

Six cities in search of an audience

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The Contested Metropolis. Six Cities at the Beginning of the 21st Century, INURA. Birkhäuser, Basel, 2004, 304 pp., 400 b/w illustrations. ISBN 3764300868, CHF74.

The authors of *The Contested Metropolis* are disarmingly frank about what this volume does not set out to achieve—‘Those seeking a coherent, closely-woven comparative analysis with a politico-sociological-urbanistic slant of large, western cities which attempts to reduce the processes presently unfolding to a single interpretative model will be disappointed by this book’ (p. 6). Instead INURA (the International Network for Urban Research and Action) has chosen to focus on the stories of six cities (Berlin, Brussels, Florence, London, Toronto and Zurich) by means of a ‘direct, immediate representation’ which is the fruit of collaborations between urbanists, squatters, activists (old and new generation), students, architects, council officials, participants in urban movements and so forth. INURA’s founding principle is that ‘An Alternative Urban World is Possible’ and this involves joining with the ‘network of people opposed to global capitalism, exploitation, sexism, consumerism’, as well as those who are ‘keen to bring about change’. This volume is not just a collection of texts however, it is also a rich source of photographs, images, maps and cartoons that are integral to the accompanying narrative and which set the collection apart from standard academic treatments of urban themes.

Berlin is one of the European cities to have undergone the most physical change in the last 15 years, but the cultural, political and

economic transformations have been no less spectacular. In ‘Berlin from Metropolust to Metropolost’, images of cranes and street art emphasize both the creative destruction and the destruction of creativity at the heart of the post-unification building frenzy. Although some developments have brought life and activity back to the former no-man’s land at the centre of the old city, the historic sites of West Berlin’s established alternative community have begun to experience the pressures of gentrification that have long been in evidence in other western metropolises, but which West Berlin’s unique status as the frontier post of the Cold War had suppressed for much of the post-war period. In the eastern districts of the city, such pressures remain minimal but there appears to be a ‘regularization’ of squatted apartment blocks and other semi-legal tenure. Alternative communities are still managing to form in the wake of Berlin’s relentless commodification such as the Wagenburg (rail coach towns) which have converted old abandoned DDR rolling stock into self-managed communities where a strong radical/alternative subculture is still in evidence. In Berlin, numerous ‘counter publics’ still survive, but there is an awareness that in surrounding Brandenburg, a more ancient heterophobia is growing in strength, while the city’s large Turkish and growing East European community is increasingly seen by local and national government as a

problem that has to be managed if not by 'integration' then by other symbolic forms of 'difference management' (such as representing Turkish women without the hijab that is customarily worn in public).

The chapter on Brussels also deals with 'subaltern spaces' such as 'The Universal Embassy' engagingly portrayed in a photo-essay by Tristan Wibault. The residents and users of the former Somali embassy in Brussels are mostly 'undocumented' migrants who have worked to convert the abandoned building into a community space that gives visible representation to the 'sans-papiers'. The users of the Universal Embassy are each given a special 'passport'—a photo ID that provides them with some tangible recognition that universal citizenship should not be dependent on the whim of an individual nation state. Although the Belgian postal service appears happy to accept the Universal Embassy card as a proof of identity, the Brussels police clearly see this DIY diplomatic mission as an affront to Belgian sovereignty (a double irony in a city that many 'Euro-sceptics' see as the capital of a would be 'post-national Europe'). The Universal Embassy has been subject to frequent violent raids and its residents arrested and removed to detention centres such as Vottem, near Liège, where conditions are described as being worse than in Belgium's regular jails. It is the fate of the 'undocumented' to inhabit these liminal spaces of high insecurity and risk, and all the more remarkable to see the creativity and inventiveness of new urban dwellers to whom all rights to the city are routinely denied.¹

Florence has also become home to an increasing variety of non-European migrants who, much more than the tourists and the visiting students, have begun to change the way the city looks and sounds. The city council, as one of the last redoubts of the post-communist left in Italy, prides itself on being open to new social movements and counter-cultural initiatives (the European Social Forum could not have organized an event on that scale without the active support and co-operation of the city authorities). However,

to describe Florence as 'an insurgent city' as the authors of this chapter do requires some qualification. They see James Holston's idea of the insurgent as spaces that disturb 'the modern city's established history, including everything from gay villages to fortified condominiums as too permissive and de-radicalizing. Instead they prefer to adopt Leonie Sandercock's notion of 'insurgent planning practices' which are *opposed to* the existing urban order and which result ultimately in what Friedmann calls the 'widening of democratic space'.²

In the chapter on London we encounter some writers who have had a long association with this journal (such as Mike Edwards and Penny Koutrolikou), and their contributions to the chapter on 'London: Un-contested Capital?' revive some of the earlier debates in *City* on regeneration, London's role in the global economy and the plight of the capital's socially disadvantaged. Mike Edwards shows how, despite some radical initiatives in sustainable transport policy such as the London congestion charge, there has been a lack of consistency in the Mayor of London's approach to the capital's transport needs. Lower bus fares have resulted in more passenger journeys, but the Plan for London still targets investment in business districts such as Docklands and especially Canary Wharf, which actually have very small night-time populations. Although this volume was completed before news of London's winning bid for the Olympic Games was announced, it is interesting to note that community groups in Newham and Tower Hamlets have already expressed concern that much of the infrastructural development will be targeted at the relatively better off (and predominantly white) neighbourhoods around Stratford in the south of the borough (where the second London cross-channel rail hub is being built) rather than the more deprived (and predominantly Asian and Black) districts to the east and west.

The major problem facing low- and middle-income Londoners, however, is the very high cost of housing—a problem that

has been exacerbated by the decline in the proportion of social housing and the decreasing availability of suitable sites for residential development. This has resulted in more cramped new builds with fewer amenities, while a displaced urbanization afflicts the wider region—forcing those who need to work in London but cannot afford to live there to engage in lengthy commutes, often using private car, rail and bus in one journey. Property owners and speculators are able to externalize these costs, while the consequence of protecting London's 'green belt' come what may means higher profits for land owners and leaves housing consumers with little or no income to improve, extend or maintain their properties, or to invest in energy-efficient home and transport technologies.

Mike Edwards proposes some very laudable objectives in the conclusion (What Is to Be Done?) such as ending the reduction in the public housing stock by halting the 'right to buy' initiative. On the other hand, a paradox of 'right to buy' has been that housing estates that were the exclusive preserve of low-income and benefit-dependent households are now starting to see the arrival of young middle-income households in search of their first affordable property. If mixed-class communities are a good thing, and Mike Edwards suggests as much in urging greater protection for those that do exist, then how do we achieve greater income diversity within neighbourhoods while ensuring those in housing need still have affordable housing options close to work, family and friends?

Echoing Engels' criticism of the draft Erfurt Programme ('They put general, abstract political questions into the foreground, thus concealing the immediate concrete questions...'), this volume generally avoids foregrounding its engagement with radical urban theory. But when abstract concepts such as 'multiculturalism' aspire to concrete political truths it is necessary to engage in some old-fashioned deconstruction. Thus it was good to find Goonewardena, Keil and Kipfer in their essay on the

'Creole City: Culture, Class and Capital in Toronto' taking on the idea of the officially sanctioned multicultural city and shaking out some of its more essentialist and atavistic components. While accepting the proposition that multiculturalism does not allow for what pop writer Pico Iyer describes as the 'global' city of 'mongrel identities and miscegenated mindsets', a city which is 'speeding into a post-national future willy-nilly' (p. 227), Goonewardena and company warn against the rush to embrace 'hybridity' as some post-modern cure-all for the cultural pathologies of the city of difference. As the authors point out, these 'blended identities' settle into more predictable patterns of discrimination in the case of unemployment which, in Toronto, is nearly twice as high among those of non-European origin; or poverty with nearly nine in ten Ghanaians living below the poverty line compared to 14% of European-origin. The authors quote the British anti-racist activist and editor of *Race and Class*, Ambalavanar Sivanandan, approvingly as a debunker of the type of 'culturalist' transformism that has allowed liberal, capitalist states to depoliticize class-based anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles through a strategy of 'diversity management'. The feminist Marxist critic, Himani Bennerji, has also warned of the dangers inherent within Canadian multiculturalism of promoting an ethnic communitarianism in which the marginalization and silencing of women is regarded as unproblematic by the 'white' Canadian left (including its 'colour-blind' socialist feminist wing). In arguably Canada's most neo-liberal city, the emphasis on competition and choice is seen by its policy elites as entirely consistent with the promotion of cultural difference and identity. 'Difference' thus becomes valorized as natural and inevitable and not the product of a distinct mode of production that is predicated on organized oppression and exploitation.

If Toronto is the capital of Canada's brave new neo-liberal frontier, Zurich at the heart of old Europe must surely qualify as one of

capitalism's most ancient bastions. Yet this city of insurers, bankers and citizens of sober protestant values has also been the centre of some of the most important *avant-garde* movements in Europe—Dadaism was born in the city's Cabaret Voltaire club in 1921, while Lenin spent several years in the Swiss city during the First World War where he wrote his major study on capitalism and imperialism in Zurich's well-appointed libraries. Some of the spirit of those years of internationalism and agitation appears to have survived the long period of post-war affluence when in 1980 an 'urban revolt' broke out involving 'riots, happenings and actions of all kinds' (p. 239) which resulted in the creation of 'a cosmopolitan ambience'. By the 1990s a lively alternative political and economic subculture had grown up in the city, encouraged in part by a reformist city council that was beginning to realize that a younger and more international population was no longer content with the dull provincialism that has characterized the city's social and cultural scene up until the 1970s. The municipal authority made Zurich the focus for often very negative and critical responses to its non-repressive policy in relation to heroin users—such as the provision of clean syringes and medical outreach services (including free AIDS screening). The toleration of 'needle park' behind the city's railway station gave Zurich an undeserved reputation for being the heroin capital of Europe, and in more recent years in response to pressure from local residents and businesses 'clean up' campaigns have targeted sex workers, drug users and squatters as part of a new revanchist strategy aimed at denying public space to these insurgent counter-publics. Indeed each and every city dealt with in this volume appears to be in the grip of some form of revanchist counter-offensive against the poor, the homeless and migrant 'non-citizens', giving a depressingly global feel to Neil Smith's eponymous and seminal study.³

On a more positive note, however, throughout these documentations, interven-

tions and critical reflections on the six cities we get a strong sense of what the title of an earlier INURA study referred to as other 'possible urban worlds',⁴ existing within the increasingly cramped spaces left outside or engaged in resisting neo-liberal globalization. One of the encouraging aspects of the INURA project is that much can be done by way of achieving such practical utopias by linking up with local resistances and learning from alternative political, economic and cultural praxes in a way that allows shared urban knowledges and struggles to inform the building of what the 2003 INURA declaration calls 'a new urban global world' based on 'the solidarity and cooperation of human collectives in justice, democracy, and harmony with non-human nature'. Anyone interested in critical urban studies and action will find something to take away and reflect on from this volume. I only hope that INURA succeeds in getting the book more widely distributed than the rather upmarket gallery bookshops in which I have so far spotted it.

Notes

- 1 Els Dietvorst also deals with creativity and 'identity retrieval' in Brussels in her 2004 essay, "'The Return of the Swallows": from urban hardship to identity retrieval—the making of a movie as a social integration project in Brussels South', *City* 8(2), pp. 279–288.
- 2 See also the work of Florence's 'laboratory for democracy' discussed in Paul Ginsborg's recent book (2005) *Il tempo di cambiare. Politica e potere nella vita quotidiana*. Turin: Einaudi.
- 3 Smith, N. (1996) *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London and New York: Routledge.
- 4 INURA (1998) *Possible Urban Worlds*. Basel: Birkhäuser.

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