
Design after decline is a commendable addition to the literature concerning urban design efforts in America since the Second World War. Urban collapse is viewed through an interdisciplinary lens, providing a detailed history of the problems that various urban networks faced when rapid deindustrialization became widespread. A number of urban case studies are considered in admirable detail, ranging from the Bronx to London, Boston, and Medellin. The author’s principal focus is on Detroit and Philadelphia – two post-industrial cities that disintegrated at an unprecedented rate. Although at times Ryan’s conception of urban revitalization almost blurs into a blind admiration of high-design aesthetics, he does deal most effectively with a critical phase in recent urban history.

Prior to the early 1970s there had been a synchronization of federal and municipal efforts in addressing urban design. At the peak of urban deindustrialization, however, this ceased to be the case. It was at this point that the Nixon administration effectively cut support for large, government-led, top-down approaches to urbanism – effectively severing the lifeline of urban Modernism. Centralized planning became an object of severe criticism, and the inherently projective, utopian nature of Modernism was buried, only to be replaced by a valorization of Postmodernism.

Following this devastating combination of urban collapse and funding cuts, the actors involved in the revitalization efforts in Detroit and Philadelphia scrambled to address the unprecedented state of urban disintegration. They were forced to face this task with an unfamiliar set of tools that functioned on a smaller, more decentralized scale than urbanists were comfortable with. Even though the shedding of the heavy-handed approach of urban Modernism had been perceived as progress, the void left by the gutting of centralized planning was hard to fill in its entirety by the fragmented nature of decentralized development.

It is while focusing on this specific point in history, and how it subsequently unravelled, that Design after decline achieves critical mass. Ryan directs his analysis towards a series of urban-development case studies from Detroit and Philadelphia. These studies bear witness to the birth of new methods of approaching an inherently centralized collapse through a decentralized lens. Ryan’s accurate cataloguing of these methods is significant, for through this process he effectively presents the contemporary urbanist with a set of tools and approaches, both pragmatic and discursive, that can be used to address the challenges of the modern city.

Palliative planning, interventionist policy, democratic decision making, projective design and patchwork urbanism – these are the fundamental skills that Ryan presents to the contemporary urban designer. He concludes with a projective vision for the post-industrial American city, set in the year 2061. The final image, composed of clustered densities amidst appropriated and reused vacant lands, is intriguingly one that has the capacity to bridge several of the schisms of current architectural and urban discourse.

Writing in a manner that successfully avoids falling into nostalgia or amnesia, Ryan’s objectivity is noteworthy. While he clearly outlines the failings of past efforts at centralized planning, he is similarly critical of the visible impotence of the various decentralized methods and ideologies that contemporary urban and architectural discourses continue to valorize. Ryan’s argument seems clear: the challenges of the modern city are of a scale that urbanism cannot address if it continues to shun...
centralized methods simply because of their past sins. In other words, the urbanist must learn from history, rather than bury it. In the end, however, one is confronted by the question as to whether this is a book about urban design or about housing design in the urban context. From this perspective, the main point of criticism that can be levelled against Ryan is that he seems too narrowly-focused on the subject of residential development, at the cost of other methods of urban revitalization. Although he does at times mention infrastructural, commercial or mixed-use development efforts, his clear focus on housing, without clarifying that the book is predominantly about housing, gives the reader the impression that cities are little more than a collection of residential neighbourhoods. Such a vision, especially in the case of post-industrial urban collapse, is a frightening one. The notion that a rapidly de-industrializing city suffering massive population and economic losses can react to the disintegration of its urban fabric by merely building high-design housing projects, seems as fitting as reattaching the falling leaves of a tree in autumn in order to fight off the coming winter.

It is important to realize that many of America’s cities have still not been able to plan effectively for the potential or reality of rapid urban collapse due to sudden economic changes. As Ryan points out, Detroit and Philadelphia are poignant examples of this. Rather than assume urban collapse as inevitable, however, there is the potential to restructure urban economic networks and reposition the modern city as a point of productivity in the global economy. It is through the revitalization of such productivity that the critical approaches outlined by Ryan can actually build upon and enforce deep urban reform. Without this foundational restructuring, however, urban development faces the risk of operating as mere plastic surgery – hiding and beautifying without actually addressing the issues at hand.

Cem Sinan Kayatekin, Department of Architecture, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, USA. E-mail: cem@uoregon.edu


Visual images are a powerful way to communicate knowledge about urban spaces. This approach, revealing both the appearance and spatial location of urban spaces, has long been a tradition in the urban sciences with, for instance, sociologists being great exponents of visual analysis during the past few decades. Advocating a visual comprehension of the city, and a reunification of old and new urban sociologies, Jerome Krase in Seeing cities change sees the value of visual sociology as a social utility. In this framework he investigates social organization and cultural meaning in the production and decoding of urban images.

An important way to observe the city is to walk in it, as de Certeau (1985) has emphasized. Krase, following this principle, observes and understands cities by comparing Polish gentrification in Brooklyn (New York) and Krakow (Poland). Highlighting the role of sight in the city, he accentuates the need for individuals to be able to interpret what they see, and to note how they see it. For example, it is important to note that perceptions and valuations of residential neighbourhood spaces may be significantly different for ‘insiders’ as opposed to ‘outsiders’. Thus when tourists visit ‘Little Italies’ or ‘Chinatowns’, communities that have arisen in not only European or American cities but in settlements scattered across Asia and Australasia, they do not see their environments in the same manner as an Italian or Chinese native does. As Krase reveals, we have different influences upon our urban reading.

In line with John Brinkerhoff Jackson’s (1984) perspective on the ‘vernacular landscape’, urban scenery’s form and meaning is shaped partly by the needs and tastes of people. In this context it is necessary to observe and describe how building types such as motels, fast-food franchises and garages not only participate in the visual competition of city streets but establish markers along them that grant inclusion and exclusion of certain people along thoroughfares. Ethnic communities in this regard provide good examples of issues associated with vernacular landscape manufacture owing to their dominance of spaces and places in cities. With the appropriation of territory to help express the presence of distinct ethnic groups in particular districts, such as ‘Little Italies’, language is also employed as a means of expressing and enforcing the concept of place. As Krase demonstrates (p. 68), Italian immigrants in New York, for instance, created words such as Italianita (little Italy), bella figura (keeping up good appearance) as well as omerta (maintaining secrecy) to help establish and display their identity within a certain part the city. Understanding urban space requires, with reference to urban sociology,
the use of visual surveys in order to observe the ways people value cities and so give meaning to them. Cityscapes contain, as Krase explains, social and cultural meanings. Therefore attached to urban landscapes are not only particular activities resulting from people’s views of the city, but also the grasp people have of how different areas of the city are seen and so understood as being distinct from other districts.

Immigrants in the US have historically had an impact upon cityscapes, just as Turks have affected German built environments, and North Africans those in France. By and large, immigrants established their communities by residing in houses that were already built, thereby becoming assimilated into the existing environment of the host society. However, Krase stresses that the American cultural landscape, for example, exhibits traces of the most diverse array of ethnic influences anywhere in the world: immigration has created in many cities environmental layers between competing European, Asian, African, and Latin American groups. He argues that with the emergence of ethnic vernacular architectures – commonly seen today as an important aspect of local cultural heritage and so tourism – ‘ethnic theme parks’ (pp. 86, 131) have come to define the face of cities. These are not to be confused with ethnic enclaves. Instead Krase employs the term to highlight the commoditization of vernacular landscapes as part of contemporary property markets, that is as ‘marketable life styles’. ‘In the spectacle of the ethnic theme park the social value of the ethnic neighbourhood … is transformed by its capacity to produce festivals, restaurants, and other amusements for outsiders’ (p. 17).

As Krase successfully demonstrates, settlements and the spaces within them are not only organized into a spatial order: they are constructed and organized through other means that include culture, a major element of urban studies. Allowing the reader to come to terms with the evolution of modern cities, Seeing cities change clearly shows how cities can be analysed and understood in terms of spatial semiotics and visual ethnography.

References


Michel Rautenberg, Faculté de Sciences Humaines et Sociales, Université Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne, Centre Max Weber, 6 rue Basse des Rives, 42023 St Etienne, France. E-mail: Michel.Rautenberg@univ-st-etienne.fr


In 2009 Michaël Darin, in his book La comédie urbaine (Darin, 2009), invited those interested in urban settlements to consider the complexity and diversity of European cities, and in so doing he explained that what we often regard as imperfections or defects are just the effects of time as well as the multiplicity of actors involved in the making of a city (Maumi, 2011). Revealing that the process of making cities is extremely long, streets were shown to be the expression of rules, negotiations, compromises and renunciations. Darin’s interest in La comédie urbaine, as well as in Patchworks Parisiens, is not the planned city, or the monumental city, but rather the ‘imperfect city’ or what might be called the ordinary or banal city. The introduction to Patchworks Parisiens, entitled ‘Banal incongruities’ explores the notion that the city is a collective work and deserves to be looked at with attention, curiosity and patience.

Patchworks Parisiens is in many respects a continuation of La comédie urbaine, but focused on the French capital. It is a collection of curiosities composed by Darin as a result of 40 walks (each of 2 hours duration) along Paris’s streets. The survey made is supported by investigations in the archives and analyses of plans. Having in mind the historical work undertaken to explain the “urban comedy”, the reader of Patchworks Parisiens is invited to go out into the street and look at it. The book is addressed to the flâneur, an individual who loves to see and be seen in the urban scene. It invites us to look at what we see, and to be surprised by it. The book thus is made to arouse curiosity, to question all the irregularities we are used to seeing around us in the urban scene. So in this context it is an invitation to go for a walk, but it is not organized as a guide or itinerary. It is comprised mostly of photographs and short notices related to the photographs, explaining briefly the ‘incongruity’ shown. Unlike La comédie urbaine,
Patchworks Parisiens has just a few plans and maps. Darin instead suggests that those interested in the core theme of the book should go to the websites of the land registry office or Paris’s Archives for more pictorial information and historical maps. His aim is not to offer a complete analysis of the selected examples given within the book.

Patchworks Parisiens is not organized topographically, but thematically. The examples of ‘incongruities’ or ‘oddness’ are classified in different categories which are used to organize the chapters. The book is made up of four primary parts each with chapters within it: ‘voisinages’ (neighbourhood relations), ‘contours’ (outlines), ‘formes’ (shapes), and ‘rencontres’ (encounters). The first chapter, opening the core of the book, is devoted to what are often considered as ‘warts’ in city landscapes, here transformed by Darin as ‘beauty spots’: small constructions (often shops) occupying residual spaces between buildings or walls.

‘Voisinages’ should be understood as the diversity of relations existing between adjacent buildings aligned along the street, and recurs as a subject in the chapters on ‘Silhouette’, ‘Unexpected floors’, ‘Small isolated buildings’, ‘Big solitary buildings’, ‘Joints and harps’, and ‘Stylistic sequence’. Questioning the nature of the ‘silhouette’ of the street, Darin considers gaps between buildings as well as matters associated with the form of party walls. The ‘Contours’ part is an examination of the quality of the voids between buildings, including ‘Gardens and courtyards’, ‘Set-back buildings’, ‘Zigzag façades’, ‘Bases’ (particular ground floor treatments of buildings, or ‘socles’), ‘Nooks’, and ‘Triangular additions’ (which are another of Darin’s ‘beauty spots’).

‘Formes’ (or shapes) opens with two photographs of the Rue de Rivoli, one from the level of the Jardin des Tuileries and the other of the Hôtel de ville de Paris. These are discussed with reference to one of the most famous Parisian streets. Thought of as an exemplar of the built diversity that comprises the city landscape, the Rue de Rivoli is explained in relation to the symmetrical composition of the façades in front of the Jardin des Tuileries, the more diverse layout in front of the Hôtel de ville, and rue Saint-Antoine, with an even more uneven alignment. This part of the book does not just focus on perfect alignments: it also covers irregularities and unsightly or unusual juxtapositions. Darin also questions the ‘Swollen streets’ resulting from the widening of some streets and their disregard of the alignments of streets lines formed in the nineteenth century. The last part of Patchworks Parisiens, ‘Rencontres’ (encounters), focuses on ‘Corner buildings’ located at crossroads, or at what are referred to as ‘Empty corners’.

Darin concludes his book with numerous ‘Absences’ in the city, and by re-inviting the reader to look at the ‘art of ordinary assembling’. Cities therefore are said to be ‘fascinating as collective artefacts developing with time, according to the successive contributions given by a multitude of people’ (p. 206). As an invitation to carry on the work of the author the book ends with blank pages that form a notebook entitled ‘Other urban curiosities and oddness’.

References


Catherine Maumi, Les Métiers de l’Histoire de l’Architecture, édifices-villes-territoires, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Grenoble, 60 Avenue de Constantine, BP 2636, 38036 Grenoble Cedex 2, France. E-mail: catherine.maumi@grenoble.archi.fr


Between 8 December 2012 and 24 February 2013 the Centro Cultural de Belém in Lisbon hosted an exhibition designed to cover more than 50 years of professional activity by the celebrated Portuguese architect Nuno Portas (1934-). It had been previously hosted, in early-to-mid 2012, in the then European Capital City of Culture, Guimarães, Portugal. A bilingual catalogue (in English and Portuguese) with the same title as the exhibition was based on the collaboration of a number of individuals, including Nuno Grande, João Serra, Gabriela Vaz-Pinheiro, Jorge Sampaio, Alexandre
Book reviews

Alves Costa, João Ferrão, Nuno Portas, and Costa Lobo.

Organized into a book, the catalogue is divided into four parts. The first part introduces the purpose of the exhibition through appreciations of Nuno Portas by Nuno Grande, the curator of the exhibition, who introduces Portas as ‘the urban being’; João B. Serra, President of the City of Guimarães Foundation, who reflects on ‘Nuno Portas’s cities’; and Gabriela Vaz-Pinheiro, co-ordinator of the Art and Architecture Programme for Guimarães in 2012, who assesses ‘Nuno Portas’s senses of a gaze in the art and architecture programme’.

The second part consists of four essays. Jorge Sampaio, a former Portuguese President, examines Portas as the man from whom one can always learn. Alexandre Alves Costa, a former colleague of Portas, discusses ‘Nuno Portas in four moments’. João Ferrão, a former State Secretary for Spatial Planning and Cities within the Portuguese Ministry of Environment, writes about ‘Nuno Portas, unique architect, and plural people settler’. Finally, Nuno Grande sheds light on ‘An urban being in the Labyrinth of Mirrors’.

The third and main part is structured according to six themes, organized in chronological order. They collectively reflect on the evolution of Portas’s 50 years of vocational activity, namely ‘The architecture for today (1957-1965)’; ‘The city as architecture (1962-1974)’; ‘The process also designs (1969-1989)’; ‘New urban policies (1978-1998)’; (v) ‘The city as an open work (1985-2008)’; and ‘The urban hypertext (1983-2012)’. Each theme includes a selection of Nuno Portas’s architectural works, essays, reports, books, conference papers and other published work, thereby testifying to a commitment to the study of the urban form, developed both in governmental workplaces, private activity, and the academic environment.

The final part comprises two contributions. The first, written by Portas, reflects on the theme of the ‘The city for today: a multiple choice trail’. Here Portas reviews his professional career according to the six stages previously mentioned in the third part of the book. However, he also includes a seventh stage which corresponds to his present professional activity. Here Portas expresses his current engagement as a researcher and a teacher of urban studies. Carlos Lobo, on the other hand, an artist in residence during the year when Guimarães was European Capital City of Culture, examines ‘For an idea of landscape’.

The book includes a generous number of images to accompany the various themes under consideration. However, the greatest value for urban morphologists is perhaps in the many journal and book references. It is an important catalogue of references not only on the study of urban form in Portugal, but also on this subject internationally. The existence of a pan-European international flow of knowledge concerned with the study of urban form is very evident. The reader is left in no doubt about Portas’s important contribution to the internationalization of Portuguese architecture, and his strategic influence in bringing into Portugal international lines of thought relating to the study of urban form (Marat-Mendes and Cabrita, 2012; Marat-Mendes et al., 2013).

References


Teresa Marat-Mendes, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa ISCTE-IUL, DINÂMIA’CET-IUL, Departamento de Arquitectura e Urbanismo, Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal. E-Mail: teresa.marat-mendes@iscte.