

Rebecca E. Biron (ed.) (2009)

**City/Art: The Urban Scene in Latin America**

Durham: Duke University Press, 274 p.

Richard Young and Amanda Holmes (eds.) (2010)

**Cultures of the City: Mediating Identities in Urban Latin/o America**

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 272 p.

Helmut K. Anheier and Yudhishtir Raj Isar (eds.) (2012)

**Cities, Cultural Policy and Governance**

London: Sage, 448 p.

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Reviewed by Christian Morgner

University of Luzern

Over the last 20 to 30 years, there has been an increasing recognition of the relation of arts and culture to the urban, particularly in Western societies. This trend has been influenced by several factors: the decline of economic activities and the subsequent social decay of urban centers, followed by their rejuvenation through arts and cultural industries; the innovative quality of artistic activities with regard to the global position of urban agglomerations; and questions about the fabrication of images and narratives of socio-urban life, so-called “urban imaginaries”. This topic has become increasingly relevant in many regions throughout the globe over the past decade – including Latin America – mainly because the problems and questions that initiated in Western societies have travelled to other parts of the world. However, the relation of arts and culture to the urban has yet to be discussed comprehensively. This review

therefore focuses on a number of significant books treating the relationship between urban centers and artistic activities in Latin America.

*City/Art*, edited by Rebecca E. Biron, addresses the artistic representations of a number of Latin-American cities (p. 20) in the form of urban imaginaries focusing on the “lived city” (23). The book is divided into three sections: “Urban Designs”, “Street Signs”, and “Traffic”.

In the first section, Néstor García Canclini’s essay introduces an innovative methodology to study the “lived city”. Canclini selected a number of photographs of traffic and analyzed them with focus groups. Those who experienced daily traffic, such as taxi drivers, deliverers, or pedestrians, considered the city as chaotic and abnormal. Conversely, government and police officials

who manage traffic considered the city to be a perfectly normal place where obstacles and problems should be anticipated. Hence, different social practices led to different ways of imagining the urban (43). The articles in the second section of the book deal with urban imaginaries and forms of aesthetic resistance in urban areas. Examples include graffiti and public art that attack the established conventions of museums and monuments, such as the work of Lotty Rosenfeldo (131). Other articles address urban imaginaries such as filmic accounts that aim to resist urban, governmental or mainstream media conventions. The third section mainly deals with urban planning, such as Hugo Achugar's conversion of a prison into a mall in central Montevideo, or the attempt to inject arts and culture into central Rio de Janeiro.

*Cultures of the City*, by Richard Young and Amanda Holmes, focuses on the complex interaction between people and urban places with regards to culture and identity (2). Culture is understood as a form of lived urban experience and expression. The book can be seen as an extension of and companion to *City/Art* because of the material discussed and its treatment of cities of a peripheral status.

The section "Imagining Urban Identities" contains essays that analyze representations, artworks, and fictional accounts. The range of subjects is impressive, covering *nueva trova* song lyrics in Cuba, filmic accounts and literary constructions of urban space in Buenos Aires, as well as theatrical or performance art in Mexico City. The essays

are predominantly based on close readings of particular works of art and discuss how meaning-making processes of urban images in music, film, or literature challenge official governmental representations. The second group of essays, "Urban Identities and Cultures of the Periphery", addresses Latino communities in Los Angeles and Detroit. Again, works of art undergo a close reading in regard to challenging established urban images. The final section of the volume, "Performance and the Ritualization of Urban Identities", takes a more sociological approach to similar content, using the term "culture" in a much broader sense. Here, the construction of citizenship or the formation of identities is discussed in relation to changes in the urban infrastructure.

Both books, *City/Art* and *Cultures of the City*, address topics of interest for a range of cultural professionals (such as curators or urban planners) and humanities scholars. They contain interesting historical details, subjects, and empirical material. However, some of the material seems to be outdated and not highly representative, e.g., where it concerns single case studies of particular works of art. Their shared focus is artistic representations, leaving the urban fabric and its function in artistic expression unexplored. The books reveal little of how the images of various cities are enabled or produced by their urban fabric and socio-spatial configuration, such as via developments in their cultural infrastructure, the concentration of artists, and their creative environment. Both texts place the creation of art and culture and its relation to urban fabric in the background. Overall, the

articles found in these books only describe changes in the pictorial self-descriptions and narratives of metropolitan areas. Yet they fail to link them to broader changes in the cities' social structure or urban fabric.

*Cities, Cultural Policy and Governance*, edited by Helmut Anheier and Yudhishtir Raj Isar, is the fifth volume of "The Cultures and Globalization Series". The book focuses on intersecting cultures, globalization, and urban studies. With a methodology of interest to urban planners, cultural geographers, and sociologists alike, the text aims to link experiences within cities to more general societal changes. The book lays emphasis on quantitative measurements. Though the publication deals with cities from various world regions, this review will focus on the Latin American portion of the text.

The editors' introduction offers an interesting perspective: the societal rise of artistic activities, in particular in metropolitan areas, can be well-explained by understanding a city as a new type of global cultural actor; one often outclassing the very national society in which it is located (2). Cities and their cultures provide the societal background for the rise or decline of artistic activities. Unfortunately, the authors are unable to provide a conceptual frame of reference to link these two aspects to culturally global cities (9). The volume tries to compensate this by providing a number of case studies covering particular cities and a large amount of statistical background information on cultural developments.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first part opens with conceptual articles on city

branding, sustainable development, informal economies, and communication networks, followed by case studies on particular cities. A section entitled "City Experiences" deals with a number of cities from Latin America, such as Mexico City (Lucina Jiménez) and São Paulo (Maria Carolina Vasconcelos-Oliveira). The articles in this section have a predominantly quantitative orientation and reveal important aspects of the spatial-cultural configuration of these cities' artistic infrastructures. Both articles show that the cities under discussion are marked by glaring inequality in the concentration of cultural institutions (e.g., theaters, galleries, museums, music venues). These institutions are clustered in a few regions of the city, which excludes large parts of the population from their use. For instance, the Iztapalapa district in Mexico City houses more than three million people, yet not a single theater, museum, or library (244). Aside from parks and public libraries, all types of art venues are located in central São Paulo (274). This could be considered a form of artistic segregation, but such a conclusion is left for the reader to make rather than integrated into a consistent theory or framework in the text. The gathering of statistical data in the second part of the volume is laudable, but it remains virtually unlinked to the section of articles. Furthermore, it appears to have been collected in an inconsistent manner. For example, the counting of art museums often differs and the definition of "art museum" is not globally standardized.

The publications *City/Art* and *Cultures of the City* address the role of urban artistic activities and their productive output in

the form of urban imaginaries, but do not fully link these close readings to societal changes or provide a conceptual frame for the relationship between an urban fabric and its artistic activity. This is exemplified by the books' explanation of the rise or decline of complex social structures and patterns that enable artistic production, such as the role of networks of artists, exchange, critical stimulation and motivation, as well as the integration of innovations from the art world at large. However, the book *Cities, Cultural Policy and Governance* overshoots the mark by providing ample background information, such as statistical data on the number of art venues, while lacking an explanation for individual differences. For instance, the book does not probe why Rio de Janeiro has more art venues than Mexico City and why these institutions are found only in major cities and particular districts. The answers to these questions would require more qualitative data than is given and might have benefitted from ethnographic or anthropological fieldwork to establish a stronger link between the data and individual case studies.

In sum, there remains a demand for publications which will reflect at greater length on the relationship of an urban fabric to artistic activity. A stronger conceptual and theoretical discussion is required in future publications to integrate and link artistic activities and the urban settings out of which they arise.