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Review: City Choreographer: Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America

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Books

Alison Bick Hirsch

City Choreographer: Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 320 pp., 105 b/w illus. \$30 (paper), ISBN 9780816679799

City Choreographer constitutes the most comprehensive monograph to date on the well-known landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, whose often-dramatic designs for fountains, plazas, and interconnected pedestrian pathways helped to change the faces of various American cities during the 1960s and 1970s. From the perspective of current planning policy and preservation, this monograph is timely insofar as a number of Halprin's best-known works, notably Denver's Skyline Park (1974) and Minneapolis's Nicollet Mall (1968), have recently been destroyed or altered beyond recognition. Other Halprin landscapes remain in a state of disrepair or planning limbo. Part of the purpose of the book, reiterated in the introduction and conclusion, is to make a plea for the ongoing relevance and importance of Halprin's design methods (perhaps more so than his built projects) for the shaping of contemporary urban form. As Alison Bick Hirsch notes: "The vocabulary, methodology, and intentions of Halprin's open-ended scoring approach have only recently become part of accepted disciplinary discourse, yet with little recognition of Halprin's pioneering efforts" (3). Given the author's

ultimately skeptical stance toward the actual open-endedness of Halprin's methods or designs, however, the historical lesson for the present remains ambivalent. The very term *city choreographer* embraces this ambivalence, marking Halprin as someone whose intention it was to stage the unrehearsed movements of diverse urban inhabitants, enticing them to explore and play on his designs, and at the same time control, or "score," patterns of movement in the city. In this sense one is reminded of earlier attempts by the proponents of the so-called New Monumentality, such as Sigfried Giedion, to spur a "spontaneous" public life through spectacles of modernist art and architecture that would appeal to some instinctive or child-like response to color and form. One is also reminded of Edmund Bacon's attempt to construct Philadelphia as a three-dimensional composition animated by systems of circulation and "greenways."

Until now, Halprin has been the primary shaper of his own legacy. Like Le Corbusier, he was a prolific publicizer of his designs and of the corresponding theories underlying their production. His books include *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes and the Human Environment* (1970) and *Taking Part: A Workshop Approach to Collective Creativity* (1974).¹ He was deeply involved in the exhibition of his work that appeared at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art in 1986, as well as the related catalog, and he also wrote an extensive professional autobiography, titled *A Life Spent Changing Places* (2011).² The challenge thus posed to any author undertaking a monograph on Halprin is to develop sufficient critical distance from Halprin's self-representation to place his design and writing within the wider historical context of this period. In accomplishing this task, Hirsch is only partially successful. The book weaves back and forth between reiterating

Halprin's theory of "choreography" and presenting a critique of the difference between Halprin's stated intentions and the works he actually created, in particular the paradoxical difference between his desire for indeterminate openness and the relatively closed or fixed nature of his urban compositions. While valid, this critique does not touch on the most pressing historical question implied by the book's subtitle, *Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America*.

The specter hovering at the periphery of this monograph is what was known in the 1960s as the "urban crisis": the decline of historical downtowns, violent civil rights protests, racial tensions, inner-city disinvestment, and the wider resistance to top-down planning by experts and politicians. What happened when Halprin's version of urban choreography collided with the various reactions to postwar urban renewal that began to appear in the 1960s and ended in the demise of modernist certainties during the 1970s? The picture that emerges in this book is that of an aesthetically innovative landscape architect, steeped in the forms and rhetorical tropes of 1950s modernism, forced to adapt to the rapidly shifting ground of the 1960s and 1970s in order to survive and succeed. Employing the language of ecology and experiential immediacy, as well as the social experimentation of "encounter groups," Halprin was effectively able to sustain a foothold in the California counterculture and thus mediate between the demand for a grassroots, community-based design and the more traditional apparatuses of city planning commissions and commercial property interests.

This portrait enlarges and refines our understanding of urban and landscape design during and after the crisis of postwar urban renewal. However, the reader has to extract this narrative with a degree of effort. The book is largely structured as

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a sequence of examples or case studies that are only very loosely tied to any overarching historical narrative. Many passages contain lengthy block quotes, sometimes nearly a page long and sometimes almost back-to-back, with the result that the author's own voice often becomes muted, buried under the sheer weight of archival detail. At other times, the author's critical voice seems to disappear behind that of Halprin's own discourse, as when we are repeatedly informed that this or another example of Halprin's design "invited participation." The quantity of examples and thickness of their descriptive detail become inversely proportionate to the analytical clarity of the larger argument, and it is often easy for the reader to miss the forest for the trees. Moreover, because the book is thematically divided into three distinct parts, each with a different narrative and main point, one almost has the sense of reading three separate books on Halprin's work side by side. Each part can easily stand on its own, and there is little sense that the parts build or depend on one another. This tripartite structure is perhaps more reflective of a desire to divide up conveniently a vast amount of material than of an attempt to generate a single, compelling story about Halprin in the context of urban renewal America.

Under the general heading "Introduction," the first part of the book contains a lengthy biographical essay detailing the formative influences and theoretical development of Halprin's work. Hirsch argues here for the significance Halprin's wife, Anna, a successful dancer and choreographer in her own right, in the theoretical development of landscape as choreography. This section certainly provides a useful supplement to what is already known from Halprin's own explanation in *The RSVP Cycles*. However, Anna Halprin's role largely disappears in the sections that follow, titled "Built Work" and "Community Workshops," in which various partners and designers within Halprin's firm become much more prominent.

"Built Work" consists of a roughly chronological assessment of Halprin's urban projects, beginning with Ghirardelli Square (1962–65) and Market Street in San Francisco (1962–75) and ending with Seattle Freeway Park (1976) and Manhattan Square Park in Rochester, New York

(1975). Urban renewal appears in this section mainly as a peripheral context for these examples. In some cases, such as the sequence of designs for Portland, Oregon, Halprin's firm played the role of ameliorating the alienating conditions of an existing urban renewal project. Likewise, Seattle's Freeway Park was intended to "heal" the condition of a freeway cutting through the heart of the city. In such projects, Halprin's designs served to soften, or "humanize," urban renewal. In other cases, such as the design for Rochester, Halprin's work was supposed to act as the generating core for an urban renewal development that never materialized. However, most of Hirsch's analysis here has to do with Halprin's aesthetic intentions, recounting his transition from designing shopping mall landscapes for Victor Gruen to designing large, often spectacular abstractions of rivers, cliffs, and waterfalls intended to create interactive urban environments that brought metaphors and experiential equivalents of nature into the midst of the city. Despite the particularity of Halprin's imagery, there are formal and rhetorical echoes here of both British Townscape designs and Garrett Eckbo's work for Victor Gruen at the Fullerton Mall in Fresno.

It is only in the final part of the book, "Community Workshops," that a more detailed and critical examination of urban renewal and its politics emerges. In chapter 5, titled "Facilitation and/or Manipulation: The Challenges of Taking Part in Fort Worth, Everett, Charlottesville, and Cleveland," Hirsch explains how Halprin and his firm orchestrated participatory planning workshops in order to arrive at conclusions closely matching the firm's preconceived ideas of the design issues and corresponding solutions while at the same time forestalling grassroots resistance by appearing to derive the designs from popular consensus. Thus, by "choreographing" the ideas and movements of a selective cross section of the urban population, Halprin could reconcile the pluralism and awareness of social difference that increasingly marked the tumultuous politics of the 1960s and 1970s with the universalism that was key to his aesthetic ideology. While one might wish that these and similar critical insights had been woven into a more coherent narrative project for the book as a whole, it could be argued that the extensiveness and relative

"open-endedness" of the author's engagement with the Halprin archive provides plentiful fodder to be taken up by future historians.

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Notes

1. Lawrence Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes and the Human Environment* (New York: George Braziller, 1970); Lawrence Halprin and Jim Burns, *Taking Part: A Workshop Approach to Collective Creativity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974).
2. Lawrence Halprin, *A Life Spent Changing Places* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

Timothy Brittain-Catlin

Bleak Houses: Disappointment and Failure in Architecture

Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014, 192 pp., 33 b/w illus. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780262026697; \$17.95 (e-book), ISBN 9780262321235

The argument of *Bleak Houses* is deceptively simple. Architecture past and present is divided into two categories: success and failure (or "winners" and "losers"). Architectural historians and critics have focused their violent attention on success at the expense of narrating failure in a sensitive and subtle way. They should now do the latter, because this will lead to a more nuanced architectural discourse accessible to a broad public and may therefore also lead to more humane, beautiful architecture in the future.

On the surface of it, this seems an appealing, graciously liberal argument, and it would seem that Timothy Brittain-Catlin is in good company. Successive generations of architectural historians and critics, laboring under the burden of the narrow modernisms of their forefathers (and a few foremothers), have struggled in myriad ways to break open the somehow sharply defined boundaries of the canon of architectural history in search of a broader and more inclusive discourse.¹

But *Bleak Houses* is a more complicated, and more frustrating, piece of writing than this. Brittain-Catlin pursues the argument sketched out above through a chaotic mash-up of genres of critical, biographical, and historical writing. One finds here not