

*The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space*. Scott McQuire. Sage Publications: London, 2009, 228 pages, ISBN: 9781412907934. RRP £75.00 (Hardcover)

Given the explosion in information technologies and their increasing integration into our everyday lives, the risk is to shirk such a Foucauldian incursion in favour of the status quo. Maintaining a dualistic ontology, which places us and the built environment on one side of a digital divide, and virtual networks and semantic spaces on the other, becomes the objective of urban officialdom. However, a tipping point has inevitably been reached where this binary logic is no longer perdurable and our urban realities are being radically altered by the march of technological innovations and Moore's Law.

It is to this end that McQuire's narrative forebodes. Informational media and its perception that it creates of the city is the fulcrum of his book. Moreover, media (his historical reverence of media extends from the humble Parisian postcard to the 'do-it-yourself' media that are diagnostic of contemporary Internet architectures) has *formulated* the modern city rather than being simulacra of it. Indeed, McQuire articulates this point clearly when discussing the genesis of cinema; "cinema is an integral step in the formation of the media city, pointing toward an emergent condition in which an expanded matrix of media feedback loops increasingly shape the ambience and intensities of urban space" (page 57). His narrative then is an in-depth and meticulous insight into how specific media artefacts have shaped and will shape the city.

The structure of the book is in three parts: the first *Thresholds of the Media City*, the second, *Public Space: Streets, Lights and Screens*, and the third, *Private Space: From Glass Architecture to Big Brother*. Each part is split into two or three chapters, and each discusses the theme with immense attention to detail and an enthusiastic evanescence which is unmatched in many contemporary urban studies books. After an introduction which adjusts the reader to the wealth of information that is on offer, Part One is a quasi-

historical look at how media has shaped the city. In particular, the first chapter focuses on Haussmann's Paris, and how Charles Marville's photographs were "a logical response to the demand for innovative forms of mapping corresponding to the emergent space of modern urban spectacle" (page 45). The second chapter explores how cinema changed the city. With references to the usual suspect *Metropolis* (1927) and the less documented *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), McQuire's most notable argument is 'film as urban dynamite', where he analyses Benjamin's essays of the 1930s in which he argued that film "should not only blow apart the prison-world of the bourgeois city, but convert the indifference of the masses into a 'collective in motion'" (page 66). In the third chapter of Part One, entitled *Liquid Cities*, we find the most compelling narrative (although my bias is swung by the reference to the film *Dark City* (1997), one of the most visually appropriate metaphors for the city ever produced) of the book. Fusing Le Corbusier's visions of a technological utopia with Constant's ideas of 'New Babylon', disaster movies and other fantastical utopian/dystopian ideas of the twentieth century, the chapter paints a vivid picture of social fluidity that is symbiotic with the city. Part Two has two chapters, the first of which details the role electricity plays in the experiential city. Perhaps deceptively entitled *Electropolis*, the chapter is notable for its excavation of the vernacular surrounding 'cyberspace'. The second chapter focuses on public space, and the antagonisms embroiled in the *crowd*. Within this chapter, there is a section entitled *Down in the Street* (page 132 – 137). This crafted prose analyses the essence of the 'crowded city', drawing on insights from Simmel, Giddens, Sennett and Benjamin (the latter two are much cited throughout the book), and the ethos of the *flâneur*. The section concludes (or rather perambulates to an end) with an evaluation of Benjamin's positive and negative outlook on the *flâneur*, arguing that "it is this understanding that underpinned Benjamin's insistence that the technological image was the key to developing new forms of political collectivity, once the dynamite of the film had blown apart the prison cell of the industrial city" (page 137).

Part Three deals with the conundrum of the decanter of private space into the public eye. The first chapter deals with how glass in architecture has transformed the urban to a window on the private, equating this shift with the rise of reality television which he argues “corresponds to the maturation of the ‘risk society’” (page 179). In the final thematic chapter, McQuire describes the ‘Digital Home’, using *Big Brother* and its affect on sociality as the fulcrum of the argument of the ‘dis-embeddedness’ of private space (page 200). In the conclusion chapter, he intertwines all the themes of the preceding chapters to rubber-stamp his final argument, which can be identified with this quote; “The aim of finding a new order for the media city should not be to re-solidify the ‘liquid city’ in the name of ostensibly stable identities and homogenous cultures... Rather the space of collective life of the context of the media city needs to be conceptualized in terms of... ‘groundless ground’” (page 206).

The structure and overall tone of the book is such that it jostles between media examples and social theoretical literature. The use of obscure and wonderfully esoteric films, artists and other media singularities colour the threads of argument, yet they remain integral to the narrative. This juxtaposition of realms of academic ethos often leads to a complexity which threatens to spill over into confusion, and in some cases the flow of text can meander violently, which makes for a tumultuous reading experience. However, this is tempered by the short, bite-sized sections which packages the narrative and facilitates the digestion of the huge quantity of detailed and excellently articulated information that is being Gatling-gunned to the reader from the outset of the book.

This being the case, it would stand to reason that this book is best utilised as a reference point; to dip in and out as per the index, extrapolating nuggets of information and academic rigour in order to add weight to your own argument. However this does a disservice to the readability of the book as a single piece of work. Granted, this requires the reader to be of a certain disposition regarding the theoretical engagement with the city – namely, in essence, to be sensitive to those spaces and practices that are in contention with that of the ‘masses’, and adhere to the ‘groundless ground’ and relational space

argument that McQuire ultimately purports. However, if this is indeed your utopia, then this is your guidebook.

Oli Mould

University of Loughborough.