the rest of the Kelsey's Upjohn Wing, what immediately struck the visitor on entering the *Urban Biographies* exhibition was the lack of ancient objects (fig. 1). No actual artifacts found in the current excavations of any of the three ancient sites were on display. Two vitrines did display ceramics and small finds, but these items, mostly drawn from the Kelsey's extant permanent collections, were merely representative of the typical material culture encountered at those ancient sites. Instead, the main visual components were modern reconstructions and even the actual tools used in fieldwork. An aerial eBee drone hung from the ceiling (fig. 2), and against one wall was a Geoscan Research RM15 earth resistance meter. While I cannot be sure, I feel confident saying these are among the first devices of their kind shown in this context.

In the general absence of ancient objects, videos and modern replicas instead communicated the show's themes. One projector for each ancient city showed rotating images of excavators at work, including many University of Michigan graduate students. The center of the room was taken up by three large "objects" from each ancient city, but not in the traditional sense of that word. Olynthus was represented by a 1:1 scale reconstruction of an open trench with a photomosaic of sherds and tiles at its bottom. For Gabii, a 3D-printer was used to replicate a Late Roman burial of a child, including the ceramic sarcophagus, the earthen trench excavated for the burial, and the skeleton itself (fig. 3). A monitor also allowed viewers to browse the recent

digital publication of a Middle Republican-period house from the site. The city of Notion was represented by a video projection of the changing layout of the city and its surrounding coastline onto a scaled topographic model. Through these "objects," the practices of the recovery and reconstruction of archaeological information were prioritized, and this focus was carried into the accompanying wall texts, even at the expense of some more famous historical details from each city's life. Texts for each site provided the main points of their geopolitical narratives, but readers encountered only the briefest summary of, for example, Olynthus' destruction by Philip II. No mention was made of the stories of Rome's kings interfering in the politics of Late Archaic Gabii.

In these ways, the exhibition suppressed larger political narratives of the rise and fall of these cities and focused instead on lived urban experience and how current archaeological techniques can aid in its recovery. The child's sarcophagus from Gabii, for example, not only serves as a vivid reminder of high child mortality in antiquity but also demonstrates how shifting human priorities shaped the use of urban space over time, as the burial formed part of a larger cemetery created in the later empire in the ruins of a previously thriving residential quarter. At Notion, aerial survey greatly deepens our understanding of the city's landscape both in its advantageous position on the Aegean coastline, and in the lack of freshwater sources within its city walls. These factors may have shaped the decisions of residents to stay in the city or seek better opportunities elsewhere; with the rise of the nearby Roman administrative center of Ephesus, Notion's challenges may have begun to outweigh the advantages of its seaport, contributing to the city's almost complete abandonment by the early empire.

Detroit's display similarly concentrated on more egalitarian narratives, supported in this case with research by the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. Again, the viewer experienced Detroit largely in the absence of artifacts. Two monitors allowed visitors to select from several short films featuring interviews with residents in the traditionally African American and working-class neighborhood of the city's North End, as well as a discussion of Detroit's geological formation and archaeology by historical archaeologist Krysta Ryzewski (fig. 4). As Ryzewski explained, archaeological work in Detroit helps reveal evidence of working-class commu-



FIG. 1. View of the main gallery of *Urban Biographies* (S. Bernard).



FIG. 2. An eBee drone used in aerial survey at the site of Notion, Turkey (A. Thomason, Michigan Photography).

nities who appear with less frequency in other archival sources. The theme of community is also a central feature in interviews with North End residents, many of whom spoke to their involvement with an urban farm on Oakland Avenue, in a once vacant area that has now been revitalized as a focal point for the neighborhood. Alongside these videos, one found only a few maps of the city, including a multispectral satellite image showing density of vegetation and built up areas in the North End neighborhood. Otherwise the only thing, as it were, on display was a soil sample taken from an



FIG. 3. Foam and plastic 3-D printed replica of a child burial from the site of Gabii, Italy (A. Thomason, Michigan Photography).



FIG. 4. Interactive touchscreen monitor presenting videos from Detroit residents and on the city's archaeology (A. Thomason, Michigan Photography).

abandoned lot now incorporated into the Oakland Avenue farm (fig. 5).

In the history of modern American cities, Detroit's expansion and contraction is well known. The early 20th century saw the rapid growth of "Motor City," followed by an equally rapid contraction in the second half of the century connected with rising racial tension and white flight to the suburbs, and compounded by the restructuring and globalizing of the city's auto industry.<sup>1</sup> This is the city's grand narrative, but the urban biography on display in the exhibition challenged this idea of an uncomplicated arc of urban rise and fall. By focusing on the repurposing of empty space into community gardens, the curators showed that the loss of population within an expansive cityscape should not be equated with a loss of vitality or urban identity. Rather, the interspersing of once densely populated neighborhoods with areas of abandonment can open up new possibilities for community engagement, in

this case the creation of the urban farm on Oakland Avenue. In an online gallery talk on the exhibition, the lead curator, Christopher Ratté, compares this trajectory to that of ancient Notion, the emigration of whose population to nearby Ephesus during the Early Imperial period created similar patterns of open and occupied space within the walled expanse of the city.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition asked the viewer to think about whether modern archaeological tools applied to ancient sites might also help inform the urban biography of a contemporary city like Detroit. Of course, the techniques of inquiry applied to past and present are not an exact match; some of the best information from Detroit comes from the residents themselves, obviously an impossible approach for antiquity, while Detroit is not, as Ryzewski pointed out, "a story in ruins" but remains a living and inhabited city. Still, new archaeological technologies in a general sense can contribute to filling out more complete urban histories in both past Mediterra-

<sup>1</sup> For this history, see Martelle 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ratté 2018.



FIG. 5. Soil sample from Oakland Avenue urban farm in Detroit (S. Bernard).

near cities and present-day Detroit. The soil sample was the exhibition's most successful artifact in showing potential convergence. As the wall text explained, while archaeologists use core sampling to understand the subsurface history of sites, farmers use similar techniques to test the viability of land for agriculture. The sample crosses time from the geological origins of Detroit's site, with sandy soils deposited during the last glacial episodes in the region, to the near present, with fragments of building materials and trash mixed into the topsoil. The more recent strata reveal much about the working-class community that inhabited the neighborhood, while the soil's contents and quality also demonstrate the possibility of growing food in Detroit's present and future.

Needless to say, an exhibition whose most representative object was a soil sample encased in a nondescript Plexiglas and metal frame does not meet typical expectations for a show on ancient cities and urbanism. Instead, shows on cities have often featured exceptional artwork and artifacts. In a sense, this connection can be traced back to the origins of classical archaeology as a modern science, coming of age as it did in the context

of 19th-century explorations of illustrious ancient cities like Troy, Mycenae, Athens, and Rome. This early archaeology in and, naturally, of cities was focused on works of art and architecture partly because digging in these places revealed sensational finds, but also because classical archaeology in this embryonic stage was motivated by such finds and was often little removed from treasure hunting. Most of Europe's first major museums were founded to showcase masterpieces collected from the ancient cities of Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Egypt. It is not by coincidence that two of the very earliest modern museums, the Capitoline and Vatican Museums, were located in the city of Rome.<sup>3</sup>

If an almost reflexive connection between archaeology, cities, and exceptional objects developed early, it is also important to acknowledge that it quickly became rooted in more intentional and scholarly approaches. In his influential paper on the "urban revolution," perhaps the first systematic treatment of past cities, V. Gordon Childe identified monumental architecture and intricate artworks made by skilled craftsmen as two of his primary indicators of urban society.<sup>4</sup> Childe's interests were not in the aesthetic or intrinsic value of artistically noteworthy works of architecture or art; rather, he viewed them as a way to capture archaeologically the concentrations of capital and political power that he saw as constitutive of urban society. While Childe's checklist for defining urban sites has been much discussed and critiqued over the years, objects d'art remain a primary means for archaeology to access and understand how political power manifested itself in urban space.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, from a different perspective, landmark works of urban studies and urban history frequently speak about cities with the language of energy and electricity.<sup>6</sup> This carries implications similar to Childe's archaeological approach: electrical current cannot be seen, but its brilliantly generative effects leave behind visible marks that may be analyzed as defining features of cities. Thus arises a metonymy by which architecture, artworks, and exceptional cultural products stand in for sociopolitical structures, and in the context of museums this has meant that shows on cities or urban life have very often relied on the ability

<sup>3</sup> See Dyson 2006, ch. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Childe 1950. On Childe's lasting influence on urban archaeology, see Cowgill 2004; Smith 2009.

<sup>5</sup> On objects, archaeology, and political life, see Smith 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Kostof 1991, 37; Braudel 1992, 479.

to show off spectacular objects; one can find no end of past exhibitions on the splendor or power of cities or urban societies.

These are obviously the narratives that the curators of *Urban Biographies* consciously tried to avoid as they placed emphasis not on cities as political spaces but on urban biographies and lived experience. In choosing to go in this different direction, they also benefited from developments in the discipline of urban archaeology itself, an outgrowth of the New or Processual trend in archaeology in the latter half of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> In a 1988 paper, John Bintliff and Anthony Snodgrass discussed the potential of applying survey methodologies, developed for the study of landscapes, to urban sites.<sup>8</sup> This application of field techniques to urban sites, a “precise reversal” of survey archaeology’s original purpose, may have seemed a radical proposition at that time. Now, 30 years later, however, such techniques have become part of the standard toolkit for many archaeologists working on urban sites, which is readily visible in the range of studies on cities in the Mediterranean and beyond collected in a recent volume edited by Paul Johnson and Martin Millett, *Archaeological Survey and the City*.<sup>9</sup> As the book’s contributions demonstrate, gains in this field are not only measurable in terms of the breadth and commonality with which survey techniques are applied to urban sites but also in terms of the approach’s potential as a whole. The field of urban survey has moved beyond the relatively limited research agenda of reconstructing urban morphologies and now instead is starting to engage with more theoretical, second-order discussions about the social or economic characteristics of urban space.

The *Urban Biographies* exhibition stands witness to these ongoing research trends and works to communicate them to museum visitors, while this recent historiography serves to strengthen the connection between the exhibition’s selection of ancient cities, even in addition to the institutional ties all three sites share with the University of Michigan. What struck this viewer visiting the exhibition is that other, grander cities not included here seem to pose interesting points of com-

parison; the appearance of empty land within Detroit’s urban space, for example, recalls what archaeologists have dubbed the leopard-spot pattern of habitation in Early Medieval Rome, characterized by immediately adjacent areas of occupation and abandonment.<sup>10</sup> Of course, Rome’s brilliant urban narrative would seem out of place when set against the exhibition’s aims, for reasons discussed above. But another, more practical aspect informing the selection of urban sites in this show is their basic availability for study using tools taken from landscape archaeology. Rome and many ancient capitals, by contrast, remained or returned to being major centers of population and architectural density. “Their sites were too well-chosen,” and modern building and architectural density have made them less accessible to the sorts of technologies on display at the Kelsey.<sup>11</sup> What ties Gabii, Notion, and Olynthus together is that each city was rediscovered as a greenfield site, allowing the productive application of fieldwalking and survey methodologies within their city walls.

Surveying urban space is not likely to produce the rich artifact assemblages that urban excavation did in years past. Perhaps this is for the best, as changing heritage practices have rightly curtailed the ability of American museums to collect newly unearthed objects from sites in the Mediterranean. As with many university museums, the Kelsey has been on the vanguard of accepting such practices, with the acquisition of antiquities largely stopping in the wake of the 1970 UNESCO Convention.<sup>12</sup> The Kelsey also puts clear emphasis on archaeology as a discipline in its display of objects throughout the Upjohn Wing; I have noted the pull-out drawers full of field journals and photographs, as well as modern copies of artifacts, all of which promote the importance of archaeological process and context rather than simply an object’s aesthetics. But these trends in how we recover and display archaeological information raise fundamental questions about what museums should do as they work to balance the need to appeal to the general public with a desire to display the advances of current practice. On the day I

<sup>7</sup> Trigger 2006, ch. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Bintliff and Snodgrass 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson and Millett 2013; the volume includes, it should be noted, a contribution on Gabii.

<sup>10</sup> Goodson 2010, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Bintliff and Snodgrass 1988, 57.

<sup>12</sup> This is explicit on the Kelsey’s website: <https://lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/collections/collections-policies/acquisitions.html>.

attended the Kelsey, the galleries were empty except for two school groups. The museum serves its purpose in communicating archaeological research in an educational setting, but one wonders how to broadcast the discipline's accomplishments outside of a university campus.

One would certainly think that biographical and inclusive narratives of urban community would be of interest to contemporary audiences, but there remains the question of the appeal of such narratives in the context of museum galleries. As I hope my description has made clear, the strengths of the *Urban Biographies* exhibition were not aesthetic, nor did the show reveal itself quickly. The gallery was somewhat dark, perhaps to facilitate viewing the accompanying videos, and taking everything in requires the viewer to spend time watching, listening, and above all thinking through sophisticated and unexpected material. While to my mind this exhibition ultimately succeeded in making thought-provoking connections between ancient and contemporary worlds, its overall tone was not dissimilar to that of a well-argued paper in an academic journal.

Thus, *Urban Biographies, Ancient and Modern* represents a welcome effort to display novelty in the venerable study of cities both ancient and modern, while it also reveals the challenges facing such an attempt. The exhibition showcased the sophistication of current techniques of urban archaeology, which have reached levels of precision that make them useful not only in recovering technical data, but also in illuminating urban communities and their lifeways. The urban biographies resulting from these research programs can present richer and more complex visions of urban life in the past and present. In Detroit, archaeological technologies can add historical context as the city's residents work to build their own urban future. All of this reflects an important turn in the conception and purpose of urban archaeology. Now capable of telling inclusive biographical narratives relevant to modern urban life, the field seems primed for public engagement. The challenge remains how to carry this achievement beyond the university museum, and how best to convey these narratives in the context of museum galleries, where viewers' expectations may be different

and, not unrelated, where the exhibition of cities has traditionally been driven by exceptional objects.

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