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Book Review: Urban Encounters

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Pittsburgh. It is tightly edited and clearly written. *The Politics of Place* represents an important addition to the literature on urban renewal and urban development by examining how contentious grassroots opposition generated democratic participation in urban redevelopment planning processes.

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Note

Full disclosure: The author was on the board of one of the preservation groups battling the mayor and his downtown plan at that time.

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Urban Encounters, by Helen Liggett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. 194 pp. \$26.00 (paper).

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In the introduction to her book *Urban Encounters*, Helen Liggett states that she wants “to use the city as a site where the daily patterns that involve ongoing negotiation with existence within it can be made to surface” (p. xii). In the book, the author, a professor of urban studies and a photographer, presents a montage of text and photography that is intended to expose or reveal a hidden potential in the contemporary city. Given the general retreat from public space in North American cities, fueled by what Richard Sennett (1978, 337-40) calls the “tyrannies of intimacy,” this would seem to be a worthy objective.

Liggett sets out the basic objectives of the book in the introduction and provides a rudimentary definition of what she means by “urban encounters.” These are “moments that sidestep the dominance of the abstract spaces of late capitalism” (p. xiii). Her overall strategy is compelling, joining a historic trajectory of authors and artists who have looked for extraordinary

situations within the everyday order of the city. These include Charles Baudelaire, André Breton, Walter Benjamin, the Situationists, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau, many of whom she invokes. Embedded in her project is the notion of the *flâneur*, or the urban stroller, and the surrealist search for moments of *frisson*, or vertigo, in the spaces of the city.

The book is divided into four sections: Urban, Space, City, and Streets. In each, she provides synopses of key texts written by a select group of urban commentators. Her photographs of ordinary urban scenes are interspersed throughout the text in a seemingly random order. Professor Liggett's desire is to provide new readings of everyday public spaces outside the norms of contemporary planning and urban design. Her use of a montage of text and images does work on occasion, creating new insights.

However, more often than not the approach does not create unexpected or new readings. Despite the author's intentions, it is often difficult to discern how the sections of the book contribute to the overall notion of the urban encounter, and generally the photographs do not provide the challenge that one would expect. The disjunction between text and image is most evident in the final section on "Streets." This section is in fact a celebration of the work of a number of photographers who operated primarily in the streets of cities; these include Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, W. Eugene Smith, and Helen Levitt. Unfortunately, there are no examples of work by these photographers to support the descriptions, which makes it frustrating for a reader not familiar with the work of the artists she cites.

Liggett's choice, spelled out in the introduction (p. ix), not to extend the notion of the urban encounter into a study of urban narratives is, I believe, a missed opportunity. The urban encounter, one must presume, is one kind of urban event. The "event" has pervaded the thinking of many French thinkers over the past several decades from poststructuralists, like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, to phenomenologists, such as Paul Ricoeur. For those, like Ricoeur, who are immersed in narrative theory, it is the event that is the constituent element in a narrative. Narratives are structured by plots and, according to Ricoeur (1986, 121-32), make both time human and give sense to human lives. Narratives pervade cities at all levels from the everyday lives of its citizens to the general history of a city. Liggett could have extended the idea of the urban encounter into narrative. An event, or encounter, only takes meaning when it can be woven into a larger tapestry of stories; indeed, provocative urban narratives are an aspect lacking in so many public or open spaces in North American cities. Certainly, the striking photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson, or the more staged work of Jeff Wall, is so poignant because it points toward narrative. As Michel de Certeau

(1984, 97-100) points out, it is the everyday actions of urban dwellers that produce urban texts or stories, often as challenges to the order dictated by planning and design regimes. On the other hand, for thinkers like Deleuze, there is no link between an event and a narrative. As explained by Cliff Stagoll in *The Deleuze Dictionary* (2005, 87-88), an event for Deleuze arises from a set of particular forces and stands alone as an indication of the imminent and chaotic nature of the world. Evidently, it is the Deleuzian definition that Liggett has opted for in her work.

Ultimately *Urban Encounters* does not satisfactorily address the author's desire to explore urban spaces as "instruments of engagement" (p. x). Liggett embraces the writings of key figures like Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau who explicate the everyday, but not to a degree that is persuasive. A deeper reading of these authors, one that would extend the meaning of the urban encounter, along with more provocative photographs, would have produced a more convincing study of urban space in contemporary cities.

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