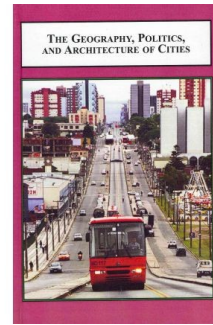


The Geography, Politics, and Architecture of Cities. Studies in the Creation and Complexification of Culture

Michael A. McAdams, Ivani Vassoler-Froelich y Jesús Treviño Cantú (eds.)
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While undoubtedly being an interesting exercise, it is not always easy to review and grasp all the complexity of a text when reading co-authored books. Not because it is not always possible to appreciate what diverse contents and authors can offer, but because they can sometimes give the impression of not being well linked or related. This comes usually from the lack of a clear line or axis that articulates the different texts into a “whole”; some “keys” to take profit of the complexity or to make the divergence useful. This can produce again the feeling of a pasted text, conformed by independent pieces that, only at the end of the process, are glued with a concrete ordin, an introduction and a title.

It was soon when I approached *The Geography, Politics, and Architecture of Cities. Studies in the Creation and Complexification of Culture* that I realized it was not one of these cases of “non-useful-combination-of-texts”. On the contrary, it gave me the impression of a genuine interest -and an effort by the editors in defining the issues treated- that actually conditioned the selection of the final chapters. The quality of the metaphors and theoretical proposals used to unfold the social practices described in the text, and the reflections linked to them, incite to apply these metaphors and theoretical proposals: not only to the concrete urban space addressed in one chapter, but also to the ones mentioned in others, as well as to your own researched or lived city/cities.

Moreover, there are several reasons why this book can be considered a useful tool. As Edward states in the foreword, “this is an unusually international and interdisciplinary collection of essays on the modern city”. It is not only the variety of examples provided, exploring the physical and symbolic boundaries of the city. Examples which allude to very different urban landscapes: Istanbul, Curitiba, Barcelona, Texas or diverse Mexican cities (just to mention some of them) and offer concrete data and reflections about those contexts.

I think one strength of the book is not only this diversity, but also the stress given to case studies, which also allows to address in a kaleidoscopic –and sometimes comparative– way the complexities and the multiple evolutions of urban cultures: cultures whose definitions run away from the narrower meanings offered by a significant part of the social science spectrum these days; cultures in a practical, changing, multifaceted and versatile context, which actually defines them as so. The wide array of disciplines represented in the book –and their permeability and interconnection, another of its clear potentialities– has a lot to do with it.

In this sense, we can summarize saying that the book may not only be useful, but it is also original in its points of view, arguments used and positions defended. It beautifully addresses issues as the complexization of urban spaces and the complexity of urban planning, the city as a border and the borders of the city, the urban governance –to mention just some of them– showing at the same time different perspectives and ways to approach it: that of the urban planner, the social scientist or the stroller, but sharing the genuine interest of unravelling the contemporary cities.

All these aspects express themselves as well in the structure of the book: composed by four different sections, plus introduction and epilogue, there are cross lines, which pervade all the text, easily allowing at the same time independent reading of concrete chapters or sections. Although it will be hard –and inadequate– to summarize in detail each of ideas present in the chapters, it can be useful for the potential reader to at least list them and give some insight to their content.

The first section, *Urban Planning, both in theory and practice*, offers four chapters that combine diverse theoretical and –as good theory should do– practical perspectives around urban planning, its limitations and possibilities. The first one, *Complexity theory and Urban Planning*, by McAdams, addresses questions about complexity of urban spaces, introducing metaphors, applications and implications for urban planning. The chapter offers a systematization of approaches that are actually intuitive, implicit in practice, but marginal in literature about urban planning. Somehow, it expresses well part of the spirit in the rest of the chapters: the need to critically reflect on classical/modernist/rationalist/positivist approaches because reality expresses other needs. Same happens with the second chapter, *Plans and Why They Fail*, by Treviño Cantú, which lists and deconstructs three basic relationships and seven planning arguments related with the success of a plan, but also offering base for effective strategic planning, stressing the importance of “decision by recommendation” in that process. The final remarks of the chapter are a particularly interesting reading. Chapter three, *A Catalyst for Change. The Role of City Organizations in the Process of Urban Reform*, by Vassoler-Froelich, focus in the way local governments confront public policy changes and opportunities in their urbanization processes in a context of cities’ integration in global market. Taking the case of Curitiba (Brazil) the author examines the factors that influence the varied levels of governance: the chapter stresses the importance of reflecting on the municipal sphere organizations and strategies, arguing that a coherent set of local policies and the establishment of institutional arrangements can bring adequate outcomes in terms of urban planning. The fourth chapter in this section, *Application of the Urban Realms Model to Istanbul*, by Karakuyu, focuses in providing an alternative descriptive and interpretative framework for urban mobility and transportation. As its title expresses, the text

applies the model of urban realms (geographical units of daily life) to the complex reality of the city of Istanbul, both describing the urban transportation of the city and providing a new way to look through the perspective of Istanbul's realms –suburban, commercial, new downtown, original Central Business District and Airport– and subrealms.

The second section, *Urban Spaces: Physical and Imaginary Borders*, explores the lines – social, economic, geographic– which divide urban spaces, through three different chapters. The first one, “Walls” *As Political Metaphors*, written by Anastassov, journeys through diverse examples of walls/barriers in Urban-Political life (Mexican-US border, Berlin wall, Cyprus Wall) and the way these metaphors perform, stressing at the same time the way they relate with the embodied mind theory and the identity narrative. It is evident that limits –lines, borders, frontiers– are essential in the analysis of urban spaces, and as it is pointed out, they widely transcend their physical character. The next two chapters are proof of it. Chapter six, *Soft Social Infrastructure – An Instrument of Survival of Poor Populations in Urban Areas. A Case Study of the Roma in Bulgaria*, by Danchev, analyses the way a Roma community in urban areas of Bulgaria deals with this –in this case socioeconomic and cultural– line through soft social infrastructure. Soft social infrastructure (different from the formal or legally defined one), is defined as an adaptive mechanism based in social capital, that plays a very important role in the economic and cultural survival of Roma. On the other hand, the author concludes that the empirical analysis of this structure may contribute to improve their overall situation. Chapter seven, *Culture in the Digital Metropolis: Theoretical And Methodological Crossroads*, by Pietrobruno, deals with a totally different subject: the new forms of standardization, the uniformity of norms, produced by the proliferation of written documentation –the on-line circulation of culture– about expressive practices on the Internet. By researching this topic, and offer theoretical perspectives and methodological strategies, the author also reflects about a border that is frequently constructed in an uncritical way – even in some scientific literature–: that of the interaction between the “cyberspace” and the “real” world or city outside, by focusing in the dissemination of contents related with Salsa through the internet.

The third section, *Urban development in the Global Periphery*, is composed by four chapters which use Mexican cities as a leitmotif and tackle effects of globalization in urbanization, particularly in the environmental and socioeconomic spheres. However, they have the ability –shared with other parts of the book– of showing urban spaces not only as receptors of policies or plans but also as actors. Chapter eight, *Political and Environmental Challenges of Border Communities: The Case of Colonias in South Texas*, by Goswami and Jozwiak, focuses in the empowerment processes in rural settlements around some concrete urban areas in South Texas, mainly inhabited by migrant population. The topics addressed include political structure relating to the “colonias”, the empowerment of its inhabitants and the way it relates to environmental problems. The authors analyze the framework –for instance, the legal one– in which these processes occur, as well as the most relevant actors, pointing out the resulting issues while highlighting some of the possibilities for applied knowledge. Chapter nine, *The Urban Structure of El Centro in Border Cities: A Case Study of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico*, by McAdams, is a text about urban morphology in a Case study in Mexico. It has two main interesting elements, the first one being to contribute to the

construction of knowledge about Border Cities, a subject that connects with section two and that I find fascinating. Moreover, it does so making a critical presentation of the state of the art about urban morphological models, while offering concrete data from the selected case. The second is to extend theoretical subjects and models that have been widely used in some areas to others, a lot less analyzed in literature. The same happens, to some extent, with chapter ten, *A Mexican Border City in the Global Periphery: Piedras Negras and the Steel Manufacturing (1935-1990)* by Yoder, also focusing in a border city. The chapter revisits the World System Model (Wallerstein, 1976) from the concrete analysis of the interconnection of a locality with the wider framework of Mexican political, industrial and financial centers, shaping the macro-geography of the city. One of the strengths of the chapter is its historical perspective, allowing to grasp the changing nature of this process while exploring the concepts of core/periphery and the regional hierarchy.

The fourth and final section, *Viewing the city beyond the built infrastructure*, uses writers' work –fictional or not– to speak both about the diverse views of urban spaces and how they affect our emotions and the way we experience –and research– them. Chapter eleven, *Barcelona 2004: A "Redeemed Flâneur's" Report*, by Treviño Cantú, offers a methodological approach traversing different visions –historic-structural, hermeneutic and, flâneur vision– of the city, to provide potential research directions. To summarize the last one, central in the chapter, the author did not try to grasp structural determinants (historic-structural approach) or interpret the city-text in terms of the "true essence" of Barcelona (hermeneutical approach), but to be closer to the sense-making perspective: an active participant in the production of meaning, conscious of its fragmentary reality. Chapters twelve and thirteen share this view, in this case being the writers Orhan Pamuk and Henry James the ones to stroll Istanbul and Paris through their literature. They not only represent an "enjoyable" reading, but also provide with interesting metaphors, points of view (impossible to find anywhere else) and methodologies. Moreover, they insist in an important (although generally understated in academic literature) aspect: the role of writers / fiction in the construction of urban meanings and metaphors. Chapter twelve, *Worldliness in Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul*, by Lashinger, focuses in the author autobiography and the way it is related with the contexts, spaces and moments of the city –and their contradictions–, by reflecting on the concept of worldliness as defined by Said. Connected also to a walking narrative, the chapter offers a reading of the city through the eyes of a shaping writer-intellectual. Chapter thirteen, *American in Paris, Paris in Americans: Symbolic Geography in the Novels of Henry James*, by Parker, explores the symbolic geography of Paris through the contribution of the north-American author to its fictional mapping. The chapter focuses in two writings of Henry James ("Madame de Mauves" and *The Ambassadors*) to show also how these narratives –and the image of the city associated with them– incorporate to the symbolic grounding, also influencing subsequent generations of writers.

As can be noted from the above synopsis, the contents offered by the authors transcend the traditional literature about urban studies. This is more visible in some of the chapters than in others, but the reader will be mistaken if feels the former are far from the more "theoretical" chapters in terms of their utility. Some of the ideas are arguable, of course, and I share some of the points of view while disagreeing in others (for instance, some methodological

statements, particularly about the role of ethnography). But in fact, this is both a positive aspect and something you would definitely expect from a book holding that diversity.

Summarizing, this is a book with a lot to deliver for the attentive reader and with a lot to offer depending on the subject you currently work in: the foreword of the book, by Karol Edward, was again accurate when saying that “what you will find most worth reading will depend on the problems that are preoccupying you at the moment”. In my case, there are two totally different subjects in the book I know well from my own research experience: Roma people and Barcelona. In this regard, those chapters will surely give for another review, but as a Social Anthropologist and Psychologist, interested in urban spaces and interactions within them, all the chapters gave me more than enough content to think about. Again, it is necessary to stress that the main strength of the book is its diversity and the multifaceted look it offers. And in fact, this is what happens with the urban space as well: it is immensely rich and it unfolds that richness when observed consciously and carefully.

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