

The Construction and Form of Modern Cities: Exploring Identities and Community

‘Urban historians’, we are told, are ‘obliged to be more eclectic’ than other scholars of the city. While the latter can take a ‘well-defined disciplinary perspective’ — as sociologists, geographers, etc. — only we are expected to ‘study the interaction of the urban fabric on the social fabric’ in its ‘unique spatial setting’ across social, economic and political boundaries (and of course through time).¹ This is a rhetoric — an ideal, perhaps — with which most of us,

*Gilbert Bonifas ed., *Lecture(s) de la ville/The City as Text* (Nice, University of Nice, 2000). 200 pp. Illustrations. 100FF.

Helen Meller, *European Cities 1890-1930: History, Culture and the Built Environment*, (Chichester: Wiley, 2001). 286 pp. 105 figures. Bibliography. £22.50.

Danial .J. Monti, *The American City: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
Viii + 391pp. £16.99.

Michael Stratton and Barry Trinder, *Twentieth-Century Industrial Archaeology*, (London: E & FN Spon, 2000). Xi + 236 pp. Many illustrations. Select bibliography. £29.99.

J.W.R. Whitehand and C.M.H. Carr, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs: A Morphological Approach*, (London: Routledge, 2001). £45.00.

doubtless, are already familiar. But how does it translate into practice? In our everyday imperfect world of time constraints a nominal commitment to eclecticism can instead spawn specialisation, and thus a lack of cross-disciplinary ‘cohesion’, so that the ‘umbrella’ of diversity instead becomes an agency for introversion.² To be truly eclectic, therefore, presumably urban historians need to be not only better read (and/or brighter) than other academic colleagues, but also better resourced! Yet before we all rush to our respective departmental heads to make a claim, we need to ask, too, whether this declaration of eclecticism is little more than yet another ‘idealised’ story that we tell about ourselves: part of our identity, of how we would like to be seen, an affirmation of our self-view. Is it as ‘imagined’, for example, as other forms of identity — a construct to serve a purpose? Is it there to make us feel special, valued and privileged?

At the very least taking an eclectic ‘turn’ posits the need for centrifugal thinking. The volumes covered by this review certainly speak to the rich diversity of urban history making.* They testify directly to the multiplicity of sources available and, more importantly, to the very different foci and methodologies employed: from analysing the spatial-visual impact of home improvements in Britain to listing archaeological sites, and from textual deconstruction to recapturing ‘lost tales’ about community from local newspapers. That these were offered individually for review to *Urban History*, and subsequently accepted as a coherent package, is indicative of the discipline’s diversity, if not its focus. But

¹ R. Rodger, ‘Urban History: prospective and retrospective’, *Urban History* 19 (1992), 9,11.

² *Ibid.*.

then history generally is a broad church. Indeed, arguably, urban history is less 'open', or more set in its ways, than other branches of the discipline: with a continuing dominance of a socio-economic agenda over political and cultural explanation, and, for example, of nineteenth over twentieth century study. Oddly, for instance, architectural history is frequently relegated to a backwater because 'most urban historians think it is unimportant'³ As a mindset, such foci and limitations might aid internal cohesion, but must do so negatively. The trumpeting of eclecticism, therefore, thunders as a testimony to intent but perhaps heralds little else.

Ironically, allocating a common descriptor to the socio-spatial 'identity' that urban historians investigate as they peruse the construction of, and human interaction with, towns and cities can be equally perplexing. Consider the following as providing indicative operating parameters. *Twentieth-Century*

³ J. L. Arnold, 'Architectural History and Urban History: A Difficult Marriage', *Journal of Urban History*, 17 (1990), 70-1; M. Swenarton, *Homes Fit For Heroes: The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing* (London, 1981), 3; R. Morris, 'Author's Response - Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750', *Reviews in History*, <http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/reviews> (accessed 10 July 2001); L. Hollen Lees, 'The challenge of political change: urban history in the 1990s', *Urban History*, 21 (1994), 7-19; N. Hayes, 'Two Tales of the City? Exploring Twentieth Century Urban and Architectural History', *Journal of Contemporary History* (forthcoming). Indicative is the recently published *Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume III 1840-1959* (Cambridge, 2000), where no space is allocated separately to architectural, and little more to cultural history, yet room is found for a plethora of socio-economic topics ranging from demography to transport, and migration to class and consumerism.

Suburbs: A Morphological Approach, for example, is a traditionally orientated but a thoroughly researched, referenced and original study. It is Whitehand's and Carr's contention that as 'the least perishable and most inert of all tangible creations by human beings, the built environment is the crucial means by which people relate their own existence to the changing world around them.'⁴ The physical environment has a significant impact on the human condition precisely because it offers a fixed point of reference — it has a 'much longer' life span than 'those who created' it. From a very different background and methodology, Mark Little, in *Lecture(s) de la ville/The City as Text* (G. Bonifas, ed.) maintains that the city is instead wholly 'provisional': in a 'state of constant fragmentation and reinvention'. In this 'dark' context it has no fixed identity. 'Cities are spaces encoded by history and symbolic memories that contribute to the narrative we spin to maintain the illusions of unity in relation to our everyday lives.' The 'desire' of the city for a 'coherent identity leads it to become established within the monumental', which become 'ciphers and landmarks upon which we hang the elements of our own narratives. We read ourselves against this shifting backdrop.'⁵ Identity, then, is based on history and traditions: a reworking of 'old images' to 'produce new ones'. But of equal importance, as Meller notes in *European Cities 1890-1930: History, Culture and the Built Environment*, identity

⁴ J.W.R. Whitehand and C.M.H. Carr, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs: A Morphological Approach* (London, 2001), 194.

⁵ M. Little, 'The Preposterous city', in G. Bonifas (ed.), *Lecture(s) de la ville/The City as Text* (Nice, 2000), 14, 16.

is also firmly sited in the future: in ‘the ideals and ambitions that inspired people to contemplate change.’ Thus we have ‘civilised’ mores that manipulate the built environment; and a plethora of modernising icons drawn from popular and high culture that offer multiple ‘progressive’ foci for an ‘illusory’ and fluctuating identity.⁶

Perhaps the most stimulating and optimistic polemic on modern urban life is provided by Monti’s, *The American City: A Social and Cultural History*. Monti, a mere sociologist who still manages to work across disciplinary boundaries, argues against those predicting a bleak urban future. Modern cities, we are told, work. But it is not ‘impressive’ architecture’ that holds the ‘secret to what makes a city great and a society good’, nor directly does it speak to its identity. Simply put, ‘no place made by people is so full of life and has so many good stories to tell’ as the city: tales ‘about the way all of us fill’ these streets and buildings and ‘the meaning we attribute to our actions.’ We might know a lot, he argues, about civic architecture, government, occupational patterns, etc. — but little about the totality of what makes cities ‘the way they are’.⁷ It is these ‘eclectic’ discourses that feed the city’s civic culture: those ceremonies, customs

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19; H. Meller, *European Cities 1890-1930: History, Culture and the Built Environment* (Chichester, 2001), 70-1, 151, 165; N. Hayes, ‘Civic Perceptions: English Cities, Housing and Local Decision-Making in the 1920s’, *Urban History*, 27 (2000), 211-33. For the fluctuating relationship between modernity and civic culture/identity through time, see R. Hartnell, ‘Art and civic culture in Birmingham in the late nineteenth century’, *Urban History* 22 (1995), 229-37.

⁷ D.J. Monti, *The American City: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford, 1999), 4-5, 16-18.

and codes that delineate appropriate public behaviour. This orders the freedom and flux of the city — providing a ‘means of containing the anxieties to which the conditions of urban modernity gave rise’.⁸

What is most impressive about cities are the ways that their inhabitants have concocted to be together in the one place.... It also takes a lot of [hard work] cooperation and some good fortune to be realized.... Implicit in the work of a civic culture are ideas that help different parties to make sense of each other’s world, to anticipate problems, and to exercise caution when dealing with persons not like oneself.⁹

The central argument for contemporary wellbeing turns on several further key ideas; none wholly new but each well integrated into the analysis. Firstly, stories about the ‘good old days’ — provoking unflattering contemporary comparisons — are exaggerated. Civic apathy is not a modern predilection; nor have business elites wholly withdrawn from civic activities. There was no ‘golden age’.¹⁰ Instead studying this civic past through such ‘incorporated’ narratives reveals the adaptive qualities of city dwellers. Phlegmatic balances were, and are still, successfully struck between, for example, the governances of piety and tolerance, libertarianism and control, etc.. Indeed an ‘absence [today] of civic values and habits is more apparent than real’. Adopting Hofstadter’s

⁸ S. Gunn, ‘The Middle Class, Modernity and the Provincial City: Manchester c.1840-80’, in A. Kidd and D. Nicholls (eds.), *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism* (Manchester, 1999), 123.

⁹ Monti, *American City*, 101-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3, 30-1, 204-5, 222-3, 265ff.

concept of a ‘covenant of comity’ (an agreed behavioural code to which even bickering groups within communities can subscribe), Monti locates this consensus in the core bourgeois values of ‘order and prosperity’. This ‘community of believers’, significantly, are those who tell and leave the ‘best and most complete stories’: providing the rules of the game about how to behave, how we explain our actions to ourselves, etc. (that is form our civic identity).¹¹

Monti’s construct of an operational civic culture is thus simultaneously socially expansive yet constricted (i.e. centred on the cash nexus of prosperity). Community building is driven by local businesses and ethnic leaders in areas like voluntarism, subscription campaigns and mutual trade associations, and, more recently, particularly by consumer and governmental communalism (located in extending credit facilities and the ritual of shopping, paying taxes and receiving political favours). Thus ‘a community of believers’ has been re-forged by extending some of the privileges of ‘privacy and opportunity for self-indulgence’ — like the benefits of credit worthiness or citizenship — to humbler persons.¹² That those with ‘limited capital and spare time’ still are, or choose to be, frequently excluded from full membership of this community suggests a tendency perhaps to inflate or misinterpret how new recipients viewed such participation. Doubtless the rituals of consumption form an omnipresent language in western society. Yet such bespoke identity remains open to numerous and conflicting interpretations though time: for example the contrary need for thrift, conspicuous

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5, 41-2, 80, 99, 207.

¹² *Ibid.*, 105-111, 348-50.

consumption as a vulgar or excluding pursuit, exploitative constructs (in terms of wages, environmental concerns, etc.).¹³ Nevertheless, Monti is surely nearer the mark in focusing on broader notions of participation than, for example, Meller who examines identity and city development primarily in the cultural-political and elite contexts of central and local government or private philanthropy, largely ignoring a business or popular cultural dynamic.¹⁴

Given Monti's wholesale reliance on the local press for his evidence (who we are, what mattered, etc. 'is locked up in the civic diary we call newspapers')¹⁵ it is surprising that greater attention is not paid to how this press acts.

Newspapers — especially newspapers in big cities — *also* functioned as businesses: not primarily as community scribes, nor campaigning or objective recorders. Arguably, too, this press operated as a mouthpiece for local elites (from which journalists most frequently sourced their reports). The press was also, for fear of offending local businesses and elites, and for reasons of local pride, essentially a consensual tool promoting positive constructs of civicness.¹⁶

Whether this is implicit in Monti's argument is difficult to disentangle; but it does

¹³ *Ibid.*, 338, 350; J. Walton, 'Towns and Consumerism', in *Cambridge Urban History*, 715-44.

¹⁴ Meller, *European Cities*, 156. Popular culture is treated as an afterthought, and there is little on commercial sector impact (excepting the interesting study on paternalistic housing practice in Zlín).

¹⁵ Monti, *American City*, 5.

¹⁶ B. Franklin and D. Murphy, 'What News? The Market, Politics and the Local Press (London, 1991), 55-75; I. Jackson, *The Provincial Press and the Community* (Manchester, 1971), 43-5, 109-16.

strengthen his case. Yet if the press ‘provided its audience with a limited, organized, common frame of reference’ — enabling disparate city dwellers to ‘think about the same thing and thus share a vision of social reality’ — it also sensationalised its reports — again for commercial reasons. Such discourses provided the very constructs of urban ‘imagined’ communities.¹⁷ Because, too, local elites and a core ‘community of believers’ overlapped considerably, claims that newspapers are the repository of the self-selecting ‘best’ community stories can be misleading. We need to exercise considerable caution when deconstructing how residents directly viewed their communities through an elite-fed or sensationalist press ‘filter’.¹⁸

Meller relies significantly less on newspaper sources, although she notes that they were to the fore of civic image making.¹⁹ Indeed, the question of identity looms centrally in this text: coupling together motifs of ‘modernisation’ with civic ambition or ‘cultural creativity’; or questioning the importance of elite institutions to local communities (more asserted than proved) and as symbols of ‘cultural transition’. But she also adopts more pragmatic or ‘quality of life’ tests: whether, for example, ‘progress’ improved working–class lives.²⁰ Meller

¹⁷D. Nord, ‘The Public Community: The Urbanization of Journalism in Chicago’, *Journal of Urban History* 11 (1985), 415; A. Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper representation in three cities* (Leicester, 1993).

¹⁸ A. Mayne and S. Lawrence, ‘Ethnologies of place: a new research agenda’, *Urban History* 26 (1999), 325-48.

¹⁹ Meller, *European Cities*, 198.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 45, 70-1, 149-51, 164-9.

concentrates on the largely institutional themes of civic government and the influence of prominent individuals. Such an approach runs opposite to that taken by Monti. As he notes cynically: civic leaders and agencies ‘succeed when they are able to make a big deal out of small favors for persons.’ They ‘fail when citizens stop believing that the favors also help them’ or that they are always ‘at the end of the line when the presents are being handed out.’²¹ Or, put another way, cities flounder when they stop believing their own publicity.

Nevertheless, both agree that historic context was central in determining distinctive, localised outcomes: ensuring that the frequently competitive instincts and experiences in individual cities were never identical. Indeed the very structure of Meller’s book, with its chapter pairings of ‘similar’, but culturally distinct cities (for example, Barcelona and Munich as regional centres — or Blackpool and Nice as holiday resorts), reinforces this. That ‘modernisation’ occurred in a host of structurally differentiated cities yet crucially in differentiated ways against a common backdrop — notably urban expansion and the movement to improve the urban quality of life — is successfully demonstrated. Structurally, the most dominant civic improving discourse was planning: the epitome of modernisation in the first quarter of the twentieth century as ‘European cities became more self-conscious about themselves, their image and identities.’²² Meller views this planning process positively — because it is civically tailored to suit individual circumstances — ignoring perhaps ideas of a broader community-

²¹ Monti, *American City*, 372.

²² Meller, *European Cities*, 182.

based perception of powerlessness in face of the official machine, or as a largely detached view of expert opinion running counter to popular taste.²³

Such an outlook ties closely to her interpretation in the round of individual elites and historic circumstances (i.e. cultural context) determining local outcomes. Hers is the important claim — especially for urban historians whose job it is to tell such stories — that cities are not simply the repositories for national, international or pan-European cultural and other structural forces; although she does, rightly, caution that ‘differences and similarities are matters of degree’ (that, for example, Hamburg and Marseilles shared as many likenesses as contrasts). Indeed, it is Meller’s contention that cultural contexts are pre-eminent in directing, and therefore determining, local ‘overarching’ progress: after all, ‘the implementation of technology for cultural purposes, while market driven, was still subject to choice.’²⁴ Presumably, too, such constructs — if modernisation is a propensity to deploy the latest technologies and techniques — were central to individual civic identities as elites sought to project them. The irony is that modernisation as a process could be little more than a political rhetoric; a social construct designed to impress.²⁵ Certainly, Meller, in common with others, sees

²³ *Ibid.*, passim; Monti, *American City*, 1-2, 37-8; Whitehand and Carr, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs*, 12-13, 43-8.

²⁴ Meller, *European Cities*, 4, 11-12, 14-15, 77-8, 182.

²⁵ N. Hayes, ‘Forcing Modernisation on the ‘one remaining really backward industry’: British Construction and the Politics of Progress and Ambiguous Assessment’, *Journal of European Economic History* (forthcoming, 2001).

an active engagement in outward display (in the form of exhibitions, advertising, buildings) as being central to creating identity: whether as a technologically progressive city, and therefore modern; as a potent symbol of urban civilisation (through the iconography of civic architecture and gallery space); or an expression of carnival, fantasy and frivolous pleasure at resorts.²⁶

In contrast to Meller's broadly-based European history (which draws heavily on secondary accounts), we have Whitehand's and Carr's exacting on-the-ground survey of inter-war English suburbs and the subsequent changes to them. Indeed, it is tempting to ponder initially on the value of studying the latter, especially at the 'microscale': that is those alterations so small as not to require planning permission (e.g. replacement windows, new doors, etc.). The authors' emphatic answer is that the 'visual effects that householders can, without any form of control, have on the landscape may be substantial', especially if 'changes are cumulated and viewed in combination with those implemented by neighbours.'²⁷ Undoubtedly they are right: yet one suspects that really the authors do not approve of such a '*laissez-faire* process in which owner-occupiers embellish or disfigure their houses at will'.²⁸ Thus, we have the case (or more precisely the evidence base) for sanctioning a reduction in private freedoms to bolster visual community conformity to the originally conceived form — so enthusiasts for artificial stone cladding beware!

²⁶ Meller, *European Cities*, 55-7, 151-2, 202-4, 212.

²⁷ Whitehand and Carr, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs*, 153.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

There is, of course, another irony here, for in tracing the history of the suburb — and English exceptionalism in this respect — the authors stress the importance of the move to privacy, so that changes to social attitudes regarding the home and family are reflected in the type of house built.²⁹ The resultant suburbs were always controversial: becoming ‘the battlefields upon which the forces of preservation and change resolve their differences.’³⁰ Identifying and analysing the hostility against the suburb by social commentators is certainly not new. But whereas, for example, Clapson has demythologised sociological arguments that paint unfavourable comparisons between coherent/traditional and new/dysfunctional suburban working-class neighbourhoods,³¹ Whitehand and Carr set their caps at demolishing that other prominent critic of the suburbs — the architectural profession itself. ‘Architects who passed comment on speculatively-built suburban houses were almost without exception highly critical of them’, in large part because they were supposedly built without professional guidance. Whitehand and Carr refute this, arguing that architects were in fact ‘heavily involved’, although they were ‘happy to remain silent’ about the fees made from an activity held in ‘so low professional esteem.’³² This only highlights the importance of contemporary image-making and identity. On one side there was

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-2, 183.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

³¹ M. Clapson, *Invincible green suburbs, brave new towns: Social change and urban dispersal in postwar England* (Manchester, 1998).

³² Whitehand and Carr, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs*, 90, 111-3, 188.

the developer, (and a plethora of publishing and other agencies): offering suburban houses as ‘myths, status objects, utilities and pieces of real estate’ through trade and sales literature, showhouses, and the exhibitions that set popular fashions. Against was the literati, planners, aesthetes and the profession: selling alternative ‘architectural styles or conceptions of cities as [organic] entities’ and opposed to the ‘individualistic expressions of the detached and semi-detached houses to which suburbanites aspired’.³³

Several other important points also emerge. As the authors restate: ‘One of the major misrepresentations of inter-war suburbs ... is their depiction as homogeneous.’ Their surveys reveal instead ‘great variety’.³⁴ While generally a fundamental distinction can be made between pre and inter-war residential developments — drawn around the ubiquitous low-density garden suburb — post 1918 densities could still vary significantly. And in terms of the constituent dwelling, Edwardian or even Victorian architectural styles were, on occasion, still being reproduced in suburbia during the early 1930s. Hipped roofs or front doors to the edge — rather than the centre — to emphasise separation in semi-detached properties, were thus by no means universal five, or even ten, years after the war. The inter-war suburb, the authors conclude, was more, not less, varied than its Edwardian predecessor.³⁵ The Tudor Walters Report and public sector activity

³³ *Ibid.*, 13, 16-18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 188. The same point is made by M. Stratton and B. Trinder, *Twentieth-Century Industrial Archaeology*, (London, 2000), 128-31.

³⁵ Whitehand and Carr, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs*, 82-3, 188.

also heavily influenced the suburb: where the densities of new working-class estates (much lower than before 1914) set a seldom approached maximum density acceptable to purchasers of new speculative houses. Stylistically, however, developers steadfastly ignored the Report through their ‘irritating’ prediction for architectural adornment.³⁶

Stratton’s and Trinder’s *Twentieth-Century Industrial Archaeology* similarly offers an on-the-ground survey: but this time sampling Britain’s modern industrial heritage — its buildings, sites and landscapes. However, the disparity with a *Twentieth Century Suburbs* evidence-based analytical approach could not be greater. Perhaps this is an unfair criticism. Clearly, the formers’ remit is singularly broader, the latter’s more focused in a way that positively enables detailed analysis. By contrast, Stratton and Trinder offer ‘our journey as the starting point for those of other people’; and in providing an indicative national listing of sites of wide industrial antecedence and functions, the authors provide a first rate, one stop archaeological guide. This ties to their intention of urging a greater eclecticism upon us all: to make better use of this ‘physical context’ when ‘conventional’ histories are being written. Academic context, too, is argued to be an essential component of this text: there to better inform ‘the specialist studies’ being undertaken by industrial archaeologists; and to allow archaeology itself to feed into current historical controversy and debate.³⁷ At this crossover point, doubts begin to emerge, because the text and supporting notes offer, to the non-

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74, 80-1.

³⁷ Stratton and Trinder, *Industrial Archaeology*, 2-4.

specialist, *only* a rudimentary first stop, and to those ‘experts’ with access to a university library and personal computer less than this stepping stone. To note but one example: Marwick’s albeit valuable work on war is accepted uncritically, controversial as it is — although the site guide to wartime factories is nonetheless valuable.

This perhaps speaks directly to the uncertain function and audience for this book. Some interesting connections are made: in noting, for example, the lack of impact likely from archaeology to enhance our understanding of mining technology (paradoxically after spending several pages listing references to exactly this), but then drawing attention to the important evidence available if studying the pit community and industrial welfarism. Yet no intellectual context or guidance beyond that is offered.³⁸ We are told, too, that the authors aim to abandon the ‘conventional wisdom’ of simply ‘deploring certain aspects of the twentieth century’ by using a top down approach. Instead they offer ‘to write from first-hand experience of sites and landscapes’: to take ‘a sceptical, irreverent and sometimes counter-intuitive attitude to received views of twentieth-century artefacts and places’. One would expect, therefore, to find new insights, or at least comment, on linked themes like the ‘horrors of living in tower blocks’: this is, after all, about people’s homes — offering the most immediate of interfaces between people and the built environment. In fact, there is little or no speculation — informed or otherwise — on the social performance of systems housing generally, either from above or below, or in either its high-rise or low-rise

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

livery.³⁹ Thus we have an ambiguous text: a painstakingly researched ‘trail guide’ offering an excellent archaeological index and photographs but with little but generalised form above that.

Ambiguity is a central facet, too, of *Lectures de la Ville/The City as Text*. Perhaps intentionally: ‘La ville est désormais un espace équivoque, énigmatique, moins lieu de mémoire que fruit de l’amagination, produit du rêve ... mais surtout de nos délires (The town is henceforth an ambiguous, enigmatic space, less a place of the memory than fruit of the imagination, product of dream ... but above all of our delirium)’;⁴⁰ but also because of an organisational shortage of internal unity. Setting aside the unhelpful lack of a codifying introduction of substance, only in the broadest of senses could this collection on ‘la nouvelle histoire culturelle’ claim an overarching theme(s). Nor does this speak directly to a penchant to eclecticism: what we have instead is a number of mostly short essays (written in English) of varying quality and focus, commenting upon the cultural production of urban ‘written and visual representations of the town’ in its various guises. Included are essays deconstructing film/public sculpture/painting/architecture/printed images, in addition to the literary works of Stein, Pope, Gascoyne and generic science fiction. But as new cultural history, the ‘city and text’ — even allowing this broader interpretation — proves too exacting for some contributors: for example, Vagnoux on San Diego and Tijuana,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 135-43.

⁴⁰ G. Bonifas, ‘Introduction’, G. Bonifas (ed.), *Lecture(s) de la ville/The City as Text* (Nice, 2000), 2. See also M. Remy, ‘British Surrealism: Disqualifying Cities’, *ibid.*.

and Faraut on the philanthropic work of Lord Brabazon, both offer ‘straight’ histories; the former a socio-economic study; the latter constructed around contemporary texts — but as a standard ‘uncritical’, stereotyping and familiar discourse — on eugenics, national efficiency and poor housing. Marcet’s essay on Gertrude Stein perhaps only reinforces this lack of unity: its central point seemingly being that Stein most frequently ignored urban backdrops to concentrate on character depiction and development.

Moser, by contrast takes the collection title literally, offering a narrative essay on ‘The Town and its Diachronic Names’, which essentially tells us that place names frequently signify ‘strength and security’. Those examining the modern city offer less reassuring contexts. In contrast to Monti’s positive construct of ‘prosperity and order’: Bonifas concludes that ‘la ville n’est plus la cité organique, mariant ordre et harmonie (the town is no longer the organic city, marrying order and harmony)’.⁴¹ Cities are thoughtfully depicted (by Scott and Beugnet) as ‘hell on earth’: a locus for alienation, despair and ‘the arid bankruptcy of unbelief’; the ‘image or metaphor of the city taken as representing the oppressive and dehumanising environment of the typical Western man of today’, with its ‘commerce-impelled’ unethicalness. This prosperity presents ‘poverty and homelessness ... [as] a sore spot at the core of urban consumer culture’ — a threat to consumption and harmony — that must be hidden to

⁴¹ Bonifas, ‘Introduction’, 2.

‘protect the established social models which the system promotes’.⁴² If for Gray the miscellanies of modern cultural production methods — the printed images of city life in magazines and books — ‘can be bound together ... into a complete, integral view of the life one has lived’; for Little today’s cultural technology is the problem, not the solution — thus cities are now ‘designed for machines’ — ‘the human becomes incidental’ spatially — ‘the machine city functions only to enable the fantasies of its inhabitants’ in cyber-space.⁴³ The paradox is, of course, that critics of the city have been making similar claims about technological intrusion and a lack of organicism and community for some two centuries.

Do we get a sense of wholeness, direction and eclectic vision from these studies: in terms of the discipline itself, and the city and its identity? Predictably one finds answers in the affirmative and negative. The breadth of study offered here is not wholly typical of urban scholarship generally and certainly unrepresentative of its internal equilibrium (for example, architectural and cultural components are refreshingly afforded key roles). Nonetheless collectively the volumes indicate the vibrant constitution and continuing potential of urban history when measured as the reader’s sum of its constituent parts. However, at the contributor’s level — as one might perhaps expect — eclecticism as a driving

⁴² R. Scott, ‘David Gascoyne’s *Night Thoughts: “The Infernal Megalopolis”*, in Bonifas, *Lecture(s) de la ville*, 54, 58-9, 62; M. Beugnet, ‘Space, Representation, and Social Exclusion: *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* (Leos Carax, 1991)’, in *ibid.*, 91.

⁴³ D.W.S. Gray, ‘London and Paris Illustrated in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century’, in *ibid.*, 149, 167; Little, ‘Preposterous City’, 15, 21.

force is less energetic. Indeed cross and inter-disciplinary study can instead promote generalisation — a pandering to a base common denominator, or one lacking a clear sense of epistemological direction — that ironically sits more uneasily than where studies, for very practical reasons, set balanced limits to their horizontal integral ambitions.

And, in terms of the city, rather than the discipline itself? Identity, here, is and always was multi-faceted, operating with a semi-viscous fluidity. How cities defined themselves was a blend between popular and elite currencies. Elites might select or nominate many of the icons and ‘best stories’ upon which much of identity was presumed to be based; but unless such stories were widely repeated and accepted, then they lacked cultural value and became meaningful only to those elites, and perhaps to local newspapers and those historians seeking a quick fix. The selection of the best stories — and their validation — was an infinitely more complex process based on combinations of commonly ‘vaunted’ values/tastes and wider processes of cultural production that urban history has yet fully to capture.

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