

## Book Reviews



*Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving.* By Caitlin DeSilvey. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 240 pp., 8 b&w photos.

Humans are by nature “meddlers,” notes Caitlin DeSilvey in her visionary and poetic reflection on time, decay, mortality, and the eternal human quest to transcend them all. Her focus is the field of cultural heritage and historic preservation, where that “meddling” — that quest for transcendence — has long taken the form of meticulous restoration and reconstruction, intended to halt, or at least slow down, the transformative forces of age and physical decay. Yet, try as they might to preserve, conserve or re-create cherished monuments and vanishing landscapes, the efforts of historic preservationists are rarely more than temporary fixes. Chemical, biological and ecological processes can be contained for a while, but they can never be completely overcome. Sustainable heritage conservation must therefore be recognized not as a one-time intervention but as a long-term commitment of human resources and funds.

Unfortunately, at a time of steadily shrinking culture budgets, relatively few heritage sites around the world can depend on such long-term support. And, to make the situation even more challenging, many new types of heritage resources have been officially recognized in recent years. Vernacular structures, abandoned industrial installations, farm compounds, military barracks, celebrity birthplaces, and modern commercial buildings are all now eligible for heritage listing — and the implicit need for preservation that such listing implies. Other threats to cultural heritage sites loom even larger: global climate change, sea-level rise, industrial pollution, drought, deforestation, and the relentless expansion of urban areas. All these make the physical preservation of the world’s cultural heritage a truly Sisyphean task.

In *Curated Decay*, DeSilvey presents an approach to the appreciation and study of material heritage in which physical preservation is not the primary goal. In her opening call to “look beyond loss,” she thus reflects on a form of heritage appreciation and research that is not a zero-sum game of “saving” or “losing” significant remains. Through a series of vivid studies of heritage sites in various conditions of abandonment, deterioration, and environmental degradation, DeSilvey eloquently and evocatively shows how “the disintegration of structural integrity does not necessarily lead to the evacuation of meaning; processes of decay and disintegration can be culturally (as well as ecologically) productive; and, in certain contexts, it is possible to look beyond loss to conceive other ways of understanding.”

Closely examining a teetering brick chimney in Cornwall, DeSilvey finds it to be not just a derelict relic of Britain’s Victorian industrial history, but a structure teeming with plant and animal life, and one undergoing material transformations that are as much a part of its heritage as the now-vanished architecture of the pumping station to which it was once attached. Likewise, her detailed description of an abandoned nineteenth-century pioneer farmstead in Montana guides readers into a *terra incognita* of antique artifacts discolored by mold and corrosion, cobwebs, and pack rat nests. DeSilvey perceptively observes how heritage sites “have social lives, but they have biological and chemical lives as well” — with the biological and chemical processes revealed most clearly in their ruinous states.

Acceptance of the futility of permanent preservation as the only alternative to destruction is best illustrated in the “terminal” conservation efforts at the nineteenth-cen-

tury breakwater of Mullion Cove on the Cornish coast. Here the National Trust decided to abandon its conservation efforts when intensifying winter winds and storms and a shifting shoreline made those efforts impractical. In this case — as with so many other heritage sites threatened by environmental change — the ideal of eternal preservation is unrealistic and impractical.

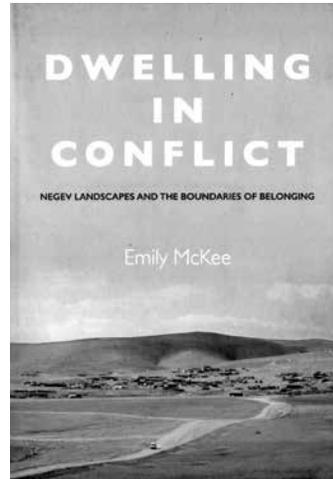
DeSilvey's poignant description of what she calls "palliative curation" is illustrated by the doomed lighthouse at Orford Ness, a defining local landmark since its construction 1792, but which the British government deemed "no longer needed for navigation purposes" in 2010. The result of that determination was a decision to abandon all attempts to artificially preserve the existing shoreline and the land on which the lighthouse stood. DeSilvey describes the rituals (and bureaucratic procedures) through which the community was encouraged to learn about and visit the site of the lighthouse to bid it farewell.

*Curated Decay* is a thought-provoking work by an innovative heritage scholar who urges acceptance of the reality that material heritage is subject to increasingly serious threats in the Anthropocene. But this is not to say that heritage advocates should throw up their hands and surrender to "the forces of nature." Culture and nature have become so interwoven that decisions (yes, very basic acts of curation) must be made. Some material remains of the past should be allowed to die with dignity, even as their material forms are being changed into something else. Caitlin DeSilvey offers a reminder that it is up to us to decide when and where it is appropriate to be heritage "meddlers" — and when we should accept the transformatory entanglement of natural forces and human designs.

**Neil Asher Silberman**

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***Dwelling in Conflict: Land, Landscapes, and the Boundaries of Belonging.*** By Emily McKee. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. Xviii + 239 pp., b&w illus., maps.



Emily McKee's *Dwelling in Conflict* reflects an expansion of critical discourse in the Israel\ Palestine academic space concerning the conflict between the state of Israel and the Bedouins. As such, the book joins two other recent treatments of Bedouin dispossession and resistance:

*Emptied Lands: A Legal Geography of Bedouin Rights in the Negev*, by Alexander Kedar, Ahmad Amara, and Oren Yiftachel (Stanford University Press, 2018); and

*Naqab Bedouin: A Century of Politics and Resistance*, by Mansour Nasasra (Columbia University Press, 2017). Taken together, the three volumes constitute a significant shift in epistemological commitment with regard to the conflict over land in the Naqab\Negev in general, and the future of the Bedouins in particular.

McKee's well-written, readable book attends to the Bedouin voice from below and the way it expresses both historical and contemporary connection to place. Based on interviews, observations, and direct contact with people — and by using the environment as an alternative lens through which to bring into focus conflict over and connection to the land — she conducts a sensitive analysis of how the Bedouins have been constructed within the Zionist perspective as the ultimate Other. And she points to the resulting contradictions as representing two parallel realities, Bedouin and Jewish, which alternately collide and fail to come together.

Underlying this impasse, McKee describes a tangled weave of physical and cognitive boundaries based on two different pasts, which continue to be expressed in the present through practices of exclusion. As she explains, these practices are ultimately grounded in a Zionist ethos that structures the Israeli Jew as modernist, representing progress and civilization, as opposed to the Bedouin, who is positioned as wild, primitive, and connected to nature. Nevertheless, by conveying the Bedouins' informal history and their unique attachment to land in their own voice, McKee succeeds in documenting their confrontation with the formal Zionist story, as reflected in their longstanding life in unrecognized villages.

Describing a trip from a Bedouin settlement to a nearby Jewish *moshav* [agricultural village], McKee examines a transition through rigid barriers. Here the lack of adequate public transport is shown to create an additional layer of complex-

ity in state-periphery relations. But even more striking is the absence of direct contact between neighboring communities, which results in the formation of a powerful sense of physical and cognitive separation. The location of parallel, noninteracting Bedouin and Jewish settlements thus embodies both an absence of exchange between communities and populations and the coexisting history of two peoples and their connection to place. At the bottom of the resulting contradictions, McKee observes, is a Zionist ethos that rejects the Bedouins' connection to place, constructing them in the image of landless wanderers — as opposed to the Jews, who are portrayed as returning from exile to claim their homeland. The Jews, as a result, see the Bedouins as residing there illegally, while the Bedouin position is that the Jews appropriated their territory. As Jewish communities continue to be established, while Bedouin villages go unrecognized, it thus becomes apparent how the denial of a Bedouin connection to place is integral to the Jewish connection to the exact same place.

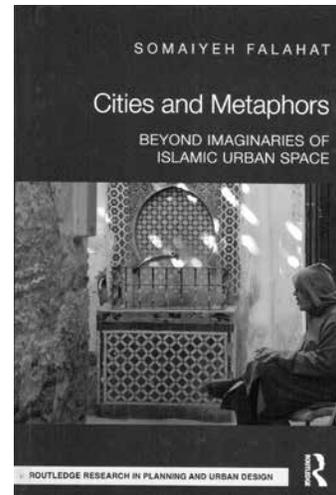
McKee's book also deals with the Bedouins' struggle against ongoing dispossession and their effort to narrate their attachment to land. And she sees this as taking place both on the level of informal practices like storytelling and the marking of territorial boundaries and formally in court. In the latter context, McKee describes the compelling case of Nuri al-Uqbi, an elderly Bedouin activist, who demands redress as a landowner from the same legal apparatus that silences him by dismissing as irrelevant his historical claims to landownership.

The book ends with hope for a better future between people, as well as with a proposal to create a different kind of contact between the two sides on the level of civil society. This is seen to involve a program of work by an environmental organization to help the Bedouins express and strengthen their connection to the land. McKee describes the cultivation of such an environmental position as a challenge to Orientalist perceptions and to the construction of Bedouins as "part of nature." Through it, the Bedouins may demonstrate that they are indeed part of nature — but because of their historical, environmental and cultural connection to place.

*Dwelling in Conflict* invites readers to understand Israeli Jewish-Arab relations as constructed in conditions of inequality, segregation and separation. By focusing on Bedouin society in southern Israel and the Bedouin's connection to place, it exposes readers to their unrelenting struggle to make their voices heard with regard to their history and commitment to place.

**Safa Aburabia**  
Ben-Gurion University

***Cities and Metaphors: Beyond Imaginaries of Islamic Urban Space.*** By Somaiyeh Falahat. Oxon, U.K., and New York: Routledge, 2018. 192 pp., 20 b&w illus.



In *Cities and Metaphors*, Somaiyeh Falahat investigates urban spaces in the historic cores of the cities Fez, Tunis and Isfahan with the aim of providing a new methodological approach to understanding premodern Islamic urbanism. Specifically, by introducing the spatial concept of Hezar-tu — literally, “a thousand insides” — she proposes an alternative tool for rethinking spatial relationships and

ambiguities in the study of Middle Eastern and North African cities.

Falahat writes in her Introduction that her use of Hezar-tu, a concept borrowed from the study of Persian literature, is derived from a reworking of the term “labyrinth.”

*Although the two terms are used as synonyms denoting a kind of spatial ambiguity, . . . they introduce two contrasting spatial structures; ‘labyrinth’ emphasises the element of path and the action of moving, while ‘Hezar-tu’ highlights spaces and thresholds. Hezar-tu is about in-betweenness, deferring and revealing but also hiding, while labyrinth is about passing and meandering. Hezar-tu is about interstitiality, liminality and the spatial condition of edges. (p.2).*

Through this lens, *Cities and Metaphors* sets out to challenge the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century postcolonial development of the term “Islamic city” as used to refer to a set of discrete architectural forms, including mosques, bazaars and madrasas, and their relationship to one another in an urban setting. Specifically, Falahat argues that this overly deterministic view has long ignored the phenomenological characteristics of cities in the Islamic world and distorted their image in theory, concept and discourse.

In the absence of such a proper vocabulary and narration of cities in the Middle East and North Africa, Falahat employs the idea of Hezar-tu to provide an alternative articulation of urban space based on phenomenological thresholds and edges. In a section on “Seeing the city as a Hezar-tu,” she reflects on how multiple, enfolded tus [insides] “. . . which are thresholds and in-betweens generating boundaries — open onto each other and must be traversed one after the other”

(p.146). Viewing historic Islamic cities in this way provides a direct challenge to the myth of walls and urban boundaries, she observes. While walls may still shape the space of urban paths, there are many other transitional cues that guide “patterns of movement between spaces” (p.150). With regard to the case-study cities, specifically, these

*... creat[e] points where movement is halted, so that the walker must traverse multiple edges and boundaries to reach a (target) space or even to traverse the city. Thresholds, including bends and turns in passages, for example, provide a mode of deferring that in itself acts as a dynamic boundary, constituting the space of pathways as a separating, as well as a linking element in the city. (p.150)*

One of the strengths of Falahat’s book is certainly her insightful methodological approach. But the book is also grounded in extensive fieldwork, which she uses to reveal complex relationships between urban theory and urban life. Using the perspective of Hezar-tu thus allows a coordinated understanding between two poles of experience: a panoptic or theoretical construction of the city, in which personal practices and interactions with space are largely disregarded; and the more anthropological experience that emerges from deeper understanding of the activities that take place in it. Moreover, by highlighting de Certeau’s notions of “place” and “space,” Falahat argues that the activity of walking may transform “place” into “practiced space.” Through the interpretation of a system of physical signs, walking in a city thus becomes a method of analysis similar to the act of reading a text (p.97).

After an introduction examining the need to diversify the global urban vocabulary and outlining how her book fits into this project, Falahat’s first chapter offers an insightful categorization of existing scholarship on the “Islamic city.” In dealing with existing general keywords and concepts, she argues that rationality has claimed a dominant role in the theorizing of cities, while the phenomenality of space (its sensual, spatial character) has been pushed into the background and neglected (p.39). Of the various terms used to describe Islamic cities, however, “labyrinth” provides a key concept spanning rationality and phenomenality. As such, it engages with emotions, practices and memories as different layers of understanding space (p.45). However, it is also a term of European provenance, and it expresses a sign of irrationality and negative order. Considering these shortcomings, she explains why she thus adapted the spatial concept of Hezar-tu from Persian literary studies as an alternative exploratory framework.

To establish a dialogue between the two metaphors, chapter two next investigates the application of the term “labyrinth” as a historical symbol of complexity in European contexts. And, after discussing imaginary and mysterious spaces, in the third chapter Falahat delves more deeply into Hezar-tu as an urban concept. Specifically, she describes

“Hezar-tu-ness” in relation to its five major characteristics: in-betweenness and the spatial conditions of the edge; spatial depth that is constructed through the sequential experience of tus [insides]; simultaneous articulation of revealing and hiding; boundary as a model of containment; and ambiguity that foregrounds infinity (pp.87–89).

For this reviewer, as a scholar of space, the most powerful and enlightening of the book’s chapters is the fourth. It is here that Falahat powerfully applies the concept of Hezar-tu to an alternative narration of the urban fabrics of the case-study cities.

One criticism I would register here, however, is that the book does not adequately describe the dynamics of everyday social life as an interwoven layer of Hezar-tu-ness. And although a number of beautiful images poetically attempt to capture the quality of historic paths and spaces, these too are less successful in revealing their urban liveliness. Supporting visual material can help significantly in narrating the socio-cultural and political layers of everyday life in a historical city. But most of the book’s images simply emphasize the physical morphosis of space. The narrative of walking in different spaces may thus illustrate the physical layers of the expressed concepts and keywords, but it largely overlooks the way they are used by the real people who inhabit them. And despite the author’s emphasis on de Certeau and his approach to reading urban space, the significance of ordinary urban experience is not presented clearly enough.

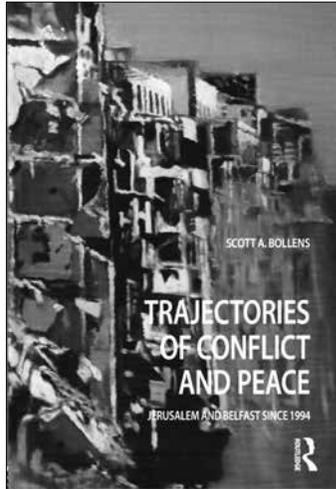
The book also largely omits discussions of method. Even though the author explains the importance of the various interviews she conducted with residents during her fieldwork, she does not specifically describe the types of questions she posed or the answers she received. I might also critique the book for a failure to situate Hezar-tu-ness in a contemporary context. Indeed, the analysis sometimes loses its way as it moves between the historical past and its present investigation. For example, it makes little reference to the changing conditions of life in the twenty-first century or to the ability of preserved historic cores to adapt to modern demands.

In spite of these few shortcomings, the thorough research into urban spaces here offers great insight into how to read the intertwined layers of Middle Eastern cities. And the profound and innovative methodology in *Cities and Metaphors* provides a rich contribution to scholarship on all historical cities. Overall, the book’s meditative text takes the reader on a journey through the multilayered surfaces and unknown in-betweens of historical spaces in search of insides and outsides, backgrounds and foregrounds, entrances and exits, color and gloom, and many other distinctive qualities.

**Shahrazad Shirvani**

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*Trajectories of Conflict and Peace: Jerusalem and Belfast since 1994.* By Scott Bollens. Abingdon, U.K., and New York: Routledge, 2018. 246 pp., 43 b&w illus.



In recent decades several regions of the world have been profoundly devastated by ethnic and religious conflict. In the cities of these regions, segregation is typically visible in many aspects of daily life, as evident in the pervasive use of terms like “the other side.” And intense levels of conflict may be further infused with a lack of confidence in political processes and

administrative structures, which are seen as fostering uneven access to resources, protection or opportunities.

Scott Bollens’s *Trajectories of Conflict and Peace* explores such conditions in the highly polarized contexts of Jerusalem since the 1993 Oslo Accord and in Belfast since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In examining the interfaces between state politics and everyday urban life, the book provides insight into peacemaking as not only an iterative process that involves national reform, but an urban socio-spatial one that seeks to embed tolerance in everyday life.

Bollens examines the trajectories of political contestation on three levels: “national,” “urban,” and “psychological.” He pays particular attention to aspects of conflict with spatial or social dimensions, such as the location of antagonist groups, territoriality, demographic change, violence rates, and the role of civil-society groups in maintaining intergroup differences. In terms of fieldwork, Bollens is able to draw on extensive ethnographic research, including semi-structured interviews and personal narratives collected in both cities between 2015 and 2016. The book thus provides an important addition to scholarship on a variety of topics, including intergroup conflict, segregated urbanism, governance of ethnic differences, political transition, and nationalism.

The book is organized into eight chapters. The first provides an overview of theories about the coproduction of conflict as these involve national politicians and urban stakeholders. Driven by complex national geopolitics and bloody intercommunal strife, both Jerusalem and Belfast thus came to exhibit a nearly complete lack of trust in normalized political channels. Ultimately, this became embedded as a condition of intractable and violent everyday battle between social groups, which was largely immune to overtures of peace or attempts at resolution.

In chapters two to seven Bollens then delves into peacemaking efforts in the two cities within the “political” and “spatial” arena since the signing of formal agreements establishing at least hypothetical processes for sustaining peace. He begins by acknowledging that what limited “tangible” peacemaking has occurred in these urban environments has been retarded by a variety of forces. In Jerusalem, he argues, new forces of urban growth have intervened in detrimental ways to disadvantage the pursuit of peace and coexistence. In particular, the national hegemonic program to assert Israeli political control over the city has evolved in unforeseen ways, and this has led to hostile and militarized spatial conditions in the form of “unlicensed” developments that have caused an escalation of violence.

Meanwhile, the peace process in Northern Ireland has been disrupted by unpredicted changes in governance. Thus, apart from the creation of neutral spaces in the city center, urban interventions in Belfast’s interface zones — e.g., the £1.5 million Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project (SRRP, 2002) — have largely produced new spaces of division between Catholics and Protestants. As Bollens notes, these inconsistencies belie the struggle to facilitate the larger postconflict political/urban ambitions of Northern Ireland, despite a few notable iconic achievements, such as the Titanic Quarters.

As part of these discussions, Bollens engages with ongoing debates on how new urban developments have increasingly become manifestos for dealing with global challenges and with new forms of nativism, nationalism, and local political populism. Indeed, contested contexts like Jerusalem and Belfast, in the face of rising inequality and the demonizing of the “other,” are systematically escalating the politics of difference among social groups. Yet, in Bollens’s view, local urban conditions are also not subsumable within the broader discourse of ethnicity and sovereignty that dominates world politics. Rather, cities provide unique places to practice a legacy of grassroots socio-spatial coexistence.

In this last regard, the book owes much to existing scholarly work on peace and postconflict theories; and the extensive research by Frank Gaffikin and Wendy Pullan on the division in Northern Ireland and Jerusalem is prominently cited. The book also draws on extensive interviews with key researchers in both contexts. Yet, while *Trajectories of Conflict and Peace* represents an essential rethinking of the complex interface between national politics and their materialization in everyday life, it falls short when it comes to understanding grassroots voices or everyday intercommunity efforts to cope with new urban polices on the ground. For example, one might note how the ten-year plan by the government of Northern Ireland to bring down all of Belfast’s “peace walls” by 2023 has resulted in the removal of only a few so far.

One of the book’s merits is that it highlights the wide range of political and urban struggles in conflicted cities and the way these arise over an extended period of time and are coproduced through the everyday interaction of residents. In

this sense, urban regions must be seen as micro-geographies replete with local histories that reflect extended social institutions and networks. Real change requires understanding how these commitments intersect with national ideologies. The quest for peace in such contexts thus raises important questions about national/urban disconnections and the way local attributes of cities continue to shape life in them today.

**Gehan Selim**

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***Banaras Reconstructed: Architecture and Sacred Space in a Hindu Holy City.*** By Madhuri Desai. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017. X + 292 pp., b&w illus.



This is a painstakingly pieced together work of *longue durée* urban history. The city of Banaras, built on the banks of the sacred river Ganges in northern India, is furnished with Shiva lingas, temples, fortress palaces, and vibrant bazaars; and its elaborate steps lead down to the river for ritual bathing and distributing ashes of the dead. For the most pious Hindus, it is

the favored place for cremations, pilgrimage, and witnessing spectacular ceremonies. Yet, in popular imagination, the origins of Banaras are shrouded in the mist of antiquity, a condition that has much to do with its mystique and to claims of its authentic and timeless Hindu identity. This book on the most sacred of Hindu cities thus sits squarely within urban scholarship on other religious centers like Jerusalem, Rome and Mecca.

Madhuri Desai sets herself the task of giving both Banaras and the contemporary myths associated with it real grounding in history. To do this, she sorts through a variety of sources, unevenly distributed through the centuries — most brilliantly, perhaps, in treating the *puranas* (sacred Sanskrit texts) dealing with the pilgrimage to Banaras as spatial texts. Comparing and contrasting scriptures from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, she maps sacred routes onto physical space, documents changing patterns of pilgrimage, and describes emergent commonplaces about the city. Readers thus discover how sacred texts sometimes direct pilgrimage routes and the development of physical space, and sometimes follow them. Banaras is thus constructed and reconstructed through the crisscrossing of literary, religious, bodily, governmental, and scientific discourses.

The main focus of the book is the period of the late 1500s to the 1930s, discussion of which Desai divides into six chronologically organized chapters. The first of these deals with all that can be gleaned about the organization of the built environment of the city from the *puranas* before the 1500s. The second traces the impact of the urban interventions and land-use policies of Muslim rulers of India, from the Mughal emperor Akbar (r.1556–1605) to his great grandson Aurangzeb (r.1658–1707). Chapters three and four then describe the competing visions for self-representation in the revival styles employed by aristocratic patrons in the

eighteenth century. The fifth chapter tries to grasp how Orientalist readings of the city were related to its administration by the British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And the last chapter focuses on visual representations of the waterfront from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. The conclusion then paints a picture of contemporary rituals and spectacles edifying to tourists and the devout alike.

Throughout this journey, the book supports a well-established position in South Asian history: that Islam and Hinduism, Hinduism and Buddhism, Buddhism and Catholicism, Catholicism and Jainism, Jainism and Protestantism, on and on, so deeply inform each other that none of the identitarian categories constructed by contemporary religious or secular thought hold up to scrutiny. The evidence Desai provides for this view is extremely thorough and deep, showing that there has never been a rigid and stable place called Banaras. Every Brahmin [Hindu priest] to author a *purana*, every act of regional and imperial patronage, every system of urban and economic maneuver, every archeological finding, and every modern speculative development has reorganized the city afresh. And every reorganization of the city has been a reorganization of Hinduism, its foundational truths, rituals and concepts.

Desai's writing style is subtle and intricate, offering historical analysis, discussions of Sanskrit terms, and explanations of specialized nomenclature. The book may be a demanding read for those unfamiliar with Sanskrit. Yet it also makes so many startling arguments that keeping at the task remains rewarding. For example, Desai documents how the sacred precinct of Banaras contains three mosques that today stand as visual proof of the destruction and disruption of existing native traditions by otherwise uninterested Muslim invaders. The most infamous of these iconoclasts, by their own admission, were the Ghurids of eleventh century. But a closer look at the *puranas* also suggests that, while these invaders may have done terrible things, "in this period the city may not have actually had a principal temple for them to destroy."

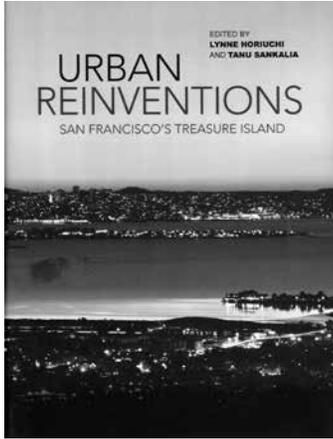
Desai also describes how travelers' records challenge the discourse of an insular city. Indeed, sixteenth-century Mughal trade networks and administrative policies made Banaras a lively cosmopolitan center. Akbar's rein, in particular, provided an especially stimulating period of intellectual debate, in which each Brahmin scholar wrote his own treatise on what the *puranans* said about ritual patterns in the city. By building two major Shiva temples, Mughal patronage ultimately sided with the Brahmin scholar Narayan Bhatt, who envisioned the Vishweshwar temple of Shiva to be the principal site of the city. And as Bhatt's proscribed movement through the sacred precinct gained traction, contending voices fell in line, and for the first time unified on the hierarchy of deities and sacred spaces.

Desai regards Mughal patronage as the foundational event in the history of Banaras and Brahmanical beliefs as practiced today. And as the book moves on to describe the later period of archeological exploration, encyclopedias, and

rational theories of Indian history created by children of the European Enlightenment, it reveals the exact manuscripts by which ideas of a timeless, antiquarian Banaras emerged. This was also the time when rigid and consequential lines between "Hinduism" and "Islam" were drawn. Thus by 1905 an Orientalist timeline gave Banaras a Buddhist lineage, Hindu continuum, and Islamic disruption. And it was within this framing of history that the author H.R. Neville argued for British rule as a corrector of Muslim wrongs. Thus did "scientific and empirical knowledge" of the Indian subcontinent create the contemporary dichotomies and myths about a timeless city and unwavering Hindu beliefs.

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*Salt Lake City*

**Urban Reinventions: San Francisco's Treasure Island.** Edited by Lynne Horiuchi and Tanu Sankalia. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 288 pp., 98 b&w and color illus.



Internationally recognized as a leading model for sustainable redevelopment, the project to rebuild San Francisco's Treasure Island/Yerba Buena Island as a new urban district has so far failed to engage the community, the historic context, or the island's legacy of toxic contamination. Nevertheless, by repackaging "sustainability" as a technologi-

cal opportunity, city officials and design professionals have managed to feed off the popular myth of a prescriptive green urbanism, as applied to a *tabula rasa*.

By investigating how this small manmade island's rich history is linked to the geopolitical and economic history of San Francisco, the Bay Area, the Pacific Rim, and the U.S. military, this volume provides an alternative perspective on issues of sustainability, and raises important questions about the normalized, positivist approach applied to so many urban developments today. For example, how will designers resolve the dilemma posed by the limitations of technology in the face of the inexorable effects of climate change? And what are the social risks of erasing a material history of racial discrimination, gendered Orientalism, and imperialism — all to write the success story of a new, high-yielding ecotopia?

*Urban Reinventions* provides an in-depth case study of these questions and more. Consisting of a series of interdisciplinary essays carefully compiled by Lynne Horiuchi and Tanu Sankalia, it seeks to inform readers about the island's history while maintaining a theoretical frame. Overall, it highlights the paradox of an island that for almost one hundred years has captured the imagination of opportunists while presenting increasingly dangerous geotechnical problems. And by presenting the island through multiple lenses, the book allows readers to develop their own conclusions about its current trajectory.

The processes of reinvention described here are not unique to Treasure Island. But the island's many lives — as an airport, a World's Fair site, a U.S. Navy base, and finally as a planned eco-development — highlight a controversial backdrop of shifting power relations. To understand how the perception of *tabula rasa* may be produced with regard to such a deeply historical site, the editors propose the idea of "urban reinventions." And the concept is lightly embedded through-

out the essays as a way to transfer the findings to other projects and unify the collection. As the editors write:

*We envision urban reinventions as a concept associated with formidable state power over land and, paradoxically, with moments of vulnerability that permit state powers to reconfigure sites. . . . Urban reinventions incorporate entirely new and utopian futures conceived through the mobilization of capital in spaces exceptional to the norm." (p.5)*

*Urban Reinventions* is thus rooted in the discourse of utopia, as in David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000); heterotopia, as in Michel Foucault's *Of Other Spaces* (1986); and ecological futurism, as in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975). Where these texts limit the agency of urban design to socio-cultural context, however, Horiuchi and Sankalia activate an analytical framework that presupposes the fiscal opportunity brought about by urban transformation. They then present this phenomenon according to a three-part chronology: the exposition era, the military era, and the eco era.

With regard to the exposition era, contributors Andrew Shanken, Lisa Schrenk, and Horiuchi each make use of a different historical lens. Shanken describes the technical feat of the island's construction — originally to fill in dangerous shoals and provide the city of San Francisco with an airport to compete with that in nearby Oakland. However, he adeptly moves beyond the engineering to expose how such mega-projects were political instruments to siphon power during a period of economic decline into supposedly expert hands.

Schrenk illustrates the spectacle of World's Fairs in the U.S. and their political value as "American world expositions" (p.69). On Treasure Island, the Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE) of 1939 and 1940 was thus intended to showcase peaceful Pacific relations and set the stage for investors and lucrative business deals. Yet, as did other U.S. fairs, it also provided a means to justify American imperialism by staging the racial inferiority of neighboring nations.

Horiuchi then hones in on a critical moment of international relations and racial discrimination by training the lens of an architectural historian on the Japan Pavilion at GGIE. Specifically, she emphasizes how the pavilion served as a material manifestation of Japanese imperialism, promoting "Japanese fascist aesthetics with major roles for women" (p.107). However, the Japanese effort to show superiority and distinction only fortified the "production of the 'Orient' for a Western audience" (p.109). And the bombing at Pearl Harbor provided the moment of transition from fair to military base, as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers blew up the Japan Pavilion.

Javier Arbona, Lindsey Dillon, and Mark Gillem next describe the military era. Arbona opens with a recounting of endogenous racism through the events of the July 1944 trial for mutiny of fifty black sailors at the Treasure Island U.S. Naval Training and Distribution Center. Known histori-

cally as the “Port Chicago Fifty,” the men were slandered and legally prosecuted for protesting dangerous conditions at the nearby Port Chicago munitions depot, where an explosion killed more than 320 mostly black civilians and military personnel. Arbona successfully argues that white supremacy, American imperial ambition, and the infallibility of divine providence situate the logic of the trial in a history of oppression rather than wartime exception (p.127).

Dillon next recounts the role of Treasure Island in the military’s campaign to develop and deploy atomic and nuclear weapons, and the long-term (and still unknown level of) environmental contamination that effort left behind. Following her investigation of the connection between activities in the Marshal Islands and on Treasure Island, Gillem then brings the focus back to the San Francisco Bay Area to analyze the decommissioning and reuse of fifteen military bases there. In doing so, he frames his analysis around four key issues: the pitfalls of contamination, the challenge of mixed-use development, the value of simple plans, and the power of parks.

In the final section, Sankalia, John Stehli, and Greig Crysler bring the discussion forward to the present, discussing current plans for the reuse of Treasure Island and how these engage with theoretical discourse. Sankalia’s chapter is especially powerful in unifying previous arguments and setting up the case for a critique of urban sustainability. As he writes, “It seems perverse to pack a sinking island with new development and then demonstrate how it can be saved” (p.201). The Treasure Island Development Plan (TIDP), is thus, above all, “an empty signifier of sustainability — a hollow experimental form that services the interests of property development” (p.206).

Stehlin reaffirms these views and offers more critical insight into the evolution of the TIDP. In particular, he emphasizes how the danger of perceiving a space with such historical and social richness as a *tabula rasa* only encourages “techno-fetishist design” (p.211). The book then ends with Crysler’s contribution, which takes an almost phenomenological approach to understanding the present material conditions of Treasure Island — conditions starkly contrasting with the award-winning renderings of the planned ecotopia to come.

This book makes an important contribution to the discourse on sustainable urbanism by questioning the foundations for contemporary best practices and illuminating the social value of historic context. The repetition of views and analyses among authors early on does belabor some of its more salient points and delay the development of a more critical and unifying discourse until the end. But *Urban Reinventions* offers a fresh perspective within interdisciplinary urban studies at a time when the concept of sustainability is quickly becoming over leveraged.

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