

Book Review

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The Politics of Urban Cultural Policy: Global Perspectives, edited by Carl Grodach and Daniel Silver. London: Routledge, 2012. 272 pp. \$150.00 (hardback).

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Urban cultural policy is one of those elusive terms for which there seems to be no definitive definition. An understanding of what urban cultural policy is and does is not only made ambiguous by the complex character of the notion of culture itself but also by the fact that it is often difficult to demarcate cultural policy as a distinct policy domain. Cultural policy's boundaries cannot simply be set as the actions implemented by a particular agency or department, and approaches to—and understandings of—cultural policy vary markedly in different countries and contexts.

Carl Grodach and Daniel Silver's edited book brings little clarity to the matter. Indeed, it does not even attempt to do so. Instead, the editors describe their goal in the volume's introduction as an attempt to provide a "far-reaching empirical resource for investigating what urban cultural policy means in . . . diverse political and institutional contexts, enabling a comparative perspective in a field that too often relies on single-case studies" (p. 3). The first half of their goal is clearly accomplished. Comprising 18 interesting and sometimes downright superb chapters covering a diverse range of cities, including Bogotá, New York, Chicago, Toronto, Paris, Berlin, and Singapore, the book undoubtedly provides a valuable resource for catching up on the latest trends concerning the nexus of culture and urban development (policy). In line with the book's title, these chapters offer interesting insights about the politics that underlie these policies. However, I am more skeptical about the book's comparative value as the individual chapters (of which most are single-case studies!) differ markedly in content and character, which renders comparisons difficult to make. A set of "key variables driving the politics of urban cultural policy as a process" (p. 9) that is put forward by the editors in the introduction

could have served as a basis for comparison, but most contributing authors unfortunately do not engage it. The book also suffers from the lack of a concluding chapter where parallels, connections, and disparities in the purposes, practices, and outcomes of cultural policy could have been identified.

In addition, readers might wonder at times about the generalized tone of Grodach and Silver's otherwise useful introduction. As is somewhat common in the burgeoning literature on the current role of culture in urban development and policy, Grodach and Silver overemphasize the newness and prevalence of culture as a local policy concern. For example, their claim that formal cultural policy until recently was "primarily a national-level concern" (p. 1) before gaining significance in cities' political arenas holds true for some contexts, but certainly not for all (including, I would argue, the home country of one of the editors, the United States). Likewise, in terms of the increasing prevalence of culture in local policy making that Grodach and Silver repeatedly allude to as the reason why the book came about, I would have expected the editors to at least acknowledge that there continue to be plenty of regions in the world in which urban cultural policy to this day plays a rather marginal role. A closely related and even more troubling problem is the geographical bias of the volume's contents. The book claims to provide "global perspectives" but 15 of its 18 chapters deal with developments in Western Europe, North America, and Australia, while several other parts of the world that I had been excited to read about—Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and so on—are not covered at all. Given that research concerning urban policy's "cultural turn" (Miles 2007, p. 41), like urban studies more generally, to this day fails to account sufficiently for developments outside of the Western advanced capitalist world and would benefit tremendously from an extended geographical range of empirical resources and scholarly insights, it is especially in this regard that Grodach and Silver's volume represents an opportunity missed.

Significantly, however, these shortcomings (however serious) do not make this a bad book. The editors have gathered a formidable set of contributions and researchers, practitioners and anyone else interested in the intersections of culture and urban development will find value in almost all of them. Among the chapters I found especially useful were Kate Oakley's discussion of London, Eleonora Pasotti's study of Bogotá, Michael Indergaard's analysis of the politics of urban cultural policy in New York City as well as Steven Sawyer's account of the struggle surrounding the artist community "Les Frigos" in Paris. Oakley's chapter critically assesses "cultural industry" strategies devised in London and provides a nuanced account of the evolution of the use and meaning of the concept of the "cultural industries" from the days of the Greater London Council to the

market-oriented or “neoliberal” urban policy environment of the mid-2000s. Pasotti discusses the artistic and cultural techniques adopted by Bogotá’s former mayors Antanas Mockus and Enrique Peñalosa in their pursuit to transform Colombia’s capital into a globally recognized model as a green and livable city. Indergaard, in one of the theoretically most incisive contributions of the volume, sheds light on the multifaceted and intricate interests, coalitions, and conflicts that shape—and are being shaped by—New York’s urban cultural policy. And Sawyer’s analysis of the dispute over Paris’ legendary ex-squat Les Frigos provides a telling example of the resistance urban cultural policy may spark as well as the strategies and tactics artists and cultural groups employ when confronted with the risks of state co-optation and institutionalization. It makes an interesting read not so much because of its theoretical sophistication or insights but because of its detailed and rich empirical discussion, and I would argue that this—a few exceptions notwithstanding—also applies to most other contributions in the book. More theoretical grounding and perspective would have strengthened many of the chapters—and with them the book as a whole—but this does not change the fact that I enjoyed reading *The Politics of Urban Cultural Policy: Global Perspectives* as it is. It does not meet all the objectives the editors set out for themselves but nevertheless provides an informative, timely, and moreover readily accessible look at its subject matter and for this the editors and authors are to be commended.

Reference

Miles, M. 2007. *Cities and cultures*. London: Routledge.