

Encountering Urban Places: Visual and Material Performances in the City. Edited by Lars Frers and Lars Meier. Hampshire, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2006. 190 pages. £55.00 (Hardback)

Encountering Urban Places is a group of nine distinct essays bound through an introduction and conclusion by the editors, Lars Frers & Lars Meier. The collection is connected through a common analysis of the ways in which the visual, social, and cultural realms come together, and shape the personal and collective meanings of various urban spaces. The style and subject matter of each of the essays is diverse with each author bringing a fresh perspective to the study of urban space.

Instead of going through the entire collection of essays chronologically, I will pick up on three broadly connected aspects of urban studies which became apparent throughout the book. These are 1): urban public space, 2): social space, and 3): The connection between the concept of 'landscape' and 'place'. In many ways it is this third aspect which gives strength to this collection of essays, as it manages to connect various issues which may often seem disjointed from each other. To a greater or lesser extent each of the essays made a connection between these different aspects of urban studies which would not normally be so clear. The variety of the essays also illustrated how such associations can be formed in both an official and unofficial capacity depending on the particular context.

At their most extreme, such associations can be seen in the way various spaces are given over to becoming living stage-sets for times-past or imagined spaces, such as theme-parks. This is emphasised by the work of Lukasz Stanek (Chapter 9) on the Polish city of Nowa Huta. As pointed out by Stanek, the former idealised projection of the socialist city had been transformed into an idealised tourist space with the residents becoming 'living fossils'. Of course, such idealised projections of the city, whether intended in construction or imposed through the regulation of space cannot serve to define urban life in its totality. This was illustrated through the rejection of this official remoulding of urban space by the residents of Nowa Huta. On a similar theme, through the medium of photography, Hellen Liggett (Chapter 2) shows how a truer reflection of urban life can be captured through an examination of its social life. These issues are expanded on by Lars Frers (Chapter 3), Martina Löw (Chapter 4) Deniz Altay (Chapter 5) and Zeuler R.M.A Lima and Vera M. Pallamin (Chapter 6). For Altay, the phenomenon of Minibar in Ankara illustrated the means by which younger people appropriated urban space. As described by the Altay, Minibar is not so much a physical space, but a social space, which can come into existence in various areas of the city where groups of younger people gather to socialise, drink and smoke. This appropriation of urban space is at the core of Lima and Pallamin's (Chapter 6) description of the use of Tarraço do Trianon in Sao Paulo. Located beside the Museum of Art Sao Paulo, the Tarraço do Trianon became the focal point of anti-government gatherings in the early 1980s leading to the demise of the military regime and movement towards democracy in Brazil. These essays serve to illustrate how the social can come to dominate the physical spaces of the city in

ways unforeseen by those responsible for their planning or design. Of course, such appropriation of space can lead to internal conflict within the city, leading to the various activities being displaced and moving around urban space. This is illustrated through the constant movement of Minibar around the various urban spaces of Ankara in response to complaints from residents.

These social interventions can have the impact of redefining the way in which the concepts of 'landscape' and 'place' are perceived and intertwined. Although inherent within many of the essays, it is in Lars Meier's (Chapter 8) 'Working in the Skyline – Images and Everyday Action' that such associations become most striking. Meier uses the example of German bankers working in the City of London to illustrate how the image of the city of London is seen as being associated with a particular way of life. The bankers, who commuted to The City each day from suburbs such as Richmond saw themselves as fitting into the image of the landscape. At the same time they associated the urban imagery of Brixton, through which they drove each day, as being symbolic of danger or fear.

In many ways it is impossible to escape the association between social structures and landscape image. This is emphasised by Jerome Krase (Chapter 7) in his work on the changes to both Italian cities and Italian quarters in American cities. For Krase the image of such spaces, and how they are changing, informs us of the changes in the social make-up of the area. The emergence of different ethnic shops within Italian shops is used by Krase to illustrate these changes. However, such a reliance on the image of place may serve to miss out on the more nuanced aspects of urban social life. This is illustrated to good effect by Martina Löw (Chapter 4) and Katherine S. Willis (Chapter 10). Löw describes how the visibility of prostitution in Vienna and Frankfurt am Main differs in terms of visibility within the urban landscape. While it is inscribed in the urban spaces of Frankfurt am Main, through various displays and symbols, the situation in Vienna is far more inconspicuous in terms of urban form in and of itself, but made evident through the enactment of road-side prostitution. The manner in which specific social practices are invisible to the eye is further highlighted by Katherine S. Willis in her chapter entitled 'Sensing Place – Mobile and Wireless Technologies in Urban Space'. For Willis, the infiltration of technologies such as wireless and mobile phones separates the social from the physical space of the city. However, the location of particular areas for wireless internet enhances the possibility of interaction and exchange in public space.

One of the most striking issues raised in this collection of essays is the manner in which social scientists personally interpret the spaces which become the subject of their analysis. For example, Lars Frers (Chapter 3) details how spaces such as Potsdamer Platz make him feel uneasy. This raises an important point in terms of the analysis of urban public space. It often seems that there is a danger within social science to read too much into the design and management of urban space, and become trapped by reading too much into particular urban imagery. Although, such spaces are often intended to be interpreted in the manner that is observed by Frers, there is a danger that social scientists might ascribe too much to such meanings at the expense of the manner in which such spaces are interpreted in everyday life.

The role of researchers themselves was further highlighted in this collection by various authors use of photography and by the various authors. Although the limits to the use of such technology is discussed in the concluding chapter there are various issues surrounding its use as a tool in urban studies which could have been further discussed. For example, Lars Frers (Chapter 3) analyses the use of space in Kiel Hauptbahnhof, detailing the manner in which people negotiate their way through the space of a contemporary railway station. A discussion of the response by either the public being studied, or the railway authority to the use of video in this example could have greatly added to this discussion. Furthermore, it seems that the limits to the use of photography for Martina Löw (Chapter 4) in examining prostitution could have been expanded on prior to the final chapter. Such limits are important in any research on urban space for two broad reasons. Firstly, it would illustrate the appropriateness of the use of such technology given the inherent social situation, and, secondly, it often seems that various spaces of the city are becoming more strictly controlled in terms of the use of photography, whether it be railway stations, markets, or even in the public open spaces of the city by various bodies, such as police and private security.

To be critical of the book, at times some of the authors are too detailed about the various theoretical aspects of their work and do not leave enough space for the actual descriptive part of their essays. It also seems that the various ways in which certain activities in particular urban spaces are clamped down and outlawed by various organisations could be further discussed. This, I feel, would greatly add to the discussion. Overall, however, I find this a thoroughly interesting and thought provoking book. It really was not until I had finished reading it that I started to think about the various examples and how they are connected together. The variety of authors and topics illustrate how differing contexts shape urban social space in different ways. As is often the case with edited volumes, readers will find different essays interest them more than others. This is why it makes such a valuable contribution to the field of urban studies. I would highly recommend this book for anyone interested in the relationship between social and physical urban space and whether this be undergraduate, graduate, academic, for teaching, or even in terms of planning or architectural practice.

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