Book review

Urban Design and the British Urban Renaissance

John Punter (ed). Routledge, 2009, ISBN 978-0-415-44330-6, £34.99, 371 pp.

There is a wealth of knowledge about urban regeneration, urban design and urban planning crammed into this book. While it comprises 16 city case studies by different authors, John Punter has skilfully edited them together into a coherent whole. Inevitably there are some variations in framing and focus between the different chapters but this adds to the richness of the material and avoids a sense of repetition. The reader can dip into case studies of the eight English 'core cities', four chapters looking at London from the central area to King's Cross, the Isle of Dogs and the whole Thames Gateway and, finally, consider Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. Some background knowledge of each city will probably help the reader navigate the fine detail of these chapters, but there is illustrative material in each case sufficient to give a feel of the city. So this book can be read as a series of city portraits. But it offers more than this.

In his introductory chapter, Punter provides an invaluable survey of the Urban Task Force ideas of 1999 and of urban regeneration more generally. This is an ideal resource to bring students and researchers up to speed. Here he also seeks to justify the specifically urban design focus of the book. Quoting the Urban Task Force, he provides a rather generic definition: 'design is a core problem solving activity that not only determines the quality of the built environment but also delivers many of the instruments for the implementation of the urban renaissance' (p. 2). This author found it quite difficult to distinguish this urban design focus from a more

general urban regeneration or even planning perspective. This is reflected across the chapters where some authors take a more architectural design approach while others take a rather broader view. Indeed this book could be an interesting resource itself to debate the parameters of urban design.

But the empirical material presented is also used by Punter in his final chapter to assess the impacts and outcomes of the Urban Renaissance effort. Here he begins by pointing out that 'Arguably, what the case studies in this book have evaluated is perhaps less the outcomes of the urban renaissance policy and more the impacts of the 1993–2007 property boom on British cities' (p. 325). There then follows an interesting discussion of the limitations of the planning system in the face of such property cycles. Nevertheless, he seeks to tie down the specific qualities of British cities after this period of renaissance. He points to the 'appreciable improvement in the quality of the built environment and the public realm in the centres of the major British cities' (p. 330) and the increased number of exemplar schemes. He sees the greater emphasis on design and place making within local authority planning as a positive change but also queries the value of the new Local Development Frameworks system or at least the way that the new system has been used. He ends by arguing that there is still great variation between local authorities and that more needs to be done to embed the design agenda in local planning and to ensure that this contributes to urban sustainability. In this, he is surely right.

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