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Urban Scholars and City Slickers: New Views from Old Presses

Bruce C. Daniels

Thirty years ago we knew what to expect from a university press: an academic tome written by a professor that was laden with footnotes, leaden in prose, bereft of pictures, and having the sex/sales appeal of what one's grandmother called a "sensible" pair of shoes. These solid, stolid, scholarly books were sensible indeed: the subjects bespoke importance, the research vouchsafed dependability, and the absence of glitter guaranteed that only the sober-minded would read them. A university imprint conveyed a warning to the frivolous or to the would-be decorator of a coffee-table — caution, contents may be hazardous to your health.

Not so any more. What a wonderful world of change we live in. Not only can journal editors end sentences with prepositions, university presses can publish books that look slick, read quick, and sell well. Why? Partly because of a general trend towards making all books more attractive: even the heaviest academic tome is usually dressed up in a fancy dust-jacket. Partly because a certain amount of reverse snobbery may be involved: great universities have an obligation to share their knowledge with the masses. Partly, it is a function of the vast increase in higher education in the 1960s: the number of professors who write books and the number of universities who publish them have probably quadrupled in the past three decades. And partly, it's economics: university presses have to pay the bills too. A regular production run for an academic history book ranges from 800 to 2,000 copies, and editorial costs cannot easily be amortized over such small numbers.

For whatever reason or combination of reasons, university presses are sprinkling their catalogues with a new type of book that is meant to fuse scholarship and readership in order to appeal to a larger audience. Most presses undoubtedly approach this kind of book warily. No university wants to cheapen its name by attaching itself to trash or — worse yet — "popular" literature. University

presses have to guard their names. Yet, some editors do not guard the name well enough and produce slick books that are not scholarly. Others guard the name too well and produce books that are too scholarly to be dressed up by any amount of flashy artwork. Some, however, combine the scholarly and the slick to inform and charm in just the right proportions. The genre can work. The five books reviewed briefly below are examples of the finest of these scholarly picture-books and are culled from a larger number of ones of lesser quality.

Girouard, Mark. *Cities and People: A Social and Architectural History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985. Pp. x, 397. 315 colour and black and white plates, notes, index.

It is hard to imagine a more learned or more delightful book than this history of the relationship between urban people and their buildings by Mark Girouard, one of England's leading architectural historians. He begins with Constantinople, the richest city of the 19th century, whose cosmopolitan public architecture made it the jewel of the early Middle Ages, and ends with Los Angeles, whose low buildings, garages, pools, and split-level housing make it the archetype of the city built on cars and consumption. For the intervening millenium, the book examines the trading centres of the high Middle Ages (Florence, Venice, and Ghent), Renaissance Rome, Amsterdam and Paris in the early modern years, Manchester and London in the industrial era, and New York and Chicago in the age of the 20th century skyscraper.

In skipping across a thousand years, Girouard obviously has been very selective. The cities he chooses for each century are those that had "star quality" and were either unrivalled examples of a certain kind of urban development or models for similar types of cities that followed or both. The lack of precision and systematic analysis in defining star quality could easily lead to a

superficial series of vignettes. It does not. Girouard's immense learning turns what could have been a pretentious guidebook into a work of serious scholarship. Most urban guides tell when buildings were designed and built, the best may even tell how they were built. *Cities and People* tells why they were built. In so doing, Girouard mixes architectural history with the political, social, and economic forces that propelled each city to stardom. More than 300 pictures are integrated into the text rather than appended to it. The visual and literary charms match each other in quality and usefulness.

Oliver, Paul. *Dwellings: The House across the World*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987. Pp. 256. 280 colour and black and white photographs, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index.

This work, too, is a *tour de force*. Paul Oliver, also an English architectural historian, has written more than a dozen books and has been a university professor in almost every corner of the world. A disciplined mind, an architect's knowledge, a quick camera, and a good travel agent could not be combined to much better use than in the present case. Nothing short of fascinating, *Dwellings* provides a literary and visual guide to housing in every part of the 20th century world. Most of the book focuses on the Third World: Chapters examine such varied groups as Eskimos and desert nomads; North and South American natives; slumdweller in Jakarta, Calcutta, Khartoum, and Lima; and peasant villages in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Oliver self-consciously chose the term "dwelling" for his title instead of "house." "All houses are dwellings," he writes, "but all dwellings are not houses." Many people live in places most of us would not call houses; they dwell there perhaps from choice, perhaps from necessity. Oliver's point of departure is essentially the same as Girouard's: buildings (in this case, dwellings)

are a response to the physical, social, and psychological needs of a society. Hence, he, too, is interested in the *why* of the architectural past and present. His approach, however, is more explicitly that of the cultural anthropologist. Thus, he roots the origins of each example of housing he examines in the intersection of belief systems, status, material resources, climate and technology.

Dwellings, in one sense, is an unusually pure form of the new social history, which seeks to examine the past from the bottom up instead of from the top down. Almost all of the buildings whose history and function he explicates are examples of vernacular architecture and the vast majority were built by the people who inhabit them. Those at the bottom of society, who seldom leave literary artifacts, are most expressive — most articulate — when they fashion their dwellings. Everyone's living-room reveals something of their character: Oliver presents a wonderful view and penetrating analysis of living-rooms around the world. Admittedly written for the general reader, *Dwellings* offers much to the serious scholar as well since no other work begins to approach its encyclopedic quality. And, despite its adherence to academic standards, *Dwellings* pack an emotional punch: one feels sadness, admiration, and sheer amazement at the places in which people live.

Pacyga, Dominic, and Skerrett, Ellen. *Chicago, City of Neighbourhoods: Histories and Tours*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986. Pp. xviii, 582. Black and white plates, bibliography, index. \$19.95 (U.S.) paper.

More than any of the other books in this package, *Chicago, City of Neighbourhoods* most explicitly fuses professional and popular history. It contains 15 chapters, each of which is divided into two parts. Both are filled with annotated photographs. The first part, usually about 30 pages, is a historical description of a particular neighbourhood that

examines architecture, ethnicity, economic functions, unusual buildings, land usage, and famous men and monuments. The second part, usually about 15 pages, is a detailed plan for a tour of the particular neighbourhood. The neighbourhoods range from the fabled retail centre (the Loop) and the famous (infamous) Stock Yard District, to the tenements of Washington Park and the stately homes of Beverley Hills. Only one of the tours is for walking (the other fourteen are for driving) and they average about two hours each.

The idea is wonderful: a collection of tours richly illustrated by the words and photographs of professional scholars. The accomplishment is substantial but diminished slightly by two problems. First, the photographs are a little too pleasant and sterile — designed to show you contented people and pleasing buildings. One gets little sense of the underside of urban life or of the vitality of a city that grew as fast as this one did and became home to so many new Americans from diverse backgrounds. The book, therefore, is a bit dull and strips the city of too much of its humanity. Secondly, the historical analysis is so detailed and so full of antiquarian minutiae that it will lose appeal for all but those who have a personal interest in each neighbourhood. Undoubtedly the authors felt that they would be damned if they included every detail and damned if they did not. Their choice to be inclusive was neither right nor wrong: it reflects the audience at which the book is aimed. If I lived in Chicago or if I wanted to visit the city and tour any part of its, this book would be among my first purchases. It is not pretty enough to sit on the fanciest coffee-tables but the hundreds of photographs are interesting and the text is well written and accurate. Loyola University University Press has produced a distinguished book for Chicago's educated and interested citizenry.

Scranton, Philip, and Licht, Walter. *Worksights: Industrial Philadelphia, 1890-1950*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. Pp. 279. 284 black and white plates, note on sources, index. \$29.95 (U.S.).

Colonial historians think of Philadelphia as the city of brotherly love planted by the Quaker William Penn to serve as the capital of an extraordinary experiment in pacifism, democracy, and humanitarianism. Home to America's first folk-hero, the philosopher/inventor Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia played an equally dramatic role in the 18th century colonial Enlightenment and in the American Revolution. Radical Philadelphia, cosmopolitan Philadelphia, and revolutionary Philadelphia gave way to industrial Philadelphia in the 19th century. At this juncture, however, Philadelphia lost some of its distinctiveness in the popular mind. Unlike Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Dallas, where cars, steel, finance, education, meat-packing, entertainment, and oil jump out in any word association test, Philadelphia seems at first blush to have a modern case of the blahs — just another big city without any special role.

No so say Philip Scranton and Walter Licht: to prove their point, they have written a 300-page book with nearly 300 photographs. Philadelphia was unique because it was not unique, they argue: it did not concentrate on one or a few products as many other cities did, but instead became the home to an extraordinary variety of "specialty firms." Its manufacturing diversity produced a little bit of everything: thus, Philadelphia advertised itself in the early 20th century as the "workshop of the world."

This industrial catholicism, according to Scranton and Licht, makes it an ideal city for a tour of manufacturing America at work. Unlike the tours offered of Chicago neighbourhoods, this one of Philadelphia is taken not on foot or by car but in the mind as one pores over the photographs. The text,

about one-third of the book, is accurate, graceful, and informative. It does not, however, unduly exercise the mind or excite the passions. The authors offer little that is new in the way of interpretation or synthesis — they use language to illustrate the pictures rather than the reverse, which is the case in most scholarly books. The photographs are sensational. They are full not of work sites but of *people* at work. People who are proud of their product, people alone with a chisel or broom, people crowded in a sweatshop, people on strike being beaten by police, people standing at attention to greet leaders, people buying war bonds at work, people hurt in industrial accidents, and much more. Virtually every photograph seems to be of prize-winning quality: an example of photographic art not just another picture. Assembling a few hundred pictures of Philadelphians at work over the span of a half-century would not be hard: assembling pictures of this quality which represent the full range of the work experience must have been a Herculean job. The good and bad of industrial America will seldom be shown with more emotional impact.

Warner, Sam Bass Jr. *To Dwell is to Garden: A History of Boston's Community Gardens with Portraits and Reflections of Boston's Gardeners in a Portfolio* by Hansi Burlach. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987. Pp. xiii, 128. Black and white plates, index.

Gardens are simple, profound, practical, and beautiful. So is this book. Out of a simple study of people and vegetables, this major statement on character, urbanization, politics, ethnicity, and immigration emerges. Added to this is the artistry of 29 evocative pictures of Bostonians at work in their gardens and the poetry of several dozen urban farmers describing what their gardens mean to them. "I don't care how bad your night's been, how bad the morning looks," one woman said in an interview, "when you look out and there's a flower, there's life."

What kind of a book can do all this? *To Dwell is to Garden*, by Sam Bass Warner Jr, one of America's most distinguished urban historians, and by Hansi Durlach, a photographer and illustrator, is an account in three parts of gardening in Boston. In Part One, "A History of Community gardening," Warner traces the evolution of urban gardening from the enclosure movement of 17th and 18th century England through the "potato patches" of the industrial American cities and the "Victory Gardens" of the world wars to the ethnic and yuppie plots cultivated at present on land exposed by the forces of urban renewal and suburbanization. Warner shows the enduring love many people have for gardening and their inventiveness in devising ways to express this love.

Part Two, by Durlach, contains the portraits and statements of the gardeners. The portraits run the gamut from a stoic old man standing in front of his corn crop to a gang of grinning kids hamming it up for the camera while leaning on their rakes. "I was born in the country," the old man explains. "I love the smell of dirt, the smell of the grass. So that keeps me going." Another said, "Whenever we had free time, we'd go out there and more kids would come." A poor parent asked: "I mean, what's the difference between a child living in the city and enjoying a butterfly flying around or a caterpillar or whatever and a child in the country? We're entitled to those things too."

Part Three, "The Histories within the Gardens," by Warner, is the most imaginative section. The crops in Boston's gardens reflect the city's modern immigration experience. Eating habits are among the most persistent of cultural traits: newcomers may learn to like hot dogs, baked beans, and scrod, but they also use their gardens to help maintain their ties to the old world. Warner surveys the city's ethnicity through its garden crops and then looks at five types of gardens in particular: those of the Anglo-Irish, the Afro-American, the Italian, the Chinese, and the Hispanic. Historians doing summer

research in the rarified atmosphere of the Massachusetts Historical Society on Boylston Street would be amazed at the quantities of peanuts, okra, turnips, eggplant, garlic, Chinese mustard, snow peas, Foogwa (bitter melon), cayenne pepper, coriander, and cush-cush that grow nearby. Most groups raise delicacies that they cannot easily get elsewhere. Urban land is too scarce for people to devote it to foodstuffs like potatoes. The uprooted of the world, as Oscar Handlin called immigrants, have literally sent down new roots in urban Boston. Presumably, these roots exist and represent the same spirit in most American cities.