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Walking Histories and Public Humanities

David Rifkind, Architecture

In 2017 I organized a program of architecture and urbanism walking tours for high school students in Miami. Funded by a small grant from the Society of Architectural Historians, the tour program was led by a graduate student (Liudmila Fuentes, MLA'18) who introduced the participants to principles of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design as they explored the built environment of downtown Miami. The tours included rides on the Metromover and stops to see significant works of public art. The largest challenges we faced were scheduling the tours and arranging for bus transport between the schools and downtown. Contacting potential participants, scheduling and confirming tours, and organizing transportation occupied the bulk of Liudmila's time. The demands on public school teachers' time made coordination difficult.

The program was developed in close collaboration with an FIU graduate student. I designed the tours in close consultation with Liudmila, who helped select buildings and landscapes to visit. She also researched similar initiatives to see what lessons we could glean about engaging high school students in discussions of the built environment. The program aligned closely with the goals of the public humanities. The participating students (69 in total, from three schools) praised Liudmila's ability to make the history of Miami come alive through the walking tours. The tours also demonstrated the importance of humanistic disciplines, such as history and philosophy, in the critical evaluation of such STEM disciplines as architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design.