

**Olechnowicz, Andrzej. *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Becontree Estate*. Oxford Historical Manuscripts. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. Pp. 273. 2 maps, 17 tables, bibliography, index. \$121.50 (cloth)**

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[See table of contents](#)

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for the understanding of “place-bound identities” and the demonstration of how “people’s attachments to places are material, social, and imaginative” (133). However, it must be said that they are presented more as auxiliary illustrations rather than as evidence to be integrated into her thesis. Indeed, considering this volume’s concern with a critical evaluation of the *utility* of the image, little attention is paid to the *theory* of the visual. Where is the discussion of the power of iconography, the insights of semiotics, the rigour of visual theory? Only a few of the contributions attempt a detailed exposition of the potential contribution of a rigorous visual analysis.

At least Denis Cosgrove does not dodge the column in his use of Renaissance spectacle and theatre to elucidate the tension between “visual and textual truth in contemporary landscape criticism” (p. 100). He takes head-on the Western world’s distrust of images and preference for text and mathematical symbol and argues that visual images should be taken seriously as “one among the many discursive fields in which we may represent truth” to be placed “into a dialectic unity with text” (p. 110). In a similar vein, Catherine Howett’s critique of “certain ways of viewing the world” (p. 85) unpacks the ways by which Western society has codified the way it “sees” the world by focussing on prevailing aesthetic and scientific discourses. In a well-documented and well-argued study, she demonstrates how our aesthetic criteria for evaluating landscapes can only be understood in the context of an ever-evolving cultural tradition.

Such perspectives on how the material world is visualized provoked those charged with the task of commenting on the future direction of landscape studies. They include some of the most productive scholars in the field: Wilbur Zelinsky, David Lowenthal, Dell Upton, Jay Appleton, Robert Riley. All of them provide good service in imaginative critiques of the past and didactic prospects for the future.

But it is Richard Walker who grasps the nettle of the essential tension running through much of this volume: the imputed conflict between the materialist approach to landscape and the enthusiasms of the new cultural geographers informed by social theory. In an excitingly critical and playful think-piece, Walker chides all around: the traditional landscape school for a static and anti-modernist view of culture; new cultural geographers for their cultural idealism; and political economists for their neglect of consumer cultures (p. 172). While his unabashed materialist position will irritate some, others will sympathize with his discontent with,

the posturing of the postmodernist and the mannered style of discourse that glibly condemns the linear, logical, and evidentiary essay in favor of fragments of literary allusion and freely tossed Lacanian word salads, which leave a faint and convoluted trail of simulacrum for the poor reader to follow (p. 173).

His critical whimsy disposed of, Walker goes on to advocate the “promiscuous mingling and mutual education of cultural geographers and political economists” (p. 173).

As noted by Dell Upton, “the primacy of vision in landscape studies” is the central theme running through these various studies (174). Indeed, the title of the original 1990 symposium — *Vision, Culture, and Landscape* — would have been a fine identifier for this volume as it represents a provocative investigation of these three inseparable phenomena.

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When urban studies came storming onto the scholarly scene in the 1960s, housing was identified as one of the essential areas of research. Scholars as diverse as American historian Sam Bass Warner and the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre considered housing a key site of scholarly investigation which directly intersected with the wider areas of political economy, social relations and culture. In the last thirty years, researchers have broadened this agenda by asking new questions and applying new methods of inquiry. Domestic economy and architecture, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, and a host of other themes have been investigated in the realm of both private and public housing. A spate of monographs on various aspects of the housing experience have been published, a specialized journal devoted to housing studies was inaugurated in the 1980s, and prominent journals in economics, geography, history and sociology regularly feature articles on housing.

Yet these developments have been uneven. In the field of public housing history much work needs to be done. Unlike labour and women’s history, broad-ranging “community” studies from an historical perspective that integrate policy analysis and the social history of tenants appear few and far between. That is why Andrzej Olechnowicz’s book on the Becontree estate is so welcome. As governments around the world shed public housing in the name of fiscal restraint and ideological zeal, this book comes at a propitious time. It seeks to understand why council housing has gained a reputation in Britain as one of the “basic social failures of the twentieth century.”

The Becontree public housing estate in the eastern environs of London was the largest supplier of public housing in the world. Comprising four square miles, it contained 25,039 separate dwellings and housed 112,570 persons. Its sheer size has ensured that it has become a focal point for the stormy debates in the twentieth century on the role of state-provided housing.

Olechnowicz concisely sketches in the background to Becontree’s development: the lack of affordable accommodation for Britain’s working class, the debates between different jurisdictions for funding and control of council estates, the pre-

vailing planning ideology that emphasized decentralized and ordered communities, and the gap between what was planned and what was built. He rigorously analyzes contemporary sources to dissect the raucous debates surrounding the planning and subsequent construction of Becontree and the development of council estates in Britain as a whole.

While attentive to political and economic structures and the labyrinthine debates among political officials at all levels, he emphasizes the central role of middle-class ideology. Becontree was criticized for three main reasons by contemporary scholars and opinion makers: 1) bad planning and inadequate local government and services; 2) lack of community structures and feeling; and 3) its solely working-class composition which was regarded as a "dumping ground for anxieties and resentments of every kind." Olechnowicz devotes the bulk of the book to evaluating these three claims and comes up with some surprising conclusions.

Olechnowicz argues that all the available evidence shows that tenants generally liked their new dwelling environment and, generally, got along well with management. He shows clearly that despite underfunding and unfair tenant selection and rent policies, tenants coped relatively well and staked out a decent life for themselves in the project. The book's attention to domestic economy is extremely valuable. In several distinct chapters, Olechnowicz details the adjustments to work and leisure caused by the move to the estate and explores the common strategies of self-help employed by tenants. His evidence confirms the much-touted argument that networks of family and friends ceased to play a large role in estates unlike the old inner-city slums. But he is careful to show that new strategies of self-help were devised.

How tenants actually lived and worked did not matter to the powerful pace-setters in public opinion. Olechnowicz delves into the various voluntary organizations, such as the National Council of Social Service, to show that the politics of the middle class were resolutely anti-working class. In a context of economic changes and the coming of mass society, working-class council tenants became a ready-made scapegoat for all the ills of society. This was especially the case when tenants became political. In 1927, neighbouring Bethnal Green Council renamed its Parmiter street scheme, the Lenin Estate. Actions such as these and radical political party interventions in tenant politics, became a focal point for conservative notions of the failure of estates to inculcate a proper notion of national citizenship. As Olechnowicz says, the British "nation" expressed the anti-socialist unity of the middle class.

The book concludes with four crucial points: 1) that the project was relatively underfunded; 2) that design problems were not crucial; 3) that failure as a community was based on middle-class notions of what a community was; and 4) that theories of embourgeoisment from the left are weak. He believes that the working-class shared much of the ideological notions of respectability pushed by the middle class.

There is room for criticism. Olechnowicz relies too heavily on official contemporary sources. Discussion of tenant organization and protests could have been fleshed out more: for instance, radical political initiatives are mentioned several times yet there are no citations of the extensive and influential radical press of the period on the housing question and the Becontree estate itself.

There is also a lack of adequate theorization. Much of the valuable insights gained from geographers and sociologists on tenant practices and the role of housing in society are neglected. For instance, Olechnowicz has set up a straw man with his discussion of left-wing theories of embourgeoisment. There are many sophisticated radical analyses of public housing which do not appeal to the crude ideological portrait he paints. In fact, many left-wing historians and scholars specifically disagree with the thesis while focusing on the structures of capitalism and the contradictions of ideology and social relations.

But these are relatively minor points. This book deserves much praise for integrating policy analysis with the lived experience of tenants. It sets a fine standard for other historians of public housing to follow.

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Igartua, José-E., *Arvida au Saguenay. Naissance d'une ville industrielle*. Montréal et Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996, 273 p.

Fruit d'une recherche de longue haleine, cette étude comble une lacune sérieuse de l'historiographie des travailleurs québécois et va longtemps servir de modèle. À travers l'utilisation méthodique de trois types de sources nominatives, et leur traitement informatique qui en facilite les recoupements, Igartua se lance dans une analyse rigoureuse et fine. Huit chapitres, d'une précision parfois chirurgicale, lui suffisent pour combiner l'histoire d'une ville mono-industrielle et l'histoire de ses travailleurs, au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cet heureux mariage de deux approches, trop longtemps étrangères l'une à l'autre, débouche sur la piste du « processus d'élaboration de l'identité ouvrière » (p. 9) d'*Arvida au Saguenay*, comme le spécifie le titre de l'ouvrage.

Au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et particulièrement durant les années 1920, le royaume du Saguenay devient la proie de capitalistes américains qui envisagent l'exploitation du potentiel hydro-électrique de la rivière Saguenay. Ce projet est attisé par la prospérité de l'après-guerre et la flambée des prix du papier. Même si le taux de profit de cette industrie est séduisant, les entrepreneurs sont conscients que le harnachement hydro-électrique du Saguenay nécessite des capitaux énormes dont il faut prévoir la rentabilisation. L'implantation d'une industrie à forte consommation d'électricité, comme l'aluminium, justifierait de tels investissements infrastructureux. C'est le projet qui anime J. B. Duke, le fondateur de l'American Tobacco Company. Sa