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*Observation Assignment: Depot Town, Ypsilanti*

### **Depot Town: “A Microcosm of America”**

For this assignment I visited Depot Town, a historical business district in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The area has been significant in the history of Ypsilanti since it first developed around a lumber mill on the Huron River in the 1830s. Many of its buildings date from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, where they were built to take advantage of the location’s strategic position between the river and the nearby Michigan Central Railroad depot. Depot Town’s prosperity waned after the turn of the century, and the district slowly fell into disuse and disrepair until a group of local property owners formed the Depot Town Association in the mid-1970s. Fueled by the group’s desire to bring about a business renaissance, and funded by private donations and federal grant money, the area steadily improved and now once again stands as a thriving center of community life in Ypsilanti.

In talking to David French, an Ypsilanti resident whose ancestors were among the first to own businesses in the area, I was struck by a comment French made because it described Depot Town in a way that reflected Carr’s vision of what a cultural institution should be. In French’s opinion, “the great thing about Ypsilanti is that it’s a microcosm of America, and you’ll find that in Depot Town.” He was referring to the fact that in Depot Town, people from widely different backgrounds came together to make something good, a place that everyone could use and enjoy. Carr writes that “cultural institutions...are grounded in the idea that a culture requires places, forums, working laboratories for cognitive change, where voices can be heard expressing hopes

and aspirations in the contexts of the possible.” His conception of a cultural institution is of a place where people are “in mutual engagement in a common world.” Depot Town is an embodiment of Carr’s principles, because it brings together diverse groups of people in a space where history is being rewritten. The information presented in Depot Town is overtly historical; it tells the story of the area’s past. But its effect is much more forward-looking – it creates a “shared” past that never really existed, to reflect the hopes of today’s community about the shared prosperity that might be possible in the future.

### **The Task at Hand and Carr’s Questions**

Not to stray too far from the task at hand, my purpose in carrying out this assignment was to observe Depot Town. What did I see there? How were people interacting with each other and with their environment? What patterns of behavior were evident? What information was being transmitted and how was it being used? What was the rhythm of the town, and how was this rhythm facilitated by the context of the cultural institution? What, if anything, was it about Depot Town that demonstrated the “shared vision of the possible” proposed by Carr? These were the questions that guided me as an observer on a recent Thursday afternoon. Each of these questions is addressed in the following paragraphs in the course of answering another set of questions posed by Carr. First, what themes or unifying ideas are evident in this setting? Do they connect to institutions other than this one? Second, what connections does the setting create between itself and everyday life outside the institution? And finally, in this setting, how might a person use the information given by the cultural institution?

*Question 1: What themes or unifying ideas are evident in this setting? Do they connect to institutions other than this one?*

Depot Town defines itself as a historic district of Ypsilanti; put simply, its unifying theme is the history of the place. Its designers have worked to create a public space where a community's 'shared' past is celebrated everyday. Almost every detail is executed with that link to the past firmly emphasized. The water fountains, the street lamps, the paving stones, even the lettering on the signage all reflect elements of the nineteenth century. The exterior details of the old brick buildings which form Depot Town's core and house its businesses are, almost without exception, restored to their turn of the century grandeur, replete with wrought iron fencing, delicate awnings, and elaborate cornices and paintwork. Relics dot the place: here, an old caboose from a steam locomotive; there, an old wagon loaded with hay bales. Businesses in Depot Town carry names like "Gordon's Five and Dime" and "Aubrey's Old Time Saloon," and antique shops outnumber any other type of retail store twofold. As you enter the area traveling west down Cross St., a sign welcomes you with "Welcome to historic Depot Town." It would be impossible for someone to here and not realize that the district is trying to present itself as a place out of time. But there are other unifying themes evident here and in discussing them it will help to move to Carr's next question.

*Question 2: What connections does the setting create between itself and everyday life outside the institution?*

Depot Town is far from an isolated pocket of history, or a dead museum of a glorious past. Its creators go to great lengths to implement unifying themes other than history to create connections with the present-day community. For one thing, the district emphasizes its connection to the local university, Eastern Michigan. Every lamppost includes a pair of banners reading, "Welcome to Depot Town" along with "and Eastern Michigan University." EMU pennants are placed in all of the flower boxes in preparation for the coming weekend's

homecoming game, and the Faculty Union has their offices here. Also evident is the theme of seasonal celebration. Depot Town is currently decorated for the fall season, as cornstalks and pumpkins sit in windows and “straw people” dressed in flannel adorn the benches along Cross St. Even on a mid-week evening, the town is alive with activity: an outdoor concert is taking place down the street, people are dining outside, and parking spaces are being blocked off for the upcoming weekend’s antique truck show. To link the district to the surrounding area, Depot Town’s developers created a series of ‘sub-themes’ which have the celebration of history as a backdrop, and have used those sub-themes to keep the area active, lively, prosperous, and relevant to today’s users.

*Question 3: How might a person use the information given by the cultural institution?*

It would be easy for Depot Town’s developers to use the area simply as a platform for telling the story of Ypsilanti’s past. They do this, and they do it well. But the area is not intended to be a museum. It is intended to be a living, core cultural institution and a functioning business district. The people that come here use the information provided to them as a unifying link. They rally around the notion of a shared past to design a public space which reflects their vision of what the future should be, and what their shared community should look like: clean, safe, lively, beautiful, educational, and diverse. Depot Town is all of these things. It was a central meeting place for the sharing of these values between community members, a place where they could find out not only about the past but about the now. What’s going on in their own backyard? What event can they enjoy this weekend? What resources can they draw upon, and what forums can they use to interact with others? These questions are answered by the information provided by Depot Town.

## **The Process of Observation**

Of course, the purpose of my visit to Depot Town was not only to study its function as a cultural institution, it was also to learn about the process of observation. I took on the role of observer for a time, an active processor and recorder of the myriad of information around me. To be so acutely aware of my surroundings was unusual to say the least. Every sound, every smell, every person, every movement, *everything* took on a significant meaning as I sat and watched, always thinking about how they might fit into the broader conceptual pattern I was actively forming for Depot Town.

Although I feel like I did an admirable job of capturing the information around me and recognizing patterns, I was far from the ideal observer Carr describes in his “Appendix B: To Observe.” The process of observation was not as easy in many respects as I thought it would be. Carr, for example, suggests that the observer “does not interrupt the flow of activity...does not interrogate others, does not draw attention, and does not make notes in the presence of the observed.” Making notes in the presence of the observed, in this case, was unavoidable if I was to capture the level of detailed observation that I wanted. To take copious notes required of me that I be physically in the middle of things, sitting beside Cross St., typing away on my laptop as cars and people moved past. While this did not necessarily disrupt the “flow of activity,” it certainly did draw some level of attention to myself, mostly from older passersby who may have found it unusual to see someone sitting outside with a computer. To Carr’s chagrin, I’m sure, I was a visible part of the environment.

I’m sure Carr would have cringed also when I indulged my desire to ask questions of those who approached me to strike up a conversation. One man I had been observing came up to

me and asked what I was doing, and with little prompting on my part went on to identify himself as having old familial ties to the district that continued into the present day. Having for three hours speculated about the history of the place as a cultural institution, I couldn't help but run with the conversation. I am, after all, a historian. The man turned out to be a fruitful source of information about the formation of the Depot Town Association and their work in the area over the past thirty years, and I learned a lot from the few minutes I spent talking with him. His involvement, however, ran counter to the notion of detached, independent observation propounded by Carr.

These failures aside, I was satisfied with my ability to capture pertinent information amidst the frenzied note-taking that went on. The process was like 'multi-tasking for the senses.' While I observed, I frequently thought to myself, why am I writing this down? Why do these details matter? As I found out later, it all mattered. Everything I observed fit into a larger picture of cultural interaction, and was essential for understanding the patterns evoked and supported by the cultural institution. Carr's advice to "examine smaller, more specific contexts after the larger contexts have been described" resulted in a rich collection of observational data that supported my mission to interpret Depot Town in completing the assignment at hand.