

*Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930.* By Richard Dennis. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 436 pages. £22.99 (Paperback)

Let me begin by saying that *Cities in Modernity* is a very good book. For the period he covers, Richard Dennis is able to range broadly in his discussion of urban life and look at some environments in thorough detail. Furthermore, both the empirical studies and the theoretical frameworks that the book draws upon are impeccably cited, which will enable other researchers to build on the author's effort. At the same time, the massiveness of this undertaking is also one of its weaknesses, as Dennis plainly admits at the beginning of the preface. "This book is both longer and shorter than it ought to be. Shorter in that in aspiring to cover every site of significance in modern cities, I am conscious of having omitted much that others would consider absolutely vital...[and yet] filled to overflowing with examples, incidents and asides, as writer and readers pick their way along" (xiii). Dennis also acknowledges that almost all of the experiences and environments he discusses are middle-class, white, and male—which is the biggest exception I have with the book. Before I go into more detail I will first outline the structure and content of the book.

The book attempts to do a number of things simultaneously, but the basic format is fairly easy to follow. The first four chapters provide an introduction, give a theoretical overview, and lay the methodological groundwork; the next seven chapters examine specific environmental experiences of modern urban life; and the final chapter attempts to use these historical examples to connect with contemporary urban concerns.

Dennis begins by alluding to the work of key theorists of urban modernity - Marshall Berman, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and David Harvey - to situate his project, but does not go much further to engage any of their work in theoretical dialogue. Rather he suggests his intention is to, "build bridges connecting cultural and economic interpretations of urbanization, and between qualitative and quantitative modes of analysis, abstract theory and the wealth of empirical studies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cities" (3). These bridges are important because they fill gaps in our understanding of the history of urban experience. Dennis builds these 'bridges' by comparing the urbanization of three distinctly different cities - London, New York, and Toronto - and using the period of 1840-1930, which he argues is an era that forms a link between industrial and post-industrial modernization. He also makes connections by drawing upon empirical evidence from across a range of areas: visual arts, literature, geography, and social science research.

While I don't believe much of the material in the first four chapters breaks new ground, it does establish his method of building bridges and the subsequent empirical chapters employing this methodology are substantial, interesting, and insightful (and each could be read on its own). Chapter 5 looks at improvements to streets and how those changes were contested between planners and pedestrians, as well as how they were interpreted and depicted by artists, writers and social activists. Chapter 6 considers public spaces as "practiced places," drawing lightly on Benjamin's work to consider the regulation of bodies, especially female, and how space can be appropriated through collective activity. Chapter 7 examines the building of suburbs and the spatial structure and social relationships that were

produced, while Chapter 8 looks at how suburbia was consumed, primarily through the marketing of 'happiness.' These chapters are intriguing because they highlight the tensions and contradictions of home ownership during a period that prefigures the golden age of suburbia. Chapter 9 looks more specifically at the multi-family residential buildings that evolved and asks, "Could an apartment ever be a *home*?" by scrutinizing "modern marketing for a modern lifestyle" (234/246). Chapter 10 turns to look at office buildings, beginning with their geographic distribution within the city and the advent of the skyscraper, before looking more closely at how the office spaces themselves were experienced and characterized in literature. Chapter 11 explores the origins of the department store (referencing both Benjamin and Zola), as well as the conditions of working and the experience of shopping in these 'cathedrals of commerce.' The concluding Chapter 12 briefly discusses sewer systems, telegraphy, telephones, and transportation in an effort to show how urban 'networks' formed, and to connect with current discourse about the circulation of capital and the paradoxes of modernity.

Each of these chapters compares instances from multiple cities while drawing upon representations from novels, painting, maps, and census data. This makes for a rich and complex portrayal of the phenomena of urban modernity. Though many of the examples leave room for interpretation, I found most of the author's assessments to be reasonable; plus he has provided many of the visual images and literary quotations for the reader to construe. As a sample, in his discussion of life in apartment buildings Dennis rapidly shifts from an editorial in a c.1900 architectural journal about apartment dwellers with 'credit and a telephone...but nothing to do at

home', to the 'furtive glimpses of apartment residents' offered in Edward Hopper's paintings, to an excerpt from Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* in which the main character comments that in her apartment building she 'doesn't know a soul' (234-5). Dennis intentionally juxtaposes these accounts to consider the social and moral implications of 'home.' As the subtitle suggests, Dennis does deal with representation and production, but in a fairly rudimentary way - city life is 'represented' in paintings, literature and statistics, and built forms are 'produced' through finance and construction - though the earnest reader will be able to weave these useful accounts together with the work of Lefebvre or other more theoretically oriented writers.

One obviously idiosyncratic feature is the author's use of Toronto as a city for comparison (which Dennis justifies on the basis of his having lived there). Unless a reader is particularly interested in Toronto, these examples seem a bit parochial, and the book would probably have been more interesting if Dennis had used a city like Paris or Buenos Aires. That said, my biggest problem is with the overwhelming focus on the experience of the white middle-class. Although Dennis at least attempts to discuss the experience of women (mainly in the sections on public space, office buildings, and department stores), there is little discussion of racial minorities or other economic classes. While I don't think it is excusable to further marginalize the experience of minorities of any sort, it is especially unclear, given the literature available, why Dennis did not address the urban experience of the working class. This leaves the reader obliged to accept the book as an account of *bourgeois* urban modernity. However, this is not necessarily a damning distinction, especially

considering that these experiences and environments underlie the construction of what many of us experience today.

In a way this answers my final question: Why do we need another book on urban modernity? *Cities in Modernity* contributes little to the theoretical discourses on urbanism or modernity, nor does it add much to any of the various disciplines it draws upon. There are also more compelling analyses of the specific phenomena it deals with, in particular Schivelbusch's account of streets,<sup>1</sup> or Kern's use of cubist painting to probe changes in the experience of time and space,<sup>2</sup> both of which the author references. While Dennis covers a broader swathe than other writers, and he does so in an erudite but accessible way, the real value of this book lies in its (seemingly unwitting) recognition of the white middle-class as the dominant actor and central force of urban modernity. Any historical account or future development must reckon with this deeply conditioned and highly complex group and its experiences of urban modernity. In this case, Dennis has presented us with a wide-ranging and perceptive collage of the modern experiences and environments of the urban middle-class.

*William Mangold*  
*Environmental Psychology Program*  
*The Graduate Center, The City University of New York*

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<sup>1</sup> Schivelbusch, W. *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialisation of Light in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Oxford University Press. 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Kern, S. *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1983.