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review essay

Aestheticization and the cultural contradictions of neoliberal (sub)urbanism

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Landscapes of privilege: the politics of the aesthetic in an American suburb. By James S. Duncan and Nancy G. Duncan. London and New York: Routledge. 2004. 261 pp. £65 cloth; £15.99 Paper. ISBN 0 41594687 5 cloth; 0 41594688 3 paper.

Behind the gates: life, security, and the pursuit of happiness in fortress America. By Setha Low. London and New York: Routledge. 2004. 275 pp. £12.99 paper. ISBN 0 41594438 4 cloth; 0 415 95041 4 paper.

Brave new neighbourhoods: the privatization of public space. By Margaret Kohn. London and New York: Routledge. 2004. 232 pp. £70 cloth; £16.99 paper. ISBN 0 41594462 7 cloth; 0 41594463 5 paper.

The political, economic and socio-spatial characteristics of neoliberal urbanism have received much attention.[1] The cultural facets of neoliberalism, and the landscapes that are germane to it, however, have until recently remained less well understood. This is beginning to change as urban scholars begin to interrogate the cultural politics of contemporary urban development(s) and processes, and their effects on urban form. The aestheticization of politics–that is, the emergence of a politics driven by aesthetic motivations, delineated by aesthetic concerns and/or masked by aesthetic appeals–would appear to be an important component of neoliberal times. While a politics of the aesthetic plainly pre-dates neoliberalism, it would appear that neoliberalization and aestheticization are intertwined, emerging as a by-product of, and as a strategy for, social exclusion and the management of class and other social identities in the context

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of deepening cultural reification. Yet, while evolving partly as a response to the contradictions of the contemporary (neoliberal) city, aestheticization processes produce new contradictions and amplify existing ones.

This is born out, either explicitly or implicitly, in three important recent works, *Landscapes of privilege, Behind the gates* and *Brave new neighbourhoods*. The first, by James and Nancy Duncan, sets out the main theoretical arguments and demonstrates their validity and importance through a detailed case study of the town of Bedford, an elite suburb of New York City in Westchester County, New York State. Duncan and Duncan show how aesthetics have been politicized in Bedford, how this has worked to simultaneously enhance, naturalize and conceal class privilege there, and how this has become a tool for social exclusion. In *Behind the gates*, Setha Low seeks to understand the motivations and desires underpinning the demand for gated suburbs in the United States. While not concerned primarily about the aesthetic dimensions of her subject or their political implications, she nonetheless provides important evidence of the aesthetic context surrounding the social construction of gated communities as 'nice places to live', and thus of the role that aesthetics play in the rapid growth and social evolution of this neighbourhood form across the urban landscape. Finally, Margaret Kohn in *Brave new neighbourhoods* outlines how public spaces are being privatized across the United States through various means, and presents a number of arguments for why this inhibits and offends democratic principles. In so doing, she makes the case for why a truly public space matters. These works demonstrate how neoliberal urbanism, at least the forms present in the US (though with some comparison to other contexts), enforces socio-spatial divisions through appeals to aesthetic choices, all the while containing and concealing important cultural contradictions with implications for the neoliberal city and even for the very basis of urbanity.

Exclusionary landscapes, landscape exclusions

In a theoretical and empirical tour de force, Duncan and Duncan draw on their 30-plus years of research in and around Bedford, New York, a wealthy suburb an hour's drive from Manhattan, to map out how a politics of the aesthetic (built around 'the sensuous, passionate, apparently autonomous subjective experience of individuals')[2] has developed there into a force for exclusion. It is not just tenants, the poor and non-whites that face exclusion, though these groups are the worst hit, but all forms of development that might impinge on the identity of Bedford as a pastoral, rural village with a very specific landscape aesthetic. The authors demonstrate how this landscape identity has been socially constructed and reconstructed through the continuous efforts and interventions of elites, town officials, residents and planners. Much political activity has been devoted to preserving the characteristics that provide Bedford with its particular status, its sense of place and its cultural codes, and thus underlie Bedford's value as a 'positional good'.[3] These include its pastoral landscape (marked by dirt roads, country cottages, horse stables, giant trees on rolling lawns, iron gates and stone fences), the construction/fabrication of Bedford Village as a historic/'authentic' New England village, and a

romantic vision of rugged wilderness and forest untouched by urban sensibilities. Duncan and Duncan base their conclusions on the series of face-to-face interviews and multiple surveys they conducted with residents, real estate agents and town officials, and on the documented history of municipal planning statements, legal challenges and council minutes.

While the social reconstruction of Bedford as an idyllic pastoral village had been developing for a number of years, and Bedford had been home to a number of elite families since the late 1800s, it was with the influx of wealthy celebrities and professionals from New York City and Bedford's evolution into a commuter suburb from the late 1960s onwards that a particularly aestheticized politics of exclusion became dominant. Enacted in 1928, Bedford's four-acre minimum lot zoning (applying to four-fifths of Bedford's land area) was intended from the start to preserve the 'look of the land'. This was maintained in recent decades despite threats of exclusionary zoning lawsuits and the economic pressures resulting from high housing demand across the New York City region. Since the early 1970s, a number of ordinances relating to wetlands protection, tree preservation, protection of open space, historic buildings, dirt roads and popular views, and the establishment of nature preserves and land trusts, removed the majority of potentially developable or divisible lands from the market. This has worked to reproduce Bedford's pastoral aesthetic, all the while ensuring the exclusion of affordable and even middle-class suburban-style housing.

This particular planning practice, and the exclusions it produces, are routinely justified by local actors on aesthetic and environmental grounds, even in the face of evidence of deleterious environmental consequences. Duncan and Duncan draw on a number of theorists, among them David Harvey, Don Mitchell and Christopher Kutz,[4] but mostly lean on Bourdieu[5] in arguing that landscape tastes as cultivated in Bedford are a form of cultural capital that residents marshal for the protection of their identities, their residential investments, and for the performance of fine social distinctions and exclusions. The adoption and mobilization of such aesthetic tastes is not necessarily superficial or dishonest, employed to mask ulterior motives (though it sometimes is). More often, such landscapes and aesthetic dispositions are fundamental markers of identity (particularly among the elite), and as such provoke sincere emotions which inadvertently act to naturalize class privileges and tastes. The result is that socially exclusionary practices are not recognized as such. Indeed, Duncan and Duncan argue that the principle motive is not usually social exclusion, but landscape exclusion intended to preserve the aesthetic qualities of place.

The cultural contradictions of such an aestheticized politics are brought to the fore in the last empirical chapter, detailing the plight of the mostly Latino day labourers who are employed on Bedford's estates, hobby farms and the gardens of the 'country cottages', all of which require substantial maintenance. But the work is unskilled, casual and inconsistent, and the pay is low. The Latinos who find work there are forced to live in substandard and over-crowded conditions in the nearby suburb of Mount Kisco, since Bedford's aesthetic praxis has left virtually no affordable housing within its boundaries. Yet in Mount Kisco these workers faced another racialized form of aestheticized politics, this time concerning their appearance and deportment, which

threatened nativist constructions of 'proper' middle-class white behaviour. In response, politicians at municipal and upper levels of government enacted legislation to prevent Latinos from congregating in parks or on the streets, and housing ordinances purported to reduce overcrowding and ensure fire safety. These laws had the effect of removing the day workers from view, often pushing them into other localities or forcing them into homelessness. Such acts have paradoxical consequences, for, as Duncan and Duncan note, the reproduction of white Anglo Bedford came to depend on Latino labour.

Imaginary/purified communities and the aesthetics of 'niceness'

Perhaps no other neighbourhood form is more clearly associated with contemporary neoliberal times than gated communities. Particularly fast-growing in the US in the 1990s, gated communities are now being built across the developed and developing world in response to the class anxieties accompanying neoliberalization.[6] Through a series of interviews in suburban Long Island, New York and San Antonio, Texas, Low gives voice to the reasons why people move into such places, why their residents like them and how they construct them as livable communities. While the traditional themes of fear, security and community feature prominently in her respondents' explanations, what stands out is how important the aesthetics of such places are for understanding how their residents relate to them. For example, a number of her respondents reported they valued the 'appearance' of security provided by the gates, and how the walled designs made them 'feel' less vulnerable, even in the face of evidence that the gates are not necessarily an effective deterrent against crime, and of their own realization after living in them of the ease with which would-be criminals could enter. Likewise, it was the aesthetic features of such neighbourhoods (including the lack of ethnic and class diversity) which made them feel 'like an old-fashioned neighbourhood', providing clues that such places were good places to live in and harking back to communities 'imagined from childhood'.[7]

However, it is Low's chapters on the construction of 'niceness' and fear of others that make the greatest contribution to our understanding of the cultural facets of this neighbourhood form. She argues (drawing on Brodkin[8]) that gated communities are culturally significant for reproducing 'whiteness'. This is accomplished through strict aesthetic controls both over the external environment, which keep it orderly and 'nice' according to the mores of white society, and over the social environment (which can thus be kept relatively more homogeneous and filled with 'nice' people), all of which act to naturalize the cultural preferences and codes of white privilege and assuage the anxieties of a white middle class beset by economic insecurity in a globalized world.[9] Though she does not expand on it, Low at one point compares gated subdivisions to 'purified communities'.[10] Contradictions arise, however, as these forms become accepted as 'normal' referents from which residents make sense of the world, allowing them to rationalize problems of race and class segregation, gender inequalities and paradoxical approaches toward immigration in US society. Importantly, she suggests

that as gated communities become the norm, the dominant meaning of community itself may come to include notions of protective boundaries and constructions of otherness that preclude alternate definitions and forms of community (the public, racial integration, collective social justice, etc.).

Low's discussion of community boundaries is related to Kohn's concept of 'imaginary communities', which she defines as groups that are 'sustained by perceived similarities in lifestyle and absence of conflict . . . reinforced by similar patterns of consumption and cultural cues rather than shared activities and practices'.[11] Yet Kohn is not talking about communities formed through the Internet or shared national histories, as in Anderson's 'imagined communities',[12] but instead those formed through 'individuals identifying with a particular location'.[13] In short, imaginary communities are those in which the aesthetic experience of living in a neighbourhood provides the basis of collective identity. Imaginary communities, argues Kohn, 'provide a way of avoiding the irreconcilable social antagonisms that pervade modern life'[14] by making it easier to avoid encounters with strangers. The two examples Kohn provides are gated and new urbanist suburbs, where aesthetics can provide the necessary cultural cues to evoke a particular style of community without having to go through any face-to-face community-building work. When communities can be articulated through aesthetic means, it can be expected that community politics may increasingly revolve around the controlling and policing of aesthetic boundaries. The gated communities that Low examines are thus but one manifestation of this control.

Privatized landscapes, atomized culture

In *Brave new neighbourhoods*, Kohn tells us why all this matters. Focusing mostly on US federal and state court challenges in a series of case studies, Kohn documents how public spaces are being privatized through legislative action, and theorizes their implications for the future of democracy. Kohn's examples include not only the privately owned retail malls, which are legally allowed to exclude individuals from their premises, but also the various residential community associations (RCAs) and business improvement districts (BIDs) which are given unaccountable control over previously public spaces; public–private partnerships such as that which produced Battery Park City, which allow developers to produce private exclusionary spaces at public cost; municipalities who conspire to grant or sell public lands to private organizations whose self-interests are exclusionary (such as Salt Lake City's sale of a prime downtown street to the Mormon church); and the anti-panhandling, anti-leafleting and anti-protesting ordinances that work to exclude citizens from otherwise open public spaces such as sidewalks, public transit stops, benches, parks, etc. Yet Kohn's book ventures far beyond a mere discussion of empirical cases, to make an original statement of urban political theory that is historically informed (including an extensive discussion of the struggles of the 'wobblies'[15] over public space during the Depression).

Regardless of whether it is accomplished through the granting of control over public and quasi-public spaces to private entities or through legislation constraining activities

in publicly owned spaces, the main effect of such forms of privatization is to prevent those with an officially sanctioned claim to the use of the space from being inconvenienced by the presence or speech of strangers – in other words, to enhance the aesthetic experience of those groups deemed 'deserving' by removing the rights of the undeserving and unwashed. Typically, the ordinances and private actions cited by Kohn are aimed at preventing the mere sight and proximity of strange others, not physical violence, threat of injury or blocked access. (Don Mitchell has subsequently described similar legal developments in terms of an 'S.U.V. model of citizenship', characterized by the right to travel within a 'floating buffer zone' of protective legal space.[16]) In such a scenario, individuals in public can avoid being inconvenienced by the public, to avoid even having to view others or hear messages that might contradict their values and preferences.

Kohn argues that these forms of privatization are a threat to the health and survival of public life and democracy. Her argument is different from the traditional defence of public space emanating from theories of deliberative democracy, which paints the public sphere as the domain within which the public can together reach a rational and inclusive consensus and discover universal truths.[17] Instead, Kohn argues that public space is necessary because it establishes proximity between strangers, and this has the potential to transgress our values: 'We need free speech and public places not because they help us reach consensus, but because they disrupt the consensus that we have already reached too easily.'[18] Physical proximity forces us to deal with our fears, to defend our rationalizations and to question our beliefs. Kohn reminds us that in the presence of another 'we cannot simply press delete... the effect of a disconcerting encounter cannot be approximated through email'.[19] Without a truly public realm characterized by the meaningful ability of strange people and strange messages to transgress our values and make us question our deeply held assumptions about the social world, individuals may lose the ability to empathize, to recognize and accept difference, to bridge divisions, and in so doing to care about others. Without a diverse public culture kept in check by constant interaction between strangers, individuals become atomized, privilege becomes naturalized, poverty and injustice become hidden, and the prevailing social order remains unquestioned.

The contradictions of neoliberal (sub)urbanism?

Contemporary urbanism (neoliberal and postmodern) has been paradoxically characterized by the simultaneous celebration of diversity on the one hand, and increasing isolation, boundaries, and separation between social groups on the other.[20] This is partly a result of the penetration of ethnic diversity discourses by market logics in the context of globalized inter-urban competition.[21] Yet, as the three works reviewed here make plain, another part of the story relates to aestheticization processes which work to naturalize landscape tastes and to reify neighbourhood forms and cultural differences. Indeed, neoliberalism and aestheticization would appear mutually reinforcing, since both foreground 'choice' as an organizing principle in the field of consumption, and

since neoliberalism provides the conditions – both greater social differentiation/class polarization and the market colonization of cultural goods – for realizing economic benefits from aesthetic distinctions.

This situation produces a number of contradictions. Duncan and Duncan show that the externalization to other locales of the costs of socially reproducing the labour on which depends the aesthetic grooming of places like Bedford is then articulated in the growth of a more virulent racialized politics that threatens to undermine regional social and economic cohesion. These underlying dynamics are concealed and mystified by the aesthetic focus in each case. Likewise, the forms of gated communities serve to demarcate new boundaries and new exclusions of others (and thus to limit choices), but these are concealed by their 'niceness' and by the aesthetic scaffolding upon which these and other imaginary communities are (socially) constructed. As Kohn's work suggests, the aesthetic exclusion of the Other from one's (public) experiences that is portended by the privatization of public space may have profound effects on contemporary political culture. In short, by concealing the casualties and irrationalities of the contemporary social order from view, society becomes less able to recognize them as such, and in turn to take corrective action. To the extent that neoliberalism accentuates aestheticization processes (and this has yet to be proven – the three books under review here do not directly tackle this question), it may be creating the conditions of its own mystification, and thus blocking its ability to learn and adapt.

Finally, there is the contradictory relation of an aestheticized neoliberalism to the city. Most urban scholars, going back to Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth, have construed the essence of urbanity as a high density of potential chance encounters with strangers, an essence which provides cities with some of their most valuable qualities (from agglomeration economies to dense networks of social capital). Yet, by enhancing an aestheticized praxis of exclusion that reifies and naturalizes existing landscapes and that works to exclude strange others from view, neoliberalism may be producing an urban realm that hampers such qualities. To be suburban literally means to be 'less than urban'. The vast majority of the cases examined in the three works under review are located in the 'suburbs' (as defined by North American custom), and this is not likely to be coincidental. However, Kohn also documents cases (like Battery Park City) in which spaces in the inner city are produced that exclude chance encounters. Thus, whether from the development of exclusive subdivisions in the 'suburbs' or gentrified high-rises in the inner city, the question arises: does an aestheticized neoliberalism entail an attack on urbanity itself, and its replacement with something 'less than urban'? Under such a cultural definition of 'sub-urban', the condominium developments and gentrification that have grown in the inner city in response to neoliberal urban policies, if they result in social 'tectonics' rather than social interaction,[22] would constitute the sub-urbanization of the city as much as does the growth of gated communities at the edge. Neoliberal urbanism may thus be beset by a fundamental contradiction: the reification and revaluation of aesthetic forms may alter social practices in ways that undercut the propinquity of heterogeneity and mixing of strangers that provides urbanity's primary economic, social and cultural asset.

Conclusion

The place of aesthetics in the practice of exclusion has been until now under-theorized. The books examined here, despite differences in focus, all speak to the importance, and contradictions, of an aestheticized social and political praxis in the urban realm. These would appear to be growing in tandem with neoliberalism's colonization and privatization of public space, and its tendency to segment markets while privileging 'choice' in market discourses. Each of the three works under review sheds light on some aspect of this, and reaffirms (for me at least) that aestheticization processes are key to understanding the spatial articulations and exclusions of neoliberal urbanism. Yet the relation of aesthetics to the evolving policy at international/global scales and in other national contexts remains less well understood (all three of these works are primarily concerned with the US case), and the links to neoliberalism need to be made more explicit. Low could, furthermore, develop her theoretical arguments more fully, and could better organize and edit her discussion (indeed, she could be accused of over-aestheticizing her subject, since she invariably foregrounds her respondents' weight, hair colour and dress!). Nonetheless, each of the works under review makes a significant contribution to the literature, and grounds their theoretical statements in detailed empirical research. The books by Duncan and Duncan and by Kohn are particularly important interventions. The former is a seminal study that challenges many of the core assumptions of urban/suburban scholars, while the latter should have reverberations across the realm of urban, social, cultural, political and legal theory.

Notes

[1] A number of authors have discerned similarities in the neoliberal urban experience. These include the shift to what Harvey calls the 'entrepreneurial city' and the naturalization of market logics which punish cities that fail to compete internationally; the rescaling of the state through the adoption of deregulation, privatization and downloading, while at the same time 'rolling out' new meso-level layers of market rules; and the marginalization of (or outright attack on) the social welfare state, as evidenced in union-busting, criminalization of the poor and cutbacks to social programmes, welfare entitlements and tax rates (and the adoption of regressive taxation), while at the same time co-opting ethnic diversity and creativity discourses in the employ of intra-urban competition. The result is a form of urbanism beset by multiple contradictions and characterized by increasing social inequality, the impoverishment of longer-term infrastructure budgets, and zero-sum-game policy races to the bottom, all of which effectively act to narrow future policy choices and reinforce emerging crises which must remain hidden if the competitive benefits of urban spectacle are to do their magic. Of course, the geography of 'actually existing neoliberalism(s)' is quite uneven, and the local issues, policy tools, political struggles, social movements, mix of sub-cultures, regime strategies and contexts of partisanship (on behalf of the political parties and civil society organizations) in shaping political discourses differ from place to place. See D. Harvey, 'From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation of urban governance in late

capitalism', *Geografiska Annaler* 71 (B) (1989), pp. 3–17; N. Brenner, *New state spaces: urban governance and the rescaling of statehood* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004); J. Peck and A. Tickell, 'Neoliberalizing space', *Antipode* 34 (2002), pp. 380–404; K. Mitchell, 'Multiculturalism, or the united colours of capitalism', *Antipode* 25 (1993), pp. 263–94.

[2] J.S. Duncan and N.G. Duncan, *Landscapes of privilege: the politics of the aesthetic in an American suburb* (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 32.

[3] *Ibid*. p. 29.

[4] D. Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989); D. Mitchell, *The lie of the land: migrant workers and the California landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1996); C. Kutz, *Complicity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[5] P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste,* trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984).

[6] E. J. Blakely and M.G. Snyder, *Fortress America: gated communities in the United States* (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 1997); T. Caldeira, *City of walls: crime, segregation, and citizenship in Sao Paulo (*Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000); M. Mycoo, 'The retreat of the upper and middle classes to gated communities in the poststructural adjustment era: the case of Trinidad', *Environment and planning A* 38 (2006), pp. 131–48.

[7] S. Low, *Behind the gated: life, security, and the pursuit of happiness in fortress America* (London, Routledge, 2004), pp. 59, 230.

[8] K. Brodkin, *How Jews became white folks and what that says about race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[9] *Ibid*. p. 173.

[10] *Ibid*. p. 22.

[11] M. Kohn, *Brave new neighbourhoods: the privatization of public space* (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 123.

[12] B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, Verso, 1991).

[13] Kohn, *Brave new neighbourhoods,* p. 123.

[14] *Ibid*. pp. 124, 125.

[15] The term 'Wobblies' refers to the group of International Workers of the World (IWW) union members that made numerous claims on the state in the 1930s in the United States, including challenging a number of municipal public space by-laws in court.

[16] D. Mitchell, 'The S.U.V. model of citizenship: floating bubbles, buffer zones, and the rise of the "purely atomic" individual', *Political geography* 25 (2005), pp. 77–100.

[17] Habermas has written extensively on deliberative democracy. See J. Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1991).

[18] Kohn, *Brave new neighbourhoods,* p. 81.

[19] *Ibid*. p. 59.

[20] K. Goonewardena and S. Kipfer, 'Spaces of difference: reflections from Toronto on multiculturalism, bourgeois urbanism and the possibility of radical urban politics', *International journal of urban and regional research* 29 (2005), pp. 670–78; L. Sandercock, *Towards cosmopolis: planning for multicultural cities* (New York, Wiley, 1998).

[21] Mitchell, *The lie of the land*; for an empirical example, see J. Hackworth and J. Rekers, 'Ethnic packaging and gentrification: the case of four neighbourhoods in Toronto', *Urban affairs review* 41 (2005), pp. 211–36.

[22] G. Robson and T. Butler, 'Coming to terms with London: middle class communities in a global city', *International journal of urban and regional research* 25 (2004), pp. 75–86; T. Slater, 'Municipally managed gentrification in South Parkdale, Toronto', *Canadian geographer* 48 (2004), pp. 303–25.