

Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape. *By David M. Scobey*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. xi + 340 pp. Index, notes, appendix, illustrations. Cloth, \$40.00. ISBN 1-566-39950-5.

Reviewed by Matthew Gandy

This is an excellent book: it is meticulously researched, full of insights, and beautifully written. In *Empire City* David Scobey sets out to provide an alternative reading of the history of landscape change in New York City to what he terms the “classic modernization model” (p. 5), with its stress on successive waves of technological change. Scobey concentrates on the “metropolitan real-estate economy,” thus avoiding the conventional emphasis on “infrastructural determinism” that pervades much of the existing literature. His consistent focus on the “rule of real estate” enables this study to extend significantly our knowledge and understanding of nineteenth-century urbanism as an integrated nexus of cultural, political, and economic change. In this sense, *Empire City* is far more than a case study of the New York real-estate market. It also succeeds in making a wider contribution to our understanding of capitalist urbanization as “both a program of physical interventions and the ideological and aesthetic discourse that inform them” (p. 9).

Scobey does not present a straightforward chronology of urban change. Each of the eight chapters explores a different, yet interrelated, facet of the city in order to build a palimpsest of critical insights. Chapter One opens with an examination of what Scobey describes as the “dialectic of metropolis and nation” (p. 31) reflected in the contrasting urban visions of figures such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Thomas Cole, and William Gilpin. In Chapters Two and Three, he surveys the striking development of the Manhattan real-estate market during the midcentury speculative boom and its far-reaching effects on the urban landscape. The enormous degree of social and spatial heterogeneity that characterized this period generated an intense volatility and instability within the process of urban transformation. The contradictory aspects to these developments are addressed in Chapter Four, where the politics of institutional change are related to pressing challenges, such as public health and social disorder. The 1863

draft riot is for Scobey the pivotal event, as it illustrates the disjuncture between the bourgeois urban ideal and the violent reality of the working-class metropolis. In Chapter Five, he turns to some of the extraordinary technological icons of modern New York, such as the Brooklyn Bridge and the elevated railway. Scobey explores how this exhilarating new landscape accompanied complex shifts in public morality and private domesticity as class antagonisms were played out through rival cultural and political discourses.

The political theme is taken further in Chapter Six, where he surveys the close imbrication between the development of the modern political machine and the complexity of large-scale public-works projects. The sense of municipal inferiority in relation to the pristine boulevards of Second Empire Paris is one of a number of cultural anxieties that illustrate the degree to which nineteenth-century New York remained in thrall to European ideals in urban design. In Chapter Seven, he examines in greater detail some of the regulatory and design anomalies emanating from rapid urban growth at a time when the limitations to the cultural project of bourgeois urbanism are becoming apparent. Thus, in the final chapter, Scobey shows how the “imperial ideal and the politics of stewardship” (p. 257) were ultimately shattered by the combined forces of economic retrenchment and political disarray. The stage was now set for a new phase in urban politics and the cultural dynamics of metropolitan governance.

This is without doubt an important book that brings a refreshing intricacy to the story of nineteenth-century New York through its deployment of a diverse array of different sources, to say nothing of the superb use of original illustrations. *Empire City* compares well with other titles in what is undoubtedly a crowded field, and it will be indispensable to scholars, students, and general readers alike. The light theoretical touch Scobey deploys here is entirely consistent with his project, but it also hints at a myriad of further themes that await further investigation. At its core, this is a book about the shifting allegiances and ideologies of metropolitan elites. It would be fascinating to discover how Scobey might tackle the contemporary dynamics of the Manhattan real-estate market and the impact of phenomena such as gentrification, whose roots clearly extend back into the speculative drama of the nineteenth century.

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