Sam Griffiths and Alexander von Lünen (eds.) (2016)
*Spatial Cultures: Towards a New Social Morphology of Cities Past and Present*

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Spatial Cultures is an anthology of 20 texts edited by Sam Griffiths and Alexander von Lünen, with roots in a one-day workshop at UCL in 2013.1 They cover a diverse range of questions woven together by how urban history, social theory and built environment research are brought into dialogue with one another both theoretically and methodologically, where one aim of the work is the interdisciplinary work it performs. The collected works address substantial questions relating to the interplay of the material built environment with the people who inhabit, govern and write about cities past and present. Within this framework, the book is divided into four parts: “Spatial cultures in the ancient and medieval worlds”, “Spatial cultures in the long nineteenth century”, “Historical cities, contemporary spatial cultures”, and “Perspectives and methods for spatial cultures research” – each consisting of five specific chapters. The authors are of different disciplinary backgrounds including but not limited to architecture, sociology, digital humanities, history, archaeology, urban theory, anthropology, and urban geography, with some having backgrounds in several different fields.

To cite the editors, the main aim of the book “has to do with conceptualizing the relation between how built environments work as complex material-informational systems and how they come to mean as inhabited spaces in particular social-historical contexts” (Griffiths and von Lünen, 2016, p. xxi). They identify as a central challenge that there is no way to neatly map either of these onto the other. However, rather than shy away from this issue and treat how cities work and mean as separate knowledge domains, they propose building further on Tschumi’s (1996) notion of disjunction, where the challenge is to ‘give precise articulation to their disjunction’ (ibid, p. xxi). I will be making use of this well-chosen term for the theme of the work, to discuss the work itself.

The book has another root, of course, which happens to be the same as the theme of this issue: early space syntax research discussing spatial cultures (Peponis, 1985, Hillier, 1989). However, it is very intentionally not a book that operates within space syntax but rather takes a much broader approach while maintaining an overall theme of morphology and society. It does attempt if not to reconcile, at least bring into articulation parallels, integrations and disjunctions between social, philosophical, cultural and morphological theories on space and society. To a large extent this arguably succeeds very well, and overall as well as in its specific chapters, the book is a rewarding read that both develops on and challenges research and knowledge of cities past, present, and future.

As with any book as diverse as Spatial Cultures, some parts will be more or less relevant for different readers, and will also capture audiences’ interest in different ways. This also makes a review difficult – would a prospective reader prefer Laurence’s Ancient Rome: Mobility in Europe’s first metropolis, Layton-Jones’ What has the future of urban parks to do with their past?, Ramos’ Grindr Guys #7: Difference, traces and spatial practices, or Liebst’s Reassembling Durkheimian sociology of space? Clearly, much of this comes down to personal preference and interest. Thus, even if I am drawn to the
historical-theoretical materials in the first two parts of the book, this is due to my current fascinations rather than variations in the quality of the material – all chapters are solid pieces of research and writing and I appreciate the somewhat bold move to contrast the historical material with methodological and theoretical chapters in the final part. I am also convinced that as my own focus shifts, other chapters of the book will become more prominent in my thinking.

*Spatial Cultures* presents chapters of diverse interest, raising fundamental, topical and important questions. The contributions are well written, each adding to the overall discussion of the book and clearly making the case that understanding ‘spatial cultures’ as defined in the book requires an interdisciplinary research effort. That said, there are of course somewhat intrinsic limitations to the way the issues that the book addresses are formulated. In the preface, Griffiths and von Lünen outline no less than 12 points in a research agenda regarding spatial cultures. This is a very ambitious positioning, especially considering that the points themselves are of fundamental character. The preface is here best read as a discussion of a research task that goes well beyond the publication itself, to which the chapters formulate specific contributions but where several of the points are not addressed head-on in any specific chapter. This is not a problem per se, but there is a sense of *disjunction* between preface and chapters. I urge readers to, in the spirit of the discussion of the preface, rather embrace this disjunction as a quality of the book, and let it become a case in point of a need to articulate the disjunction between theoretical models and frameworks on the one hand, and specific research questions, empirical materials, or methodological proposals on the other.

However, this points to a weakness of the book, which I argue follows suit with its strengths: the diversity of the material. To a certain extent, the disjunctions and differences that contribute to the quality sometimes feel a bit too wide and could be addressed more clearly. At times, the reader is slightly overtasked with connecting the dots between chapters, as well as between individual chapters and the proposed agenda, where especially the latter is a challenge that could have been reduced further. This is likely in part a result of the book being a collaborative effort around a set of themes by authors whose contributions often concern recent or current projects.

Another possible weakness, or rather an opportunity for coming development, is the comparative lack of presence of discussions on the works of architects, planners, administrators, geographers and other actors operating on what in a simplified sense, using further the editors’ own reference to Lefebvre (1991), could be summarised as conceived space. In so far as the work intends to address meaning, this is a layer that arguably needs greater inclusion in future work. If I insist on repeating the notion of articulation of disjunctions that Griffiths and von Lünen so elegantly propose, the disjunction between such actors and works, and the uses, perceptions and processes of inhabitants focused on in the book would further complete the picture of ‘spatial cultures’. However, for the current work, such additions would arguably risk tipping the scales of diversity from quality to weakness.

To conclude, however, when read as outlining a research field of ‘spatial cultures’ combined with a set of specific investigations that demonstrate such a field both individually and in combination, the noted weaknesses disappear in the richness of the material. While on occasion stumbling in the formulations a little on whether the book is an answer or a challenge, I believe the intention is just this: to raise challenges and questions for coming research, and to map out a theoretical territory while presenting an account of current knowledge. The work clearly manages to do both quite well. In its
separate contributions and as an integrated whole, *Spatial Cultures* thus forms a solid contribution to our understanding of cities and social morphologies.

**References**


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