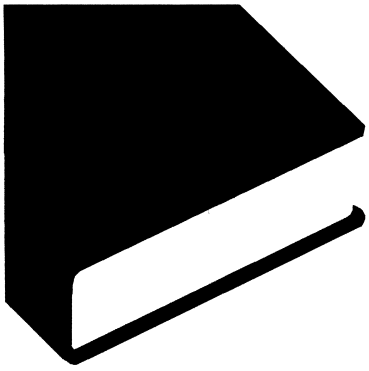

BOOK REVIEWS

Cities after the fall of Communism: reshaping cultural landscapes and European identity edited by *Jon Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis* and *Blair Ruble*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, USA, 2009, 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-8018-9191-5.

The end of East European communism in 1989, arguably the most important geo-political event of the late-twentieth century, converted cities in the region into laboratories of socio-spatial change. Twenty years later, this change remains crudely understood; hence, the persistence of the rather vague term 'transitional city'. One key reason for the continuous misunderstanding of contemporary East European urbanism may well be that scholarship on the subject has been heavily dominated by the political economy approach, to the neglect of 'softer', humanist-driven interpretations. In this sense, *Cities after the fall of Communism* presents a laudable attempt to complement the literature by adding an important analytical variable explaining urban change in the region – that of culture.

The book is edited masterfully. The ambitious research approach of the editors is succinctly summarized in Strauss's famous question: 'What time is this space?' The editors propose that urban transformation in the post-communist period is at least partially the product of cultural identity re-creation that seeks to find a desirable past and thus position cities in the region for a desirable European future. This thesis holds together the wide variety of individual case studies chosen from central and north-eastern Europe: Vilnius, Novgorod, Wrocław, Tallinn, Odessa, Sevastopol, Kaliningrad, Kharkiv, Lviv, Łódź and Szczecin. The details of the cases vary immensely: for example, whereas in some cases a Russian / Soviet identity is celebrated, in most it appears to be vehemently rejected. Still, the fundamentals of the story – heart-wrenching searches for the most flattering past (among several other, more grim ones marked by oppression and ethnic extinctions) and their representation in space, whether achieved by changing street names, demolishing old monuments or erecting new ones – are omnipresent. Having in mind that most of the cities discussed in the volume have been nodes of perpetual ethnic and national rivalry, their latest urban revamping seems to be part of a perennial story of spatial change as a tool of identity reclamation. In this sense, the story is the perfect post-Soviet illustration of an old Soviet joke about the communist regime's enviable ability to erase the past. It is easy to predict the future, the joke went; it is the past that is harder to predict – it always keeps changing.

The book is organized in three parts: 'European cities old and new: re-creating medieval histories' (Vilnius, Novgorod, Wrocław); 'Architecture and history at ports of entry' (Tallinn, Odessa, Sevastopol); and 'Cities at a new east-west border' (Kharkiv, Łódź , Szczecin). This division works well because it is both geographical and conceptual. The common theme of urban change as a mighty weapon of cultural change should not obscure the fact that all cities discussed in the book seem to have found different and unique ways of coping with it.

An interesting story is presented of Wrocław (once known as Breslau), a city in Poland. Seeking to sidestep thorny issues of Polish versus German identity (the city has at different points of history been part of Austria, Bavaria and Prussia, but its German population was expelled after the Second World War and the German legacy was purposefully suppressed), Wrocław has found a creative way of avoiding the debate entirely. In reshaping its urban fabric, it has sought simultaneously to celebrate its medieval, pre-nation-state heritage and its latest, post-nation-state European Union identity. At the other end of the

spectrum, the Russian city of Novgorod has sought to revamp its local, unique, city-based identity, both underplaying its status as a quintessential ethno-national centre and proposing a new, locally-inspired notion of Russian identity.

In the concluding chapter, the editors claim that the fall of communism has been ultimately a triumph of the nation-state (p. 336), obviously referring to the post-1989 disintegration of multi-ethnic federations and their replacement by 'ethnically clean' republics. Yet in many ways, the cases demonstrate how short-lived this triumph has been. Faced with a triple transition – post-communism, Europeanization and globalization – East European cities are reshaping themselves by invoking the end of nation-statehood and searching for either a deeply-local or deeply-transnational identity – but, in either case, a non-nation-state identity. In this sense, the editors are not only correct but perhaps prophetic in making their grand concluding claim that in their painful soul-searching for a post-nation-state identity East Europeans have found the secret of a unified Europe – the secret that European Union bureaucrats have sought for decades and have yet to find. In this sense Eastern Europe may indeed be the 'New Europe'.

Cities after the fall of Communism is a superb volume that must be added to the library of any scholar interested in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet world. Further, by offering unique insights into the intersection of architecture, urbanity and culture, this book will be useful to scholars in a number of humanities and social sciences – for example, art history, architecture, sociology and cultural anthropology. It will make excellent reading in graduate seminars in any of these disciplines.

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After amnesia: learning from the Islamic Mediterranean urban fabric by *Attilio Petruccioli*, Edizioni ICAR, Polytechnic of Bari, Bari, Italy, 2007, 238 pp. ISBN 978-88-95006-03-1.

If we analyse the construction process of a house, we see that the builder possesses in thought the form of the house; he knows what the fact of being a house is. In a certain sense the house has its beginnings in house: in something immaterial (its concept) that generates something that includes the material (Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* IX 1050a, 5-10).

The form of territory is the text in which history is written and the primary tool in understanding, recording and translating it. It is the direct expression of the history of mankind. The great feudal societies of the past can be considered, above all, as great civilizations of urban and building fabric, where economy, society, religion, and culture are all legible in a great common vision, in a great unified design, which finds in the urban and building fabric, and in their traces and persistence, the historical evidence of its existence and identity. Civilizations such as that of the Chinese and *Dar al Islam* reveal, in the immense variety of their buildings designed around a courtyard, 'always the same and yet always different', the reason for their existence. They tell us of the readings and interpretations that man has carried out over time. They patiently and precisely explain to us the civic organization of those societies. They let us glimpse, and know how to read, the possible forms of their future.

This is the main reason why Attilio Petruccioli's *After amnesia* is a precious document in the study of urban form. A civilization of urban and building fabric lends itself perfectly to a morphological interpretation of its urban and territorial structures, even when these are complex and profoundly stratified from a historical perspective. The book is full of interesting and useful insights not only in the numerous case studies analysed, ranging from Spain to Bosnia and from North Africa to the Middle East, but also in the issues that are addressed that have significance for the whole discipline.

In an ample introductory chapter, entitled 'The fourth typology', the author clarifies the concepts informing his work (for instance, the concepts of *type* and *typological process* and those of *organicity* and *seriality*) and highlights their profound historico-cultural implications. He then proposes a reading of the Islamic Mediterranean urban fabric. The book deals in turn with three interpretative tools and three scales for the concept of *type*, ranging from *building type* to *urban organism*. The author sheds light on a complex reality, whose systemic and civic dimensions, and so perhaps the more profound reason for its history, often eludes us.

Petrucccioli offers us an efficient interpretative key. His interpretation of the Mediterranean