

BOOK REVIEW

O'Donoghue, Daniel P. (ed).

Urban Transformations: Centres, Peripheries and Systems

Farham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014.

209 pages

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The definition and interpretation of what is considered “urban” is in constant flux. Debates regarding the precise terminology of places have resulted in continuously changing typologies that reflect the complexity of cities and their hinterland. *Urban Transformations: Centres, Peripheries and Systems*, a collection of discrete chapters by members of the International Geographical Union Urban Commission, explores the relationship between core and peripheral areas at a range of historical, spatial and conceptual scales. The goal of the book, as articulated by editor Daniel P. O'Donoghue, is to provide students with “real exposure to, and understanding of, the evolving form and function of cities and their associated peripheral regions as well as their impact on modern twenty-first century landscapes.” As a collection of essays, the book presents varied and interesting case studies, however, as an educational resource the book is hindered by awkward organization and the dissimilarity cases. The wide temporal and geographic range covered in the book, coupled with extensive context-dependent details within each chapter, makes it difficult to grasp the broader understanding that the editor seeks.

Thematically, the book is built around the idea of “urban transformations.” The broadness of the theme is reflected in the diverse array of topics covered. Many chapters touch on, and a few focus on, the changing spatial structure of urban areas, however, the majority of chapters are stand-alone products with little relation to the rest of the book. Beyond the sweeping catchall of “urban transformations,” it is difficult to identify many other threads tying the different chapters together as the focus shifts from Internet services in Madrid to riots in England, or childcare in Tokyo to segregation in South Africa.

The diversity of the chapters helps fulfill the editor's goal of providing students with real exposure to a range of global urban evolution case studies. As individual pieces of work, the chapters provide insight to the resilience and transformative processes of cities, but unfortunately the sum does not provide much more than the individual parts. Despite some strong sections, overall the book is hindered by three significant shortcomings.

First, the book's organization is not intuitive. The chapters are organized by geographic region. In the introduction, the editor explains that any one approach to organizing such distinct chapters will attract criticism and that the choice is one of preference rather than correctness. That being said, his choice of organization is not conducive to gaining a broader, global understanding of the material. Not only does the book not flow from chapter to chapter, this approach undermines the global nature of the material—one of the book's strongest points. By clustering chapters of similar geography together, it is more difficult for the reader to appreciate the similarities and differences that arise from global comparisons.

Second, the range of topics is too great. Although the diversity of the material was no doubt intended to be an asset, it ultimately acts as a hindrance. By including chapters on a wide range of topics, geographies, and time periods, there is little common ground for the reader to stand on. Additionally, the constant fluctuation of context-dependent information is a barrier to gaining a cross-national understanding of the various phenomena.

Third, there is a lack of consistency in the style, research quality and writing quality of the chapters. Due to the organizational approach, research papers are intermixed with report-like articles and exploratory essays. This unpredictability is awkward for the reader as it is difficult to establish consistent expectations. This is unfortunate as many chapters, such as Jim Simmons study of power nodes in Toronto, are clear, concise, well-articulated pieces of research.

The global scope of the book remains its strongest feature. Unfortunately, due to the aforementioned factors, the book is best used as a targeted-resource for a select number of chapters rather than as a body of work as a whole. Considering that students are the target audience, a stronger thread is needed to tie the chapters together. O'Donoghue's chapter on core-peripheral contrasts in South East England could have been expanded into a template for other chapters to follow. The book contains a lot of good information and interesting hypotheses; however it is in need of stronger editorial guidance, better organization and simplified themes.

Maxwell Hartt
School of Planning
University of Waterloo