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City Sites: Multimedia Essays on New York and Chicago, 1870s-1930s. Maria Balshaw, Anna Notaro, Liam Kennedy and Douglas Tallack, eds..

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The Internet has ceased to be a novelty for most historians, but surprisingly few of us have begun to explore its potential. <p> There's the H-net, of course: a way to converse with colleagues all over the world, and a quick outlet for book reviews, but an overwhelmingly text-based production. One enters it as a bookish scholar dipping a toe in the backwaters, far from the torrents of JPEGs and Java applets in the mainstream. Many of us also have looked at the maps, images, and historical documents available on such sites as Edward Ayers' <i>The Valley of the Shadow</i>, or the Library of Congress's <i>American Memory</i>.[1] Yet even the most enthusiastic surfer, or the instructor who posts syllabi on the web, dabbles timidly in a medium that offers historians the power to produce rich, multi-layered, electronic books. <p> E-books, Robert Darnton has suggested, could incorporate historical narratives, hyperlinked explorations of particular topics, documentation, historiographical and theoretical essays, pedagogical suggestions, and forums for interaction between author and reader. The multiple layers and access routes in the e-book, Darnton argues, "could show how themes crisscross outside [the writer's] narrative and extend far beyond the boundaries of [the] book. Not that books should be exempt from the imperative of trimming a narrative down to a graceful shape. But instead of using an argument to close a case, they could open up new ways of making sense of the evidence, new possibilities of making available the raw material embedded in the story, a new consciousness of the complexities involved in construing the past." [2] <p> One innovative effort to explore this potential can be seen in <cite>City Sites: Multimedia Essays on New York and Chicago, 1870s-1930s.</cite> Created by an international and interdisciplinary group of ten scholars in the "3Cities Project,"

based at the universities of Birmingham and Nottingham, this web-based multimedia production is visually impressive, highly ambitious, and conceptually sophisticated. The editors call the book a "study of the iconography, spatial forms and visual and literary cultures" of the two cities. (The third of the "3Cities" is Los Angeles; although left out of the e-book, two essays on L.A. may be reached through the main 3Cities site).[3] <p> The book is far more concerned with urban theory than with urban history as traditionally understood. The editors have also put considerable thought into the ways in which the medium of the web can influence the development and communication of ideas. They summarize their purpose as follows: "City Sites [...] has been developed to demonstrate the ways in which new multimedia technologies can enhance conventional scholarly understandings of urban culture. <cite>City Sites</cite> presents an entirely new conception of what an electronic book might look like. Indeed we hope that the format of the book will provoke discussion about the newly developing protocols for delivering academic research in a multimedia environment. The book has been devised as a web based presentation, however—in keeping with the notion of a book format—it exists as a bounded and finished structure, within which users experience considerable freedom of movement but also extensive guidance and signposting to orient them within the book's complex structure. <cite>City Sites</cite> is published by the University of Birmingham Press and it has been subject to the usual processes of external peer review, editorial processes and copyright protection. It exists, then, as a hybrid text, occupying a new space between paper text and multimedia presentation." <p> It is a strange hybrid, indeed, with the anarchic energy of a flashy web site and the daunting jargon of post-everything academia. The

bells and whistles of e-gimmickry occasionally distract from the exploration of ideas, and some readers may be put off by the writing style, but this e-book is well worth reading to see ways in which the web can be used to present scholarship. <p> ENTERING THE SITE <p> The four editors, who also wrote some of the strongest essays in the book, suggest that their “theories of urban space are [...] inseparable from the multimedia practices of writing about urban space.” Indeed, the experience of clicking one’s way through the site corresponds nicely with one of the main themes in the ten essays: the multiplicity of ways in which space can be produced and seen. <p> The choices begin immediately. A navigation bar on the left of the site’s front page gives essentially three starting points for the reader/viewer: “Contexts,” “Essays,” and “Pathways.” (“Pathways” becomes visible after clicking on “Essays”). <p> “Contexts” is by far the most impressive way into the site, a Broadway compared to the back streets of the other two routes. Whether the reader/viewer chooses New York or Chicago, she or he is treated to some introductory Flash animation. A simplified sketch of a skyline appears and fills with rosy pastels, behind figures of city people cut from historic photographs. Then two doors swing closed, blocking out the skyline and revealing an evocative streetscape. A beautifully rendered map of the city’s core appears. In the case of Chicago, the viewer zooms in over the Loop and finds a street map with pop-up photographs of such landmarks as the Rookery and the Carson Pirie Scott building. Most of these images are crisp and colorful; unfortunately, they are dead ends rather than links to further discussions or depictions of the buildings. Hot-buttons on each city’s map link the reader/viewer to any of five essays related to the history of some part of that city. <p> These essays—the core of the site, also accessible directly from the navigation bar—bristle with hot-buttons and hyperlinks to other web sites. The reader is encouraged to pursue his or her own interests, nibbling freely through a smorgasbord of ideas and information. The essays are broken into short sections that are semi-independent of one another and, in most cases, can be read in any order. There are dangers as well as advantages in embracing the web’s potential for non-linear reading. Sustained concentration is difficult to maintain when a click of the mouse brings the immediate reward of new sensations. When the reading gets tough, the reader gets tempted to wander off. A linear reading is possible by following directional arrows at the foot of each section, but a surer method is to hit “print.” I found myself printing out page after page in order to write this review, covering my desk with increasingly disheveled

mounds of paper. <p> Though they share a common format, the essays prove to be quite different from one another in subject matter, tone, and use of the medium. In most cases, the essays’ relation to physical urban space is not so literal as one might imagine from reading the labels on the hot-buttons. The writers are concerned less with neighborhoods per se than with broader theoretical issues. <p> THE NEW YORK ESSAYS <p> On the New York map, the hot-buttons leading to the essays are labeled “Harlem,” “The Skyline,” “Lower East Side,” “Times Square,” and “Flatiron Building.” (The full titles of the essays are more detailed). In “Harlem—From Lenox to Seventh Avenue: Mapping the ‘Negro Capital of the World,’” Maria Balshaw examines the ways in which Harlem’s public spaces were depicted in visual and literary texts in the 1920s. She discusses how the image of a sophisticated “race capital” (epitomized by Seventh Ave.) developed in constant interplay with the representation of a disorderly ghetto (epitomized by Lenox Ave.). In this essay, as in many others, readers trained as historians may wish for more historical context. A little background information about the emergence of Harlem as a black neighborhood is included in sections titled “Arrival” and “Race Capital.” The latter section is placed almost parenthetically, reachable by a hot-button from the main essay. “Race Capital” should not be missed, as it contains an excellent animated map showing the spread of African American settlement. <p> Anna Notaro’s “Constructing the Futurist City: The Skyscraper” examines ideas of urban modernism expressed in the work of architectural illustrator Hugh Ferriss. The viewer of Ferriss’s skyscraper images, Notaro shows, is placed in a new, imagined relationship to the urban landscape, gazing from an elevated point across a dramatically shadowed (but somewhat creepy and Blade-Runner-like) megalopolis of the future. Both of these first two essays are packed with handsome images. To a far greater extent than would be possible in a traditional book from a cost-conscious academic press, the authors are able to develop their arguments by presenting extensive visual evidence. As in all of the essays, their citations are revealed in pop-up windows that highlight the relevant parts of a shared bibliography. <p> In “The Rhetoric of Space: Jacob Riis and New York City’s Lower East Side,” Douglas Tallack discusses the tension between the lived spaces of the streets and homes that Riis photographed, and the symbolic geography that his depictions created. Tallack’s main purpose is to employ rhetorical theory to understand how a “space” becomes constructed as a “place.” Readers who make the effort to work through the somewhat forbidding prose will find this one of the most thought-provoking essays in the

book. Tallack's use of web applications is also very effective. Echoing the opening video, Tallack includes a series of image maps that allow the reader/viewer to zoom in on the Lower East Side and then click onto pop-up versions of Riis's photographs in their spatial context. The map also shows Riis's customary route through the neighborhood. The image map is, obviously, a well-chosen device for an essay concerned with issues of cognitive mapping. Of all ten essays in the book, Tallack's is the one that best shows the promise of the medium. <p> Eric Sandeen discusses the development of New York's symbolic center, in an essay titled "Signs of the Times: Waiting for the Millennium in Times Square." He writes in his abstract, "Through looking at the Crossroads of the World, as the triangle formed by the crossing of 42nd Street and Seventh Avenue by Broadway is often called, we can see how conceptions of urban design, perceptions of centre city entertainment and danger, manifestations of American commercial culture, and class dynamics change over time." This sounds fascinating, but it is only thinly developed in the essay that follows. Sandeen devotes most of the essay to discussions of the physical development of the square, interspersed with descriptions of New Year's celebrations. <p> John Walsh contributes an essay on "The Attraction of the Flatiron Building: Construction Processes," in which he suggests that a "focus on dynamic construction-oriented ways of seeing takes us further from the Flatiron's familiar facade and towards modern ways of visualising and representing systems and processes which in themselves amount to an intriguing modern evaluation of vision." Some of Walsh's most important pieces of evidence are QuickTime film clips in the American Memory collection, which are unfortunately rather difficult to bring up. The essay contains some interesting insights, but it could be strengthened if Walsh provided direct links to the film clips and if he phrased his arguments more clearly and succinctly. <p> THE CHICAGO ESSAYS <p> On the Chicago map, the five hot-buttons are labeled "Chicago Gateways," "Marshall Field," "White City," "South Side," and "Maxwell Street." The first of these leads to an essay by William Boelhower, titled "The Mysteries of Chicago: Floating in a Sea of Signs." This sprawling essay argues that life in Chicago was presented as a "new order of circulation, of plunging into the sea of floating signs." It illustrates its point with an elaborate animated examination of an 1868 bird's eye view, and with examples of "flow" taken from written descriptions of the city and from Louis Sullivan's ornamentation. Much of the essay is an extension of ideas drawn from William Cronon's <i>Nature's Metropolis</i>, though expressed in far more exclusionary lan-

guage (there's even some untranslated French).[4] <p> The Marshall Field link leads to an essay titled "Meeting Places: Shopping for Selves in Chicago and New York," by Jude Davies. Like Boelhower's work, this essay has a tenuous connection to a specific locality. It is rather, in Davies's words, "concerned with the representation of urban identities and experiences in Theodore Dreiser's 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*." Unlike Boelhower's work, Davies' essay makes only modest use of web applications. Of all the essays in <i>City Sites</i>, this is the closest to a traditional printed text; its argument depends very little on the sprinkling of illustrations. Nevertheless, it is a lucid and thoughtful discussion of Dreiser's portrayal of the creation of the self. <p> Christopher Gair faced the challenge of contributing to an already crowded field of web-based examinations of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. His essay on whiteness and the White City, "Whose America? White City and the Shaping of National Identity, 1883-1905," proves to be easily the most conceptually sophisticated of the Columbian Exposition web sites, but may not come as much of a surprise to those who have read books by Robert Rydell and Matthew Jacobson.[5] <p> The "South Side" link leads to Liam Kennedy's "Black Metropolis: The Space of the Street in the Art of Archibald Motley, Jr." This extensive essay is lucid, informative, and copiously illustrated—an excellent Chicago counterpart to Balshaw's essay on Harlem. It also includes some solid historical context and an animated map of the southward expansion of the Black Belt in the 1920s. The essay will be of interest to a broad range of readers, including undergraduates. <p> In "Maxwell Street and the Crucible of Culture," Max Page asserts that "the very nature and form of American cities—their density of population, their opportunity for mixing of races, ethnicities, and classes, and their social instability—has allowed cities to play [a] role in the development of American popular and mass culture." The process seems to have worked like this in the case of Maxwell Street: struggling Delta blues musicians came to the bustling street market to find an audience; they electrified their music to be heard over the noise of the crowd; Jewish merchants heard the music and recorded it for commercial distribution. As Page acknowledges, "this is only the quickest outline of how the Blues was shaped by Maxwell Street." Readers may be a bit disappointed by the thin development of this argument, given the essay's ambitious claims in its opening pages. Like Sandeen's piece on Times Square, the essay seems unfinished. Nevertheless, readers will be pleased to find some excellent images and two sound clips. <p> PATHWAYS <p> There is another way to navigate the

site, as noted above: by following the “Pathways” across the various essays. Readers can choose selections related to any of four topics: leisure, architecture, race, and space. Unfortunately, it is not easy to move back and forth between essays and pathways, a problem the designers may wish to correct. <p> The pathways are evidently intended for readers interested in a particular theoretical problem, but who might these readers be? Any scholar seriously interested in theory would learn little from these vaguely related excerpts, as they are too short to explore an issue in any depth. Nobody with a casual interest in the topic is likely to be engaged either; the excerpts are much less meaningful when torn from their context. The quality of the prose does not help. In one of the selections, the reader is treated to passages like this: “Metonymy, although close to synecdoche in some respects and certainly distinguishable from allegory and symbol, relies on contiguous relations which function primarily in a combinatorial manner on the horizontal plane.” <p> It is a bit disheartening to see that academics, having perfected a style of writing that repels the uninitiated, are now spreading it on the Internet. True, there is room on the Internet for all kinds of specialized micro-communities, so theoreticians are entitled to their own little niches where they can talk to each other. Still, there is so much to admire about <i>City Sites</i> that I wish the editors had made it accessible to a broader audience. A typical American undergraduate would find some of the essays utterly impenetrable. Though the authors try to help out by linking difficult terminology to definitions in pop-up windows, a student assigned to read these essays would be tempted to give up on the words and merely look at the pretty pictures. Some of the most unwelcoming writing, oddly enough, is in two essays that make especially good use of web applications: Tallack’s piece on Jacob Riis, and Boelhower’s piece on Chicago’s “sea of signs.” Perhaps this junction of Java and jargon is somehow reflective of the postmodern aesthetic, but it seems to defeat the larger purpose of using the web to aid in understanding the city. <p> CONCLUSION: WRITING FOR THE Web <p> An alternative style of writing e-books can be seen in two works created under the direction of Carl Smith: <i>The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory</i> (1996) and <i>The Dramas of Haymarket</i> (2000). Both sites are intelligently written yet accessible to a general audience. They contain a wealth of images and primary-source documents and are easy to navigate, including in the non-linear style favored by the 3Cities project.[6] <p> This is not to say that all e-books must be designed for the general reader. Original scholarship,

aimed primarily at an academic audience, will be published increasingly on-line and will undoubtedly take a wide variety of forms. Still, scholars should keep in mind that the Internet provides an opportunity to share their work with a wider educated public, including with colleagues in other disciplines, if only they can express their ideas clearly and simply. <p> The main achievement of <i>City Sites</i> is not its writing style or, in most essays, the originality of the research. The book’s major contribution is its innovative use of web applications in presenting and illustrating scholarly arguments. Anyone interested in the development of the electronic book can learn a great deal from this example and from reading the authors’ extensive explanations of their philosophy, in their “Overview” and in the main 3Cities site.[7] The book will undoubtedly inspire much discussion. In keeping with the collaborative nature of their project, the authors encourage readers to send them comments, which they promise to post on the 3Cities site. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. Edward L. Ayers, “The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War.” Available on-line: <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2> [5 March 2001]. Library of Congress, American Memory. Available on-line: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html> [5 March 2001]. <p> [2]. Robert Darnton, “The New Age of the Book,” <i>New York Review of Books</i>, March 19, 1999. Available on-line: <http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev/> [5 March 2001] <p> [3]. The 3Cities Project, “Los Angeles.” Available on-line: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/losange.htm> [6 March 2001] <p> [4]. William Cronon, <i>Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West</i> (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). <p> [5]. Julie K. Rose, “The World’s Columbian Exposition: Idea, Experience, Aftermath.” Available on-line: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~{}MA96/WCE/title.html> [5 March 2001]. Bruce R. Schulman, “Interactive Guide to the World’s Columbian Exposition.” Available on-line: <http://users.vnet.net/schulman/Columbian/columbian.html> [5 March 2001]. Chicago Historical Society, “The World’s Columbian Exposition.” Available on-line: <http://www.chicagohs.org/history/expo.html>. [5 March 2001]. Erin Shaughnessy, “How Did African-American Women Define Their Citizenship at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893?” in “Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1820-1940<i></i>.” Available on-line: <http://www.binghamton.edu/womhist/ibw/page1.htm> [5 March 2001].

Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). [6]. Chicago Historical Society and Northwestern University, "The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory." Available on-line: <http://www.chicagohs.org/fire> [5 March 2001]. Chicago Historical Society and Northwestern University, "The Dramas of Haymarket." Available on-line: <http://www.chicagohistory.org/dramas/index.htm> [5 March 2001]. These sites originated out of Smith's traditionally printed book, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). [7]. The 3Cities Project, "Project Description and Aims." Available on-line: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/theproj.htm> [7 March 2001]

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