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# review essay

## Theorizing cities under stress

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**Specular city: transforming culture, consumption, and space in Buenos Aires, 1955–1973.** By Laura Podalsky. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press. 2004. 287 pp. \$55.00 cloth; \$22.95 paper. ISBN 1 56639 947 5 cloth; ISBN 1 56639 948 3 paper.

**Wounded cities: destruction and reconstruction in a globalized world.** Edited by Jane Schneider and Ida Susser. Oxford and New York: Berg. 2003. 317 pp. \$55.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper. ISBN 1 85973 683 1 cloth; ISBN 1 85973 688 2 paper.

**Popular culture in the age of white flight: fear and fantasy in suburban Los Angeles.** By Eric Avila. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2004. 308 pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN 0 520 24121 5 cloth.

At first glance, it might appear that *Specular city*, *Wounded cities*, and *Popular culture in the age of white flight* have little in common. After all, these three studies focus on different cities at different historical periods, and they construct their arguments within different conceptual frameworks and unrelated historiographical traditions. Yet what shines through in all these books is the shared understanding that cities are not just aggregations, or accumulations, of buildings varying in size and shape, streets and passageways, configured landscapes, population densities, socio-economic relationships, and so on, but also repositories of imagined pasts and futures, sites of memory and nostalgia, and show-cases for the visual display of symbols and images.<sup>1</sup> Put in another way, cities are more than their built environment, and more than an agglomeration of zones, places, and locations; they are also active agents integrally connected with the fashioning of distinctly urban sensibilities, attachments to place, and ‘structures of feeling’.

Besides their wonderfully eclectic interdisciplinary approaches, the common thread that connects these three books under review is their shared concern with deciphering

cities under stress. Despite the different urban localities and the different time-periods, all three books address the interlocking themes of the spatial configuration of urban landscapes, the uses (and abuses) of public space, and the collective memory of urban residents. In *Specular city*, Laura Podalsky views the spatial reconfiguration and cultural transformation of Buenos Aires during the interregnum after the downfall of the Juan Perón in 1955 and before his restoration in 1973 through the lens of film, fiction-writing, and architecture. She argues that the abrupt departure of Perón provided middle-class urban residents, who were eager to erase the working-class imprint that the Peronist movement had inscribed on the cityscape, with a unique opportunity to redefine the use of public space, to rebuild cityspaces, and to recast urban social relations in ways that favored their class interests and sensibilities. She juxtaposes a constellation of distinctly modern and popular cultural forms: cinema, fiction-writing, architectural design, and sequestered shopping arcades. Aside from their growing popularity, these cultural forms came to symbolize a new visuality of urban spectacle that defined Buenos Aires after the downfall of Juan Perón.<sup>2</sup>

In *Wounded cities*, Jane Schneider and Ida Susser bring together a disparate collection of essays that critically assess the external forces, the ongoing conflicts, and the particular events that have 'traumatized', 'injured', and otherwise 'afflicted' various cities around the world. In their view, 'wounded' cities are the embodiment of all that has gone wrong with contemporary urbanism. Yet whatever the source of the affliction, 'wounded' cities – like all cities – are dynamic entities, containing within themselves 'the potential to recuperate loss and reconstruct anew for the future'.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in *Popular culture in the age of white flight*, Eric Aliva seeks to explain the connection between 'white flight' from the central city and the rapid expansion of racially homogeneous suburbs in Los Angeles after World War II, on the one side, and the formation of an inclusive white identity incubated within these suburban spaces, on the other. In his view, 'the culture of suburban whiteness' – symbolized by Hollywood cinema, Disneyland, Dodger Stadium, and the freeway system – dovetailed with the emergence of a new political outlook that rejected the tenets of new Deal liberalism and adopted instead a race-conscious, sociocultural sensibility that anticipated the rise of the Reaganite New Right.<sup>4</sup>

## City as spectacle

Laura Podasky uses the visual metaphor of 'spectacle' to decipher both the physical transformation and the sociocultural metamorphosis of Buenos Aires in the almost two decades between the ouster of Juan Perón in 1955 and his triumphal return to political power in 1973. In constructing her analysis, she draws on the theoretical work of such urban scholars as Frederic Jameson, David Harvey, Mike Davis, Ed Soja, and Derek Gregory to weave together a compelling argument that links the materiality of urban space with its discursive representations. Borrowing from Henri Lefebvre, Podalsky develops a tripartite analytic framework that distinguishes between three spatial registers: built environment (stable material structures); lived practices (the everyday

uses of urban space); and discursive representations. She employs this analytic framework with great clarity and eloquence in her investigation of Buenos Aires.

Podasky establishes the sociohistorical context for her story by moving backward in time. During the nine-year reign of Juan Perón (1946–1955), she contends, the spectacle of working-class militancy, coupled with the steady stream of immigrant newcomers from the rural hinterlands to the capital city, fundamentally reshaped the urban landscape of Buenos Aires. Fearing the specter of political power in the hands of newcomers to the city, the anti-Peronist urban elite reacted to these unsettling circumstances with a great deal of class resentment and hostility. They associated Peronism with the ‘loss of the city’ – a city taken over by unruly working-class crowds, with their ‘anonymous earth-coloured faces’ and their raucous, noisy demonstrations in the public spaces of the central city, particularly the centrally-located and symbolically significant Plaza de Mayo.<sup>5</sup> The use of the urban landscape as ‘exhibitionary space’ for the Peronist regime no longer guaranteed the upper-middle class urban residents the vaunted, special place in the public sphere they long regarded as their birthright. Nurtured in the aristocratic milieu of ‘natural’ hierarchies, the urban elite looked upon working class supporters of the Peronist regime through the demonizing lens of a quasi-racialized Other. Whereas the Peronists focused attention on the working class newcomers by naming them *descamisados* [the shirtless ones], middle-class urbanites derisively dismissed these new arrivals to the city as *cabecitas negras* [literally, little black heads], a derogatory term for provincial immigrants and a pejorative reference to their indigenous sociocultural heritage.

In the years following the downfall of Perón, middle-class residents sought to reassert their class identity through the transformation in the uses and meanings of urban space. A host of social groups, including filmmakers, architects and designers, fiction-writers, and urban planners – the organic intellectuals of the property-owning urban middle-class – moved quickly to impose their vision of middle-class propriety on the urban social fabric by ‘taking back’ the city from the ‘unruly’ masses, the boisterous crowds, and the plebian newcomers with their unsophisticated tastes and unvarnished mannerisms. Taking her cue from Diana Taylor’s study of performance and power, Podasky stresses the importance of urban spectacle to the Peronist regime, particularly the staged performativity of large-scale political rallies in the public spaces of the city.<sup>6</sup> She argues that, after the downfall of Juan Perón, a succession of political regimes sought, with varying degrees of success, to erase the collective consciousness and the historical memory of working class militancy.<sup>7</sup>

Podasky shows that the physical and symbolic transformation of the urban landscape in both the physical and symbolic realms was not a linear process, but the result of multiple dynamics that overlapped and intersected in surprising ways. The steady accretion of soaring skyscrapers and other innovative building-types transformed the built environment of the city. These iconic symbols of high modernism brokered a visible break with the Peronist past and marked re-entry of Argentina into the world market.<sup>8</sup> The rapid construction of expensive high-rise apartment complexes towering above the streetscape enabled anxious middle-class urban residents to geographically (and hence culturally) distance themselves from the conventional public

places of the urban landscape, and hence to avoid social interaction with the unruly crowds, the peripatetic newcomers to the city, and the urban 'riff-raff'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the steady increase in the number of privately-owned automobiles offered greater geographical mobility for the middle and upper classes, or as Podasky puts it, a 'way to move around the city with greater freedom and, perhaps more important, to negotiate the urban terrain without having to encounter the working classes'.<sup>10</sup> Podasky pays particular attention to the spatial reconfiguration of the city and such visual attractions as enclosed shopping arcades, or *galerías*, to trace the emergence of a middle-class consumer culture. The proliferation of these glitzy sites of consumption after the fall of Perón provided a sheltered environment separated from the public spaces (streets, plazas, boulevards) of the city. Yet instead of fostering the leisurely gaze of the strolling *flâneur*, the new *galerías* 'encouraged the spontaneous purchases by hurried pedestrians'.<sup>11</sup>

In an argument that dovetails nicely with what Vanessa Schwartz suggests in *Spectacular realities*, Podasky contends that the symbolic representation of Buenos Aires relied upon an explicit connection between visual and written texts.<sup>12</sup> She describes a variety of novel practices of visual spectacle that sprang up after the fall of Perón to celebrate middle-class consumerism. Producers of the new popular culture – architects, intellectuals, filmmakers and fiction-writers, in particular – aimed to please this middle-class urban public through the construction of a shared experience through the written word and visual display. The specular city, embodied in architecture, enclosed shopping arcades, the new cinema, and popular fiction-writing, created a shared environment through which 'respectable' urban residents began to imagine themselves as active participants in a refined middle-class consumer culture that distanced itself from the unruly masses that the Peronist movement had relied upon for political support.

Podasky traces the connection between new architectural designs, new transportation patterns, and new consumer practices that originated in the late 1950s with the growing literary and cinematic obsession with the urban landscape of Buenos Aires. The physical transformation of city became the subject of new films, short stories, and novels that dramatized the disillusionment, alienation, and estrangement of middle-class urban residents. The new cinema (particularly filmmakers associated with the *Generación del 60*) and fiction-writing that blossomed during the 1960s looked upon the city as a site of new social anxieties by focusing attention on the alleged invasion of the city by the uncultured masses pouring in from the provinces. Podasky argues that the urban literature focusing on the city can be 'seen as a reaction to the influx of provincial peoples who had migrated into Buenos Aires and were associated with Peronism'.<sup>13</sup>

In stressing enduring sociocultural continuities over recurrent political ruptures, Podasky argues that the urban transformations of the 1960s served as 'an incubator' for the flowering of post-modernist consumer culture of the 1990s. New kinds of advertising blunted some of the censorial labours of the ever-vigilant state administration that sought to monitor political subversion and amoral sexuality. At the same time, the new 'culture industries' contributed to the creation of 'a new cultural sensibility' that

'interpolated Argentine citizens as urban consumer-subjects and promoted consumption as an adequate substitute for social engagement'.<sup>14</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, the steady accretion of new buildings (with postmodern design motifs), upscale retail shops, boutiques, and high-end restaurants 'substantially transformed' the central city.<sup>15</sup>

Podalsky argues that, taken together, the elements that constituted the reconfigured cultural realm of Buenos Aires formed the basis of a new hegemonic project that aimed to pull together a 'nation sharply fractured by political divisions'.<sup>16</sup> In its conventional usage, 'hegemony' implies a broad social consensus that the political power wielded by those at the 'commanding heights' of the state apparatus is legitimate. In my view, the way that Podalsky uses hegemony is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. As she herself acknowledges, the succession of military and civilian governments that ruled Argentina after 1955 experienced considerable difficulties in crafting a new social consensus, and establishing their legitimacy as speaking for the nation as an imagined community.<sup>17</sup>

## The city as organic whole

The interlocking themes of crisis, trauma, and recuperation are the subject of *Wounded cities*. In their Introduction to this collection of essays, Jane Schneider and Ida Susser put forward a framework of analysis that conceptualizes cities from what they regard as 'two contrasting, irreducible points of view'. On the one hand, they conceptualize the city as a 'body politic', that is, as an evolving entity capable of suffering and recuperation, of injury and recovery, and even of massive destruction and Phoenix-like 'rebirth'. This use of an organic metaphor serves as an orienting device that enables them to treat the city as a coherent subject, that is, as a unified whole with its own intrinsic nature and integrity, its own historical specificity, and its own meaning. Treating the city as an organic unity means acknowledging that changes in any part of the urban fabric necessarily affects the whole. On the other hand, Susser and Schneider situate cities at the intersection of the 'global' and the 'local', where powerful external forces intrude upon the particularity of place by disrupting historically-specific patterns of social life, and by intensifying conflicts and exaggerating differences in particular locations.<sup>18</sup>

In laying out their own analytic framework, Susser and Schneider take issue with the highly influential 'global cities' paradigm associated with the pathbreaking work of Saskia Sassen. The 'global cities' paradigm rests on the view that the spatial dispersal of giant transnational corporations over considerable distances requires a parallel territorial concentration of 'command and control' functions at the apex of an evolving global urban hierarchy. Sassen identifies Tokyo, New York, and London as the exemplars of 'global city' model because, as the world's great financial centers with their heavy concentrations of corporate headquarters, they coordinate the most important functions necessary for the world economy to operate. For Susser and Schneider, there is something highly misleading about arranging cities in a single, hierarchical rank-order according to which some are endowed with particular

characteristics that make them more 'global' or 'world-class' than others. In contrast to the 'global cities' model, Susser and Schneider suggest that the ongoing process of globalization has brought all the cities of the world as embedded nodal points in 'a single, interconnected web' where 'variation among them is hardly attributable to a rank order of 'more' or 'less' engagement with [a host of] globalizing pressures'.<sup>19</sup>

Susser and Schneider divide the essays into four sections: (1) the Degradation of Urban Life, (2) Crises of Crime and Criminalization, (3) Rapid, Inconsistent Expansion, and (4) Reconstruction and Recovery. This sequential order is not accidental. Despite the overwhelming *noir* imagery that pervades most of the essays, the narratological ordering of the book – starting with degradation and ending with recovery – suggests the possibility that 'wounded' cities can recuperate, where regeneration offers a hopeful vision of a better future. Whereas Mike Davis views 'dead cities' (kept alive by truly heroic artificial means) as the almost inevitable outcome of the 'ordinary' practices of unrelenting capitalist growth and the accompanying environmental degradation, Susser and Schneider are more cautious in their substantive claims about possible urban futures.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, they acknowledge that cities suffer the deleterious effects of globalization, and that these are part-and-parcel of the expected, 'ordinary' patterns of urban growth and transformation. Yet what they are primarily concerned with are the extraordinary circumstances that cause 'exceptional' harm, often in unexpected ways, to cities around the world.<sup>21</sup>

In their panoramic excursion around the globe, cities are 'wounded' in so many different ways: some (the city of Ulan-Ude in Siberia) are so frozen by sub-zero temperatures that their inhabitants literally retreat into hibernation to await the spring thaw; others (Mexico City, Kingston) are so scarred by crime and violence that residents fear to venture into public space; and still others (Medellín and Harlem) are so debilitated by narcotics and the accompanying drug-wars that young people experience death in unprecedented numbers. Some cities (Xalapa) have experienced job losses and declining incomes for most urban residents in the face of neo-liberal reforms; others (Beirut, Belfast, Palermo) are so wracked by civil strife and so partitioned into rival zones of control that they cease to function as whole units; and finally, still others (Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City) experience unfettered expansion at such an accelerated pace that urban planners and municipal authorities lose so much control over urban governance that they can no longer hope to provide the services and infrastructure necessary to sustain settled urban residents and newcomers alike.

In his opening essay, David Harvey lays particular stress on the strengths and weaknesses of the use of organic metaphors to frame the analysis of cities. In suggesting that 'body politic' is a 'contested term', he points out (and correctly in my view) that in the whirlwind world of competitive rivalries and sometimes antagonistic interests 'what looks like a wounded city to some appears perfectly healthy to someone else'.<sup>22</sup> It is also the case that treating the city as an organic unity can sometimes easily slip into simplistic functionalism that ignores the sometimes uneven, disconnected, and contradictory impulses of 'city building' processes.

Urban decay, degeneration, and perpetual crisis are closely linked with declining social investment in urban infrastructure and the abandonment of modernist-inspired



improvement projects targeting impoverished neighbourhoods. In a provocative contribution, Claudio Lomnitz seeks to make sense of the urban crisis of Mexico City through the metaphor of death. He suggests that the ‘depreciation and degradation of urban life’ in Mexico City – with a population larger than the whole of Central America – city finds its counterpart in the ritual elaboration of death through public commemorations (‘Day of the Death’), the apparent fatalism of urban residents in the face of grave risk, and the emergence of more predatory and violence forms of criminality.<sup>23</sup>

Cities suffer seemingly irreparable harm when they become embedded in the global circuits of the international trade in illegal drugs. In a short essay, Don Robotham traces the ongoing tragedy of Kinston, (Jamaica) as a anemic city starved of resources and abandoned by those with the financial means to migrate elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> In a particularly compelling account of random violence and death, Mary Roldan tells the story of Medellín, a once quiet city in the mountains of Columbia that descended downward into a spasm of violence that spiraled out of control. In a strange twist that reflected the scope of urban collapse, a macabre ‘death industry’ developed around the random killings, where local entrepreneurs – with ‘assembly-line precision’ – were able to arrange “‘non-stop’ service for a potential victim [of violence] from massacre to burial in one fell swoop’, including the provision of everything from flowers to candy, and grave-diggers to elaborate crypts and mausoleums. Week-end funerals assumed a ‘perversely festive air’ as friends, families, and comrades of the deceased flooded the cemeteries, ‘bringing food and drink with them, playing the dead cartel soldier’s favorite heavy metal music on imposing loud speakers, writing notes and leaving offerings before the graves of their disappeared *parches* [buddies].’<sup>25</sup>

Most of the case studies in the *Wounded cities* collection concern devastation caused by war, civil strife, and sectarian violence. The essay by Dominic Bryan details the transformation of Belfast into a polarized city, divided along sectarian lines and characterized by partitions, barriers, and walls.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Aseel Sawalha chronicles how the bitter Lebanese civil war (1975–1991) destroyed Beirut, a thriving, cosmopolitan banking and commercial center, and a city once considered the ‘Paris’ or the ‘jewel’ of the Middle East. Ironically, the launching of the massive reconstruction effort to rebuild the city center along modernist lines reproduced the very symptoms of urban disorder it was designed to eliminate: informality, illegality, blighted landscapes, and degraded infrastructure.<sup>27</sup>

Like most edited volumes, *Wounded cities* suffers from unevenness. Some essays were more informative, provocative, and better written than others. At times, some contributors seemed at pains to impose the ‘wounded’ metaphor onto their otherwise conventional narrative accounts of particular cities. The limitations of essay-length forced the authors into the unenviable choice of balancing broad generalizations with precise empirical detail, sometimes with mixed results. While Susser and Schneider seem to suggest that cities can indeed recuperate from trauma and devastation, they actually provide little evidence where the rejuvenation of cities to the benefit of the urban poor has taken place in the recent past.



## Suburbia and splintering urbanism

The primary aim of *Popular culture in the age of white flight* is to explore how social identities are situated within spatial practices. In seeking to understand the creation of a culture of suburban whiteness in Los Angeles after World War II, Eric Avila takes ‘race’ and ‘space’ as his primary categories of analysis. Through an examination of such seemingly disconnected iconic symbols of popular culture as film noir, Dodger Stadium, Disneyland, and the extensive network of freeways, he traces the rise of a new suburban consciousness that coalesced around an inchoate conception of ‘white identity’ in Los Angeles in the post-World War II period.

The emergence of the so-called ‘L.A. School’ of contemporary urban studies has triggered a great deal of debate over the status of Los Angeles as a paradigmatic exemplar of a new kind of postmodern urbanity.<sup>28</sup> By arguing against the exceptionality of Los Angeles, Avila suggests that what we gain from analyzing this place can help us in making sense of other cities. ‘Like all cities, Los Angeles maintains a distinct identity that materialized under a unique set of political, economic, social, and geographic circumstances’, he contends. ‘And yet, to greater and lesser degrees, the city also mirrors larger processes that shape the development of cities in the United States, the West, and beyond’.<sup>29</sup>

Suburbanization is a mode of urbanization in which cities extend outward rather than upward to accommodate the locational appetites of largely middle-class homeowners, retailers, and real estate developers. In Los Angeles as elsewhere, the suburbs represented a new sociospatial order that promised relief from the disquieting anxieties of modern urban life: congestion and overcrowding, noise, pollution, anonymity, promiscuity, crime, and ethnic (and racial) diversity.<sup>30</sup> Postwar suburbanization sanctioned the formation of a new racial geography that reinforced, to an even greater degree, the spatial contrast between white and black lives.<sup>31</sup> On a broader scale, mass suburbanization rekindled latent desires for a sanitized social order that revolved around on class harmony, middle-class respectability, and racial homogeneity.

Avila links seemingly unrelated cultural markers – Hollywood and film noir, Disneyland, Dodger Stadium, and the freeway grid – as the symbolic embodiments of the ‘new’ Los Angeles that took shape in the decades following World War II.<sup>32</sup> This disparate collection of ‘spatial fantasies’, as Avila calls them, asserted a normative vision of what a city should (and should not) be. Through its visual rendition of film noir and science fiction, Hollywood dramatized the ‘blight’ and decay that afflicted the urban core of Los Angeles during the 1940s. As white flight and deindustrialization denuded the physical and social landscape of the inner city, Hollywood marketed spectacles of urban decline as mass entertainment. Set amid the littered streets, dark alleys, and decaying buildings of the downtown, film noir represented the postwar crisis of the public city through its dystopian narratives of social disorder and psychological malaise.<sup>33</sup>

If film noir dramatized the postwar crisis of the public city with its menacing images of urban disorder and chaos, then Disneyland embodied the utopian longings of the new white suburbanites. Through its emphasis on race as a central ‘theme’, its

regimented ordering of spatial relations, its staunch insistence on family values and wholesome entertainment, and its privileging of a mythical, small-town, Midwestern sensibility, Disneyland 'repudiated the slums of the noir imagination, supplied a usable past, present, and future for Southern California's transient and mobile population, and modeled popular idealizations of race and space in the age of white flight'.<sup>34</sup> As a counterpoint to the urbanoid wretchedness of Coney Island, Disneyland symbolized the 'retreat from the public culture of New Deal liberalism' and instead warmly embraced a privatized, suburban ideal of conspicuous consumption.<sup>35</sup>

In the confident view of city officials, the erection of Dodger Stadium at Chavez Ravine – involving the eviction of a settled Chicano community – demonstrated the regenerative possibilities of modernist-inspired urban renewal. As a substitute for urban streetcars, the vast network of new freeways underscored the centrality of highway construction for suburban growth and development. Beginning in the early 1950s, freeway building constituted the largest public works project in the history of Los Angeles. Carried out by a phalanx of 'faceless bureaucrats' in the Division of Highways, this massive undertaking, which involved the physical erasure of numerous neighborhoods, lacked a single leading official – a Baron Haussmann or Robert Moses, for example – that 'the public could either venerate as a hero of progress or despise as an executioner of urban communities'.<sup>36</sup>

In a masterful *tour de force*, Avila insightfully identifies film noir, Disneyland, Dodger Stadium, and the vast freeway grid as cultural expressions of both the sociospatial transformation of Los Angeles in the post-World War II period in general, and the emergence of suburbanism as a way of life, in particular. As he points out, investigating these expressions of popular culture 'offers a glimpse into the more subtle interplay of conflict, contestation, and even consensus', thereby permitting a much more nuanced analytic approach than that which informs much of the historiography of the distinct brand of (sub)urbanism' that engulfed Southern California after World War II.<sup>37</sup>

Avila argues that these spatial practices, taken together, engendered a growing awareness and consciousness of race, or to put it precisely, that they produced a 'culture of suburban whiteness'.<sup>38</sup> Yet while I find his argument provocative and believable, I do not find it convincing. I think that he allows association of these cultural markers with racial formation to substitute for a causal analysis that accounts for the construction of a self-conscious 'white suburban identity'. What he fails to do, in my estimation, is to adequately explain how and why, in his words, 'popular culture in the age of white flight codified the formation of a white suburban identity that encompassed the aspirations of diverse groups pursuing the fruits of postwar consumer affluence'.<sup>39</sup> In my view, for Avila's argument to be persuasive, he must more firmly establish the causal links between popular culture in the age of white flight with the formation of a distinctive 'white suburban identity', and clarify with greater precision how 'whiteness' as a distinctive racial identity became 'naturalized' as the normative ideal for the white racial formation that evolved in tandem with suburban expansion in Los Angeles after World War II.

## Unsettled cityscapes

The approach to understanding cities that characterizes all three books under review is what Lynn Lees has called 'urban biography', or the tracing of a specific theme (or closely related set of themes) in one city at a time. Rather than treating cities as mere instances of generic 'city types', these three studies seek to uncover the historical specificity of particular cities. This narrowing of the focus for research reflects the current skepticism with the explanatory powers of grand, macro-historical models and their 'universalising' claims – such as the Chicago School of urban sociology, Marxian economics, Braudelian theories of the *longue durée*, and the like, which reached their intellectual zenith in the 1980s – to account for the historical peculiarities of urban transformation. By turning away from grand theorizing of macro-historical explanation and embracing instead interpretive approaches that take seriously the connection between materiality and meaning, these three studies have focused attention on trying to grasp, whether implicitly or explicitly, the impact of global processes on small-scale social life in urban settings.<sup>40</sup>

What these three books have in common is their understanding of cities as 'representational' spaces, that is, cities as imagined places, as conveyers of meaning, and as iconic symbols of normative ideals. They also share the view of the city as palimpsest: a multilayered space where, at any given moment traces of an older city coexist with embryonic signs of a newer one about to come into existence. All are theoretically informed rather than theoretically driven accounts of urban life. Put specifically, they all seem to agree that general theories, pitched at high levels of abstraction, fail to grasp the historical specificities of urban transformation.<sup>41</sup> Finally, these books attest to the growing interest and importance of geographical themes in the analysis of urban life. Each in their useful and provocative ways, they explore how the use of urban space, attachments to place, and sites of memory enable us to think more clearly about, as Stephen Legg puts it, 'the presentness of the past'.<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The classical statement on the city as image is Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Podalsky, *Specular city*, pp. 1–21.

<sup>3</sup> Ida Susser and Jane Schneider, 'Wounded cities: destruction and reconstruction in a globalized world', in Schneider and Susser, *Wounded cities*, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Avila, *Popular culture in the age of white flight*, pp. 7, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Podalsky, *Specular city*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Taylor, *Disappearing acts: spectacles of gender and nationalism in Argentina's dirty war* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Podalsky, *Specular city*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4.

- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 168.
- <sup>12</sup> Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular realities: early mass culture in fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998), pp. 5–8.
- <sup>13</sup> Podalsky, *Specular city*, p. 20.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 228–9.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 71.
- <sup>18</sup> Susser and Schneider, ‘Wounded cities’, pp. 1–23.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
- <sup>20</sup> See Mike Davis, *Dead cities and other tales* (New York, New Press, 2002).
- <sup>21</sup> For a provocative essay that deals with these themes, see Sheila Crane, ‘Digging up the present in Marseille’s old port: toward an archaeology of reconstruction’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* **63** (2004), pp. 297–319.
- <sup>22</sup> David Harvey, ‘The city as a body politic’, in Schneider and Susser, *Wounded cities*, pp. 25–44.
- <sup>23</sup> Claudio Lomnitz, ‘The depreciation of life during Mexico City’s transition into the “crisis”’, in Schneider and Susser, *Wounded cities*, pp. 47–69.
- <sup>24</sup> Don Robatham, ‘How Kingston was wounded’, in Schneider and Susser, *Wounded cities*, pp. 111–28.
- <sup>25</sup> Mary Roldan, ‘Wounded Medellin: narcotics traffic against a background of industrial decline’, in Schneider and Susser, *Wounded cities*, p. 143.
- <sup>26</sup> Dominic Bryan, ‘Belfast: urban space, “policing” and sectarian polarization’, in Schneider and Susser, *Wounded cities*, pp. 251–69.
- <sup>27</sup> Aseel Sawalha, ‘“Healing the wounds of war”: placing the war-displaced in postwar Beirut’, in Schneider and Susser, *Wounded cities*, pp. 271–90, esp. p. 288. See also S. Makdisi, ‘Laying claim to Beirut: urban narrative and spatial identity in the age of *Solidere*’, *Critical inquiry* **23** (1997), pp. 661–705.
- <sup>28</sup> The historiographical literature is extensive, but see Michael Dear, ‘Los Angeles and the Chicago School: invitation to a debate’, *City and community* **1** (2002), pp. 5–32; Michael Dear and Steven Flusty, ‘The iron lotus: Los Angeles and postmodern urbanism’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Studies* **551** (1997), pp. 151–63; and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, ‘Is the LA School a model or a mess?’, *American historical review* **105** (2000), pp. 1683–91.
- <sup>29</sup> Avila, *Popular culture in the age of white flight*, p. xiv.
- <sup>30</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass frontier: the suburbanization of the United States* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985).
- <sup>31</sup> Avila, *Popular culture in the age of white flight*, pp. 4–5.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

- <sup>40</sup> Lynn Hollen Lees, 'The challenge of political change: urban history in the 1990s', *Urban history* **21** (1994), pp. 9, 13. Lee attributes some of her ideas to Charles Tilly.
- <sup>41</sup> See Frank Mort, 'Archaeologies of city life: commercial culture, masculinity, and spatial relations in 1980s London', *Environment and planning D* **13** (1995), pp. 573–90, esp. p. 587.
- <sup>42</sup> See Stephen Legg, 'Review essay: memory and nostalgia', *Cultural geographies* **11** (2004), pp. 99–107, esp. p. 106.