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Book review

Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City

edited by Christoph Lindner and Gerard F. Sandoval, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 295 pages, € 113,00 (hardback), ISBN 978 94 6372 203 2

Aesthetic concerns in urban design often belong in one of two camps. In the first camp, urban aesthetics is reduced to an endorsement of traditional architectural styles and human-scale urban types. The recent work of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission in the UK that celebrates the beauty of Georgian and Victorian architecture with the aim to re-discover 'civic pride' in the built environment is one such example. In the second camp, urban aesthetics is regarded as a superficial concern, based on an opposition between aesthetics and function, between surface and structure. What these two camps have in common, however, is that they shy away (accidentally or on purpose) from a critical investigation of the politics of aesthetics. They also share a reference point: the nineteenth-century City Beautiful movement, which aimed to transform the city into a 'beautiful' environment with neoclassical public buildings, multifunctional parks, and connecting boulevards. With its aesthetic-political conservatism and moralising tendencies, the first camp can be understood as a continuation of this movement (despite differences in taste). With its rejection of this movement, the second camp is an attempt to stay truthful to the origins of the discipline. José Luis Sert, the organizer of the first urban design conference at the Harvard's Graduate School of Design in 1956, identified not only scientific planning but also the 'superficial' City Beautiful movement as a hostile force to urban design, arguing that it ignores the "roots of the problems and attempted only window-dressing" (Sorkin 2007, p. 620). Thinking along similar lines, Jane Jacobs (1992) regarded City Beautiful plans as great schemes that "mainly came to nothing" (p. 24).

Aesthetics of Gentrification, edited by Christoph Lindner and Gerard F. Sandoval, is a vital source for urban designers who do not belong to either of the two camps and recognize that both approaches end up solidifying existing social and economic arrangements and power relations. An alternative account of the City Beautiful movement examines the ways in which it was a middle- and upper-middle class attempt to refashion cities, aiming to increase property values (potentially displacing local residents), enhance workers' productivity, and 'civilize' racialized groups. Its commitment to a liberal-capitalist society was an attempt to avert an urban revolution. If, indeed, urban design is not only a dead discipline that has become irrelevant for tackling

societal problems such as structural racism and obscenely widening income gaps, but also an enterprise that was "misbegotten from the get-go" (Sorkin 2007, p. 620), then this is partly because of its reactionary understanding of aesthetics. The result is, as Sorkin argues, that "[u]rban design and the New Urbanism are the house styles of gentrification, urban renewal with a human face" (Ibid., p.632).

Aesthetics of Gentrification contributes to a different, to a radical understanding of urban aesthetics. In thirteen substantive chapters, a range of superb scholars examine relationships between aesthetics and gentrification from global and transnational perspectives. The book's overall argument is that the aesthetics of gentrification "produce sites of spectacular excess where the political economic forces driving urban redevelopment are empowered to remake space according to the needs of global capital" (p. 9). Aesthetics is conceptualized as a battleground where urban struggles are played out, i.e. aesthetics is explored politically as a "visual regime" (p. 15) in relation to ways of sensing and making sense of the city. This discloses who and what is (and is not) shared, common, and valued.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, contributors explore the ways in which gentrification encompasses neoliberal consumption processes. In the second part, issues of racism, xenophobia, and 'othering' in urban redevelopment are being addressed. In the final part, authors focus on anti-gentrification movements and representational politics. Cutting across are common themes, one of which is issues of race. In Chapter 2, for example, Samuel Zipp, Jennifer Hock, and Nathan Storring explore Jacobs' take on gentrification (what she termed 'self-destruction of diversity') and how the market both creates and destroys heterogeneity. Jacobs' vision, they suggest, was not an aesthetic one. Her celebration of diversity, which she saw as the result of urban freedom and creativity, "led her away from a full confrontation with the forces of exclusion and domination" (p. 44). Hence, she failed to recognize institutional racism, based on a belief that in a diverse city racial prejudice would diminish over time. In Chapter 6, Brandi Thompson Summers examines the aesthetic re-coding of a popular gentrified commercial corridor in Washington D.C. as a diverse neighbourhood. She shows how "representations of blackness and diversity [...] are deployed in the pursuit of authenticity" (p. 118), a process in which meaning is not attached to people but to things and experiences. New residents express their "discontent over aesthetic shifts in the built environment as a matter of taste, rather than acknowledging the violence experienced by marginalized populations" (p. 119). The push for diversity is contrary to what some of us might believe not a post-racial project but "saturated with and structured by race" (p. 133).

These glimpses into only two of the chapters reveal the productive space that this book opens up for urban designers. Who is silenced or marginalized in certain socio-spatial mappings of a neighbourhood? How is blackness represented? How is a post-racial city imagined? *Aesthetics of Gentrification* makes a first step towards a critical understanding of how racial constellations contribute to urban aesthetic phenomena, but also how aesthetic elements support racializing processes. Examining the interlinking of these two processes – and, hence, exploring aesthetics of gentrification as well as multiple forms of gentrifying aesthetics – is critical for urban analysis and the design of structures and infrastructural systems that do not become complicit with violent urban processes of displacement, exclusion, and division.

The empirical richness of *Aesthetics of Gentrification* also prompts urban designers to examine how they make sense of aesthetic subjects, objects, and experiences, problematizing ways in which the aesthetic theories they engage with are saturated with and structured by race. Such theories can be traced back to an eighteenth-century European Enlightenment preoccupation with aesthetic reflection as a subjective yet universal judgment of the world, the city, and what it is to be human, as well as a preoccupation with the aesthetic subject as a distant, self-aware, and anti-revolutionary 'civilized' subject that is opposed to an 'underdeveloped' racialized other (see City Beautiful movement). Challenging these preoccupations, urban designers will have to reassess the values that they attach to visual qualities such as diversity versus monotony, and expand their repertoire of aesthetic concepts beyond the beautiful in order to find ways to better understand but also counter gentrification (exploring, for example, the superficial, the imperfect, the offensive, and the obscure). And they might also speak back to the overall Rancierian framing of aesthetics (offered in Chapter 1) that universalizes the disruptive nature of (democratic) aesthetics, when they listen to long-term residents, and co-imagine and co-design ways of intervening in dominant aesthetic regimes in the neoliberal city.

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References

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