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Kevin R. McNamara. *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourse of American Cities.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996. vii + 311 pp. $39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2645-0.

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Kevin McNamara (formerly of Texas A&M University and the University of California, Irvine and San Diego) discusses changing twentieth century ideas of the city. His starting point is the notion of the Chicago school of urbanists who saw cities as potentially the sites of a broader political culture based on differences. They believed new fluid communities would emerge from common interests which would cut across old divisions of class, religion, and ethnicity. Essentially, *Urban Verbs* is a series of inter-linked essays on the artistic understanding (or failure of understanding) of urban diversity by American writers, planners, and architects over the last century. It is structured as three paired essays. The first two discuss Henry James's and Theodore Dreiser's realist narratives of the city, the next two Hugh Ferris's and William Carlos Williams's modernist visions of the city, and the final pair, on the film *The Naked City* and Venturi and Scott Brown's pop architecture and writing, the "climax stage of the modernist city."

Chapter One ("Building Culture") concentrates on Henry James's descriptions of New York–for instance, of the Waldorf Astoria hotel in *The American Scene*. McNamara contrasts James's descriptions of the "Anglo-ethnic" and immigrant domains. He sees the American culture described by James as being tripartite, the endangered genteel culture of James's youth, the new market-centred world of the businessman and the exotic heritage of the Old World immigrant. However, James's aristocratic belief in the superiority of a European past, allied with a fear of the cultural impact of European "peasant" immigration, is seen as essentially backward looking. He was simultaneously intrigued by the integrity and diversity of immigrant cultures but afraid of the melting pot.

Chapter Two ("Markets of Delight") takes as its key text Theodore Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*. This traces the arrival in Chicago of the ambitious Carrie Meeber and her rise through many relationships to become a successful Broadway personality. The novel is set against an urban landscape largely created by a vast redevelopment program in the decade after the fire of 1871 and characterised by the minimalist skyscrapers of the Chicago school. Carrie is a commodity, desired by men, and made more desirable in the new market of leisure by men's investment in her. McNamara sees her success as representing the force of the market in producing wealth, though he disagrees with the interpretation of her as a representative of speculation in the economy. In particular, McNamara sees in the character Bob Ames, the epitome of the Progressives in favour of scientific planning.

Chapter Three ("Recentring the City") is essentially an analysis of Hugh Ferriss's *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* of 1929, against the backdrop of the international foment in modernist architecture and planning. Ferris saw architecture as a social and moral force. He argued against the historicist use of period styles, the use of ornament in general, the masking of social or structural function, and the design of buildings with no relation to their neighbours. All of these failings were characteristic of the pre-Depression boom in speculative skyscraper construction. In 1952, Ferris wrote "What makes great buildings great is not their appearance, attractive as it may be, but the fact that their appearance is the outward and visible sign of an inward and architectural reality." Ferris believed architecture had been corrupted by economics and believed architects should call upon artists, scientists, and psychologists to make the city livable. In this, McNamara finds echoes of Dreiser's progressive engineer, Bob Ames. Ferris's *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* of 1929 was a fantasist and utopian call for the rationally planned skyscraper city. Skyscrapers were to be at least half a mile apart separated by parkland, while the city plan was based on theosophical symbolism unifying spirit and matter. As McNamara points out, this exemplifies a trend in modernist architecture to flee "from history to mythic structures and 'timeless' values." McNamara also argues that a fatal flaw in Ferris's ideal city model is its final and static nature and inability to adapt, its intent

being to house the idea of Man rather than the complex and shifting diversity of reality. In this he finds a close parallel with the failings of the apparently very different utopian vision of one of Ferris's critics, Lewis Mumford's garden city.

Chapter Four ("Expanding the City's Limits") takes as its key text William Carlos Wlliams's poem "Paterson," which McNamara sees as an example of a more historically-minded modernist commentary on cities, also evident in American poems like T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Ezra Pound's *The Bridge*. Williams's politics was shaped by the Progressive historian's view of American history as the triumph of democracy and human rights and a belief in democratic pluralism and diversity. His vision was essentially liberal, feeling sympathetic to the poor but not to the idea of class struggle. His poem–in five books and tracing the history of the grim, industrial company town of Paterson, New Jersey–has as its early villain the late eighteenth century industrialist Hamilton, who is accused of subverting local democracy, ravaging the landscape and deskilling the work force in the new "factory" style mills. Williams saw Patterson as a complex and dynamic city, beset by forces both binding and dividing its inhabitants, ultimately a failure but with some slight hope of eventual betterment. McNamamra sees the poem as a hymn to urban diversity and complex discourse as well as an antidote to the authority claimed by both modernists, like Ferris, and the powerful theorists of social and political homogenity of the McCarthyite era.

Chapter Five ("Containing the Multitudes") centres on that classic film of New York, Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* of 1948. In contrast to the moral ambiguities of Film Noir films (recently revived in *LA Confidential*), it portrays inner-city New York as "a pathologically abnormal city, a topography of secret places and unspeakable lusts." McNamara sees the roots of this philosophy in the abandonment of evolutionary and progressive models of social evolution in favour of the steady-state model of structural functionalism, as purveyed by such sociologists as Talcott Parsons. The purging of the society from infection by the psychotic, criminal, sexually deviant or politically dangerous is seen in terms of a natural biological function. McNamara suggests that *The Naked City* does not set out to change society but to naturalize the public to the growing internal security network and spread of surveillance that was a feature of the Cold War. The final cut of the film even erased Lieutenant Muldoon's musings on the social background to crime. Desire seen as healthy in Dreiser's Carrie is now seen as a threat to social stability.

Chapter Six ("Popping the Modernist Bubble") is based on a study of a series of essays of the 1960s and early 1970s by husband and wife, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, which offered a critique of the failure of the modernist progressive approach to cities. Venturi and Brown (along with co-author Steven Izenour) in their famous, though controversial illustrated, essay "Learning from Las Vegas" looked to suburban America, and in particular commercial strip development, as the forefront of a new architectural symbolism. McNamara, while a critic of the political and racial divisions represented by suburbia, is a fan of the irony found in the couple's architecture, which sees as closely related to pop art. He examines a number of their plans, especially those for public places, as vivid expressions of a pluralistic post-modernist culture. However, he is critical of their lack of appreciation of the role social heterogeneity and conflict plays in shaping the modern cityscape. An example is Venturi and Brown's Western Plaza of 1971 in Washington D.C. This flat space is inscribed with floor plans of the capitol and white house. Around its boundary are thirty-nine inscriptions which the *Washington Post* described as "profound, pompous and even funny observations about the capitol city." McNamara praises its popular appeal but takes its designers to account for their lack of political engagement, specifically not tackling the disenfranchisement of the city's African-American majority.

This is a wide-ranging and erudite work in its use of sources and scope of analysis. Like so many post-modernist essays, it often makes great demands on the reader. It makes little allowance for the uninitiated in its constant flow of ideas and dialogue, rather than using a slow build-up to a grand argument. The main audience for this work will thus be graduate students and professionals, with some grasp already of the issues involved, though individual chapters could be usefully added to a wide range of undergraduate course reading lists. *Urban Verbs* is an important contribution in its interdisciplinary attempt to analyse divergent discourses about the modern city from the alarm by turn-of-the-century progressives at the crisis of unplanned capitalist growth to the post-modernist horror at the alienation of inner-city and suburb. It seeks common threads between the analyses of academics, architects, film makers and writers. Interdisciplinarity is often espoused but in the individualistic field of the arts too few are prepared to take on the hard work and risks in search of the ample intellectual rewards.

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