



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Design after decline: how America rebuilds shrinking cities** by *Brent D. Ryan*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, USA, 2012, 288 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4407-6.

*Design after decline* is a commendable addition to the literature concerning urban design efforts in America since the Second World War. Urban collapse is viewed through an interdisciplinary lens, providing a detailed history of the problems that various urban networks faced when rapid deindustrialization became widespread. A number of urban case studies are considered in admirable detail, ranging from the Bronx to London, Boston, and Medellín. The author's principal focus is on Detroit and Philadelphia – two post-industrial cities that disintegrated at an unprecedented rate. Although at times Ryan's conception of urban revitalization almost blurs into a blind admiration of high-design aesthetics, he does deal most effectively with a critical phase in recent urban history.

Prior to the early 1970s there had been a synchronization of federal and municipal efforts in addressing urban design. At the peak of urban deindustrialization, however, this ceased to be the case. It was at this point that the Nixon administration effectively cut support for large, government-led, top-down approaches to urbanism – effectively severing the lifeline of urban Modernism. Centralized planning became an object of severe criticism, and the inherently projective, utopian nature of Modernism was buried, only to be replaced by a valorization of Postmodernism.

Following this devastating combination of urban collapse and funding cuts, the actors involved in the revitalization efforts in Detroit and Philadelphia scrambled to address the unprecedented state of urban disintegration. They were forced to face this task with an unfamiliar set of tools that functioned on a smaller, more decentralized scale than

urbanists were comfortable with. Even though the shedding of the heavy-handed approach of urban Modernism had been perceived as progress, the void left by the gutting of centralized planning was hard to fill in its entirety by the fragmented nature of decentralized development.

It is while focusing on this specific point in history, and how it subsequently unravelled, that *Design after decline* achieves critical mass. Ryan directs his analysis towards a series of urban-development case studies from Detroit and Philadelphia. These studies bear witness to the birth of new methods of approaching an inherently centralized collapse through a decentralized lens. Ryan's accurate cataloguing of these methods is significant, for through this process he effectively presents the contemporary urbanist with a set of tools and approaches, both pragmatic and discursive, that can be used to address the challenges of the modern city.

Palliative planning, interventionist policy, democratic decision making, projective design and patchwork urbanism – these are the fundamental skills that Ryan presents to the contemporary urban designer. He concludes with a projective vision for the post-industrial American city, set in the year 2061. The final image, composed of clustered densities amidst appropriated and reused vacant lands, is intriguingly one that has the capacity to bridge several of the schisms of current architectural and urban discourse.

Writing in a manner that successfully avoids falling into nostalgia or amnesia, Ryan's objectivity is noteworthy. While he clearly outlines the failings of past efforts at centralized planning, he is similarly critical of the visible impotence of the various decentralized methods and ideologies that contemporary urban and architectural discourses continue to valorize. Ryan's argument seems clear: the challenges of the modern city are of a scale that urbanism cannot address if it continues to shun

centralized methods simply because of their past sins. In other words, the urbanist must learn from history, rather than bury it. In the end, however, one is confronted by the question as to whether this is a book about urban design or about housing design in the urban context. From this perspective, the main point of criticism that can be levelled against Ryan is that he seems too narrowly-focused on the subject of residential development, at the cost of other methods of urban revitalization. Although he does at times mention infrastructural, commercial or mixed-use development efforts, his clear focus on housing, without clarifying that the book is predominantly about housing, gives the reader the impression that cities are little more than a collection of residential neighbourhoods. Such a vision, especially in the case of post-industrial urban collapse, is a frightening one. The notion that a rapidly de-industrializing city suffering massive population and economic losses can react to the disintegration of its urban fabric by merely building high-design housing projects, seems as fitting as reattaching the falling leaves of a tree in autumn in order to fight off the coming winter.

It is important to realize that many of America's cities have still not been able to plan effectively for the potential or reality of rapid urban collapse due to sudden economic changes. As Ryan points out, Detroit and Philadelphia are poignant examples of this. Rather than assume urban collapse as inevitable, however, there is the potential to restructure urban economic networks and reposition the modern city as a point of productivity in the global economy. It is through the revitalization of such productivity that the critical approaches outlined by Ryan can actually build upon and enforce deep urban reform. Without this foundational restructuring, however, urban development faces the risk of operating as mere plastic surgery – hiding and beautifying without actually addressing the issues at hand.

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**Seeing cities change: local culture and class**  
by *Jerome Krase*, Ashgate, Farnham, UK,  
2012, 290 pp. ISBN 9-7814-0942-8787.

Visual images are a powerful way to communicate knowledge about urban spaces. This approach,

revealing both the appearance and spatial location of urban spaces, has long been a tradition in the urban sciences with, for instance, sociologists being great exponents of visual analysis during the past few decades. Advocating a visual comprehension of the city, and a reunification of old and new urban sociologies, Jerome Krase in *Seeing cities change* sees the value of visual sociology as a social utility. In this framework he investigates social organization and cultural meaning in the production and decoding of urban images.

An important way to observe the city is to walk in it, as de Certeau (1985) has emphasized. Krase, following this principle, observes and understands cities by comparing Polish gentrification in Brooklyn (New York) and Krakow (Poland). Highlighting the role of sight in the city, he accentuates the need for individuals to be able to interpret what they see, and to note how they see it. For example, it is important to note that perceptions and valuations of residential neighbourhood spaces may be significantly different for 'insiders' as opposed to 'outsiders'. Thus when tourists visit 'Little Italies' or 'Chinatowns', communities that have arisen in not only European or American cities but in settlements scattered across Asia and Australasia, they do not see their environments in the same manner as an Italian or Chinese native does. As Krase reveals, we have different influences upon our urban reading.

In line with John Brinkerhoff Jackson's (1984) perspective on the 'vernacular landscape', urban scenery's form and meaning is shaped partly by the needs and tastes of people. In this context it is necessary to observe and describe how building types such as motels, fast-food franchises and garages not only participate in the visual competition of city streets but establish markers along them that grant inclusion and exclusion of certain people along thoroughfares. Ethnic communities in this regard provide good examples of issues associated with vernacular landscape manufacture owing to their dominance of spaces and places in cities. With the appropriation of territory to help express the presence of distinct ethnic groups in particular districts, such as 'Little Italies', language is also employed as a means of expressing and enforcing the concept of place. As Krase demonstrates (p. 68), Italian immigrants in New York, for instance, created words such as *Italianita* (little Italy), *bella figura* (keeping up good appearance) as well as *omerta* (maintaining secrecy) to help establish and display their identity within a certain part the city. Understanding urban space requires, with reference to urban sociology,