

# Placing the Walls: 3-D Modeling of Chicana/o Murals in LA

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## Abstract

Placing the Walls is a 3-D simulation model of the Estrada Courts Public Housing, located in East Los Angeles and known for its more than 60 murals that narrate the events and ethos of the Chicana/o Movement of the 70's. It considers 3-D modeling and simulation as one of emerging digital methodologies for exploring site-specificity and spatial context in the field of cultural informatics and archival studies. The discussion will focus on the technical aspects of building 3-D models with open source applications, as well as the theoretical implications of 'simulation-as-documentation.'

*Keywords:* 3-D simulation, cultural informatics, digital humanities, archival studies

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## Introduction

Developed during the NEH 2011 Vectors Summer Institute on Digital Approaches to American Studies at the University of Southern California, *Placing the Walls* is a methodological exploration of 3-D modeling and simulation for the analysis of site-specific cultural production in relation to identity and community formations. In the field of classics and archeology, digital models of various ancient sites have been one of the most exciting developments in recent years. In other fields, the 'games' environment of digital simulation has been used in classrooms to add the 'experiential' and the interactive layer to one's understanding of various events. While the claims of realism, both objective and 'augmented,' is certainly alluring, digital models can be perhaps more productively framed as "representational methodology," as Chris Johanson argues (2009), for which the models serve as "tinker toys" to test hypothesis and to propose various interpretations. For cultural informatics, 3-D models and simulations are useful for questions and challenges related to how to represent discrete data in some form of continuity.

A collaborative project between Michael Rocchio, a Ph.D. candidate in architecture, and David Kim, a Ph.D. candidate in information studies, *Placing the Walls* explores how 3-D models can serve both interactive and archival function. Taking the Estrada Courts Public Housing in East Los Angeles as a case study, the model is a digital representation of the site that is famous for more than sixty community murals that were organized as a part of the broader Chicana/o arts movement and LA's beautification efforts in the 70's and the 80's. The model captures all the murals that are currently in existence at the site, including those that are seldom discussed, older images of some of the murals that document their gradual decay, and related archival records, as well as the graffiti and tags that have accumulated over the years. From our digital recreation, we propose spatially oriented analysis of the site, focusing on the contrast between the murals on the exterior walls and those in the interior alleyways and the significance of graffiti in the documentation of the murals.

For the documentation and archival concerns in cultural informatics, 3-D models offer the opportunity to capture spatial contexts on various subject matters, in a manner perhaps more dynamic than, say, a book catalog. By digitally reconstructing a physical site, digital models reveal the constructed-ness of all social spaces, from which one must decide which elements of the site matter and should be captured in the model in order generate productive interpretations of the site. Thus, the digital model's ultimate aim is not objective realism but analytically useful representation, and its representational advantage is the capacity to gather various pieces information of a site and present them as an interactive 'whole.'

The project is built in combination of various digital platforms available for free to the public. The model itself is generated in Google SketchUp, using high-resolution images we captured at the site and the dimensions we obtained from official records. The KMZ file for the model is then geo-referenced and exported to Google Earth. HyperCities, a geo-temporal authoring platform designed by UCLA, provides the narrative frame for the interpretation of the site, as well as the interface to include related archival materials and descriptions of the murals.



Figure 1. An image from the 3-D model in HyperCities.

## Reference

Johanson, C. (2009). Visualizing History: Modeling an Eternal City. *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 25(4), 403-418. doi:10.1080/01973760903331924