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REVIEW

Urban Underside

Review of *Endcommercial* *Reading the City*

Victor Margolin

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This essay presents a review of *Endcommercial®: Reading the City* by Florian Böhm, Luca Pizzaroni, Wolfgang Scheppe (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002; 544pp., illustrated, ISBN 3775712216).

The sheer volume of photographs – approximately 1,000 – included in *Endcommercial®: Reading the City* challenges the conventions of urban representation that have prevailed in the history of photography. Rather than characterise a city or cities with a series of iconic images of important landmarks or distinctive scenes, Florian Böhm, Luca Pizzaroni, and Wolfgang Scheppe, present a view of urban life that focuses on the generic, the anonymous and the inconsequential.

The majority of the photographs are from New York, although some depict other cities. The differences are not evident in the photographs since the authors went to great pains to emphasise the commonality of daily life in cities around the globe.

At the time of the book's publication, the authors, who shared the photography, had approximately 60,000

images in their archive. That has now risen to more than 100,000. The documentation is ongoing and selections from daily shoots are posted on one of the project's websites www.digitalslum.com. As Wolfgang Scheppe explains in an interview on their other website endcommercial.com the project could not have been undertaken without the advent of digital photography which made possible the inexpensive production and storage of so many images. From their digital database, the authors not only generated the pictures for the book but also for an exhibition that has been shown in New York as well as in a number of European cities.

Scheppe is quite clear, however, in his and his collaborators' preference for the book as the principal medium of display because it emphasises the aggregate of images rather than privileging any single one. Like the Russian Constructivist photographer, Alexander Rodchenko, who believed that multiple snapshots of Lenin rather than a single formal portrait best captured the Soviet leader's personality, Scheppe, Böhm and Pizzaroni polemically reject the iconic urban photograph in favor of a mass of seemingly mundane images that, in their entirety, constitute a fascinating display of city life at its most ordinary.

Scheppe, Böhm and Pizzaroni approach the documentation of a city as a scientist would an ecosystem, the difference being that they invent their own taxonomy while the scientist relies on an existing and widely agreed-upon order to classify flora and fauna. The authors' working method was to shoot first, according to whatever interested them and develop a taxonomy afterwards. Hence, they not only discovered new components of urban life but also sought to re-invent our understanding of how cities function. Their project was guided by a determination to expose the hidden or otherwise invisible actions, processes and communication codes that constitute the fabric of daily life for large numbers of people. They show little interest in the lives of the rich and famous that Tom Wolfe exposed in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, except to feature a section on stylish store facades, which they designate as "corporate monuments."

Although their choices of what to photograph were subjective and intuitive, they give their taxonomy a pseudo-scientific veneer by presenting it as a corporate organisation chart comprised of separate boxes connected hierarchically by lines. They use the same visual rhetoric for the title page and table of contents. The system actually works rather neatly as a means to visualise the conceptual framework of the separate photographic sections. In the title spread for each section, they highlight in black the box that designates the photographs for that section and link it to the two boxes that show where the section is located within the larger conceptual hierarchy. The rhetorical assertion here is that all the photographic groupings are fragments of a composite of urban life as the authors want to present it.

Through the terms they use for their principal categories, *system*, *order*, and *identity*, the authors present a taxonomic structure that

appears to be sociologically complete. One is inclined to read the term *system* as the totality of urban processes, institutions and structures much in the way that one understands Talcott Parsons' attempt to produce a comprehensive macro-theory of social organisation in the 1950s. *Identity*, too, is a term that characterises a central problem in sociological discourse, while *order* summons up an Enlightenment vision of proper social arrangements.

The first hint that the authors' view of the city is anything but an Enlightenment one is revealed in the titles of some of the sub-categories, *dysfunctional speech act*, *alternative media*, and *habitual reinterpretation*. Within the first category are sections of photographs that depict signs with missing letters, stores that have been abandoned and billboards with no messages on them. As alternative media, the authors consider car doors on which letters spelling out personal names or names of small businesses have been stenciled or glued; labels with messages that have been pasted on doors, fire boxes, and other surfaces; and signs that have been tacked or pasted on poles of various kinds. By '*habitual reinterpretation*' the authors have in mind the discovery of new uses for objects such as plastic milk crates that are frequently appropriated for seating; city standpipes that assume the same purpose; and tattered chairs of all kinds that fill the streets of neighborhoods with an active public life.

Perusing these and other photos, one comes to understand that the authors have not organised their images according to a macro-theory of social order. Instead, they are more interested in how people cope at street level. They make reference in their diagram to *autopoiesis*, a term devised by the Chilean biologists Umberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, who argue that an organism's first obligation is to maintain its own inner nature, which it does by taking in what it needs from the environment around it. According to Maturana and Varela, this principle is true biologically as well as socially and can apply equally to an amoeba or a corporation. What Scheppe, Böhm, and Pizzaroni show us is how ordinary people adapt the city's resources to their own needs in ways that are highly improvisatory. With this understanding, we can re-read their principal organising categories – *system*, *order*, and *identity* – as referring to a microsystem of personal experience rather than a macrosystem of civic life.

There is considerable irony in the relation between many of the sub-categories and the images they encompass. 'Property', for example, is represented by photographs of bicycle frames, in various states of disrepair, chained to street posts. The category also includes close-ups photographs of taped objects, suggesting the dynamic between dysfunctional things and jerry-rigged attempts to fix them. Widening the frame, the authors provide photographs of shop proprietors, seated on stools, keeping an eye on their merchandise. In the sub-category, *commerce*, they contrast a section depicting the facades of upscale stores like Fendi, Prada,

and Gucci with photos of street vendors and hawkers whose own emporia are usually nothing more than a folding table or a tarp on the ground. The irony is particularly marked in the series of photos depicting plastic A-frames that support wooden crossbars, which function as barriers. However, a number of the A-frames depicted are either broken or out of use, suggesting a metaphor of resistance to authority. This reading is strengthened by the placement of this section at the opening of the book, thus leading off the narrative of urban survival with a critical take on a class of artifacts that signify social control.

Another form of irony is the authors' choice of terms denoting high or commercial art – *sculpture*, *design*, *architecture*, and *typography* – to designate improvised, accidental, or inconsequential objects they find in the street. As 'sculpture' they identify abandoned bicycle frames; autopoetic design depicts the improvisatory use of plastic crates and standpipes for seating, improvised stands put up by street vendors and shopping carts appropriated by trash pickers, vendors, and homeless people. As 'architecture' they include transitory structures such as plastic A-frame barrier supports and blue tarps used to cover a multitude of containers. And finally vernacular typography is represented by some atypical examples: street names carved in cement, painted drain holes, raised letters on steel plates and stickers pasted on lamp posts.

What the authors present to the reader is a purportedly coherent visual and material culture comprised of objects and messages that can easily escape the notice of those who are not actually involved in it. For those who can read them, the city is constantly transmitting signs and signals. Abandoned buildings tell us that a neighborhood is in decay; police barriers indicate that a public demonstration or event has just happened or is about to happen; notices posted subversively on public property advertise everything from raves to dog walkers. It is both intriguing and informative to view serial examples of these mostly invisible signs.

Given that the book, with 1,000 photographs, is already a weighty tome, the authors devise an intriguing strategy for readers to access additional information related to their project. By establishing a website for interviews, reviews, and other commentary, the authors invite those interested to participate in an ongoing discourse about the book. Likewise, they can share the visual continuity of the project by checking out new photographs at another site devoted only to that purpose. The open-endedness of the documentation and the discourse about it are far better suited to the authors' processual reading of the city than to a more definitive representation of city life. Not only have they invented a new reading of urban experience, they have also devised innovative tools to facilitate it.