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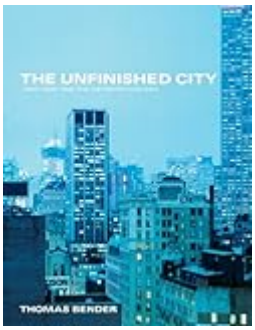

Thomas Bender. *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea.* New York: New Press, 2002. xvi + 253 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56584-736-1; $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-9996-3.

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Published on H-Urban (February, 2008)

Toward a Pluralized Public Culture

When a city's residents share experiences with strangers, they give birth to public life. This happens in parks, on sidewalks and public squares, and along the various queues that form in front of theaters and at bus stops. Yet, the creation of urban publics and the cultures that accompany them occurs in less recognized places as well. Publics are also nurtured in literary salons, university seminars, museums, and city council chambers; through the viewing of public access television; while reading newspapers and magazines; and when standing before supermarket bulletin boards offering guitar lessons or help with house-cleaning. In these less visible ways, people learn how to perceive the city and act within it. Such publics are as real and significant as those that form when residents rally at city hall to protest rising property taxes or congregate along the river to celebrate Earth Day. To speak of the public life of the city requires more than a simple division of home and workplace from streets and playgrounds.

No one better negotiates this expansive understanding of the city's public life than the historian Thomas Bender, University Professor of the Humanities at New York University. Engaging the complexity of the city, he never loses sight of the telling detail or the historical moment. Erudite and urbane, he is our most accomplished and perceptive commentator on urban culture. Some people write too much and with too little consequence. Thomas Bender does not write enough.

In this collection of essays on the cultural forms that defined the twentieth-century U.S. city, Bender engages the themes that have defined his career: the importance of intellectual projects and artistic visions for asserting as well as challenging cultural authority; the formation of political cultures and democratic publics, both cosmopolitan and metropolitan; and the contribution of the physical form of cities to the metropolitan idea. He situates these overlapping themes in New York City and confines himself to the period from the late nineteenth century, when the middle class became socially prominent, to the present. Central to his thinking are the perceptual shifts–contrasting modes of representation such as realism and abstract expressionism–that characterized

the turmoil of modernity. Echoing his understanding of what the city should be, Bender presents a series of revealing fragments. New York City, he imagines, resists "the logic of closure, of resolution" (p. xiv).

Intellectual projects, including science and engineering, have always been at the center of Bender's writings, beginning with his early books, *Toward an Urban Vision* (1975) and *Community and Social Change in America* (1978) on the role of ideas and institutions in shaping the meaning of community and urban culture, to his wonderful *New York Intellect* (1987) and the co-edited *American Academic Culture in Transformation* (1998). Here, he begins with public works–the Brooklyn Bridge and the subways–which transformed peoples' cognitive understanding of New York City. These "icons of transformation" brought functional coherence to the burgeoning and disorienting metropolis of the late nineteenth century; photographs and subway maps offered visual coherence. Thomas Edison's invention of the electric light presents an opportunity to explore the contribution of science to urban culture, not with the obvious–the cinemas, the greater accessibility of the streets at night–but with the connection between the periphery of the city where Edison's laboratories were located and the center where Edison sought Wall Street financing, legal expertise, and publicity. The subsequent rise of the research university further defined the metropolis and a cosmopolitan culture.

In these essays, though, artistic visions–the kinds of images that are seen in museums and purchased at art galleries by the middle class–have a greater presence than scholarly pronouncements or engineering marvels. For Bender, perception "largely defines the metropolitan experience" (p. xiii). In fact, "modernity privileges the visual" (p. 101) with the skyline as the obvious example. Closely spaced office towers signal a city that has embraced corporate modernism and, in return, occupies a valued place in flows of national and international capital. Bender, as he does so well, works against this reading however. The skyline becomes a reason to explore verticality as modern New York's "distinctive urban aesthetic" (p. 39), an aesthetic at odds with the horizontal civic tradition of the early twentieth century that focused on the street and proposed a progressive neoclassical style of architecture for bringing visual coherence to a fragmented city. Style was hardly the issue, Bender maintains. The crisis of the industrial city was one of functional coherence.

Contrasting modes of representation are most explicit in the discussion of the paintings of John Sloan and the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz. Sloan's work focused on the "horizontality" of everyday life: a woman reaching over her fire escape to pin damp clothes on a line extending to an adjoining building, men drinking and socializing at McSorley's Bar. Sloan's realist style is strikingly distinct from Stieglitz's abstractions: the block-like towers of Rockefeller Center rising behind a blacked-out city, the Flatiron Building like the prow of a ship in a fog. Stieglitz offers an "aesthetic of distance" (p. 107); Sloan a "humanity of sympathy" (p. 132).

Such competing "structures of perception" (p. 102), a phrase Bender adapts from the cultural theorist Raymond Williams, vie for cultural authority among different publics. They joust for dominance as regards how the city should be perceived. Artists and intellectuals thus literally create the city, though in ways loosely connected to its actual form and underlying processes. Out of this emerges a pluralized urban culture that is always in flux. "Reality," of course, goes its independent way.

What distinguishes Bender's discussion of these icons of transformation and modes of representation is the connection he draws to the formation of publics. His premise is that in times of rapid social change, people look for ways of understanding the city; perceptual forms are the key. Bender, though, goes further and offers these publics as evidence of the formation of the "metropolitan idea" and as an essential prerequisite of democracy. By representing the city, artists, intellectuals, engineers, and scientists give rise to it and do so without regard for the tyranny of political boundaries that divide the city from its surrounding municipalities. And even though most of Bender's illustrations situate the metropolitan periphery in New York City's shadow, he is undeterred in his quest to achieve a more inclusive metropolitan space. The key is a pluralized public culture in which cosmopolitanism reigns and people conduct their lives locally and at the metropolitan scale.

At stake for Bender is a citizenship that is as attached to the city as that which had been contemplated by political reformers in the early twentieth century. Such an urban citizenship would have two dimensions. First, it would embrace social differences rather than succumbing to the allure of a single identity. Here, Bender's plural publics do their work by providing the ground on which identity and tolerance can operate. An engagement with difference resists "the rising tide of privatization, residential isolation, intolerance … , and the substitution of consumerism for politics" (p. 197). Second, an urban citizen-

ship would embrace the deliberative democracy of John Dewey and other American pragmatists who called for a political realm of widespread and near-constant deliberative engagement. Through public "talk," people gain access to political institutions and it is this access that assures democracy. By acting publicly, and together, the hope is that citizens will forge a metropolitan project that can replace a "reactive parochial nationalism" (p. 247). Metropolitan fragmentation is dissolved.

New York City informs, deepens, and circumscribes Bender's vision. Freed from being the country's political capital, it is at odds with the rest of the United States, "a nation historically suspicious of cities" (p. xiv). Bender infers that New York City, of all U.S. cities, most accepts the "idea" of the city and the importance of the public realm. The implicit "other" is the suburbs with their avoidance of "difference" and retreat into the privacy of the middle-class family. And, although Bender asserts New York's exceptionalism, he does it with so much humility that one can hardly begrudge him his passion.

The vision that Bender offers is enticing. Ideas matter, not just in politics but in people's daily lives as well. And, on what grounds would one oppose an inclusive and deliberative democracy and tolerance for a multiplicity of differences, each extending across metropolitan space?

Still, there are aspects of Bender's vision that make it less convincing. First, virtually no attention is given to how this vision might be politically realized, a surprising absence given the commitment to pragmatism. Rather, his theory of cultural change is lodged in perceptual shifts for which we must rely on intellectuals, artists, and scientists. Consequently, collective action is championed and yet remains muted. This, though, is the weakest of criticisms; I ask for a political agenda, which is not what Bender set out to do. An inattentiveness to power and its exercise comes up again in Bender's selection of themes. Absent from his cultural and political realms are corruption, xenophobia, cynicism, rent-seeking, nepotism, and evil. The cartoons of Thomas Nast, the photographs of Weegee and Camilo Jose Vergara, and the performance pieces of Anna Deveare Smith would have balanced a bias for the intellectual projects and artistic visions of the middle class. If Bender is going to be as inclusive empirically as he is politically, his gaze needs to extend to the "underside" of the city and the fears and insecurities that its portrayal has engendered. Also unmentioned is capitalism's other role, not as the builder of majestic skyscrapers, the financier of massive public works, and the patron of great museums and symphonic orchestras but as the protagonist of anti-unionism, yellow journalism, and opposition to public housing, not to mention the absconder of public spaces. Here is where a little more Raymond Williams would have been helpful in recognizing the importance of how culture is produced and distributed, by whom, and for what purposes. Without "economics," urban culture seldom reaches beyond a chosen few.

Nevertheless, I challenge anyone to name a better, more perceptive, more interesting contemporary collection of essays on the public life of cities. Bender's deft handling of subtle ideas and his resistance to any premature "framing" of cultural matters are a welcome relief from cultural theorists for whom the city is a source of validating examples rather than intellectual challenges. By contrast, Bender never strays far beyond what can be said with the evidence at hand. He has a moral and political position, but it directs rather than distorts his historical interpretations. In these essays, Bender searches history for the conditions that give rise to plural publics, the roots of deliberative democracy, and the foundation for a metropolitan realm in which urban cultures can flourish. He does so superbly.

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Citation: Robert Beauregard. Review of Bender, Thomas, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

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