
Book Reviews

Cian O'Callaghan and Cesare Di Felicianantonio (eds.) 2023: *The New Urban Ruins: Vacancy, Urban Politics and International Experiments in the Post-Crisis City*. Bristol: Policy Press



The New Urban Ruins: Vacancy, Urban Politics and International Experiments in the Post-Crisis City responds to one of the most urgent debates in urban studies today; namely, how can the concept of 'new urban ruins' be brought to intersect critically with broader urban challenges? By articulating a diverse and rich set of questions, the volume offers a unique lens through which to observe ruins and vacant spaces in relation to contemporary urban transformations. The volume takes a further step too, claiming that 'vacant spaces in cities are active, lively and heavily contested' (p. 3).

To achieve its aim, the analysis focuses on different spatialities, temporalities and cultural imaginaries that vacant spaces evoke in different geographical contexts. The book presents 15 chapters structured across three parts, as well as the editors' introduction and conclusion. The first part deals with the re-conceptualization of ruination in the post-crisis context, the second with the political economic aspect of vacant space in an urban context, and the third with the reappropriation of urban vacant spaces. All three parts bring together an array of important conceptual and methodological approaches that serve as key reference points for cultural geography and urban sociology. The editors conclude with a proposal for a new research agenda which sets out sustainable proposals for future development in re-purposing vacant sites.

The introduction by Cian O'Callaghan and Cesare Di Felicianantonio highlights the under-theorization of the concept of vacancy in urban studies. The current body of literature treats the topic of urban vacancy essentially as a question of visibility, particularly in moments of crisis and their aftermath. The discussion therefore starts with two claims: (1) that there is a lack of conceptual clarity across different disciplines that privileges urban ruins and vacant spaces according to their measurable impact; and (2) that there is a heuristic contraposition between antique sites and modern ruins on the one hand, and the nuanced processes through which

urban vacancy can play an important role in urban political experiments and alternative spatialities.

Overall, the major achievement of the book is the way that it envisions cities as both immaterial repositories of memory and material networks of social action, while at the same time bringing a global focus to the topic of vacancy and ruination. The contributions showcase a variety of international case studies that aim to go beyond the typical dichotomy of the global North and South.

In Part 1, the volume explores in-depth the relationship between ruins and urban vacancy to shed light on aspects of contestation between urban pasts and futures in a post-crisis context. Four chapters engage with key instances where ruins are envisaged as a form of loss, enjoyment, violence, spatial injustice, ecological habitat and monumental emptiness. In the first of these, Lucas Pohl shows how the Michigan Central Station building was preserved both as a 'nostalgic reminder of Detroit's glory days' (p. 26) and as a symbol of loss in the immediate present. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, the chapter unfolds around the relationship between a ruin and its loss, and ultimately the question of fantasy vs. materiality.

If urban ruins are about potential fantasy, in the next chapter Karen Till focuses on how a former Jewish school in Berlin-Mitte can be 'reclaimed as a historical place from a ruin of spatial injustice by calling attention to the loss of Jewish life and political thought in the city' (p. 36) via a temporary art exhibition. In the same vein, Sandra Jasper illustrates how West Berlin's squatting scene and 'wasteland' of the 1970s has been reanimated by non-human life which now offers favourable conditions for 'alternative socio-ecological futures' (p. 55) to flourish. The last chapter in this section, by Christina Lee, looks at the city of Ordos Kangbashi in Inner Mongolia, which is seen as the quintessential example of a monumental ghost city but one which also offers a future possibility of habitation beyond its empty surface. Together, these chapters respond to the question of how urban ruins of the past are made invisible—or, conversely, commodified towards inevitable gentrification outcomes—through controversial narratives and ambivalent processes of urban development.

The five chapters in Part 2 bring together cases which display novelty in the discussion about the political economy of vacant urban space. The section starts with a chapter by Nathan McClintock in which he highlights a contentious tendency whereby 'vacant lots serve as key sites of urban commoning' (p. 102) and compares this with conditions in three North American cities where urban agriculture is entrenched through prolonged mechanisms of 'settler colonialism and racial capitalism'. The next case discusses vacant housing stock in an East German city and the reallocation of public housing companies to private owners, investigating how the emergence of vacant housing turned into a problem. The problematization of this issue led to tensions between two different rationalities of excess stock versus opportunity (and their attendant policy interventions), resulting in a dynamic which segregated the social fabric of the city.

A chapter by Sara Cremaschi and Alessandro Coppola focuses on housing vacancy and spatial rearrangements in relation to natural disasters. Using the case of L'Aquila in Italy in the aftermath of the 2009 earthquake, the authors outline the conditions and actors involved in the political economic reconstruction of the post-disaster phase. The post-emergency intervention created a layered set of regulations

that deeply affected the reconstruction of the built environment and ultimately prevented their return to use. Cremaschi and Coppola's findings show that the local population has been deeply affected by the stratification of these regulations, resulting in housing vacancy, abandonment and ruination as an outcome of the peculiar political economy of reconstruction.

Altogether, these chapters discuss the important question of how the temporality and spatiality of urban ruination and recovery can be represented in visual and narrative forms, as well as the material conditions that provide common ground for alternative post-crisis reconfigurations. They make a significant contribution to a deeper understanding of how urban vacancy became controversial in the urban land market and the different rationalities around deploying vacant spaces and for whom.

The authors of the chapters in Part 3 take some important steps to explain vacancy and its political configuration via practices of re-appropriation in various institutional contexts. Mara Ferreri builds on the commoning of housing in Barcelona by urban activists, while Matthew Caulkins looks at spatio-legal configurations in vacant buildings in relation to property politics and squatting movements in São Paulo. The last two chapters, by the editors and Rachel McArdle, respectively, tackle the issue of how the presence of artists and squatters might potentially represent an alternative form of social project by experimenting with different ways of using vacant urban spaces and providing housing for vulnerable segments of society. In their chapter, Di Felicianantonio and O'Callaghan showcase the eviction of one of the squats in central Rome—mostly populated by refugees—by examining the material and 'immaterial infrastructures in terms of people and vacant spaces ... in shaping the emerging post-pandemic city' (p. 213). McArdle then investigates the case of Dublin's Bolt hostel and Apollo House to imagine diverse urban futures, claiming that, through the choice of the building and the presence of volunteer networks, both material and immaterial infrastructures have contributed to the production of an urban commons.

All of the book's chapters deploy a rich variety of qualitative techniques from a psycho-geographical approach to auto-ethnography that add value to the interpretation of the empirical material. The authors frame urban ruination as a multi-dimensional process and discuss the conditions for re-using vacant spaces in post-crisis settings across the globe. The book will thus find a broad and diverse audience among urban scholars, social scientists, planners, policy-makers and practitioners. It is becoming increasingly clear that there will always be vacancy and ruins in urban spaces, where experiments will be carried out through grassroots and collective actions and to which urban policies need to be tailored accordingly.

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