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Michael Katz on Place and Space in Urban History

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Michael Katz on Place and Space in Urban History

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Few will ever question the originality and pathbreaking importance of Michael Katz's many and influential publications. Fewer still will be surprised that "From Urban as Site to Urban as Place" raises creative and penetrating questions about the writing of urban history during the past half century. Katz's erudite essay typifies his scholarly *oeuvre*. Whether writing about education, geographic mobility and transiency, the persistence of urban poverty, historical sociology, urban disorder, or the multiple and profound intersection of these subjects,[1] Michael Katz more often than not forces historians in multiple fields to not only reinterpret long-held paradigms but to revisit fundamental problems. Simply put, Katz asks questions that force us to reexamine how we think about cities.

Katz places considerable importance on the Yale University conference on urban history in 1968 that produced the influential volume *Nineteenth-Century Cities* (1969).[2] The event proved to be a landmark gathering for a generation of urbanists who came of age at a paradoxical moment in American urban history: the simultaneous optimism embodied in the Great Society and economic abyss of the "urban crisis." These events combined to force many historians to reconceptualize their treatment of American cities.[3] Before 1970, urban history was a field with a meta-narrative, exemplified in the writings of Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. and Lewis Mumford. Schlesinger's seminal *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (1933) moved the discussion of cities past the celebratory accounts of earlier booster biographies of cities while also challenging the popular frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. The city, not the frontier, was the central theme in the emergence of the modern United States.[4] Significantly, Schlesinger emphasized the physical spaces and social structures found in cities, relying upon and integrating theories associated with the so-called Chicago School of Sociology. "There is a city mentality which is clearly differentiated from the rural mind," wrote Louis Wirth. "The city man thinks in mechanistic terms, in rational terms, while the rustic thinks in naturalistic, magical terms."[5] Schlesinger implicitly agreed and set the stage for later historians such as Richard Wade and John Reps who argued that the "American character" was historically rooted more in the American city than the Western frontier.[6]

Writer and architectural critic Lewis Mumford repeated Schlesinger's portrait equating cities with civilization. In multiple publications after 1930 which culminated in *The City in History*

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(1961), Mumford offered one of the initial global histories of urbanization. The rise of the city was a development so profound, he argued, that it emancipated humankind from the primitive, irrational life of rural society. Urban structures, in Mumford's mind, were the final product of science and technology, the culmination of the increasing value attached to rational thought. Tracing large shifts in economic organization, alterations in city geography and the built environment, and the transformation of social life, Mumford's meta-narrative thematically linked culture, politics, and technology within a comprehensive account of Western urbanization.[7]

Katz insightfully points out that participants in the Yale conference intended to move beyond the paradigms of Schlesinger and Mumford. Many did so by adopting methodologies that emphasized the city as a site with emblematic social processes. Simultaneous and equally important was the previous and concurrent work of Sam Bass Warner Jr. *Streetcar Suburbs* (1962)—considered by many to be the groundbreaking text that stimulated the explosion of suburban studies in the next half century—employed Boston as a case study representative of the larger national process of suburbanization. Then in *The Private City* (1968) and *The Urban Wilderness* (1972), Warner used specific spatial sites—Philadelphia in three specific chronological periods in the former and Philadelphia, New York, and Los Angeles in the latter—to demonstrate a distinctive American urbanization that evolved out of an ideology that valorized market development, which he labeled "privatism." Warner focused on the specific structures and creations of urban communities. But in describing American urbanization as the fusion of thousands of individual, money-making citizens and autonomous, accumulating enterprises, he placed cities in the center of the history of American capitalism.[8]

Warner's scaffolding paradigm, the Yale conference, and Theodore Hershberg's *Philadelphia* represented and generated influential spatial examinations of cities. Equally significant, they stimulated case study approaches. For this generation of historians, the physical city served as a case study for larger social processes and transformations. Cases studies may have tumbled into disfavor among social scientists as Katz points out, but for urban historians they became *de rigueur*. The examples he cites by Max Page, Margaret Pugh O'Mara, Domenic Vitiello, and Alison Isenberg exemplify the use of a metropolitan area (New York, Silicon Valley, and Philadelphia, respectively) or an urban spatial form (downtowns) as case studies illustrating larger urban processes.[9] Similarly, the influence of Jane Jacobs generated "thick descriptions" of urban neighborhoods and detailed examinations of urban political economies, replacing Mumford's "textile" and "Coketown" paradigms of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities after 1970.[10]

Katz identifies the "urban crisis" as an influential event not only in the United States but in the way historians thereafter wrote about cities. Perhaps the most influential work on the urban crisis, however, was Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto*. Hirsch creatively integrated concepts of race, space, and place, demonstrating how socially constructed ideas of race influenced the spatial forms of segregation in specific neighborhoods in a specific city. Between 1940 and 1970, a state-sanctioned "second ghetto" with a distinctive form of spatial segregation emerged, supported by white, Euro-American "ethnics" defending their "homeowner rights" and downtown elites striving to preserve commercial real estate values. This pattern of racial exclusion was, according to Hirsch, "so pervasive, so deep, that it virtually constituted a new form of *de jure* segregation."[11]

Making the Second Ghetto did more than challenge prevailing interpretations of residential segregation and racial exclusion. First, Hirsch's study generated a school of "second ghetto" interpretations.[12] Second, *Making the Second Ghetto* stimulated another group of urbanists to challenge prevailing interpretations that located the breakdown of the New Deal coalition, the "urban crisis," and the rise of "Reagan Democrats" with Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty after 1965.[13] These and other historians identified the origins of these events in the decade after World War II. Finally, Hirsch previewed later scholarship on the social and linguistic construction of

race, particularly the concepts of "whiteness" and the "merging of 'ethnics'" as analytical tools for understanding racial segregation.[14]

Katz paints a broad landscape in his overview. In so doing, however, he creates a binary evolution of urban history that sometimes obscures and oversimplifies. At least five trends in urban history complicate Katz's paradigm. First, studies of cities as places shaped by urban forms never supplanted earlier methods of studying cities as sites of social processes and institutions. These conceptualizations have existed side by side for the past half century. One example is the considerable literature that examines the social processes associated with disorder and "deviancy," which expands not only earlier definitions of the underworld, policing, and informal economies but moves alternative subcultures from the marginal to center-stage narratives in urban history.[15] Similarly, recent studies in comparative urbanization—some by Katz's very own students—use urban renewal, segregation, ethnicity, and other urban "products" to attend equally to the social processes and institutions (the city as site) found in a specific urban place or form (usually a neighborhood, if not a specific city).[16]

Second, Katz asserts that "little work examines how networks of urban cultural institutions have been buffeted by and responded to urban transformation." Yet a considerable literature does just this. Examinations of women's organizations, African American cultural institutions, Jewish synagogues, Progressive reform, and social work institutions emphasize the many and multiple responses to the transformative processes of domestic migration, foreign immigration, and urbanization.[17] Other studies adopting anthropological and ethnographic methodologies treat culture broadly, demonstrating how rapid urbanization created new communities, transformed their neighborhood institutions, upset residential spatial patterns, and even restructured sexual intimacy. More significantly, they make visible social groups largely invisible in the historical literature prior to 1960.[18]

Recent studies of urban religion, in particular, reveal how urban spaces and places not only affected religious groups but how those groups transformed city neighborhoods. The appropriation of urban space for particular devotional rituals was sometimes the external manifestation of a distinctive inner religiosity. For example, John McGreevy, Ellen Skerrett, Eileen McMahon, Gerald Gamm, and others emphasize how twentieth-century American urban Catholics adopted a sacralized attachment to residential property and the urban neighborhood, thereby identifying a resilient relationship between urban space and religious worship.[19] Robert Orsi demonstrates how a street *feste* in New York and a religious shrine in Chicago became "in-between" places, "placeless sites," and devotional spaces that did not require a physical journey in the minds of the devout. Thomas Tweed shows how another shrine in Miami became a "translocational place," transmitting lore not only about the past but also the future. In these spaces, the religious or symbolic power of the place becomes so powerful that the pilgrimage location transcends other forms of interaction (letters, petitions, classified advertisements). More importantly, city streets and urban places serve as sources of religious vitality— "existential multiplicity" in Orsi's words—and thereby become spaces facilitating religious creativity, innovation, and experimentation (think Jane Jacobs), not breakdown and decline (as imagined by the Chicago school sociologists).[20] And the appropriation of space for religious purposes was not unique to Catholics. Diane Winston and Kyle Roberts demonstrate how different evangelical groups adopted missionary strategies shaped by specific streets in New York, resulting in a sacralization of secular space or "sanctification of the commonplace."[21] These historians of urban religion, by scrutinizing the devotional and cultural practices that make territorial claims on shrines, churches, streets, and neighborhoods, have compelled urbanists to reconceptualize space and place.

Third, the most innovative work in architectural history and landscape studies frequently combine methods focusing on a city as site and place, weaving social and cultural history into

the evolution of a built environment. The vast literature on urban parks best exemplifies this trend.[22] Equally important, however, recent historians employ the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, the Prudential Center in Boston, and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco to demonstrate the interrelated relationships among architectural structures, urban politics, and social institutions to illuminate broader historical and cultural themes.[23] The multiple-volume examinations of New York and Chicago architecture by Robert A. M. Stern and his coauthors and John Zukowsky, respectively, are among the most encyclopedic since I. N. Phelps Stokes's opus on Manhattan.[24] Other studies, inspired by the work of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, focus on "ordinary" landscapes—the department store, the shopping mall, the gas station, the supermarket, the drive-in, the bungalow, the theme park, the street—and apply questions and methods associated with social history to the evolution of the built environment.[25] Finally, the "Los Angeles school" of urbanism with its distinct emphasis on geography, class, and metropolitan urbanization exemplifies still another series of debates on urban forms.[26]

Fourth, numerous and significant urban histories do not neatly fall into this binary divisions of site or place. This is particularly true in urban environmental history, infrastructure history, and the impact of technology on cities. Some works in these fields adhere to Katz's concept of spatial place as a bounded entity, including Harold Platt on Chicago, Andrew Hurley on St. Louis and Gary, and Greg Hise and William Deverell on Los Angeles.[27] More often they do not. William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, ostensibly a work about Chicago, is equally an examination of the nineteenth-century environmental economy of the "greater West" and reflective of regional approaches to urban or metropolitan history.[28] Others, notably Joel Tarr and Clay McShane, reveal how a particular technology or natural entity—the car, the bike, the horse, the river—transformed urban life and beyond.[29]

Fifth, the bulk of Katz's examples focuses on the twentieth century, especially in the postwar period. This attention is deserved, especially since the most important work examines the growing importance of the "suburban" form. But this vast literature now goes beyond questions focused on place, space, and form to examine equally complex subjects of environmentalism, race, gender, religion, and class.[30] Increasingly, the home, the built residence, or the housing project has served as the physical vehicle and intersection to examine these issues.[31]

Finally, "traditional" urban history never vanished. Exemplified by urban biography on one hand and urban political history on the other, a robust literature of individual city histories and political biographies has thrived. Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace's *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (1999) represents the most popular urban biography of the past half century because of its successful synthesizing and narration. But frequently this literature eschews the theoretical paradigms associated with the city as site or city as place.[32] Related to this, urban political biography remains a popular genre. Although published more than 35 years ago, Robert Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1974) remains influential and the subject of seemingly constant revision.[33]

These disagreements, however, should not diminish the importance of Katz's arguments. His evolutionary conceptualizations of the city as site and place represent how one generation of urban historians and social scientists made sense of the chaotic metropolis. The impact extends beyond the academy; Americans think differently about their cities and suburbs today. In 1970, Richard Wade lamented the dearth of research on American cities.[34] Few make such claims today. Michael Katz is one reason why.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. On education, see Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Katz, *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America* (New York: Praeger, 1971); Katz, *Reconstructing American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987). On geographic mobility and transiency, see Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). On the persistence of urban poverty, see Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty* (New York: Pantheon, 1989). On historical sociology, see Katz and Thomas Sugrue, eds., *W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and the City: The Philadelphia Negro and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). On urban disorder, see Katz, *Why Don't American Cities Burn?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). On the multiple and profound intersections of these subjects, see Katz, *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State, the "Underclass," and Urban Schools as History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Katz and Mark J. Stern, *One Nation Divisible: What America Was and What It Is Becoming* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).
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4. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).
5. Robert Park, Ernest W. Burgess, Roderick D. McKenzie, and Louis Wirth, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), 219.
6. Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); John C. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).
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9. Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Domenic Vitiello, *Engineering Philadelphia: The Sellers Family and the Industrial Metropolis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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11. Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983; reissued Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. 254–55.

12. Raymond A. Mohl, "Making the Second Ghetto in Metropolitan Miami, 1940-1960," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (March 1995): 410–13; Raymond A. Mohl, "The Second Ghetto and the 'Infiltration Theory' in Urban Real Estate 1940-1960," in *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*, ed. June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 58–74; the articles by Raymond Mohl, Roger Biles, Wendy Plotkin, Amanda Irene Seligman, and D. Bradford Hunt in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 94 (2001): 8–123; and articles by Ronald Bayor, Raymond A. Mohl, Carl H. Nightingale, Amanda Irene Seligman, Thomas J. Sugrue, and Heather Ann Thompson in "Special Issue: Urban History, Arnold Hirsch, and the Second Ghetto Thesis," *Journal of Urban History* 29 (2003): 238–309.

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14. On Hirsch being among the earliest to use the term "whiteness," see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 186; and Sugrue, "Revisiting the Second Ghetto," 283–86. Some of the best and most provocative assessments of whiteness studies fail to acknowledge Hirsch. See Eric Arnesen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001): 3–32; and Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *Journal of American History* 89 (2002): 154–73. On the social construction of whiteness, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990).

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Notes on a Desegregated Method: Learning from Michael Katz and Others

N. D. B. Connolly[1]

I was heartened, if surprised, to see Michael Katz's sunny assessment of our current scholarly moment: "As a field, urban history has never shimmered so vibrantly."[1] I could not agree more.

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