



Clarisse Godard Desmarest (ed.), *The New Town of Edinburgh: An Architectural Celebration*

Edinburgh, John Donald, 2019, 320 p.

Cyril Besson



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- 1 The world population now lives in predominantly urban areas—an event that according to the UN occurred in 2007. Despite how recent this fact is, our everyday lifestyles are so dependent on this inscription in the space that surrounds us that it is not easy to realize that it has not always been so, or even that the situation came to be gradually, and that the metropolises of today, amnesic though they would like to be to the various stages of their development, are not just dedicated to novelty and a cult of modernity taken as the latest fads of urban design. Underneath the hustle and bustle, cities are also places of heritage and permanences, monuments in the various senses meant by Régis Debray in his essay “Trace, forme ou message ?” (in *Les cahiers de médiologie*, vol. 1, no. 7, Paris, Gallimard, 1999).
- 2 As multilayered accretions of strata, they also testify to the different horizons of occupation that their relatively plastic space was subjected to over time. Haussman’s Paris notoriously tried to rewrite population distribution and control, and elements from Benjamin’s studies on the displays of power by totalitarian political regimes could be applied to the ways in which urban space embodies the spectacle of authority, in its most concrete manifestations.
- 3 History, power and citizenship are central notions in the volume edited by Clarisse Godard Desmarest, *The New Town of Edinburgh: An Architectural Celebration*. The book very

nicely complements the abundant literature already published on the subject of Edinburgh's Janus-like separation between its Old and New Towns, taking the city away from the mere view of Edinburgh as "the western world's most extensive Roman classical city, but also one of its finest" (as Henry-Russell Hitchcock's foreword establishes), towards a nuanced, learned and profound assessment of its past and relevance.

- 4 In her introduction, Godard Desmarest establishes the New Town of Edinburgh as "a unique architectural ensemble in respect of its size, monumentality and degree of preservation", offering a "sparkle of order and modernity in the extended metropolis", and delineates the volume's project: a history of architectural and city planning trends, but also (and perhaps primarily) a piece of cultural and political history. This history is more consistent than the common representation of the city as Janus-like would lead us to believe, as explained by Murray Pittock, who examines the continuity of Edinburgh through urban improvement in city planning and the development of ideas, challenging the "new-ness" of the so-called "New Town".
- 5 The volume's first part surveys "Earlier contexts". Aonghus MacKechnie provides a historical background for the emergence of ideas that would lead to the establishment of New Town in the 18th century. Margaret Stewart examines plans by the 6th Earl of Mar designed to foster "a sense of political unity and equality between the partner states of his hoped-for federation" [of Scotland, Ireland, England and France], a failed endeavor that nonetheless provided one enduring aspect of Edinburgh, its orthogonal grid. Anthony Lewis studies the competition between Glasgow and Scotland's capital city, and the role played in this rivalry by profit from slavery.
- 6 The second part is about the relationship between the Old Town and the New Town. Giovanna Guidicini studies the New Town as a new entry point for royal visits, resulting in the perception of the planning of the New Town as a validation of new order, social and political, "infusing a Unionist agenda on the new development" and "display[ing] through the urban route an image of Edinburgh and of Scotland appropriate for the ruler's dignified and dignifying political" crossing. The story is not all about unity or continuity, however: Stana Nenadic considers the once-flourishing, but now all-but-gone, area of craft production. Richard Rodger studies the transformations of the city at the turn of the 19th century, establishing it as a communications hub for county towns and burghs, in a context where road connections were vital for local economies north of the border. John Lowrey traces changes in the horizon of occupation, the transition from domestic and public, to mainly commercial, use, focusing on the growth of commercialisation in the new town in the early 20th century.
- 7 Part Three is rather poetically entitled "New Towns Elsewhere"; in a sense, it studies the New Town as a diffusive model. Robin Skinner deals with the New Zealand "Edinburgh of the South", Dunedin (the Gaelic name for Edinburgh), examining the many links between the designs of the two namesakes. Ophlie Siméon details how "the Enlightenment ideals behind the Edinburgh New Town also found a powerful outlet in the Scottish countryside", especially in the late eighteenth century planned village movement. Alistair Fair examines how ideas of sociability (built civility) were brought to the fore in the New Town's 20th-century successors, with "the central place of ideas of community, citizenship and transformation in the conception of new towns", and how "the emergence of the affluent 'consumer-citizen' during the 1950's and 1960's

increasingly challenged the assumptions of the 1940's" while not quite erasing all traces of those years.

- 8 Part Four is about "The Age of Conservation". Pierre Chabard, in French, describes the changing relationships between the Old and New Towns in the 19th century, through Patrick Geddes's failed initiatives, as well as the opposition between the notions of town planning and city design, and French and English theories of urban planning. Ranald MacInnes in the intertextually-entitled chapter, "A Tale of One City?", examines the contradictory architectural political impulses between old and new, and how continuity dominates despite everything, concluding that "the most powerful idea behind the development of Edinburgh has been Edinburgh itself".
- 9 In Part 5, about "The New Town Celebrations of 1967 and 2017", Godard Desmarest explains how "the celebrations of the New Town bicentenary and the concern for national heritage which came to prevail in the 1970's were contemporary with a revival of Scottish nationalism" making Edinburgh "central to this sense of identity as the stateless nation's capital".
- 10 A very thorough yet accessible volume, all in all, and also a very beautiful one, with an abundance of designs, maps, paintings, engravings... a wealth of visual material, then, entirely printed on glossy paper, for the incredibly low cover price of £50. This book is a major addition to the existing literature on the subject, and a delight for the specialist and the layman alike.

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