

Plotting Their Timescape

Molly Kleiman

James Sanders and Jake Barton have been hired to tell the history of New York City in 25 minutes. They are building Timescape—a 16 foot long, continuously running, three screen orientation film for the Museum of the City of New York.

Neither of these men is a stranger to NYC storytelling. The night before our interview, Sanders had received an Emmy for his screenplay for Ric Burns's 18 hour documentary on the history of New York. Sander's recent book, *Celluloid Skyline*, documents the city through film and architecture. Jake Barton designed the mysterious, colorful booth that hovers on a sound-proofing air bed in Grand Central Station, for David Issey's oral history project, "StoryCorps." With the non-profit City Lore, he is creating the "City of Memory," a project in which city dwellers add their testimonials to the stories and historical data embedded in an interactive map installation of the city.

I meet Sanders and Barton in the Local Projects studio. The room is wallpapered with storyboards, a patchwork of triptychs. Historical flash points, in trios of xeroxes, are plastered, floor to ceiling, in tight, thick rows. The maps, varied in contents and parameters, are annotated accordingly—on some, neighborhoods are sectioned off politely; other diagrams bear the red and green scars of arrows shrieking onto the page. Each map is sandwiched by blurry, black and white reproduced images culled from the Museum of the City of New York's archives. Headlines organize the wall like newsies' cries or Stan Lee's cells: "The Metropolis," "The Industrial City," "City of Strangers." So this is how you organize a cartography installation: this is how you map a map.

Molly Kleiman: James, you have already condensed 350 years of New York history into an eight episode, 18 hour, award winning documentary. How (and why!) did you take on this task of splicing that research into a 25 minute presentation?

James Sanders: When the museum said they wanted to replace their old, now rickety, orientation film, I started thinking about the stories that can't be told in a linear narrative story. With Jake looking at it in filmic terms, the



and me preparing a treatment, we devised this new approach, this multimedia, three-screen form. We only have 25 minutes. So, the goal was to find the subordinate structure of the story: what are the girders? what are the big changes that went on? Which in this case were a series of events or moments. We use maps along with images on either side, which are drawn from the treasures of the museum's collection. Paintings, photographs, lithographs—these become the flesh, the human component.

MK: But what does this cartographic lens provide that an ordinary film can't?

Jake Barton: We are making a movie where the map is the central character and the main player—and literally, the central screen you'll be watching. The pictures have a way of grounding the map in the specificity of reality. And the maps help the pictures not to over romanticize. You can see here (points to map of the IRT), in the beginning of "the Metropolis," in 1900-1920s, this is the beginning of the subway lines. And then you can fast forward to where all these apartment complexes were laid over the rail lines. (His gaze moves down the wall). So, there is a way in which layering one map over another map allows us to draw parallels and show the reasons things changed from one period to the next. The end of each chapter is the foreshadowing, the individual piece of either infrastructure or reorgan-

ization that catapults the city into the next stage. And in very unexpected ways.

JS: And that's how cities grow. Our task is to untangle the city's history and lease out the layers. The maps will unfold on to and build upon one another.

MK: How do you go about untangling these narratives without thinning the story into a bland lesson or a broad tale?

JS: Think of the city as a palimpsest, a series of overlays. The city that we know today is only the most recent overlay of the city that existed 25 or 30 years ago. All we can do is follow a few threads through and touch on different kinds of stories. This is not some picaresque of all the colorful stories that have ever happened in New York. We are trying to emphasize that these were not imperfect versions of the city we live in now—these were not cutesie places with quaint people in them. They were as complicated, rich, and exciting as the city we live in now. We are going to remind people that for all the superficial changes, in many ways, city life does not fundamentally change. We still do the same things. People work, go to school, go to church, they play, they fall in love.

MK: But how do you make the bored or reluctant museum-goer believe that? Or, better, experience that?

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