

BOOKS REVIEWS – RECENZIOK

GÁBOR PATKÓS

Tamás JUHÁSZ (ed.): *Art in Urban Space: Reflections on City Culture in Europe and North-America*, Budapest – Paris, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2021, 266 pp.

Urban studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field, loosely connected by the subject of its interest, the city. The starting point for the collection at hand was an international conference hosted by Károli Gáspár University (KRE) and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) in 2019. The volume is compiled with this interdisciplinary perspective in mind, and rather than employing rigid and restrictive definitions, it applies more fluid and inclusive approaches to the concepts of “art”, “urban,” and “space.”

Tamás Juhász's introductory chapter serves as a theoretical foundation for the volume. The chapter provides a vast and comprehensive overview of the critical literature on the topic, in addition to formulating the position the volume aims to take. The author carefully considers the inherently challenging task to thoroughly explore the theoretically loaded and interdependent concepts of “art” and “space.” According to Juhász, art will be considered in the broadest sense of the term, meaning “any art form or artistic activity” (9), while space is to be understood as “a domain politically demarcated, socially structured and culturally always recreated” (11). Therefore, to consider arts in an urban context it is essential to realize that arts “necessarily and simultaneously position themselves in such interlocking levels as the global and the local, [...] therefore posing a perpetual threat to hegemonic discourses that attempt to isolate and privilege any of these levels” (13). Based on this insight, Juhász arrives at the conclusion that defines the theoretical framework of the entire volume: “the effect arising from encounters in the city [...] is aptly characterized by the term *disruption*” (14).

The chapters are organized into three sections, the first one titled “Public Art Considerations,” which focuses on the meanings of the term “public art,” and the challenges of contextualizing historical moments through public artworks. Holly Lynn Baumgartner's analysis of the history and significance of the Heidelberg Project in Detroit demonstrates that the city itself takes an active role in the creation of the artwork; in other words, “it is Detroit and its past, painful 400 years that called the HP into being” (24). Baumgartner also recognizes that space, more specifically the dichotomy of absence and presence, in fact, operates in paradoxical ways: “its greatest artistic impact [is] in its removal, the meaning constructed from its absence” (38). The author also notes that the Heidelberg Project is capable of

“narrating an alternative history of Detroit” (38) and that “art has a healing effect on the publics engaging with it” (38).

Issues of historical imagination are also important in the chapter by Gizela Horváth, which continues with the exploration of further dichotomies, considering the inside and the outside and the public and the private. The chapter analyzes the public art works of Banksy, Perjovschi, and the arguably failed attempt at creating visual public space titled “Muian project” (53). While the consideration of walls to disrupt the modernist dichotomy of public and private is an important critical aspect, the one-to-one correspondence between physical walls and the Facebook wall reads as a slightly less convincing argument.

Adrienne Gálosi’s most important point may be the concept of “normalization,” more specifically the question of how the city and public art “normalize each other” (59). According to Gálosi, when examining public art “from the angle of their contribution to urban development or regeneration” we are faced with the city’s “strong normative impact on art” (67), but at the same time, art is also used to normalize urban spaces. After examining the political and socioeconomical relevance of normalization, the reader is reminded that art always allows freedom, as it “does not compel us” (72), but always “finds its own ways of disjunction and conjunction”, the best art doing both at the same time (73).

The second section titled “War, Travel and Resistance” features essays which aim to theorize broader issues of culture and are connected by the critical significance of cities and urban spaces. Although the critical orientations of the chapters are different, an emerging common theme is the recognition that it is essential to consider the lived experiences of the city in order to fully understand their respective subjects. Ágnes Zsófia Kovács aims to compare and contrast Edith Wharton’s lesser-known travelogue and John Ruskin’s contributions to art history through a thoroughly interdisciplinary analysis. The author argues that despite their shared method of “precise observation” of Italian architecture, the unique aspect of Wharton’s art historical writing is owed to the fact that she was interested in the “local continuity and historical change of artistic styles or manners represented in buildings, gardens and landscapes” (102). According to Kovács, Wharton’s most important contribution is the way in which she “connects the story of Italian visual arts to the story of Italian cities continually” (103).

Teodóra Dömötör aims to explore the “feminizing effect” of urban living, focusing on the narrative representation of the city in “A Very Short Story” by Ernest Hemingway. An interesting critical argument is that relationships between characters are strongly influenced by their ties to certain locations, most importantly to New York City. In other words, “city living plays a crucial role in shaping cultural and gender identity” (123).

Michael Collins’s interest lies in exploring the concept of intellectual cross-fertilization among cities in war and peace. Cities within this framework can be considered as “perpetual synergy machines” or “hubs of vast imagined communities”

(130). However, according to Collins, World War II itself could be read as a “single, monstrous city” constructed by “credits and debts” (140) that mirrors individual cities, that “decay into anti-cities” (143) during wartime.

Jasamin Kashanipour brings the reader’s attention to the critical concept of “artification” through the examination of two ethnographic narratives taking place in contemporary Vienna. Artification and Kashanipour’s chapter in general are focused on ideas of resistance towards, especially, the neoliberal conditions that are “manipulating people’s desire into adoration of economic growth” (184). According to the author, “cities as well as arts have increasingly become tools of capitalist commodification” (170) and artification, or in other words “transfiguring the act of life modeling into an art form” (172) could be a critical reactionary attitude to cultural globalization.

The third and final section, “London: Word, Action and Image” offers a glimpse into different social and historical contexts with the central theme of considering London as a prominent actor on the map of cultural geography. Erzsébet Stróbl offers an inventive reading of the coronation entry of Queen Elizabeth I into London as an early modern theatrical performance utilizing the city as a public stage. This argument is further supported by the analysis of the complex interplay between London as theatre, actors-audiences as participants, and scenic and sound design. In addition, Stróbl argues that the theatrical entry was “one of the first pieces of propaganda” (209) and a demonstration of the young Queen’s capacity for self-representation, which could be seen as “crucial to her success as a female ruler” (209).

Dóra Janczer Csikós also examines the spaces of London through the perspective of performing arts and analyzes William Hogarth’s print as satire: “behind the façade of apparent order and respectability, there is now turmoil and degradation” (216). This degradation, for Hogarth, appears to be the result of “foreign and delusory entertainments” (217), most notably Italian-language opera. Janczer Csikós continuously highlights the “interconnectedness of financial and moral issues with the anxiety over the alien, foreign invaders” (225), while also taking the spatial and cultural topographies of London into consideration.

In the third chapter of this section, Éva Péteri reads Ford Maddox Brown’s most well-known painting, *Work*, through the framework of class criticism by comparing the human and dog figures in the painting. Péteri carefully analyzes the visual imagery starting with the human characters and exploring the socioeconomic realities of the time. The author then contrasts humans with the depiction of dogs in the painting, resulting in the bitter realization that “unlike people, dogs of different breed and social background do interact” (241).

Finally, the closing chapter of the volume by Sarah Butler reflects on her lived experiences as a writer working and living in London. The chapter is unique in the sense that it is based on extracts from Butler’s three different novels “reflecting on the city, ideas of home, and the novel as form from the perspective of a practitioner”

(246). The most important notion for the author seems to be the realization that the city and the home are terms that constantly re-interpret each other and that “home is a process, something that is constantly being made and re-made, modified, changed, lost and found” (247). Butler also entertains the idea that “the home and the city as generated through and imbued by narrative” (253), which echoes Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity, but unfortunately this direction is not explored further.

Ultimately, the structure of the volume seems to echo the subject of its investigation: reading the chapters feels like experiencing chance encounters, which are not accidentally, yet unexpectedly revolve around the same “space”. This collection of essays is a highly productive attempt at reflecting on the complex relationships between art and the city, or in other words, understanding how cities shape the perception of our shared cultural productions. In general, *Art in Urban Space* is a valuable addition to the theoretical toolkit of anyone interested in urban studies and arts in general, not only due to the high-quality scholarship demonstrated by the individual contributions, but also because of the compelling and engaging way in which the collection is brought together.