

# Reviews

## Arts and culture in urban redevelopment It's not all bad

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*Cultural Capitals: Revaluing the Arts, Remaking Urban Spaces*, Louise C. Johnson. Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, 2009, 292 pp., ISBN 9780754649779, £65.00 (hbk).

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Johnson's *Cultural Capitals: Revaluing the Arts, Remaking Urban Spaces*, explores the arts and culture as panacea orthodoxy in urban redevelopment schemes. Her conclusion: it's not *all* bad. The book is part of a series titled, 'Re-materializing Cultural Geography', edited by Mark Boyle at the University of Strathclyde in the UK and Don Mitchell at Syracuse University in the USA. It is a series dedicated to geographer Peter Jackson's seminal call to integrate culture into social geography. In response, Johnson recognizes the increasingly pertinent 'role of culture in defining commodities, identities, and economic activity' (p. 4), and develops her theoretical framework around this concept.

Although Johnson alerts us of the critical work on the role of culture in urban restructuring and spectacle such as Adorno (1991), Zukin (1995), Deutsche (1996), among others, she wishes to assess just how socially, politically and economically sustainable culture-led urban development can be. Her task is to empirically examine actually existing cultural policy rather than their theoretical ideals. Thus she lends a refreshing take on the culture and creativity as urban catalyst debate, one that acknowledges the arguments for, and the critiques against, this mode of urban restructuring.

Johnson begins by thoughtfully elaborating on a definition of a 'Cultural Capital', a term reproduced in capital letters to indicate its governmental designation and political support. Calling for the integration of explanations of cultural capital from economic, sociological, cultural tourism and cultural geography perspectives, Johnson attempts to clarify how embodied, objective and institutional forms of cultural capital are mobilized in remaking urban spaces. Central to this urban restructuring is the 'creative city' orthodoxy promoted by Richard Florida and Charles Landry. Fueled by this orthodoxy Johnson suggests that there has been an emergence of a 'Cultural Capital industry' in policy proliferation. While Johnson acknowledges the critiques of these urban strategies (e.g. MacLeod, 2002; Peck, 2005), she clearly supports them as innovative and viable tactics. She finds hope in work along the lines of Hannigan (1998), and argues for the possibility of 'local authorities and community members asserting some control and gaining real benefits from this tendency to create urban spectacles' (p. 65).

Johnson then undertakes a series of case studies of Glasgow, Bilbao, Singapore and Geelong. All are cities once reliant upon secondary, production-related economies that are now struggling to adopt and adapt to

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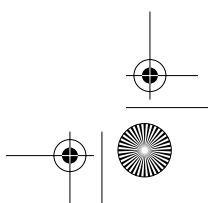
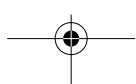
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5 tertiary economies, urban entrepreneurialism, post-colonialism and inter-urban competition. Johnson diligently analyzes how each of her case studies strives to draw value from cultural development. For Johnson, Glasgow's vie for an international title of 'City of Culture' was built upon its design history and the revaluing of its heritage and associated architecture. In contrast, Bilbao's experience is based upon the importation of cultural capital through the internationally established Guggenheim Foundation and a renowned global 'starchitect'. In a similar attempt to draw upon global circuits of cultural (and economic) capital, Singapore built its Esplanade-Theatres by the Bay complex to anchor a new, embodied arts scene as well as attract a Western blockbuster theatre. Finally, in Geelong, the failure to materialize another Guggenheim franchise nonetheless resulted in the emergence of cultural policy that ultimately enhanced the cultural image of the city. Johnson meticulously describes each of these Cultural Capitals from their local and regional political contingencies to their interconnectedness with global circuits of economic and cultural capital.

10 For Johnson, what is central to the economic restructuring and urban regeneration strategies of all of the case study cities is a revaluation of the arts by urban policy makers. While she admits that waterfront redevelopment that integrates urban design, heritage restoration, and arts and culture has become quite formulaic, she claims that it is 'certainly better than [the] ongoing abandonment' (p. 240). Additionally, though Johnson acknowledges that the policies behind these Cultural Capitals often marginalize local artists and arts organizations through their embrace of global cultural capital, she still extols the importance of the arts in its ability to 'express something of the marginalized people in [the city] and offer alternative representations' (p. 43).

15 Some critical scholars will no doubt find Johnson's analysis overly optimistic and lacking a substantive engagement with structural

inequality and political economy. According to Johnson:

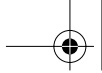
'when given the choice of allowing the collapse of manufacturing to continue, unemployment to go on rising, city buildings to fall further into disrepair, public spaces to be abandoned; or to mobilise private and government investment into supporting artistic productions which can variously reverse these trends, my argument is that the [second] choice is a wise, ethical, and sustainable one'. (p. 236)

This may set up a reductive and false dichotomy, but it frames the predicament that municipalities find themselves in today. When they consider how the arts can be deployed as an economic driver in their own cities, urban policy makers will assess the successes and failures of others. It is within this groundedness that Johnson succeeds, in constructing a thorough account of how four Cultural Capitals are emerging and existing in today's social, economic and political contingencies.

In the book as a whole Johnson invites critical engagement with these topics. By virtue of her thorough and judicious analysis, scholars and policy makers alike will find value in reading this account of arts and culture in urban redevelopment through the lens of Cultural Capitals. Johnson is to be applauded for her redemptive take on cultural redevelopment schemes while retaining a critical edge.

### References

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