

BOOK REVIEWS

Bénédicte Lefebvre and Michel Rautenberg (2010). *Utopies et mythologies urbaines à Villeneuve d'Ascq*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Press Universitaires du Septentrion.

This co-authored book by Bénédicte Lefebvre and Michel Rautenberg aims to explore the way in which the pioneer inhabitants of Villeneuve d'Ascq have entered the context of a newly created urban space that originated by an administrative decision in the 1960s. In October 1967, French authorities made the critical decision to build a new city using 'old spatial materials' in social and political terms. Villeneuve d'Ascq, the result of the administrative recreation of the old communes of Ascq, Annapes and Flers, was established east of Lille, the local metropolis. EPAL was the public organization responsible for its spatial organization.

The authors engage in an empirical study of how the evolution and expansion of the new city have operated in relation to newcomers and of how the latter have conceived this project in terms of social and cultural daily life. Much emphasis is given, here, to the views that new citizens carry with them about their life and future and to how this affects their use of the

urban space and the meanings they attach to it.

Citizens are not seen, here, as passive receivers of a ready-made structure, but as active and highly energetic agents. In Henri Lefebvre's terms, they have adopted a spatial practice of re-territorialisation, giving priority to their socially meaningful needs. This ongoing spatial history has lasted thirty years.

Lefebvre's and Rautenberg's study stems from five basic hypotheses. The first is that citizens are embedded in the new spatial context, carrying with them their social, cultural and cognitive dispositions. The second concerns the quality of the urban environment as designed, imagined and realized by its administrative regulators. The third relates to the role of public powers, such as municipality newspapers and councils. The fourth accounts for the generational succession of the residents. Finally, the fifth addresses the constant dialogue between the sociality of citizens and the image of the city as a whole.

The notions of disposition and adjustment, that is the representational space and the representation of space, are central in the Lefebvrian conceptualization. The first intends to show how residents employ their past and present experiences in practical ways. The second refers to the

set of transformations which affect the agents' practices and behaviour, which are set in motion in order to be adapted to their specific residential conditions, as they are defined by the limits between private and public space, by the social relations of neighbourhood and by the practices of socialization, as well as by negotiations with the administrators. The interplay between such adjustment, citizens' dispositions and the relationship between public and private space is analyzed in this book through the concepts of 'openness' and 'closeness', referring to the degree of social and individual participation in the newly formed space.

This kind of social practice creates a historical and mythological past with direct reference and connection to the narrative on the utopian destination of the new city. Informants' narratives show how, in Edward Soja's terms, the new urban space operates as a kind of socio-spatial dialectic, in the context of their attempt to socialize space, appropriate it and transform it into a key of symbolic reference.

The methodology adopted in this work is polyphonic and multivariate, based on the systematic use of statistical evidence and ethnographic interviews with inhabitants in conjunction with the study of articles published in the local newspapers

and of official documents from EPAL's archives. The emphasis is on people's accounts about the public space, the intermediary public space, the collective space and the private space.

This study of Villeneuve d'Ascq is not simply an account of the evolution of a new city; it is a study of the ways through which agents interact with the imaginary of the built environment and its social construction in order to make their life possible in it. It shows how 'top-to-down' policies regarding space are appropriated by people in their daily lives, and how they create complex socio-spatial formations from the results of such policies. Almost thirty years after the implementation of this urban experiment, the original utopias about its future are still contested and mediated by the social rhetoric on space in everyday life, as Michel de Certeau would put it. It is precisely for this reason that both writers do not conceptualize space in a Euclidean manner; rather, they conceptualize it as conditioned and produced by specific social relations that, though embedded in certain political decision-making processes, imprint their own choices in it. Thus, this book gives the reader the opportunity to think about the notions of space and spatiality. Space, we are invited to consider, is not something 'out there', a 'different thing' from society

waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, space is socially produced; it is included in specific social relations and, at the same time, includes them, thus encompassing deeply political dimensions. As the Villeneuve d'Ascq case eminently shows, societies create, through specific and contested conditions and social relations, not only their history but also their spaces — material, relational, lived, symbolic — though not always in terms of their own choice.

Manos Spyridakis

University of Peloponnese, Greece
spyman@ath.forthnet.gr

Peter J. M. Nas (ed.) (2011). *Cities Full of Symbols: A Theory of Urban Space and Culture*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.

This lengthy edited volume deserves attention for the ambition of its subtitle alone, which promises to offer a theory of both urban space and urban culture. The main title, meanwhile, in calling our attention to the symbolic layer of the urban environment, announces the central tenet of the book's theoretical approach.

While there has certainly been insufficient coverage of this symbolic aspect in the literature on urban

anthropology, it would be naive to accept that a theory can be developed in an academic vacuum and on the basis of self-reference alone. The list of references for the introduction contains only nineteen entries—eight of these being previous works by the editor. Theoretical discussion is limited to a couple of paragraphs on *The Image of the City* (1960) by Kevin Lynch, whose method of mental mapping is applied in five case-studies in this volume, and to a brief mention of Castells, de Certau, Nora, and Low. The gap in the literature identified by the editor in the opening paragraphs simply cannot be as great as we are led to believe by such a meagre and cursory review of the literature. Nevertheless, it must be said that the systematic and persistent application of concepts and methods originally developed by the editor does contribute to the coherence and cohesion of the volume.

The volume contains fourteen chapters, amongst which the Introduction and the Conclusion present the bulk of the theory promised in the subtitle. The remaining twelve chapters are case-studies from various places, with five devoted to Indonesia. Together with a chapter on Colombo in Sri Lanka, coverage of Southeast Asia takes up half of the book. The remaining chapters touch on Europe—Ghent, The Hague, and Gdansk—and the

Americas, including Buenos Aires and the two US cities of Albuquerque in New Mexico and New York City.

The majority of the authors are Dutch, most of them associated with the University of Leiden, where the editor is also based. Most are social anthropologists, alongside experts in linguistics, sociology, urban development and regional studies. No justification is needed for this preponderance of social anthropologists and Dutch writers, nor for the close association of many contributors with Leiden University; the disciplinary bias is actually a strong point of this anthology. Rather, the book's greatest shortcoming lies in the narrow theoretical grounds upon which most of the authors rely, with many seeming to presume the previous work of the editor a sufficient basis for their arguments. There is only one chapter that does not cite the editor's works.

All the same, the coherence achieved through this degree of focus enhances the analytical tools outlined by the editor in the introduction, especially its classification of the types of symbolic bearers of cities—the material, discursive, iconic, behavioural, and emotional ways in which urban symbolism finds expression (p. 9 and p. 19). The order of the chapters follows the organizational principle of different nature. The first seven chapters

are more holistic case-studies of cities, while the following two are comparative studies and the remaining four chapters focus on parts of cities, analysing different types of symbolic bearers. Most of the chapters provide interesting insights into urban symbolic ecology, each treating a different aspect of this ecology, all cumulatively helping to develop a more profound understanding of the analytical tools offered in the introduction and in the previous works of the editor to which they subscribe.

The concluding chapter only vaguely refers to the ample case-study material in the preceding chapters. Instead, Nas and De Giosa suggest what they call a new paradigm for urban research that is sensitive to the problem of social cohesion. Essentially, readers are offered a crash-course in a methodology of urban research that focuses on the production, consumption, manipulation and alteration of symbols in and of cities. If not absolutely convincing as a contribution to the theory of urban space and culture, this collection offers inspirational material to all interested scholars. It should prove especially useful to novices in the field, offering basic classificatory instruments for deciphering the symbolic 'jungle' that characterizes contemporary cities (p. 286). Finally, one of the most welcoming

features of this book is its availability as an open access document via www.oapen.org.

Goran Janev

Sts Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje

gorjan00@yahoo.com