

Reviews of books

Editors:

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Gaynor Kavanagh and Elizabeth Frostick (eds), *Making City Histories in Museums*. London: Leicester University Press, 1998. xii + 212pp. 16 figures. 9 tables. £57.50 hbk.

As an integral part of the urban experience, many city museums have shifted, over the course of the twentieth century, from being museums *in* cities to museums *about* cities. As a consequence, the making of city histories in museums is gradually becoming a more self-critical, politicized and democratic process. This collection of papers charts the social history of this important museological transition, and examines its implications for existing city history museums and their public.

The first three chapters are primarily regional surveys. Gaynor Kavanagh provides a useful overview of the social history of the making of city histories in museums in the United Kingdom (and Scandinavia) from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. Her penultimate section also attempts to establish a more theorized statement of the processes involved in the interpretation of city histories, but one which is compromised by its confusing combination of post-structuralist critique followed by a structuralist systems diagram. Michael Wallace begins with a detailed social history of the rise and fall of New York's first urban history museums, and a useful review of democratizing initiatives being pursued by similar museums across the USA. He also provocatively calls for urban history museums to participate in debates about politically-sensitive contemporary urban issues, optimistically claiming that herein lies the potential for urban regeneration. I wonder if his citizens agree? Bill Maguire provides a useful introduction to the socio-political history of city museums in Belfast and (London)Derry, and to the debates and decisions involved in setting up urban history exhibitions. Interestingly, his curatorial attitude is much less interventionist than that of Wallace.

Next come a pair of local case studies. Sally MacDonald presents a detailed report on the decision-making process involved in the establishment of a museum in Croydon, designed to deal with its particular identity problem. Carol Scott provides a valuable introduction to recent issues and methodological developments relating to visitor evaluation and research amongst multi-ethnic urban populations, with particular reference to problems faced by the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Then there are three chapters of a more discursive nature. Max Hebditch offers 'a brief survey' of city history museums in Europe. Unfortunately, his patchy geographical coverage and limited research offer little support for his attempts at

generalization, with the exception of his obvious point about the diversity of such museums. Catherine Ross provides a well-informed and wide-ranging discussion of city museum collecting, with particular reference to the history of the Museum of London. David Fleming attempts to predict the future for city history museums. He makes some interesting suggestions, but it is difficult to take them seriously, given that they are presented in an authoritative voice, through a succession of speculative generalizations which refer to a future with an unspecified time-scale.

The following three chapters summarize the results of broader social studies of cities. Raj Pal outlines a detailed study of the social history of post-war immigration in Birmingham. Disappointingly, given his stated concern with reconstructing power relations between museums and their public, he fails to connect his research to ongoing community museum projects in Birmingham. Roy Porter presents an enjoyable social history of urban encounters in the urban spaces of London and offers suggestions for London in the new millennium, but without any direct reference to museums. Rachael Unsworth provides a useful overview of urban geographers' approaches to the study of cities and highlights their relevance to museological representations of cities.

In the final chapter, Elizabeth Frostick outlines plans to create a new city museum of the twenty-first century in Birmingham. It is an interesting example, but it reads like a company manifesto, with its emphasis on the 'positive' and its portrayal of all difficulties as 'challenges'.

Overall, the book is a compromised attempt to deal with an important topic. There is plenty of interesting information, and a couple of outstanding papers, but there is also a serious lack of coherence. The editors have attempted to incorporate too great a diversity of themes and perspectives relating to cities and museums, without any clear statement of their aims. This problem is compounded by the lack of an introduction to the book, which is not made up for by the brief preface. Nor is it helped by the essentially descriptive narrative style of many of the authors, none of whom make their theoretical perspectives explicit. The book also lacks originality, many of the papers having been published in one form or another elsewhere.

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Anita Joussemet (ed.), *La recherche sur la ville au Brésil: Actes des journées franco-brésiliennes du PIR Villes*. Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1997. 284pp. Bibliography by chapter. No price stated.

This is a very good book, encompassing historical and contemporary accounts of the Brazilian research and thought on cities. It is the result of a workshop on the subject held in Paris between 28–29 November 1994. The work is divided in parts and contains articles written by Brazilian geographers, architects with a training in sociology and political science as well as sociologists. Indeed, the authors belong to different regions of the country, escaping the vice of books concentrating on the so-called axis Rio de Janeiro–São Paulo.

Part I deals with the history of urban research and urbanistic thought. Here one finds a masterful essay by geographer Mauricio de Almeida Abreu from the