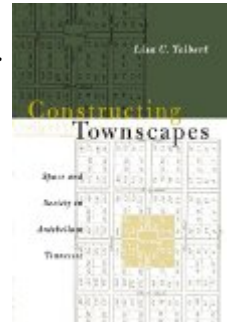


Lisa C. Tolbert. *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xvii + 294 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-4768-8.



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Town Living at its Finest

Urban history has long been the province of those interested in demographics, politics, race relations, and transportation. Recently, several studies have included the built environment as an integral part of the story. This blending of urban history and architectural history seems rather commonsensical, but has only rarely been put into practice. Lisa Tolbert's *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* is a very good example of this trend.

I must offer a caveat at the outset, however. This is a study of four towns, not cities. All of them were county seats in middle Tennessee in the early nineteenth century, and remain so today. These towns are Columbia, the seat of Maury County; Franklin, the seat of Williamson County; Murfreesboro, the seat of Rutherford County; and Shelbyville, the seat of Bedford County. Each of these towns came into the being in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the courthouse town for new counties, and each developed along similar lines by the time of the Civil War. None developed into a city. Indeed, Tolbert

argues on behalf of their own cultural niche, distinct from both the surrounding plantations and the nearby cities.

After a useful introduction, the book is organized into two sections. It begins with a fascinating description of the transformation of a near-virgin landscape covered in canebrakes and forests into fully-conceived towns with blocks, grid street patterns, and courthouse squares. This section continues through the 1850s when the railroads provided the incentive to follow national trends of creating specialized areas for commercial, residential, and warehouse buildings.

Tolbert makes extensive use of the phrase "architectural choices" in describing the building process within these towns. This is a refreshing and enlivening approach. In many histories of cities, buildings serve as a virtually unchanging backdrop for other sorts of activities. By using the concept of the architectural choices, she assumes, correctly I believe, that people have reasons for wanting their surroundings to look the way they do. Approaches to material culture studies from a generation or more ago would interpret the basis

of these choices as considerations of status. In this sense, buildings, particularly the grand ones, reflected the quest for power and the expression of that power in relation to other social groups.

Tolbert draws instead on the concepts of refinement and gentility as her interpretive tools, particularly as defined in Richard Bushman's 1992 book, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, and Cities*. [1] She uses the related concepts of refinement and gentility in particular to explain the nearly complete renovation of these towns from the late 1840s to the Civil War. The commercial and political leaders of these small towns had extensive contacts with seaboard cities, particularly Philadelphia. As a result they were aware of the new trends and standards in residential and commercial architecture and town planning. This began with the early reliance on grid plans for the streets and extended to the latest mid-century vogue for brick storefronts.

Progress in part meant keeping up with these standards, which required an increasing articulation of space within urban areas. Residences were kept well apart from both the commercial centers and the warehousing, wholesaling, and limited manufacturing facilities that accompanied the new railroads. These standards also suggested particular architectural styles and forms for the new houses and stores of the town, and required that they be kept in a neat, orderly, and attractive way. Reminiscent of David Carlton's interpretation of southern boosterism in late nineteenth century upcountry South Carolina [2], Tolbert argues that antebellum property owners in these southern towns had "particular responsibility for promoting the public good....Architectural change was more than a matter of comfort and convenience; it was perceived as an essential component of local progress" (p. 92).

Tolbert turns her attention in the second section of her book to how three different social groups carried out their lives within and surrounded by the buildings. Here she describes the

interplay between, and particular arrangements of buildings, and the social, often ceremonial uses of these spaces. She uses the concept of townscapes to carry out this analysis. Townscapes, as she notes in her introduction, "evoked multiple meanings based on particular group experiences" (p. 10). While the buildings at any given moment were the same, the ways that young women, young men, and slaves and free blacks acted within and among them varied widely. Thus, the townscapes which appeared to each of these groups differed. Her focus is the relationship between physical surroundings and shared experiences. The story comes full circle when she examines how changing notions of what constituted acceptable behavior for the various groups affected the architectural choices of the people who were creating the buildings.

Tolbert tries to use the notion of townscapes as a way to provide a cultural, rather than a qualitative, distinction between town and cities or plantations. The distinctions between county towns and the surrounding plantations becomes clear as the towns mature and develop institutions and regulations separate from the surrounding countryside. The distinction between small towns and cities, however, is less clear.

Her interpretation works very well in the discussion of slaves and free blacks. Many scholars have noted the sharp distinction between urban and plantation slavery. Tolbert provides a convincing argument that town slavery differed in fundamental ways from both the city and the plantation versions. In contrast to both plantations and cities, she notes, towns had no distinct spaces set aside for slaves. Instead, both whites and blacks lived in close proximity in mixed-race households, and slaves were hired out for short-term projects on a small-scale basis. The spatial integration that characterized the towns restricted the formation of autonomous slave communities, but the relative flexibility of movement within the towns allowed for informal contact among

the slaves that in turn allowed for a decentralized sense of community. As Tolbert notes, "the actual townscape of slaves was a tangled maze of associations that mediated the relationship between master and slave" (p. 211).

Her interpretation of towns as culturally rather than quantitatively different from cities works less well in the discussions of young, unmarried women. Women in the towns, Tolbert notes, adopted the new standards of gentility and refinement in terms of housekeeping, household production, and rituals of visiting. These standards were incorporated in the re-creation of the towns in the 1850s with the increasingly clear articulation of commercial, residential, and warehouse spaces. Town leaders recognized the importance of women in presenting an image of refined culture that was an important aspect of progress, and created women's colleges in spatially distinct parts of the towns.

The standards of behavior for young unmarried men also changed during the 1850s as the rowdiness and competitiveness that had long been expected of young men needed to be contained. In the new era of refined gentility and a sense of communal, as much as individual, progress, the energies of young men needed to be channeled in constructive ways that would challenge neither "an increasingly privatized domesticity in the renovated townscape" (p. 64) on the one hand nor traditional male authority on the other. In this case, however, the link between social change and architectural choices is unconvincing; the closest example is given with regard to the temperance movement, as she notes that bars and saloons were kept out of the renovated courthouse square, which was re-formed to attract a refined female clientele. She provides more evidence to show that the rituals of male behavior, including serenading, drinking, and apprenticeships, were changing during the mid nineteenth century than to show any lines of influence between these changes and the architec-

tural choices that formed the renovated townscapes of the 1850s.

While her discussions of the process of developing the towns is fascinating and very valuable, the distinctions as expressed in architectural choices between towns and cities falls slightly short of the mark. In particular, she notes that leaders in these towns clearly and consciously based their architectural choices on urban patterns, from the use of grid street patterns in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to specialized retail spaces in the mid nineteenth century. Her argument that "towns were not simple urban microcosms" (p. 70) is not as persuasive as one would hope. She seeks to avoid using qualitative factors in explaining the cultural significance of towns in the early nineteenth century, but the simple fact of not having as many people seems a vital component; once a definition of "progress" has been defined, the limited population and smaller scale of the towns placed greater responsibility on fewer individuals to carry the burden of this progress. In a small town, one family's house could make the difference in how a town was perceived. At the same time, however, their goals and the sources of their standards were identical to those of city dwellers.

Nonetheless, this is a very valuable book. It opens a new level of discussion regarding the relations between towns and cities and the buildings that formed them. At an experiential level, this book will give readers a new and keener appreciation for the look of today's small towns. As a historian who works extensively with local records throughout the southeast, I have become adept in locating the courthouse in the middle of small southern towns no matter what buildings have been erected on their outskirts. I now know why.

Notes

[1]. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

[2]. David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina 1880-1920*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982.

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