

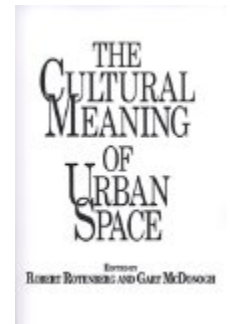
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Louis Rotenberg, Gary W. McDonogh. *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space*. Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1993. xix + 226 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89789-319-0; \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89789-320-6.

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The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space originated as a symposium at the 1990 meeting of the American Anthropological Association dedicated to exploring “what commonalities exist in the process of giving meaning to urban spaces in various cities” (p. xi). Editors Robert Rotenberg and Gary McDonogh assembled the presented papers and additional solicited articles into the three parts of the published volume. Rotenberg claims in his introduction that “all urbanites share life experiences through the commonalities or [sic] urban conditions and the shared metropolitan knowledge.... [C]ity dwellers share meanings regardless of the particular city they inhabit or the history that has shaped their particular culture” (p. xii). Although this book falls short of demonstrating Rotenberg’s claim that one can find some universal urban meaning, the variety of approaches deployed by the authors does suggest that urban historians might venture more boldly into exploring the meanings of spaces.

Rotenberg’s ahistoricism is apparent both in the volume’s introduction and in his chapter “On the Salubrity of Sites.” In this article Rotenberg juxtaposes the writings of the first-century Roman architect Vitruvius with the musings of his own late-twentieth-century Viennese informants. In *De Architectura*, Vitruvius gave directions for choosing healthy locations for cities in order (in Rotenberg’s words) “to minimize the noxious influences of nature on the lives of the people” (p. 18). Although the writings of Vitruvius disappeared from most of Europe until the Renaissance, his ideas, writes Rotenberg, continued to influence interpretations of nature in Central Europe, particularly in Vienna (p. 19). In the twentieth century, wealthy residents of Vienna take great pleasure in their private gardens, hurrying home from work to en-

joy the fresh air and exercise of gardening. From this dubious continuity, Rotenberg concludes that the “fundamental problem of urban life” is “that, at its heart, urban agglomeration is pestilential in character” (pp. 27-28). Anticipating his argument in the volume’s introduction, Rotenberg writes, “there is magic in the feelings of wholesomeness and longevity that people attribute to their life in garden. It is a place we all know” (p. xv). Yet the other articles in this volume, rather than suggesting that urbanites seek and find a mystical place they all know, show that city dwellers discover in their surroundings a variety of pleasures and displeasures.

Scholars have come to call “urban” an area of human habitation characterized by concentration of population. Students of sociology, anthropology, history, and other social sciences have devoted much attention in the twentieth century to discerning the consequences of urbanism, including the important question of whether there is some common urban experience. Rotenberg takes this logic a step further, assuming not only that there is a common experience, but also that common experience gives rise to common meaning: thus both of the nouns in the book’s title are singular, not plural. But most of the articles are quite sensitive to context, suggesting that meanings arise in particular times and places. In exploring how scholars can approach the search for meanings and demonstrating a variety of ways urban people have interpreted spaces, the rest of the volume provides readers with fruitful lessons.

The four articles in the first section of the book, “The Language of Place,” approach the problem of urban space through particular concepts, examining what those con-

cepts can reveal about cities. The most promising of these is offered by Gary McDonogh, the volume's co-editor, in "The Geography of Emptiness." Reasoning that if denseness is the defining characteristic of cities, then empty spaces within cities profoundly disturb their character (p. 7), McDonogh studies allegedly empty spaces as sites of conflict (p. 4). From such sites of conflict we can learn what matters to urban residents about their surroundings—from which we can begin to discover the cultural meanings of urban space. For example, McDonogh points to "the Rambles," Barcelona's downtown promenade, which he was warned away from because "no one" went there. Yet, the Rambles are full of activity carried out by people whose presence is a sore point for those who warned McDonogh to stay away (pp. 9-10). From this and other similar episodes he concludes that by attending to the ways in which people talk about the "empty" spaces in cities, one can learn about "points of trace and conflict in history, across social divisions, in planning" (p. 13). In comparison to Rotenberg's insistence (also in this section of the book) that salubrity held a continuous value for European urbanites, McDonogh's article gently suggests how to seek out such meanings, yet is much more instructive.

Similarly, Deborah Pellow's article on "Chinese Privacy" traces across time how residents of the crowded city of Shanghai have responded to their shortage of living space while privacy has come to be valued as much for individuals as for families (p. 34). Theodore C. Bestor's piece "Rediscovering Shitamachi" investigates the transformations in local interpretations of two areas within Tokyo and how the spaces themselves have represented distinct ways of life. The lesson of these articles is that the interpretations of local spaces are not fixed, but are instead historically dynamic and, in that dynamism, revealing.

A second set of articles explores scholars' assumptions about the meaning of urban spaces. Rather than directly studying how urbanites understand their environment, Setha Low, Margaret Rodman, Susan Greenbaum, and Donald Pitkin reflect on how scholars' own experiences of space and inherited assumptions can lead to idiosyncratic interpretations of what local spaces mean to their residents. Low's article argues that scholars have mistakenly claimed that the towns with gridplans and central plazas in Spanish North America derived solely from European colonizers (p. 76). Her work, however, suggests the influence of Aztec, Mayan, and Taino sources for the development of the gridplan-plaza complex. She asks, "If the central plaza and Great Temple of

Tenochtitlan were the sacred spaces of the Aztec world, then what is the meaning of the cultural preservation that occurs when Cortes decides to build Mexico City on the ruins of this space, thus perpetuating the ceremonial plaza and Great Temple in its new Spanish-American plaza and cathedral form?" (p. 78). Although she does not provide evidence to answer such questions definitively, Low's piece reminds the reader that an unexamined set of assumptions can lead scholars to misread evidence subsequently gathered.

Conversely, Donald Pitkin's article is a reflection on the importance of ignorance. When Pitkin first visited Italy in 1948, he was struck by the contrast between his own experiences of rather reserved uses of public spaces and the freedom with which Italians seemed to extend their homes into the streets (p. 98). Pitkin subtly emphasizes his lack of knowledge by confessing not to know the origin of the "bella figura," in which promenaders "burnish the image of self for the consumption of others," speculating that the "origin is to be found in ancient urban settings where a premium was placed on the appraisal of others for which propinquity selected" (p. 98).[1] Pitkin eventually learned enough for his doctoral thesis, but the point of this article is that it was his ignorance—or perhaps, more kindly, his openness—that allowed him to learn. He shows that for all people—whether living as residents in or as students of urban areas—"space is not given in nature but is socially constructed, continuously contested, and known experientially" (p. 101).

In a more statistical vein, Susan Greenbaum's article, "Housing Abandonment in Inner-City Black Neighborhoods," examines the creation of a residential ghetto in Kansas City, Kansas, after World War II. Greenbaum argues that the creation of black ghettos should be understood not in terms of simple white flight from black invaders, but in terms of the existence of two racially based housing markets within a single region.

The final article that may be grouped in this set is Margaret Rodman's study. Rodman argues that scholars who would derive their understandings of space from architecture alone unnecessarily limit their vision. To demonstrate this, Rodman discusses the active attempts to maintain a sense of community among residents of cooperative housing in Toronto. Although the physical layouts of cooperative buildings do not show much common space, meetings for making decisions about the community are one of the most important ways of maintaining its coherence. And, in fact, the shortage of common

meeting space is one of the chief points of conflict over the shape of such cooperatives (p. 136). Thus, Rodman makes an argument for “a synthesis of experience-based approaches to understanding place with those that treat space as socially constructed and contested” (p. 137).

The remainder of the articles model a variety of ways of discovering interpretations of urban space in specific temporal and geographical contexts. Two of the articles—“We Have Always Lived under the Castle: Historical Symbols and the Maintenance of Meaning” by John Mock and Theodore C. Bestor’s “Rediscovering Shitamachi”—examine the workings of historical memory of specific sites in Japanese culture. Mock’s article explores how public spaces in the city of Hikone have retained cultural significance over time, even as the specific interpretations of those sites have changed. He nicely demonstrates how one can look for cultural continuities even across periods of substantial social and economic change. Bestor’s article, mentioned earlier, takes two regions of Edo/Tokyo and shows how the local valuations of these areas have intertwined and contrasted with one another.

Another pair of articles, on waterfront space in North America, explores how changing attitudes toward the border between land and water reflect transformations in the organization of citywide space. In Toronto, Matthew Cooper shows, as the waterfront was transformed from a space useful for transportation into the controversial commercial Harbourfront project, not only did the space itself change, but the meaning of access to the waterfront changed as well. In an approach that resembles Gary McDonogh’s argument for looking to “empty” sites as “zones of conflict,” Cooper argues that visual access to the waterfront became as compelling a source for planning as physical access. Similarly, R. Timothy Sieber explores the images of water in Boston in the 1970s and 1980s. He argues that the developing importance of visual access to water—reflected in higher prices assigned to properties from which people can see water and in advertisements for condominiums showing water scenes rather than the available property—reflects the latest manifestation of urbanites’ historical search for nature in the city.

Charles Rutheiser, in “Mapping Contested Terrains: Schoolrooms and Streetcorners in Urban Belize,” takes a different angle. Rather than showing how a single site or type of site has changed in meaning over time, Rutheiser shows how at a given moment, different sites in a city can take on different meanings for young people. Thus, particular schools and streets have come to function differently for youth of different economic and social back-

grounds in Belize City. As gangs modeled on those in the United States arose in the late 1980s, the meaning of local neighborhoods changed from isolated “bases” to spaces seen within a regional geographic hierarchy.

Urban historians have not done a great deal to study the subject that makes up the core of this book: the cultural meaning of urban space. When historians talk about the spatial characteristics of human habitation, they usually are referring either to demographics—that is, how people divide themselves and others into distinctive neighborhoods[2]—or architecture.[3] A few historians have begun to study how people use the spaces in cities. For example, Earl Lewis explores the public use of Norfolk’s streets by African-Americans and Thomas Jablonsky’s *Pride in the Jungle* explicitly traces the development of a sense of bounded neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago.[4] But what those spaces have meant to people in the past, and what those meanings can tell us about history, remain largely unexamined. In 1974, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argued that “[t]he life style of a people is the sum of their economic, social, and ultra-mundane activities. These generate spatial patterns; they require architectural forms and material settings which, upon completion, in turn influence the patterning of activities.”[5]

Some of the approaches taken by the anthropologist contributors to this book may not prove particularly useful to historians—they are embedded in debates internal to that discipline (for example, Deborah Pellow’s article on Chinese privacy). But some of the other approaches do jibe quite nicely with historical projects. Historians may want to attend to the meaning of urban spaces for a variety of reasons. To offer one example, Mark Gelfand notes in *A Nation of Cities* that during the 1940s urban policy-makers paid particular attention to physical blight as the urban problem.[6] Complementing this observation with a cultural study of how residents of blighted areas interpreted the significance of their physical surroundings, and whether these views were consistent with those of local authorities, might pay significant dividends in explaining white flight, urban “unrest,” and relationships between poor people and government officials in the postwar era.

At the end of the book’s introduction, Rotenberg writes, “the cultural meaning of urban spaces, like all languages, has a standard syntax, but also a local accent. The strength of these chapters is that they together analyze the syntax, while training our ears to hear the accent in the urbanite’s valuation of space” (p. xix). Roten-

berg is correct to say that the book's contribution is to aid readers in tuning in the specific meanings people use as they transform the spaces around them into places. But he goes too far in claiming that the book gathers a previously unknown language together in comprehensible form, for even he does not attempt to articulate what the core of the "shared metropolitan knowledge" might be.

Notes

[1]. His speculation is most likely correct: in Book I of the *Ars Amatoria* (line 99), the Roman poet Ovid commented that wealthy ladies attended public games to see the spectacle, and to be seen themselves ("spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsae").

[2]. See, for example, "Spatial Patterns of Rapid Growth," chap. 3 in Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), or Thomas Walter Hanchett, "Sorting out the New South City: Charlotte

and Its Neighborhoods" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1993).

[3]. Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

[4]. Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 91, and Thomas J. Jablonsky, *Pride in the Jungle: Community and Everyday Life in Back of the Yards Chicago* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

[5]. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 173.

[6]. Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

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