

BOOK REVIEWS

The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City

Neil Smith
Routledge, 1996

Neil Smith is a cultural geographer who has devoted his academic career to the study of gentrification. His argument is that gentrification is a deliberate policy of capital disinvestment and reinvestment which results in a revanchist (revenge) policy against the poor.

Smith begins by introducing the gentrification in the context of the Lower East Side in New York City. The first part of the book outlines his theory of gentrification from local, global, and social perspectives. Drawing from examples such as Society Hill in Philadelphia, Harlem, Amsterdam, Paris and Budapest, Smith attempts to illustrate his theories. He champions contemporary urban squatters likening their role to that of the squatters in the American expansion of the 19th century.

The book is essentially a collection of his previously published articles adapted to fit together in book-length. He unifies the various chapters by drawing a parallel between Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier" thesis to the real estate industry's portrayal of gentrification as urban pioneering. It's a clever idea that does not quite work: Turner's theory is based upon national consciousness and the formation of national identity; Smith's application of it is based upon advertising and rhetoric of the real-estate industry. Similarly his theory of revanchism does not quite correspond to the American example as well as to the British model. Smith, writing from a working-class Scottish perspective, carries a bitter tradition of class animosity and applies it to the North American and other European examples. However, Americans tend to subvert class conflict into the arena of the market economy. The net effect is worse for the disenfranchised because, unlike a paternalistic upper-class, the market is merciless and without pity.

Although the book is soundly documented with a profusion of studies and statistics to support his thesis, Smith manages to dry out an otherwise provocative subject with chapter upon chapter of dry social science writing. His humorless and unflinching disdain for gentrification grows tiresome after the first one hundred pages. The material on New York's Lower East Side for example, is already covered more extensively (and more interestingly) in Janet Abu-Lughod's consanguine anthology *From Urban Village to East Village*. Smith's critique of gentrification through his analysis of the real estate myths and the realities of human displacement would have been more useful in a book that was accessible to a wider audience.

Reclaiming Our Cities and Towns: Better Living with Less Transit

David Engwicht
New Society Publishers, 1993

The author, a community activist who gained expertise in transport planning while fighting a road upgrade in his community in Brisbane, Australia, presents a persuasive tract against automobile planning that, in his view, destroys city spaces. His thesis states that cities are places of exchange; and because of the private nature of the automobile, vehicular based planning limits the 'exchange opportunities' for people. In particular, people without cars (whom Engwicht terms "access to exchange deprived" or ATEDs) are disadvantaged by every dollar of capital investment in the automobile. The argument is most compelling in the section on rights in which Engwicht outlines the possibility for legal recourse against bad transportation design.

Engwicht's grass roots activism is reflected in lengthy discussions of the superiority of lateral thinking over linear thinking or how a system can be negated by "the flutter of a butterfly wings continents away." He believes that human settlements can be in harmony with the world-wide eco-system in a state of eco-unification. These concepts are used to bolster his advocacy of decentralized cities, made up of 'nodes'. These 'small town' planning concepts have also been espoused by neo-traditionalist planners like Duany and Plater-Zyberk, by Peter Calthorpe in his Pedestrian Pockets schemes, and even by Disney in its new Florida town, Celebration. Whether the 'new planning' represents a nostalgic gloss on conventional development or a radical departure is still under debate.

Engwicht's practical suggestions include the establishment of a community 'recollections board' to revive the oral tradition, prohibition of single occupant vehicles in city centers, and a five year moratorium on automobile infrastructure expenditures. Some of these suggestions ignore or fail to address social theory and capitalism as factors which have contributed to the hegemony of the automobile.

The eco-reactionary underpinning of this book (illustrated in the dedication by a poem "You gave us life/...we fouled the nest/...lead us home") reflects an anti-modern assertion against cultural fluidity and social transformation. Engwicht has translated a genuine community-based transportation experience into a global prescription which lacks both depth and understanding of market and social forces. A small pamphlet edited by Engwicht, entitled, *Traffic Calming*, turns out to be a more lively tract describing the successful battle which he and others waged against the proposed arterial road through his community.

— Zachary Barowitz

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