H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margaret Kohn. *Brave New Neighborhoods: the Privatization of Public Space.* New York: Routledge, 2004. vi + 221 pp. $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-94463-2; $140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-94462-5.

Reviewed by Ileana Apostol and Tridib Banerjee

Published on H-Urban (January, 2006)

A Brave New Case for Public Space

A persistent narrative of loss permeates contemporary writings on comparative urbanism, urban design, and urban space.[1] This narrative has several recurring themes: placelessness, anomie, social insularity and loss of community. In *Brave New Neighborhoods*, Margaret Kohn emphasizes still another theme of loss, namely the atrophying of the public sphere resulting from increasing commodification and privatization of public space. This book is a rigorous yet passionate argument against the current shifts in public spaces. Essentially the author argues "that public life is undermined by the growing phenomenon of private government" and proposes to demonstrate "why the disappearance of public space has negative consequences for democratic politics" (p. 3). In developing these arguments, Kohn draws from "political theory, cultural analysis, and free speech jurisprudence" with implications for urban design, planning and public policy.

The book begins with a discussion of three main premises. First, increasing commodification and privatization of public spaces restrict democracy, political activity, and freedom of speech. Second, exclusion of certain activities and people from privatized public spaces leads to de facto segregation, and thus, by implication, further erosion of democratic rights and processes. Third, the conventional dichotomy of the private and public in the built environment does not adequately capture the complexity and variety of places that comprise our life experience. The first premise of this book is political. But the second and the third premises encompass broader social issues, focus on the political economy of the production of urban space, and suggest implications for public policy and design. In discussing the third premise the author acknowledges the inherent difficulty in making her case about public space. We will come to that presently, but first let us briefly review the structure of the argument Kohn presents in this book.

In the two chapters following the introduction the author reviews the workers' movement on street-speaking rights at the turn of the last century. She argues that such rights have often been contentious. She also reviews the contemporary status of such rights, the essential premise of the public forum doctrine, and the Habermasian construct of the public sphere. Chapters 4 through 7 are devoted to current examples of the privatization of public space. These examples include shopping malls, corporate open spaces, business improvement districts, and the like. The author also addresses self-governing communities, focusing on civil liberty issues in intentional communities, gated communities and residential community associations. She calls these communities "brave new neighborhoods" (the title of the book), and argues that Battery Park City in New York is an epitome of these neighborhoods. In the subsequent chapter the author presents three critiques–which she defines as liberal, romantic, and democratic–on Yale law professor Robert Ellickson's recent proposal for "homeless-free zones." The penultimate chapter concludes Kohn's case about public space by discussing three arguments for the provision of public good–the economic, the normative, and the po-

litical. Mindful that the internet is increasingly playing a major role in our public discourse (indeed was a major player in the last presidential campaign), the author maintains that cybercivitas is no substitute for democratic public spaces.

In her well-written and researched book, Kohn draws political conclusions from stories about past and present uses of public spaces in North America. Many of these stories are derived from journalistic accounts and other media sources. "Rather than attempting to provide a systematic argument," the author writes, "I introduce (in a suggestive manner) some theories that explain how the public realm fosters politically salient capacities and identities" (p. 201). She draws from a large array of research data, and uses interpretive storytelling to illustrate controversies about human rights. The narratives often bring forth enduring tensions and contentions about democratic rights and public spaces, whether they concern members of the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies) a century ago, the more recent history of suburban shopping malls as privately owned replacements for public space, or even the more recent gated and New Urbanist communities.

What is rather extraordinary about this book is that here a case for public space is made not by a city planner or an urban designer, but by a political scientist whose arguments are mainly grounded in political theory. There are few such examples. The recent work of Benjamin Barber entitled *A Place for Us* is one.[2] Barber is also a political theorist and he contends that public space precedes community and democratic processes. Kohn's work, however, extends beyond political theory and includes relevant coverage of the jurisprudence and legal arguments involving rights and public spaces. The chapter on the three critiques of "homeless-free zones" is particularly relevant for students of planning, public policy, and urban design.

Despite its overall success in arguing against the privatization of public space, the book nevertheless has a few structural problems. First, it lacks a focal argument. Although the author makes every effort to explain the scope of the book and its theme, part of the problem is that the book appears to be a collection of discrete articles. Further, some of the chapters include unconvincing and contradictory theoretical arguments, exemplified by the chapter that presents the "three rationales for the provision of public good." As the author reveals, the traditional arguments for public goods are now challenged by economists with a libertarian bent. Some of these economists argue that just about every form of public goods can be delivered through the market process.[3] Others see private government as an improvement over the traditional forms of government.[4] The author does not fully counter these arguments in making her case.

Is there a compelling case for public space here? And if so, what kind of public space are we talking about? More parks, more open spaces, more public plazas? Edward Blakely and Mary Snyder, coauthors of *Fortress America*, asked rather poignantly: "Can this nation fulfill its social contract in the absence of social contact?"[5] If social contact is the necessary condition for democratic processes, as Kohn also argues in rejecting the notion of a cybercivitas, will the mere provision of public space enable such contact? This is a particular challenge when the provision of public space takes place under the current social ecology of segregation and insularity of social groups. Can we create, for instance, Richard Sennett's ideal of a democratic urban space simply by increasing the supply of public spaces in our sprawling and segregated urban areas?[6] Critics would cite studies documenting the abandonment of parks and plazas to argue that space itself does not necessarily promote public discourse and debate. Many public spaces are at best places of sports, recreation, and physical exercise. Often these spaces are used exclusively by inner-city residents of lower income brackets, while the wealthy retreat to private clubs or spaces of exclusive suburbs. We believe that convivial public places–public life in "the public square"– enhance civic and democratic engagement more than "pure" public spaces. Since places like Starbucks cafes or Borders bookstores are becoming the places for public life, isn't it possible that private commercial spaces also promote social contact, and thus can be a part of a metaphorical "public square"? If so, what might be the role of public policy in achieving that end?

Another missing dimension in this book is the absence of the supply-side story of public space: that is, the planning, design, and production of public spaces. A convincing case for public space needs to be based on some understanding of the actual uses of public space, as well as the institutional aspects of planning. For example, the author does not mention the classic work of William H. Whyte on the social life of public spaces, which was the basis for re-thinking the New York City zoning ordinance.[7] Similarly, a comparative study of the design and production of downtown corporate spaces for public use in three major California cities by Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Tridib Banerjee is overlooked in this book, although it especially addressed rights is-

sues from the perspective of designers, developers, and the city authorities.[8] Also overlooked is the comprehensive study of the New York City experience of privately owned public spaces by Jerold S. Kayden. His book described legal approaches through which zoning regulation procured privately owned space. Kayden called these approaches "law's oxymoronic invention" that established "an axiomatic tension between private and public interest."[9] While this study is a continuation of previous research that started in the 1970s under the leadership of Whyte, it shows the perspective of law as designer of public spaces in New York.

We mention these studies because they in fact complement and reinforce Kohn's arguments by adding an essential dimension of urban space: its physicality and the ongoing process of design. These studies emphasize the political economy of urban design in the production of public space, incorporating various influences such as politics, institutional structures, negotiations with developers, development guidelines, professional constraints, legal agreements and means of enforcement, individuals' preferences and the challenge of aggregating individual choices into collective decisions.

All in all, *Brave New Neighborhoods* will be considered an important contribution to the literature on the production and management of public spaces, and the larger political economy of the relevant development processes. Because of its clear and fluent narratives, and engaging stories, the book will appeal to an audience outside academia. Indeed, Kohn's book has the potential to inspire citizen-activists, for the author successfully conveys an optimistic message on the future of democratic practices.

Notes

[1]. From a 1996 video interview of Margaret Crawford, conducted at the University of Southern California. Among other sources, see James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

[2]. Benjamin Barber, *A Place for Us* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

[3]. Harry Richardson and Peter Gordon, "Market Planning: Oxymoron or Common Sense?" *Journal of the American Planning Association* 59 (Summer 1993), pp. 347-352.

[4]. David T. Beito et al., *The Voluntary City: Choice Community and Civil Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[5]. Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), p. 3.

[6]. Richard Sennett, *Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992).

[7]. William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1980); William H.Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

[8]. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Tridib Banerjee, *Urban Design Downtown: Poetics and Politics of Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[9]. Jerold S. Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), pp. vii, 55.

Citation: Ileana Apostol and Tridib Banerjee. Review of Kohn, Margaret, *Brave New Neighborhoods: the Privatization of Public Space.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11306