Dell Upton
Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, 395 pp., 20 color and 144 b/w illus. $45 (cloth), ISBN 9780300124880

In this “postmetropolitan” age, with most cities in the United States still grappling with the infrastructural, economic, and social problems of the postindustrial, postfordist transition, it is well worth considering what those cities were like before mass industrialization; before, that is, the creative destruction, immigration, wealth, and poverty that industry brought to the city. Those cities of the United States’ relatively new republic were primarily mercantile in nature, and their wealth was garnered from the ships that plied our shores, taking away the grains, hides, timber, cotton, and other natural resources that the United States was supplying to the world, and bringing back goods of all kinds to be consumed. Compared to industrial cities, these mercantile cities were relatively small in area and in population; on the eve of the Civil War, the largest city—New York—contained just over 800,000 people. Ship masts ruled their skylines, and economic activity clustered around their docks, wharves, and warehouses; these were cities that looked as rough and tumble as the mercantile economy that created them.

But, as Dell Upton’s insightful book tells us, we would be missing the mark by a wide margin if we focused only on the purely functional aspects of mercantile cities in the United States. Cities like Philadelphia and New Orleans, the foci of Upton’s book, were rimmed by wharves and docks, yes, but they were also filled with shopping arcades, roads, office buildings, planned pleasure grounds, correctional facilities, cemeteries, and parks—sites not that dissimilar to those of our postindustrial cities. The built forms of these cities, like all urban landscapes, served a variety of purposes, some particular to the socioeconomic conditions of early nineteenth-century America, and some far more universal. Another City provides a wonderful guide to the particularities of the early American republic and to the cities its inhabitants imagined, created, and lived in.

Key to interpreting the urban landscapes of the United States’ mercantile cities is the reader’s understanding of what Upton refers to as the republican “spatial imagination,” a unifying vision of an idealized social order that attempted to express it and reinforce it in the material landscape. In the first half of the nineteenth century, this spatial imagination took the form of the grid. The gridded landscape, of course, was not unique to this time nor to the United States, but its Greek democratic roots, its classical geometry, and its implied egalitarianism made it a particularly powerful symbol of the new Republic. And it was not just the street plans that accorded with the grid; Upton argues that the design of everything—office buildings, consumer arcades, and cemeteries—gave precedence to the orderliness of the grid.

The bulk of Another City is five chapters, each of which takes as its focus an element of the urban landscape that was reshaped by this republican spatial imagination. I was particularly drawn to the chapter on office buildings, whose title, “Permutations of the Pigeonhole: Architecture as Memory,” suggests that this is a different sort of architectural history. Drawing on a range of sources, Upton shows how the growing mercantile economy of antebellum United States necessitated new ways of keeping track of orders, payments, and goods, mostly through the creation of documents that were in desperate need of sorting. The pigeonholed desk was the perfect tool for keeping those documents in place, in effect, expanding a merchant’s memory. It also became a model for designing spaces much larger than desks. For example, Upton shows how the first large office building in the United States, Robert Mill’s New Treasury Building in Washington D.C., was an extension of the idea of using gridded space as a sort of filing system; it was conceived of “as a giant system of pigeonholes” (200). This is fascinating stuff: linking the design of early office buildings in the United States to the growing mercantile economy through the idea of spatial organization as a form of memory work. Upton’s analyses of cemeteries, correctional facilities, and shopping arcades are equally filled with interesting and provocative historical connections that show how the idea of the grid helped citizens of the early republic organize their cities. But where did this urban organizational zeal come from?

Upton argues that the need for orderliness, which was paramount in the early republican city, grew out of the controlled (sometimes uncontrolled) chaos that urban residents confronted in the first decades of the nineteenth century. One of the most innovative and fascinating aspects of this “intellectual history of architecture” (10) is the attention Upton provides to the visceral and sensory aspects of urban life. He refers to these experiences as the “lived city,” and he opens his book with a section that explores the theme in far-reaching detail, analyzing how people looked on the promenade and why they looked at one another, the smells of a hot and humid summer day in New Orleans, the often disruptive sounds of small-scale industry in the alleys behind their houses, and their feelings about mosquitoes swarming around a room. Anyone who has done archival research will know how difficult it is to find information about these seemingly mundane and everyday aspects of urban life, but Upton is creative in his use of sources and his scenarios make the sights, sounds, and smells of the early republican city come to life.

If anything can be thought of as a weakness of the book, it would be the relatively short shrift given to the last section, two chapters exploring the development of and controls over urban public spaces (waterfronts and walkways). It is not that Upton ignores the subtleties here—for example, as in all chapters, he is very aware of the gendered and racialized aspects of public/private space and urban landscapes—but this last section comes as a bit of a letdown after the richness and intricacies of the first two sections. My disappointment could also have been shaped by the degree to which issues concerning access to public space, the privatization of urban space, and rights to the city are the topics du jour in academic and urban policy/planning circles. I think that some
engagement with these contemporary discussions would have highlighted both the continuities and the discontinuities between the early republican world and our postmetropolitan one in terms of who controls the city for whose benefit. But perhaps that is a job for scholars of our contemporary urban spaces, who would do well to understand the historical contexts in which American cities began to produce American citizens through contestations, engagements, and all other forms of encounter with others on the streets of the city.

This insightful, rich, and surprisingly entertaining new book should be at the top of their reading lists.

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Cynthia Zaitzevsky
Long Island Landscapes and the Women Who Designed Them

Thaïsa Way
Unbounded Practice: Women and Landscape Architecture in the Early Twentieth Century
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, 288 pp., 10 color and 71 b/w illus. $50 (hardcover), ISBN 978081392808

Women interested in the male-dominated profession of landscape architecture worked hard to establish themselves in the early twentieth century; scholars today must have a similar determination to document their histories. Select repositories contain collections that have allowed for in-depth investigations, as is possible for the work of Beatrix Jones Farrand, Ellen Biddle Shipman, and Marian Cruger Coffin, but more often scholarship is a matter of slow digging followed by the equally slow weaving together of fragments in an attempt to get a sense of the whole. Such work is manifest in these books by Cynthia Zaitzevsky and Thaïsa Way. More than biographies of place, these address the varied educational backgrounds of their subjects, their quest for professional legitimacy, the New Woman and her place in the Progressive Era, and the gender biases that affected her. They introduce the reader to creative, resourceful, fearless professionals—an “army of women landscape architects,” in Farrand’s words—and assess the role of women who shaped the practice.

Fully half of all the gardens laid out on Long Island in the Country Place Era (ca. 1890–1940) were designed by women. This is reason enough to consider the subject, but initially Zaitzevsky questioned the validity of separating their work from that of their male counterparts, for “one cannot tell by looking at a landscape whether it was designed by a woman or man” (7). Ultimately, it became apparent that the landscape architects who are the focus of her study were bound not only by gender but by a set of shared characteristics that included family background, education, financial circumstances, and a “passion for excellence.” The patterns that become evident are not what the reader might expect. For example, most women were privileged but not wealthy, and circumstances forced them to support themselves. Although each had a landscape-related education, there was a wide range in what constituted that education, be it mentoring from a family member or taking courses at MIT. Each subject and, when possible, qualitative biographies and project analyses with a photographic record of their work (e.g., the Lowthorpe School of Landscape Architecture and the Cambridge School) and, later, at a limited number of land-grant and private universities such as Cornell, MIT, and the University of Illinois. An appendix listing projects on Long Island provides a convenient reference, particularly for students new to the field who want a concise introduction to the subject. Copious notes with citations replace a standard bibliography. The outstanding and varied illustrations include reproductions of watercolors, drawings, and tinted glass slides, including Shipman’s perennial planting plan for the Misses Puynt, the Farrand office watercolor of a rose arbor for the Percy Chubb residence, and a photograph of Flanders’ Staffordshire pottery model of the Vincent Astor garden in Port Washington, created for An Exhibition of Landscape Architecture (1932). The large format of the book invites careful scrutiny of the details.

Whereas Zaitzevsky focuses on Long Island, Way looks at some two hundred women practicing across the United States (mostly on the east and west coasts). Like Zaitzevsky, she focuses on the years between ca. 1890 and 1940—bracketing this period with the publication of Mariana Van Rensselaer’s Art Out-of-Doors (1893) and the changes in the profession that began in the 1940s—without reference to this period as the Country Place Era. Her goal is to “redescribe the breadth of practice that, in turn, shaped the emerging praxis” and to read history as we know it “through an alternative lens” (266). In her eight chapters and conclusion she approaches the subject thematically—“Learning a Craft” and “Designing a Social Agenda” are two examples. She challenges assumptions, for example, that landscape was a hobby suited to wealthy women and that practitioners restricted themselves to residential work that was inherently of less importance than public projects. Throughout she provides a narrative that frames the practice of landscape architecture.