Miles Orvell and Klaus Benesch, eds. Rethinking the American City. An International Dialogue

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11164
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Theodora Tsimpouki, « Miles Orvell and Klaus Benesch, eds. Rethinking the American City. An International Dialogue », European journal of American studies [Online], Reviews 2015-4, document 12, Online since 06 October 2015, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11164

This text was automatically generated on 22 April 2019.

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Rarely does one encounter a book that is as thought-provoking as it is fascinating to the reader. The nine diverse essays that comprise this volume, all seek to “rethink” and “reevaluate” the narratives that have come to shape American urban space. But while there have been several recent publications that attempt to “redefine” the American city, no volume to my knowledge has addressed the topic in such a multifaceted and comprehensive manner as *Rethinking the American City*.  

As the editors explain in their “Introduction,” the essays in the volume originated at a conference in Munich, in 2011. Miles Orvell and Klaus Benesch invited a group of internationally renowned cultural studies scholars, urban historians, and architects to participate in conversation on American cities. Each speaker was assigned a topic connected with the complex and seemingly insoluble problems pertaining to contemporary American cities. The focal points for analysis were energy, sustainability, the multicultural city, ruins, aesthetic space, designing the city, mobility, the digital city, the future city. The conversation that was held after each essay between the author and the discussants was recorded and is here presented as part of
an integral chapter, along with the original paper. This innovative format of thematically and methodologically diverse essays followed by extended dialogues makes the reading of *Rethinking the American City* an extremely lively and richly rewarding experience, as well as it opens up new and exciting paths of enquiry.

The essay collection begins with David E. Nye’s discussion of the histories of energy and of transportation in the United States, focusing on cases such as the Los Angeles vast freeway system or Portland’s Aerial Tram. Nye, who is the author of a number of books on the social history of American energy systems, argues that, while each energy transition has profound implications for the form and texture of urban life and it remains unclear what urban patterns might emerge using new energy forms (13), the United States need to urgently seek a more efficient energy future in order to face resource scarcity and global warming. With regard to sustainability, Andrew Ross talks of the transition from a “creative city,” a development model that flourished in the 2000s, to a “green city” model, to a thriving “sustainable cities” movement in almost all of the world’s developed countries and in many developing nations. While scholarship has focused on environmental showpieces (and Portland is one of them), the author directs his attention to the challenges of Phoenix, Arizona to become a “resilient metropolis” (32). As an outspoken opponent of social and environmental inequalities, Ross does not see enclaves of green new urbanism and other green innovations as a solution to sustainability; rather, he, recommends ways to correct injustices, such as the poverty of populations at risk, “toxic” race relations (37), and the thousands of “climate migrants” (36) that cross the border with Mexico. In the long run, the author concludes that there can be no ecological sustainability without social and economic sustainability because they are all an integral part of sustainable development. In her essay titled “The Multicultural City,” Mabel O. Wilson traces the history of the Cabrini-Green housing project in the Near North Side neighborhood in Chicago from its inception (1950s) to its tearing down half a century later, after it had become a neglected, underfunded and dangerous urban ghetto. Wilson examines the artwork that was produced before and during the demotion of Cabrini-Green (art installations, videos, workshops, poetry, etc.), which made visible to
nonresidents the violent transformation of urban/architectural space and the possibilities of its redevelopment.

“Ruins” is the next essay by Miles Orvell, professor of English and American Studies at Temple University and author of many books in American culture, including *The Death and Life of Main Street* (2012). Taking for granted the late twentieth century “strange obsession with ruins,” to quote Andreas Huyssen, Orvell proceeds to examine the nuances of the present fascination with industrial ruins and the implications of such proliferation of waste, litter and rubble in urban space. He discerns three different, yet (questionably) all positive approaches to view urban decline. The first is that, since cities can be read as a kind of palimpsest, ruins are the material embodiment of communal and national memory. The second is that ruins stand as a rebuke to “capitalist notions of endless progress and that the exploration of ruins constitutes an essential resistance to the official aesthetic order” (73). The third view sees ruins as natural, a part of a cycle that relates the process of urban growth and decay “to the organic process in a natural habitat” (79). Orvell finds these attitudes that aestheticize and naturalize ruins rather problematic, and focuses on the issue of “the nature of agency and responsibility in the built environment” (80). In his essay, David M. Lubin, on the other hand, takes a closer look at the “Aesthetic Space” of the American City. His examples are two sets of pairings: Richard Serra’s site-specific sculpture *Tilted Arc* and Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *The Gates*, and the Seagram Building and the artwork installed in the adjoining plaza. Lubin considers the *Tilted Arc* and the Seagram Building “a greater, more sustainable work of art” because it is “more provocative and engaging” (96). Other buildings, like the Woolworth Tower or the demolished Pennsylvania Station are also discussed in relation to their use, symbolic value and beauty, but the author concludes that the decisions made about them can never be of lasting consensus because modern cities “contain” “diversity, competition, and conflict” (103). Following the same line of thought, Albena Yaneva, in her essay “Designing the City,” focuses on the controversies surrounding the failed Whitney extension which Rem Koolhaas was commissioned to design. Yaneva offers a brief history of the building’s construction and failed plans to
expand it, claiming that a building must be seen not as an autonomous object but as “a complex ecology, a network of connections” (125) that always involves society. Only an understanding of the public interactions of a building can bring awareness of the ways in which architecture and design participate in “the making of the urban social fabric” (126).

Klaus Benesch, professor of English and American Studies at Ludwig Maximilians University Munich and Director of the Bavarian American Academy, is the author of the following essay, “Mobility.” Benesch brings to the forefront another very important aspect of the contemporary American city that has to do with the concept of mobility and its relation to the notion of place. After a brief account of the alleged interdependence of mobility and modernity that emphasizes fluidity, displacement, movement at the expense of rootedness, stability and “at-homeness,” Benesch challenges John Kasarda and Greg Lindsay’s celebration of aerotropolis. He argues instead that even airports, considered as transitional or nonplaces par excellence, evoke the need of “rest zones,” of spaces of grounding, “where we reconnect to the physical environment to readjust our worn-out, disoriented sense of place” (146). Benesch’s reservations for a world in constant mobility are not just ecological or socio-economic but also ontological. His reference to Heidegger’s Gelassenheit, which –among other things– signifies to “ground the self in ‘place’” (151) in order to recover a new form of meditative thinking is a mode of resisting universal mobility and perpetual restlessness. In addition to mobility, Malcolm McCullough underlines another pivotal aspect of our contemporary world, the issue of distraction and information superabundance. To be sure, in a “Digital City,” as the essay is titled, information overconsumption has a much more participatory, social infrastructure. Nevertheless, McCullough questions contemporary information overconsumption and the lost opportunities for attention restoration, and proposes a “commitment to a focused, thematic, filtered program of engagement” (180) rather than simply tuning out. In the last essay of the volume, “Future City,” Jeffrey Meikle analyzes such expressions of the American modernist future city as Chicago’s 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, the New York World’s Fair of 1939, Minoru Yamasaki’s former Pruitt-
Igoe housing project, as well as their many permutations to underline their common perspective suggestive of a “totalizing vision of static perfection” (197). From the final decades of the twentieth century onward, however, this master viewpoint and narrative of earlier future cities has been replaced by more piecemeal, workable projects of possible urban futures, even though the modernist utopian model is still invoked as a compelling vision (f. ex. Kinshasa’s La Cité du Fleuve). Meikle’s final observation is very topical and timely and in a way could neatly summarize the main idea of the volume: “Contemporary urban realities are too multicentered, too culturally diverse, too fragmented, and too dependent on historical remnants and random permutations to be encompassed by any unifying future vision” (202).

As mentioned above, one of the most appealing features of Rethinking the American City lies in its multifaceted and pluralistic vision; the essays included deal with disparate disciplinary perspectives, geographical regions and topics, but with common focal points. But the volume carries even greater rewards in the dialogue that follows each chapter and the questions raised by the discussants. As Dolores Hayden succinctly notes in her “Foreword,” this is a book that will appeal equally to the specialists in the history of the American city, as well as to scholars and students of cultural studies, urban studies, visual studies, technology studies and environmental studies.

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