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Securing the Spectacular City: The Politics of Revitalization and Homelessness in Downtown Seattle and The Prince of Providence [book review]

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English aristocracy. Buddha sat under the now sacred banyon tree while he was teaching. To honor a magnificent specimen of a tree can also be to acknowledge the interdependent web of life, not necessarily to invoke human prominence.

The authors find that the “intent of zoning is to preserve the appearance of a New England colonial village. However, no buildings remain from the colonial period...” (p. 155). What is wrong, they ask, with a group of people wanting to preserve their history? No buildings are left, but the site is remembered. Is this any different from Santa Fe, New Mexico, wanting to preserve its distinctive architecture and city form even if no ancient structures have survived? Is a fake Italian village in Las Vegas better?

As a deep ecologist who believes that humans are part of nature and have evolved with nature, I find many observations and interpretations in this book difficult to accept. My disagreements include the book’s basic premise stated on the back jacket: “Landscapes are not as innocent as they appear” (back jacket). “Innocent” is a word I never would use with a landscape.

Landscapes of Privilege would provoke discussion in any seminar where it was paired with the writings of John Muir, Edward Abby, or Terry Tempest Williams. The chapter on the increasing number of Latino workers would lead to interesting discussions of affordable housing and culture clash. In a class on historic preservation, the statement that “Historic preservation tends to be based on an exclusivist aesthetic that no longer recognizes itself as such” (p. 152) should evoke vigorous debate.

Studying elites is an interesting subject, and this book makes the most of the topic using critical landscape theory. The post-modernists will love it.

Margot W. Garcia

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The Prince of Providence: The True Story of Buddy Cianci, America’s Most Notorious Mayor, Some Wiseguys, and the Feds

Mike Stanton. Random House, New York, 2003. 442 pages. \$25.95.

Securing the Spectacular City: The Politics of Revitalization and Homelessness in Downtown Seattle

Timothy A. Gibson. Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2004. 322 pages. \$70.

The question that hovers throughout Mike Stanton’s *The Prince of Providence* is how could a mayor who was indicted on 12 corruption charges and convicted in 2002 of federal racketeering remain immensely popular with the people of his city? Despite the fact that kickbacks, bribes, and payoffs were rampant in city government, Providence’s mayor, Vincent A. (Buddy) Cianci, Jr., enjoyed approval ratings above 60%, even after his indictment. Moreover, public support for Cianci has been a long-term proposition; he was first elected mayor in 1974 and then reelected five times,

sometimes by landslide margins. The puzzle deepens when one considers Cianci’s 1984 conviction on a felony assault charge following a bizarre incident in which he essentially kidnapped a man he suspected of having an affair with his wife and interrogated him for several hours while attacking him with a lighted cigarette, ashtray, and fireplace log. And then there was the credible allegation that Cianci, as a third-year law student, had raped a woman at gunpoint.

Americans have a long history of tolerating political rogues and excusing their malfeasance with a knowing wink, if such politicians happen to be skilled practitioners of symbolic politics—or if they just happen to be unusually engaging people. Stanton, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist, demonstrates that notwithstanding the darker side to Cianci’s personality, there was a lighter side that delighted many citizens. He was entertaining, fun loving, flamboyant, charismatic, a skilled orator, a shameless booster of the city, and a political animal. Cianci relished everything about the political game—the routine administration of city services, the relentless pursuit of new business investment, and the perpetual wooing of voters. The mayor’s larger-than-life personality, voracious appetite for campaigns, and adept control over his patronage empire all contributed to a cult of personality that deterred serious political opposition while encouraging broad public support.

Yet there is another explanation for Cianci’s political appeal, one that is insufficiently developed by the author. While Cianci held sway over city hall, Providence was transformed from a dying industrial city into a thriving postindustrial center featuring a host of sociocultural amenities. By the late 1990s, popular magazines lauded the city’s arts scene, superb restaurants, and historic character, ranking Providence as one of the most livable cities in the country. While comparable cities such as Hartford, Connecticut, continued to lose residents, Providence experienced an 8% surge in its population between 1990 and 2000. Stanton asserts: “Providence became the paradigm for the New American city, defined by culture rather than manufacturing” (p. 228). But was Cianci responsible for the city’s dramatic turnaround?

From the earliest years of his administration, Cianci displayed a knack for cutting through red tape and accumulating federal funds to finance projects such as the renovation of the Biltmore Hotel. He also deviated from planning orthodoxy by eschewing extensive demolition and embracing historic preservation. Protecting the city’s historic character, however, did not prevent him from thinking ambitiously about urban revitalization. Ignoring skeptics, he endorsed an audacious plan to relocate the railroad tracks and parking lots that separated the downtown district from the State House, reroute two small rivers that had been paved over decades earlier, and replace the asphalt with a series of small and elegant bridges. Much of the waterfront redevelopment occurred after Cianci resigned following his felony assault conviction, but he managed to win reelection in 1990 in time to supervise the completion of the project. The “crowning touch” was WaterPlace Park, a one-acre pond surrounded by an amphitheater and promenades along the newly exposed rivers, and WaterFire, a series of floating metal braziers with dancing flames amidst evocative music heard from loudspeakers. Thousands of residents and visitors descended upon the riverfront to celebrate the city’s revival.

Cianci pushed other projects to rejuvenate downtown Providence, including new office buildings, a convention center, an

upscale shopping mall, a half dozen new hotels, a movie theater complex, and an outdoor ice skating rink. Most intriguingly, he sought to remake the entire downtown core into an arts-and-entertainment district. Providence became the first city in the U.S. to use tax abatements and exemptions to entice artists to live and work downtown. Other changes to the tax and zoning laws encouraged developers to convert vacant commercial space into residential lofts and retail shops. The city supported local theater and dance companies, persuaded Hollywood to produce several films and a successful television show in the city, initiated a public art program, and provided generous loans to restaurants. Downtown Providence flourished.

Stanton could have been more thorough in examining the transformation of Providence from industrial backwater—the so-called “armpit of New England”—into a lively social and cultural center during a period in which Buddy Cianci presided over city hall. Only one full chapter and fragments of others are devoted to what may be the most compelling explanation for the mystery surrounding Cianci’s lofty approval ratings amidst so much scandal and criminal behavior. This is not to say that Cianci actually deserves the lion’s share of the credit for the Providence renaissance; but a *prima facie* case that his leadership, vision, charisma, and muscle were responsible exists and merits closer scholarly scrutiny. Nor is it clear that the city’s downtown development policies, notwithstanding their popularity with local citizens, were ideal; the current mayor of Providence won election in part by claiming that while downtown development helped the city, outlying neighborhoods and schools were neglected.

If the story of downtown development lurks in the background of Stanton’s book, it takes center stage in Timothy A. Gibson’s study of Seattle, *Securing the Spectacular City*. Although Providence and Seattle are very different cities, they have pursued similar redevelopment strategies. Following the collapse of the commercial office market in the early 1990s, both cities promoted upscale retail, culture, and leisure within their downtown cores. Seattle invested \$1.4 billion, half of it in public money, building a symphony hall, art museum, performing arts center, Nordstrom department store, retail-cinema complex, expanded convention center, and two sports stadiums. The rationale for a strategy predicated upon what David Harvey calls “the mobilization of spectacle” is to foster an image of urban vitality that will stimulate high-end consumption, tourism, and corporate investment.

In seeking to reveal the winners and losers of downtown revitalization in Seattle, Gibson considers three case studies: (1) the “Rhodes Project,” a heavily-subsidized, three-block redevelopment in the heart of the downtown retail district; (2) the city’s attempt to protect its investment in upscale consumption by “zoning out” the area’s homeless population through a series of ordinances prohibiting public urination, aggressive panhandling, and sitting on sidewalks; and (3) the contested placement of a hygiene center for the homeless in the emerging downtown cultural district. In each case, pro-development forces got what they wanted, including huge public subsidies, the routing of vehicular traffic through Westlake Park (a dynamic civic space), and the removal of homeless people who were deemed an affront to the “target populations” of luxury consumption and leisure in the new downtown Seattle.

Gibson’s critical examination of urban development in Seattle

extends the research of scholars such as Sharon Zukin, Michael Sorkin, and Dennis Judd, and produces familiar conclusions about the power of downtown business elites and the costs incurred by the city’s working class and poor. The most significant theoretical contribution in this lucidly written book is Gibson’s careful elaboration of how business leaders manipulated popular perceptions of urban vitality and anxieties about urban decline to generate “a hospitable ideological terrain for the realization of their political agenda” (p. 262). In the end, “citizens and city officials were encouraged to view their experience of downtown through the lens of the downtown business community” (p. 9). The hegemony of the downtown business community’s vision, along with its imposing stock of financial resources and political clout, all but guaranteed the formation of “the spectacular city.”

Still, the analysis of power relations in Seattle may be too one-sided. Although Gibson’s research appears to support his assessment that the downtown business community’s influence is “ever-present and extremely powerful” (p. 224), his choice of case studies may have dictated that finding. After all, is it really that surprising that downtown elites would prevail in their opposition to a hygiene center for the homeless across the street from a brand new symphony hall? Moreover, Gibson’s own research indicates that anti-poverty activists possess influence of their own. For instance, activists succeeded in extracting significant concessions from the city regarding the provision of low-income housing in exchange for agreeing to the placement of the new, state-of-the-art hygiene center just two blocks outside the downtown district. Rather than working from theoretical frameworks that marginalize the role of politics in urban affairs, it would have been interesting to see Gibson engage regime theory, which he never addresses, to consider the potential for the construction of an alternative regime based on progressive ideas, values, and practices, especially in a city like Seattle. Would Seattle have pursued an alternative strategy had community-based activists teamed up with a mayor with the popular appeal and power of a Buddy Cianci? Or the commitment to equity and empowerment of a Ray Flynn or a Harold Washington? Or, absent such progressive leadership from above, what is the potential for progressive change emanating from the grassroots, assuming that activists devote serious effort to contesting the ideological hegemony of the downtown business community?

Stephen J. McGovern

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