

The AAG Review of Books

Review Forum for Kinder, Kimberley. *DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City Without Services*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

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Like other cities taken up as symbolic embodiments of – and referendums upon – their times, Detroit today is inevitably a more complex place than caricatured by its many critics, mourners, and ardent champions. Kimberley Kinder's 2016 book, *DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City Without Services*, tells a story of contemporary life in Motor City neighborhoods that does not shy away from the complications and compromises of living in a city under extreme austerity. As the commentaries gathered in this forum, adapted from a panel and discussion at the 2016 AAG Annual Meeting in Boston, illustrate, Kinder's fine-grained account dives beneath surficial evocations of spectacular ruin and infrastructural fragmentation in the United States' paradigmatic "shrinking" city to illuminate a dedicated, shifting, sometimes hopeful, often personally costly, inevitably partial, pragmatic and idealistic, strained, and above all local and intimate tissue of place-making and -maintaining practices.

However, as the reflections collected here also show, the book's significance goes beyond its contribution to a more grounded critical historiography and geography of Detroit and its neighborhoods – as important as that task has been and continues to be. Intellectually and methodologically, *DIY Detroit* foregrounds a wealth of detail on everyday practices of repair, management, maintenance, and camouflage in and around several neighborhoods' houses and their surrounds; theoretically, it ranges widely but adopts a light touch, sometimes tacit. This choice, clearly intentional, provides an opening for and provocation to cross-cutting conversations in a discipline in flux. Urban geography today is perhaps more theoretically wide-ranging and polyvocal than at any time in its history (and certainly is aspirationally so). Tellingly, the intellectually diverse commentaries assembled here find in common points of entry in *DIY Detroit*'s empirically rich treatment. Three common themes emerging in these reflections are perhaps of particular (although certainly not exclusive) interest.

First, the commentators here take up *DIY Detroit*'s invitation to reflect upon the power of articulating urban political economic critiques of austerity and post-Fordist economic-fiscal crisis with cultural economic analysis, digging deeper into the embedded relations that shape

experiences of these processes. Various drawing on traditions of feminist geography and political economy to focus on geographies of care and social reproduction, everyday resistance and insurgent planning, commentaries highlight these traditions' common interest in everyday practice and its political possibilities – even as Kinder's account provides a timely caution about these strategies' limitations and real-world obstacles.

Second, *DIY Detroit*'s central object, neighborhoods' built landscapes – buildings, but also the quasi-private, quasi-public “gray” spaces around them, provides an unusually rich opportunity to connect several strands of urban cultural investigation, new and old. Commentators draw attention to the materiality of Kinder's account as a contribution to STS-inspired work on cities (for example, as might be found in urban political ecological explorations of infrastructure); simultaneously, they point to *DIY Detroit*'s roots and interest for vernacular architecture (and, by implication, geography's cultural landscapes tradition), fields seeing ongoing critical rejuvenation in work on the cultural geographies of racial and ethnic identity, cultural diasporas, affect, and memory.

Finally, Kinder's account provides important insights into ongoing debates over the future of the so-called “comparative gesture” (Robinson 2011) in a more geographically pluralistic urban geography. As several commentators point out, *DIY Detroit* draws a contextually grounded picture of a comparatively “ordinary” experience for city-dwellers globally, the need to self-provision and “make do” in cities with uneven and limited public services. The book chronicles grounded practices and problems of urban self-provisioning that, considering this relative normality of informality and self-building in cities worldwide, may find points of meaningful comparison across many contexts. At the same time, Kinder's account emphasizes meaningful contrasts and the importance of context: for example, the ongoing weight of residential property values in US households' economic security and experience of decline, and the particular politics and problems of services *withdrawn* in Detroit's ongoing economic and fiscal crisis (itself a particularly severe expression of mounting strains on the US municipal state post-Fordism).

DIY Detroit's insights warrant a broad discussion within urban geography and beyond; it is to be hoped that the essays gathered in this collection will contribute to this kind of pluralistic and productive conversation.

References

Robinson, J. 2011. Cities in a world of cities: the comparative gesture. *International journal of urban and regional research*, 35(1), 1-23.