

Book Reviews

Public Space: Design, Use and Management. Edited by Chua Beng Huat and Norman Edwards. Singapore: Singapore University Press, for Centre for Advanced Studies, 1992. Pp. viii, 177.

Four elements characterize current trends in the social sciences. These include the following:

1. delineating new objects of analysis (especially from “the everyday”);
2. a growing emphasis on the role of space in social constitution and functioning;
3. an acceptance and assertion of inter-disciplinary approaches to analysis; and
4. a need to situate social and physical analytic concerns within policy frames (that is, “relevance”).

A recent collection of short essays from Singapore’s Centre for Advanced Studies and the Singapore University Press entitled *Public Space: Design, Use and Management* (1992), edited by Chua Beng Huat and Norman Edwards may be fit within this quatrefoil mould.

The book is a short one, about 180 pages, but it is expansive in its agenda, which involves opening up and examining the topic of “public space in Singapore” from different angles. The book’s eleven substantive essays (outside the introduction) are divided into three headings:

1. “*historical*” (including topics such as colonial visions of street life (V. Savage), the colonial suburb (N. Edwards), and back lanes as contested regions (K.C. Ho and V.L.N. Eun);
2. “*present cultural practices in built form and environment*” (including topics such as decoding civic spaces (Chua Beng Huat), public space in Housing Development Board (HDB) estates (Ooi

Giok Ling and Thomas T.W. Tan), perceptions of Duxton Plain (K. Kwok), and public spaces in private developments such as malls (B.G. Field);

3. "*natural environment*" (including topics such as conservation spaces (essays by C. Briffett, R. Corlett, and C. Hails) or the design of naturalistic exhibits at zoos (B. Harrison).

This is an incredible array of topics to be bound by one theme and one book spine. Due to the number and diversity of the essays in the collection, I will consider the piece as a whole rather than look at each essay individually. Editors Chua and Edwards are to be lauded for bringing together this collection because of the originality of the topic and the quality of the authors.

The book is something of a pioneering effort. From the outset, the editors note that when considering Singapore,

one of the many areas of the environment which remains to be analyzed comprehensively is that of public space; its availability, condition, quality, and usage. This is the task set for this collection of essays.

With regard to this goal the collection succeeds, to a point. Juxtaposition of approaches and topics is the route chosen to achieve comprehensiveness rather than synthesis by the editors or strict guidelines for authors. The book takes an avowedly *multi*-disciplinary approach. The key failing of the book begins with this first premiss: that it is "multi"- rather than "inter"-disciplinary. For the collection to make a greater contribution more cross-fertilization and *inter*-disciplinary discussions would be needed. The introductory chapter attempts to negotiate some of this interaction but cannot fully weave the tapestry composed of all of the perspectives as they are so starkly variant.

Essay topics range from the psychology of perception to the need to provide environments amenable to bird habitat to representations of power in public buildings to costing public access atria. In each case the individual author presents his or her slice of the pie, which the reader is left to integrate with material from other essays — an engaging pastime but a trying one given the range of topics.

We are somewhat fortunate in this pursuit as the editors have done an excellent job in their selection of authors. Most are premier authorities in their area of discussion (for example, Ooi Giok Ling on HDB planning or Richard Corlett on Singapore's flora). The depth of knowledge and the involvement of the authors in their topics brings a surety to the individual essays but unfortunately also tends to fragment the whole.

This said, some recurring themes do emerge from the essays. In all of the essays there is an almost palpable tension over the direction of land-use and an emphasis on its importance: public space matters to each of these authors.

There is also at the core of the collection a number of other tensions such as

1. designed versus spontaneous or wild spaces;
2. public versus private spaces; and
3. human versus natural spaces.

The focus on these binary divisions serves to give the essays an axis on which to turn and helps the reader in thinking about the dichotomies at hand, especially as issues cross between essays.

A second weakness of the collection revolves around its theoretical underpinnings and the as yet underdeveloped conceptualization of public space as presented by the editors in the introduction and as witnessed in the brief and extremely eclectic introductory frames of a number of the essays.

I should say that the theoretical lacuna I am pointing to in the collection may in part be due to the dated nature of most of the writing. It appears as though most of the essays were written *circa* 1986 (judging by data and references). This makes them inventive and path-breaking for the time that they were written but a little slim in terms of current discussion. The bibliographies tend to illustrate a search for a body of literature that was as yet not fully developed or publicized.

Both the terms "space" and "public" have been the topic of much debate since the mid-1980s to the late 1980s. The works of De Certeau, LeFebvre, and even Soja would have greatly informed the collection. For

example, the theorization and multiplicity of space (its appropriation and colonization), which Ho and Eun's essay gets closest to is now very much *de rigueur*.

As it is, little is written in the collection about critical issues such as power and public space (*à la* Giddens or Foucault) or about the volatile but important issues of gender or ethnicity and "public space". All three of these areas are currently central to research on public space and would seem to have a deep resonance for Singapore as well.

The main success of the collection is in its policy applicability. Most of the chapters (and building to a crescendo by the book's end with the "nature" chapters) tend to argue a strong policy line. For example, the rather more pragmatic or policy-oriented pieces concerning the built environment are Ooi and Tan's chapter on HDB amenity design and Kwok's examination of perceptions of Duxton Plain. Interestingly, these two essays also get the closest to considering actual user perceptions of public spaces whereas most of the rest of the work is inferential.

Taken as a whole, the collection is strong in terms of the way it highlights a previously rather hidden (yet paradoxically ubiquitous) topic — public space — and its efforts at maintaining "policy" relevance. It is less successful in terms of the conceptualization of space and its interdisciplinarity.

The editors have designed an expansive package ably filled by knowledgeable authors. The book should be attractive to those interested in Singapore, and/or the incredible array of topics that the editors have brought together. More than this, the essays and the collection, one hopes, are foundational to a further penetration of the topic of public space in Singapore. The editors and authors have marked off a "new space" in research in Singapore and for this we thank them.

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