

*Testimonies of the City. Identity, Community and Change in a Contemporary Urban World.* Edited by Richard Rodger and Joanna Herbert. 2007. London: Ashgate. 296 pages. £55.00 (Hardback).

*Testimonies of the City* is a well-fitting title for this book bringing together studies from several cities in both Europe and America. Following on from a meeting at the Seventh International Conference on Urban History in Athens in 2004, the book debates a range of issues relevant to urban studies, individual contributors having backgrounds in sociology, history, ethnography, art and architecture history. They are united by a shared interest in oral accounts as sources of knowledge about life in cities. Insights into everyday life, memories and meanings associated with frequented spaces, and also penetrations into the backstage of decision-making about urban restructuring or public art installation, are principally obtained by collecting and interpreting oral testimonies. Indeed, presenting research in oral history and outlining its potentials for studying life in cities is one of the editors' aims (p. 3).

The book covers four major thematic areas; Part 1, entitled 'Social identities', consists of three studies, each of them in turn illuminating the complex relationship between social identities formation and/ or performance and the uses of spaces for work or leisure. The second part, 'Community, neighbourhood and daily life,' proposes insights into everyday life in three cities - Zagreb, Limburg, and Paris - at different moments of history. In addition to providing detailed accounts of quotidian uses of spaces, it raises questions about the processes through which meanings are ascribed to places and about the ways these are being reproduced, opposed or changed. The following chapters, assembled under the heading 'Responses to Urban Change,' draw readers' attention to more official interventions into urban space. The final section, 'Migration and methods,' turns to the specificities of writing histories of migrants (Chapter eleven) and of "cross-cultural" interviewing (Chapter twelve).

As a whole, the book opens a large variety of topics and questions. Moreover, authors invite readers to learn about different cities (Budapest, Glasgow, Vienna, Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, Bucharest, Leicester, Paris, Zagreb, and Limburg) set in various historical, political and social contexts. Despite this diversity, few ideas and images emerge repeatedly. The first recurrent theme depicted in oral testimonies about life in cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that of incessant migration or, better, *motion*. Migration between countries and settling in is remembered and made meaningful in inhabitants' life-stories and perceptions of places. Other types of migration, such as moving from rural to urban areas, leaving one quarter for another, and seeing former neighbours leave while accepting newcomers, seem to be of major importance to the way relationships towards cities are formed and experienced. Moreover, places themselves change and their characteristic features are also sometimes set in motion; the moving of a clock (a replica of Big Ben) from one quarter to another part of the city in Sao Paulo (p.195-197) has become a symbol of the irreversible transformation of the locality by (re)development attempts. Other links between individual chapters are due to

authors' shared focus on everyday life, routine encounters, and on the rhythms of activities, especially if described and explained by city inhabitants. Herbert and Rodger see such perspective as bringing insights that possibly challenge dominant interpretations of events or question "traditional histories" (p. 7).

In relation to this shared approach of individual studies two principal aims and hopes are formulated in the introductory chapter. The first is that the book will "illustrate how oral testimonies offer new insights into conceptualising and comprehending the contemporary city", and, second, that it will "encourage those that remain resistant to oral sources critically to rethink their reservations and assumptions" (p. 19). The book certainly provides multiple illustrations of approaching and establishing relations with respondents, interpreting testimonies, combining oral sources with other materials and, finally, gaining new knowledge about phenomena. In addition, studies are situated in particular cities and the stories and narratives are related to them as to specific settings. Nevertheless, conceptualisation of *city* does not seem to be given such attention. The 'General Editors' Preface' to the book, as to the series 'Historical Urban Studies,' outlines their understanding of urbanity as characterised by "density" and "proximity", and of city as defined by its "function" in relation to other settlements (p. ix). In some chapters however, the word city is, in fact, used only in connection with the proper name of a place (*city of X*); the general editors' definition is neither accepted nor challenged. As a result, 'Testimonies of the City' provides important expositions on using oral *testimonies*, while similar reflections on the concept of *city* are often missing. It could, however, be argued that emphasis has been placed on discussion of research methods and the presenting of findings about different aspects of life in urban settings. And this was certainly successfully achieved.

According to the editors' hopes quoted above, the book is also expected to present and prove the strengths of oral history. In spite of this general aim, a slight tendency sometimes appears to see it as a less capable fellow of statistics. When describing their interviewees, Ronnie Johnston and Arthur McIvor comment that these did not constitute a "representative sample of the male Glasgow workforce" (p. 25), and Wladimir Fischer claims that his "research did not intend to be representative" (p. 244). Johnston and McIvor also reflect the risk of "skewing" their "sample" (p.26) by contacting respondents through one organization. I assume that these remarks are included to show awareness of the research design imperfections and of possible critiques of capacity to generalize from the research performed. Nevertheless, such references, as well as the vocabulary used, position their actual research, based on in-depth and life-story interviews, only as an *alternative* to random sampling and statistical methods of inference that are presented as *the normal*. On the other hand, Herbert and Rodger (Chapter one) fully explain the advantages and uniqueness of oral history, and the studies included in the book confirm their words about depth and comprehensiveness of information that could hardly be obtained without collecting and interpreting oral sources. Next to these, apologies for not constructing representative samples seem unnecessary.

In several chapters, the analysis is accompanied by photographs or reproductions to illustrate the text or make it more complete. For those interested, authors

provide lists of works for “further reading”; actual bibliographies are however missing and references are to be found in – often extensive – footnotes. As said earlier, the book opens a wide variety of topics, such as masculinity defined by industrial workers, living in high-rise buildings, socialist urban planning and city redevelopment, everyday life of working class Parisians in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remembering migrant communities, or protest against dominant culture expressed in unique dress code and specific use of urban spaces. This richness may at a certain point become even a little distracting; without a concluding chapter, the book is rather a mosaic of works linked by shared methodological approaches than a coherent comparative study of particular problems in urban history. Nevertheless, ‘Testimonies of the City’ offers insights into places and moments of history that are often fascinating and surprising. As such, it shall be stimulating for readers and scholars with various research interests within, but also outside, urban studies.

*Slavomíra Ferenčuhová*  
*Masaryk University, Brno*