

**Public Space and the Challenges of Urban Transformation in Europe**, Ali Madanipour, Sabine Knierbein, and Aglaée Degros (eds.), 2014, New York and London: Routledge, 232 pages. Paperback: \$58.95, ISBN: 978-0-415-64055-8; Hardback: \$170, ISBN: 978-0-415-63834-0

This edited volume is a result of a yearlong collaboration at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space in Vienna, headed by Sabine Knierbein, where Ali Madanipour and Aglaée Degros served as Visiting Professors in 2010. A conference organized by the above scholars brought participants from Europe to reflect on the design, planning, functions, usage, and politics of public spaces across European cities. As a result, *Public Space and the Challenges of Urban Transformation in Europe* is an eclectic book in terms of theoretical inclinations, empirical evidence, and style. The challenge of the editors was organising such disparate views in a thematically coherent volume. The outcome is a three-part book. Essays in Part I investigate the relationship between the state and public space by paying attention to the different plans, strategies and policies mobilized by public authorities to foster urban change. Part II analyses how different stakeholders in the city define, assign, and resist the roles and functions of public space. Essays in Part III delve deep into the fabric of everyday life to assess how inhabitants understand, negotiate, and struggle with the diversity of the city through their everyday usage of public spaces. The introduction to each part by the editors provides a useful summary of each essay and reasoning for why they were grouped together. A conclusion to the volume, authored by the editors, reflects on the future of European cities and their public spaces.

The editors define public space as a “crossroads” that serves as the “meeting place of politics and culture, social and individual territories, and instrumental and expressive concerns.” (p. 1) In other words, public spaces encapsulate the multiple and complex challenges affecting Europe today. Moreover, the authors of each chapter argue in different ways that public spaces not only provide us a lens through which to assess urban transformations in Europe, but that public spaces can also offer “the potential to make a valuable contribution in addressing the economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political challenges facing European cities.” (p. 7)

The book is extremely well organized and easy to follow. The editing of individual chapters, however, left me unsatisfied at times. Although each author is ultimately responsible for the content and organization of their chapters, some of the essays in this volume could have benefited from further editing. For instance, some of the essays are part of larger projects that the authors are currently working on. Consequently, some of the chapters – including Bricocoli and Savoldi’s chapter on Milan, Hackenberg’s account of Antwerp, Litscher’s research on Swiss cities, and to a lesser extent, because it intended and effectively made a methodological intervention, De Vita’s chapter on Naples and Belfast – tried to summarize their entire research

projects while dedicating only a few pages to the analysis of their case study. Their case studies, however, were extremely informative and suggestive and I wished they had spent more time analysing the details of how Milan, Antwerp, Swiss cities, Naples or Belfast negotiated the politics of public space.

Other chapters failed to connect their theoretical discussions with their empirical findings which, perhaps unintentionally, resulted in mostly descriptive accounts of life in public spaces. In this category I include Roskamm's very provocative and creative account of Berlin's *Tempelhofer Feld*, a 4,000,000 m<sup>2</sup> empty field. Roskamm's reading of this public space explores how inhabitants appropriate and use an empty public space – how they fill it with their own functions, meanings, and contents – and yet his discussion of Lefebvre and Laclau did not directly correlate with the empirical observations at the beginning of the chapter. Koutrolidou's chapter on Hackney, London and Billig's account of public spaces in informal settlements in Istanbul were extremely descriptive chapters – and informative in that regard – that did not attempt to make an argument or a theoretical contribution to debates on public space in Europe. Chapters in this and the above category, when read individually, did not add much to discussions and debates of public space. However, when read in conjunction with the rest of the book helped expand our understanding of how public spaces can exacerbate or resolve the challenges affecting Europe.

I found the chapters on Vienna, Budapest, Dresden, Warsaw, Paris, and London (by Koch and Latham) excellent. These chapters could be read individually because they balanced out their theoretical and empirical contributions while remaining concise. More specifically, Knierbein, Madanipour and Degros' research in Vienna demonstrates that public spaces are not neutral arenas in the city, but have in fact become, in some instances, "catalysts of change." (p. 37) In other words, central to economic and urban restructuring across Europe has been the renovation of public spaces. Polyák's exploration of open-air markets in Budapest confirms the findings of the Vienna research. The author shows that open-air markets have historically facilitated urban encounters and relations. However, Polyák highlights that city officials in Budapest now see open-air markets as evidence of poverty, while in other European cities open-air markets have in fact accelerated the gentrification process. Polyák thus raises the important question, whose *publics* are markets serving? Voisin-Bormuth's excellent account of Dresden, similarly asks for whom is the city being designed. The author investigated the transformation of Dresden's city centre and shows how city officials have in recent times attempted to deconstruct the city's socialist past by creating supposedly democratic public spaces. In reality, the new public spaces serve particular capitalist functions that respond not to the inhabitants' needs and wishes, but to the public authorities' views of what public space should be.

Elżanowski's research on Warsaw explored the struggles to recreate the past in a neighbourhood where a Jewish ghetto used to stand. The chapter raises an equally important question, what kind of past, and for whom is it being recreated? Palumbo's brilliant ethnographic account of Barbès in Paris showcases the richness of the neighbourhood's social and ethnic diversity, its carnival character, as well as the uncertainty of its urban encounters. Palumbo demonstrates that public authorities fear uncertainty and have attempted in recent years to "hyperorganize" the neighbourhood by reducing the fortuitousness and casualness that make Barbès exciting and unique among Paris' neighbourhoods. Finally, Koch and Latham engaged with critical geography studies on public space to argue that much of the literature highlights the negativity of public space, such as exclusions and encroachments, or the political potential of public spaces for claim-making. The authors argue that we should pay attention instead to the everyday usage of public spaces to understand how public spaces transform over time through the mundane and daily appropriation by the public.

*Public Space and the Challenges of Urban Transformation in Europe* is an excellent resource for teachers of Urban Studies, Urban Geography, or European regional urban courses. Students of European cities will learn that public spaces are "crossroads" that when critically analysed can reveal the complexity of European societies, the multiple forces shaping European cities, and the democratic potentials of public spaces. The book is further proof that understanding the city requires a multidisciplinary approach, something the editors did brilliantly by putting this book together. In short, this volume forces us to raise questions and to look for answers to the most pressing urban question of our times: by whom and for whom are our cities being designed, planned, constructed, and produced?

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