

Book Review

COMMON GROUND? READINGS AND REFLECTIONS ON PUBLIC SPACE, edited by **Anthony M. Orum and Zachary P. Neal**. New York: Routledge, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-415-99727-0 (paper); 227 pp.

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Orum and Neal have produced what is, to my knowledge, the first collection of previously published work focused exclusively on public space and intended primarily for classroom adoption. A portion of the 15 selections will be familiar to most urbanists (especially pieces by Jacobs, Whyte, Oldenburg, Baumgartner, Anderson, Davis, and Zukin), but many less familiar (at least to me) names are represented as well, including Don Mitchell's discussion of the history and fate of Berkeley's People's Park, a fascinating analysis by Timothy Dreischer comparing "billboard subversion" to the more familiar "graffiti," and a detailed look at the conflict over the placement of Richard Serra's public art piece, "Tilted Arc" by Caroline Levine.

Beyond being a first book of reprints focused on public space and beyond the inclusion of authors with whom most readers of this journal will likely be unacquainted, the editors have given us something else new. They have proposed a scheme for making sense of the admittedly disparate social science writings on the topic and have used the scheme to organize the book's selections. They argue that these writings emerge from three "distinct" models of public space: as civil order; as power and resistance; and as art, theatre, and performance. In this scheme, the mentioned works of Jacobs, Whyte, Oldenburg, Baumgartner, and Anderson represent "civil order"; Davis, Zukin, and Mitchell deal with "power and resistance"; and Dreischer and Levine conceive of public space in terms of "art, theatre, and performance."

In addition, Orum and Neal provide original essays. Neal's introduction *defines* public space as "including all areas that are open and accessible to all members of the public in a society, in principle though not necessarily in practice" (p. 1); *reviews* some legal and political considerations relative to that definition and then emphasizes that "this book focus[es] on a social conception . . ." (p. 4); *introduces* the triadic organizing scheme of the volume; and briefly *describes* five important forms of public space from the Greek agora through 20th century public accommodations. Orum writes the essays opening each section, providing an overview of the readings in each and explaining why each work exemplifies a particular model. In the final two essays, Neal asks whether—as so many critics contend—we are truly facing a loss of public space and answers that we probably are not and Orum offers a "tool-kit" consisting of a series of questions that seek

to enlarge the range of inquiries within each model but also to encourage work that uses all three of them. The book ends with eight pages of references and suggestions for further reading.

There is much to like in this volume. The readings are engaging and the plan of the book and its layout are reader friendly (especially student reader). The placement of work on public space into one of three models will likely, at least at first glance, strike many readers as articulating divisions in the literature that they had sensed but never identified. And the contributions by the editors should provide wonderful “jumping off” points for in-class discussions.

And yet, and yet. For serious students of public space who are familiar with a large portion of the relevant literature, the reaction is likely to be more mixed. That is, once we move beyond appreciating the book as a classroom text offering an appealing introduction to the topic of public space, qualms and questions must necessarily arise. One especially important question is whether the distinctions between and among the models are truly reflective of the distinctions between and among research reports? Unfortunately, I do not think so. Given space constraints, I cannot lay out the reasons for this particular judgment in great detail. Let me, instead, give two examples of the kind of assertions on which the judgment is based.

In the introduction to the section on power and resistance, it is suggested that this second perspective “takes a darker and more cynical view of public space as compared to the rosy and optimistic view of those who speak of such space as civil order” (p. 78). But what is rosy and optimistic about Anderson’s detailing of the difficult interactions between middle-class blacks and whites and the poorer black males who are their neighbors? And surely Baumgartner’s depiction of the “moral minimalism” of residents of a suburban “community” is a match for the contributions of Zukin or Davis on the “dark and cynical” dimension. My second example comes from the book’s last essay on “tool kits” for future research. Relative to the civil order model, some questions that “illuminate a path for further inquiries” are proposed: “What kinds of social relationships develop among people in public? Where do such relationships occur? . . . What goes on in larger public spaces such as parks? . . . And in what ways do these actions promote the civil order of a community or society?” (p. 208). Good questions. The problem is that there is already an enormous body of work that has addressed them. As such, the model would appear to have been built from a seriously incomplete set of cases.

In the end, though and despite my concerns, I think this volume makes an important contribution to our understanding of urban life and culture (to use Robert Park’s phrase). By its very existence it testifies to the importance of aspects of social life that urbanists too often ignore, such as mundane places and events, casual encounters, non-intimate relationships, and street décor, among many others. And as an added bonus, we have been given an initial attempt at locating order in the disorder of public-space research and that should provide many of us with many years worth of rich material for argument and debate.