



Review of Global Cities: Urban Environments in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and China

Robert Gottlieb and Simon Ng. *Global Cities. Urban Environments in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and China*. 2017. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 447 pages, ISBN 978-0-2620-3591-0 Hardcover (\$35.00).

Another book on ‘global cities,’ or a couple of them anyway (the subtitle is a much better indication of what this book is about). While the subject matter is urban environments under conditions of contemporary globalization, Los Angeles and Hong Kong do not function as simple case studies. There is specific value-added by focusing on urban environmental issues in the context of changing urban places within dynamic global spaces of flows. Obviously, the choice of these two cities relates to the authors’ respective areas of expertise, and they introduce their collaboration on this book as deriving from conferences in the two cities. In the introductory chapter, they justify why bringing together these two contrasting archetypal urban places – the ‘horizontal city’ and the ‘vertical city’ – makes sense: In the last four decades, the growth of the world-economy has revolved around the key relationship between Chinese production and U.S. consumption, enabled in large part through connections between these two cities and their encompassing regions. There is a curious difference in the treatment of the two cities as the subtitle reveals, however: China is added to the discussion of Hong Kong, while Los Angeles stands alone. The absence of the U.S. from the discussion is a key part of the critique elaborated in this review.

While the organization of the book is formulaic, the resulting similarity across chapters helps in the task of holding disparate topics together. Thus chapters on trade logistics, air pollution, water consumption, feeding the cities, moving around in the cities, and spatial content of the cities, are



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each treated, first as a problem with each city, then as impacts within each city, followed by discussion of how these relate to China, before concluding with policy suggestions as ‘strategies for change’. As you get to know what to expect in each chapter, the bigger picture of whole urban environments is built up. However, the book does not conclude with a synthesis that sketches out this picture; rather Gottlieb and Ng choose to end with a short concluding chapter on how to change things. This is in keeping with the tenor of the book – something needs to be done – but does a disservice to the substance of the book, changing natures of urban environments.

This is a very empirical book; each substantive chapter tells stories of practice, research and policy in which arguments for growth are rebutted by environmental considerations. The cumulative effect is a text packed full of facts underpinning what appear as political dilemmas unfolding in different ways in different contexts. It is good to be reminded that many policy positions that are taken for granted today are only thus so because of the work of many people changing political agendas. For instance, in Los Angeles there was a long period of searching for the causes of the dreadful air pollution – for some time viewed as “baffling” (67) – before the finger is pointed at automobiles in this city of cars. But even when thus recognized, there remains subversion of policy. For instance, the story of Volkswagen’s doctoring emission levels is told and we find Chancellor Merkel playing the role of the German car industry’s chief lobbyist in attacking California’s new nitrogen oxide regulations in 2010 (90). From such detail, the conclusion to this chapter identifies local air pollution in Los Angeles, Hong Kong and China as a “global issue” linking it to climate change (p. 94). This is one of the relatively few places where consumption briefly comes to the fore, via the recognition of “the interplay of between production and consumption” being “a core contributor to climate change” (94).

One common feature of writing on environmental issues is that when authors move from science to policy and political responses, the focus is much more on policing supply than controlling demand. And this is true of this book: Gottlieb and Ng trace the books’ origins to concerns for the environmental impacts of “systems of production and distribution” (262). They broach consumption excesses in the chapter on logistics, recognizing China’s role in producing cheap products for the benefit of American consumers, and in the chapter on food, where food retailing is discussed. Yet the notion of urban demand as the crucial factor creating some environmental problems is left lurking in the background. This is where the ‘missing U.S.A.’ fits in: whereas when dealing with Hong Kong, the massive production zone that is China is within the book’s purview, when dealing with Los Angeles, the massive consumption zone that is the U.S.A. is implicit in the overall argument, but never explicitly treated.

This problem is best illustrated with the final two substantive chapters, which cover transportation and public/private spaces in the two cities. Cars play a prominent role in creating

problems for the two urban environments, despite their overt landscape differences: pedestrians get a bad deal, with policymakers appearing immune to the notion of vibrant streets. For instance, gated communities are commonplace in both cities despite their very different residential land use: the suburban, horizontal, gated communities in Los Angeles are matched by high-rise, vertical, gated communities in Hong Kong. Yet these interesting commonalities are not treated in their broader context: the two chapters are the most locally orientated of the book. Without wider coverage of the U.S.A. as the creator of consumer modernity, only half the story is told. This is because it is the massive suburbanization of America from the 1950s on that generates the core of global demand—demand which, from the 1980s on, is chiefly supplied via the importation of massive supplies of goods from China. The automobile in the city is central to this supply/demand nexus. Accordingly, the chapter entitled “Spaces in the city” could have been very different. As written, it deals with urban open spaces, their public and private ownership, and their role in facilitating or limiting political protest. An alternative take on the spatial constitution of cities would emphasize that contemporary cities have been shaped to facilitate historically unprecedented levels of material consumption. The car is centrally implicated in this dimension of modern urbanity, and the process differs in interesting ways between Hong Kong and Los Angeles. This was the ‘synthesis chapter’ I was expecting, bringing together the previous environmental topics in an overall analysis of urban spatial organization.

Gottlieb and Ng’s discussion of spaces in the city leads neatly to their final chapter on social movements and policy. Here three activists who have made a difference are lauded, and bottom-up politics are promoted. Overall this is an optimistic discussion that finishes with a call for “structural reform” in pursuing Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’ to create an “ecological civilization” (262-3). Of course, this has to be a ‘right to *remake* the city’.

On reading this book, you get a real feel for Gottlieb and Ng’s scholarly pursuits and political agendas. I found their project sufficiently engaging that I was left wanting a further chapter. (And there is room: one of the unusual things about the book is that the text takes up only 263 of the 447 pages, leaving nearly 200 pages on notes, bibliography and index!) Nevertheless, the book tells us a lot about two global cities that have not received sufficient treatment in the literature. The fundamental strength of the book is the relational approach that lies at the heart of their joint endeavour; this makes it so much more than just a comparative study of Los Angeles and Hong Kong. Couple this with an empirically rich text on two urban environments that are commonly neglected in the scholarship on global cities, and the sum is an outstanding contribution to understanding cities in contemporary globalization.

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