

MILES ORVELL and KLAUS BENESCH, eds., *Rethinking the American City: An International Dialogue* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2014), 245 pp.

Paradoxes provide great tools for challenging well-trodden mental paths and for creating alertness in slumbering minds. Henry David Thoreau's classic "The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us" awakens readers into awareness that seeing may not be directly translated into insight and that what you see may not necessarily be what you get. Cities are a paradigmatic case in point. What you see in a city need not be of its own urban making. In their compelling essay collection *Rethinking the American City*, editors Miles Orvell and Klaus Benesch also challenge readers promptly with a paradox by urban historian Mike Davis. Contradicting conventional assessments of the relationship between the current climate crisis and contemporary American cities, Davis holds that "the single most important cause of global warming—the urbanization of humanity—is also potentially the principal solution to the problem of human survival in the later twenty-first century" (xii). At first glance it seems inadequate to call darkness light, suggesting that the unsustainability evident in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, or Phoenix will provide the solution to our environmental crisis. Since the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Communiqué, we have been aware of the admonition that "the future of our globe will be won or lost in cities of the world" (30) and that, as a consequence of this observation, adjustment, and change in cities is inevitable. Davis's paradoxical solution that cities may provide the means to overcome the climate crisis can be addressed on two levels. What Davis argues is that the horizontal expansion of urban sprawl as one of the major causes of climate change is actually driven by an "anti-urban" or "suburban" impulse (xii). What he suggests as a solution is to follow the "classically urban" impulse to integrate work, recreation, and home life in compact dense neighborhoods and thus move toward a virtuous urban ecological future.

The Davis paradox can then be understood as a question of defining 'urban' properly. What a city means and how it functions is a key question. However, this question still remains unanswered in urban studies even after the much promoted 'spatial turn' in recent decades. As Dolores Hayden rightly points out

in her foreword to the volume, "definitions of key terms such as space, place [...] urban, and suburban remain controversial" (viii). It is therefore also one of the aims of the volume to make sense of the "messiness" in the meaning of "space and place" (xv). In particular, it proposes new ways of rethinking and redefining narratives that have come to shape American urban space.

*Rethinking the American City* is one of several recent publications that document that cities have once again moved to the center of intellectual and political debates. The essays in the volume originated at a conference organized by Klaus Benesch in Munich at the Bavarian American Academy in 2011. Each one of them offers significant contributions to the ongoing discussion about the seemingly insoluble problems connected with the evident power and powerlessness of cities. The volume advances the debate as it offers a rich interdisciplinary tableau of defining what is crucial about the various interpretive scales for the American city. It suggests nine distinct thematic focal points for analysis. The essays are dedicated to energy (David E. Nye), sustainability (Andrew Ross), the multicultural city (Mabel O. Wilson), ruins (Miles Orvell), aesthetic space (David M. Lubin), designing the city (Albena Yaneva), mobility (Klaus Benesch), the digital city (Malcolm McCollough), and the future city (Jeffrey L. Meikle). Each thematic perspective produces a complex grid for the explanation and understanding of the contemporary American city. This pluralism in perspectives is also mirrored by the diversity of methodologies and theoretical approaches—among them are sociological case studies, qualitative ethnographic interviews, participant observation, Clifford Geertz's thick description, or Bruno Latour's network theory. The multiplicity of perspectives explores different scales in the city, addressing both issues of place and space. It ranges from the complexities involved in thinking about a single building (Albena Yaneva's account of the intricacies involved in Rem Koolhaas's attempt at designing the New Whitney), to addressing issues related to a set of neighborhood buildings (Mabel Wilson's deep analysis of the demolition of the Cabrini-Green housing project in the Near North Side neighborhood in Chicago) and to explorations of mobility in the accelerated globalized networks of urban transportation nodes (Klaus Benesch's critical appraisal of John Kasarda and Greg Lindsay's

concept of 'aerotropolis' or David Nye's complex discussion of change and inertia in urban transportation systems).

The thematic diversity in *Rethinking the American City* opens up a host of rewarding terrains for investigation. As is the nature of a succinct review, only a small number of the insights, impulses, and research projects suggested at the conference can be highlighted. Malcom McCollough, for instance, addresses the latest developments in digital media and discusses the demand for new approaches to deal with the smart grids of the soft city. He explains the ways in which traditional urbanist models, such as the stimulus overload concept established by the German intellectual Georg Simmel in the early phases of metropolitan modernization processes, have to be reassessed and redefined. As McCollough demonstrates, the old reactions of distance and detachment in the face of a fast chaotic urban pace (for instance, the blasé attitude that modern urbanites developed according to Simmel) no longer function as adequate responses in the contemporary digitized city. Posturban subjects, he notes, are not dulled into retreat from public life but are socialized in distinct fashion. For the more recent 'read/write' city as opposed to the traditional 'read-only' city, tuning in and not tuning out appears to be the adequate critical response of resistance. Countercultural agency may therefore be established by a "commitment to a focused, thematic, filtered program of engagement" (180). With regard to sustainability, Andrew Ross shows in his discussion of Phoenix, Arizona (to pick one of the worst sustainability scenarios for American cities) that enclaves of green new urbanism alone will not do as a solution. Ross argues against James Lovelock's insinuation that democracy should be put on hold for a while to implement large-scale ecological measures to counter climate change. Ross shows instead that environmental justice can only work with and through democratic participation of the affected urban communities. Orvell innovatively discusses the implications of the increased presence of dilapidated structures, dross, and litter in American cities. The proliferation of urban ruins, as for instance in Detroit, may be interpreted to function as rebuke to hollow notions of capitalist progress. Such ruins may also serve as a starting point to critically reconceptualize seemingly 'natural' cycles of destruction and renewal. It is important, for Orvell, to raise the question

of who pays the price for the creative destruction and who is made responsible to clean up after free entrepreneurs leave their urban playgrounds behind in ruins.

The multiplicity and openness of thematic perspectives creates a particularly rich conceptual inventory in *Rethinking the American City*. Social, political, ecological, economic, and aesthetic dimensions in the American city are addressed from different angles. In complex fashion, David M. Lubin raises the issues connected with the function of architecture and art in the American city. Is it to serve disruption (as in the case of Richard Serra's 1981 steel sculpture *Tilted Arc* in Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan) or is it to be playfully affirmative (as in the case of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 2005 installation of *The Gates* in New York City's Central Park)? Lubin suggests that "modern or postmodern art that challenges and obstructs viewer-pedestrians is ultimately more provocative and engaging than modernist and postmodernist circus art that flatters and humors them" (96). The essay collection also addresses the problematic of predictions for urban planning. Jeffrey L. Meikle concludes his section on the future city with the following admonition: "Contemporary urban realities are too multicentered, too culturally diverse, too fragmented, and too dependent on historical remnants and random permutations to be encompassed by any unifying vision" (202).

In thinking about novel ways of addressing issues in urban space, the volume also offers an innovative way of presenting such debates. Each short essay is followed by the transcribed and edited comments, questions, and answers from the Munich conference. This format ensures that each participant is enabled to bring her or his specific thematic focus to bear on the topic addressed. It thus highlights the potential interdisciplinary connections between the presentations, particularly for readers relatively unfamiliar with the distinct specialized disciplinary discourses. The shift from the general 2011 conference topic "Thinking Architecture Technology Culture: A Conversation" to a precise national focus in the book titled *Rethinking the American City* also assists in reframing the conference contributions productively within a transnational American Studies context. As a result of this implicit reconfiguration, one may paradoxically assert that the American city is and is not at the center of attention. The future does

not “really run through American bones any more” (218) and yet the defining narratives are still centrally related to globalized processes affected by American cities.

By examining the American city from a great variety of thematic angles, the present essay collection advances the urban studies debate about space and place substantially. Yet to close with one more paradox: the ac-

count of “so many intractable problems” (216) and the evident difficulty of coming to terms with them in an appropriate fashion will hopefully provide future readers and researchers with the necessary impulses to address again the very ‘intractable problems’ of the American city.

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