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Stephen A. Mrozowski. *The Archaeology of Class in Urban America.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xvii + 190 pp. Illustrations. $84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85394-1.

Reviewed by Jane Eva Baxter (DePaul University)

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An Interdisciplinary Approach to Class

Stephen Mrozowskiâs *The Archaeology of Class in Urban America* is a strong example of the multifaceted, interdisciplinary research that characterizes historical archaeology as a field of inquiry. Combining analyses of excavated materials, investigations of the built environment, and interpretations of the historical record, Mrozowski traces the changing dynamics of class in America through the case studies of eighteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island and nineteeth-century Lowell, Massachusetts. Looking at class through an archaeological lens allowed Mrozowski to investigate intimately the lives of people residing in particular households and neighborhoods to understand âhow class was manifest in the lives of a very small number of people" (p. 5). This approach to understanding class through the daily lives of ordinary people in the context of major historical and material shifts is compelling and engaging, and offers a unique perspective on the dynamics of class relations in the American past. This study is also integrated with theoretical understandings of capitalism and space and place that unite this study of changing class dynamics with the evolving social and material environments of urban America. There are three particular strengths of this work that bear mentioning in detail.

The first particular strength of this book is its truly historical nature. Mrozowski deliberately takes a diachronic approach that speaks not only to the dynamics of class in a particular time and place, but also how conceptions and expressions of class evolved over 150 years of American history. His approach is realized through a well-theorized understanding of shifts in capitalism and a movement beyond previous archaeological studies, which tended to focus on the constraints placed on individuals by broader cultural forces in capitalist systems. Mrozowski instead convincingly engages in a study that âlinks social relations of production under three different incarnations of capitalist political economy–merchant, industrial, and managerial–to examine how consumption patterns and their role in the construction of individual, group, or class identity changed over timeâ (p. 9).

The second strength of this book is the way that Mrozowski links these historical shifts to constructions of space and the built environment. Informed by theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, Mrozowski explores how historical trends in capitalism and concomitant constructions of class relations became manifest in the built environment of urban America. This exploration includes a study of how urban spaces were planned and maintained to uphold ideals of class and order and how those conceptions changed between an eighteenth-century merchant town and a nineteenth-century planned, industrial community. This emphasis on planning and intent is paired with an examination of the archaeological evidence that enabled the interpretation of how spaces became contested as class relations were played out in the daily lives of residents.

Another particular strength of this book is that it is unabashedly archaeological in content and perspective. Rather than shying away from actively engaging archaeological evidence in print, which has been a recent tendency in many monographs in historical archaeology, Mrozowski builds his arguments literally and figuratively from the ground up. This deliberate approach to his study makes this work particularly compelling, as it allows for a complex investigation of everyday lives through multiple lines of material evidence. These types of material objects include more typical lines of evidence such as ceramics and personal artifacts, but also ecological evidence from palynology and ethnobotany, which were used to reconstruct diet and health among households of different classes.

The Archaeology of Class in Urban America is not without its weaknesses, however. Particularly, this study is diminished by focusing on a single variable, that of class, as the analytical lens for exploring social and historical differences in urban contexts. Contemporary archaeological dialogues on identity favor analyses that simultaneously engage the multiple, overlapping social variables that comprise identity on individual, household, and community levels. While Mrozowski is clearly aware of this trend, he deliberately chooses to privilege class as the significant variable for understanding social difference in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. This approach is in many ways useful, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of class and identity, but it also reveals that many types of differences among households or between historical periods cannot be understood through class alone. Because other variables of difference, such as ethnic origin and identity or gender, are not theoretically developed in the text, their invocation to explain phenomena not well understood as class differences is often simplistic and without nuance.

Overall, *The Archaeology of Class in Urban America* delivers on its promises. It is a rich interdisciplinary text that traces historical and social developments in capitalism through the built environment and the archaeological record. While the emphasis on class is at times limiting, this study interprets class relations in urban America in a theoretically sophisticated and heavily contextualized way. The interdisciplinarity of Mrozowskiâs work makes this study accessible and interesting to a wide array of audiences and would be suitable for both graduate and undergraduate courses. As a scholar of nineteenth-century urban America, I consider the work to be an essential addition to my library.

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