

BOOK REVIEW

The Radicals' City: Urban Environment, Polarisation, Cohesion

Ralf Brand and Sara Fregonese

Farnham, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013, 216 pages, £60.00 (Hb)

ISBN 978 1 40945 160 0

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Urban design is broadly accepted as having significant impacts with regard to place-making, with literature often looking directly towards architecture as a catalyst for urban events to 'take place'. Likewise, urban design performs as a mediating – or sometimes inflammatory – force. In this extremely accessible and engaging book, *The Radicals' City* focuses on the role the built environment plays in urban socio-political landscapes, drawing from four contemporary examples of urban spatial conflict. Belfast, Beirut, Berlin and Amsterdam are each addressed as individual case studies in reasonable depth, examining both the physical and discursive roles of material structures as capable of either polarising or uniting the diverse urban populations in these cities.

Using the starting point of 'radicalism', the communities that are emphasised in the book are those which are enmeshed in a 'radicalising' process. The authors do, however, critique the assumption that radicalisation occurs simply as the result of either separation of a group/individual from the mainstream (due to their 'extremist' politics), or their increasing isolation due to the mainstream pole shifting away from (typically) minority or disadvantaged groups, with the result that their politics are thus re-viewed as 'radical' by comparison. Indeed, in their introduction the authors make note of the problematic nature of the term, and instead use "polarisation" to clarify the movement of two ideological poles shifting apart. However, the focus of the case studies and subsequent interview material is less on 'radicals' themselves but on the way that material structures influence the daily life and overall attitudes of everyday people, such as the installation of CCTV cameras, gated communities or political street art.

Clearly, the four case studies are urban environments that have experienced significant troubles; they are centres of conflict, disquiet and inter-community tensions, which sometimes erupt into violence. While acknowledging that there is a significant body of literature surrounding the material politics of war zones, the authors emphasise the need for literature to address zones of unrest *before* they become states of overt conflict. Their interest lies in the possibility of urban design to employ knowledges and strategies that can diffuse socio-political tensions before such violence occurs.

The first three chapters of the book clearly identify the goals of the study, the authors' background in associated projects, and where the case studies are situated within existing literature. Using an appropriate metaphor, the authors believe there should be a bridge between ideological understandings of space and the physical existence of the built environment. As such, they argue that the concepts of radicalism or extremism could benefit from being situated more closely in the 'material turn' where concrete events, contexts and structures are analysed as grounded in spatial and temporal specifics. For instance, the authors critique existing literature around processes of polarisation as largely ignoring material settings, instead focusing on behaviours that give rise to unrest. Likewise, literature dealing exclusively with the built environment is deemed as relying too literally on causal relations between urban forms and social outcomes (such as 'environmental criminology', where architects are portrayed as power-holders capable of averting criminal activity by eliminating potential spaces of felonious encounters, for example). Rather, the authors see a need for architectural literature to move beyond the idea of a 'spatial hero' and look at ground-level social contexts *and* the built environment as a single assemblage.

To achieve this goal, *The Radicals' City* proposes a Latourian collaboration between the human and built urban environment, arguing that entities exist as combinations of actors: engineers, architects, structures, the public and so forth. To analyse how these entities engage with space, the authors argue that Science and Technology studies need to look further into a broader range of hybridised subjects in order to better address the built world as both product and mediator of socio-political tensions. Non-human structures, then, are awarded agency in *The Radicals' City*, with power to accelerate or mitigate urban unrest.

The case studies themselves are structured as individual chapters, each with a good amount of visual material to reproduce the materialities of urban structures in a way that words alone could not do justice. We see through photographic examples how solid barriers separate housing and commercial areas, examples of the use of art, memorials, codes and religious iconography to mark (or dispute) territories, and creative interventions designed to induce hospitable relations in public spaces. These visual representations give the reader a better insight into how radicalised artefacts impregnate the built environments of the case study cities; we can see how they bear the marks of the very human inhabitants as much as the politics, abstract architectures and pragmatic concerns that gave these structures life.

The chapter on Belfast, for example, concentrates on the religious, political, ethnic and linguistic conflict between Catholics and Protestants. It focuses on built constructions such as 'peacelines' that establish a physical wall between communities, with resultant duplication of services. Defensive architecture (such as peacelines or surveillance cameras) is investigated alongside murals and political symbolologies (such as bilingual signage). These provide both corporeal and semiotic understandings of disputed space, and are set in contrast to productive regeneration that encourages peaceful relationships. To demonstrate these possibilities, the authors address shared-space zones, which provide alternative ways to use space in which long-standing tensions might be dispelled or temporarily cast aside.

The second case study in Beirut reveals a historiography of a city embedded in cycles of infrastructural damage and rejuvenation. As well as addressing obvious symbols of political strife (propaganda art, religious buildings or derelict buildings), the authors look closely at the “unbuilding” of Beirut’s security apparatus and attempts to counter the demarcation of Muslim and Christian spaces (such as ensuring mall decoration is in neutral colours). Furthermore, the economic inaccessibility of new ‘neutral’ zones such as the recently constructed Beirut Central District is highlighted, with stark contrast existing between poorer war-scarred neighbourhoods and the much-touted rebirth of a luxury Beirut.

The Radicals' City goes on to consider Berlin in terms of extremist action by neo-Nazi groups. This is explored with particular attention to the ways that such groups function under-the-radar by drawing on coded messages and symbols to ensure their presence is acknowledged in spite of being legally forbidden. Likewise, religio-cultural discord is at the heart of the Amsterdam case study also, where urban design reflects differences between conservative (usually older), native Dutch inhabitants and immigrant groups perceived by them as threatening (such as Muslim youth ‘gangs’). This chapter focuses on a landscape of distrust, where multiple cultural practices exist side-by-side, yet present quite different material features. In contrast to Belfast or Beirut then, the authors are drawing on Amsterdam as an example of the role which urban architecture can play in a pre-conflict area, holding the potential to provide spaces of positive interaction, or - more ominously - to intensify social divisions until they become entrenched in the social framework of the city.

The book then pulls the case studies together by viewing them in terms of the wider implications for planning practice and policy. Here, the authors reinforce the importance of considering social and spatial practices side by side, and emphasise the potential for the built environment to function in a positive manner. Urban design is thus credited as a facilitator for de-polarised encounters that serve to decrease isolation and diffuse potentially volatile political situations. For example, the authors cite platforms created through urban design in Amsterdam as productive spaces for friendly encounters, dialogue and performance that can both address and sometimes make fun of segregational practices in a way that espouses tolerance and creates a shared public space.

Finally, *The Radicals' City* engages with eminent scholars and planners who have specialised in urban partition and collaboration through architectural practice. This is formatted as a series of interviews with university professors Scott Bollens and Frank Gaffiken, Jon Calame, the founder of the Minerva Partners organisation (who promote community-strengthening in urban planning), and Wendy Pullen, an architect with experience in a range of contested, insecure and uncertain cities. This section added additional perspectives and understandings to the existing material, and was a well-intentioned way of opening up further discussion rather than presenting the book as the final word on the subject. However, while it offers many interesting insights, at times this piece strays from previous content to the point that the reader is left with a sense of incompleteness. The authors do a good job of linking their central points to interview material, but the introduction of new emphases and terminologies may be of less value to a reader without an urban planning background.

This is of importance, because overall this book will be of interest to all those engaged in urban design, planning, architectural studies, cultural geography, or social policy. Thus, while the focus of the book is on conflict zones, it attends more widely to the role of public and private structures in creating urban socio-cultural responses. As well as offering some real-world suggestions towards the way the built environment can perform as a mechanism for positive social change, due to its broad socio-economic-political viewpoint *The Radicals' City* is best thought of as sitting alongside more

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generalised literature. It adds welcome theoretical insights rather than being seen specifically as a 'handbook' for urban change.

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