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Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities

By Jeffrey Hou

Routledge, 2010

Reviewed by Nicola Szibbo

Jeffrey Hou's collection of catalytic articles provides a critical look into how contemporary social, political, economic and cultural issues are being framed and contested in the public realm today. Insurgent public spaces—spaces of civic contestation and informal activity—are no longer confined to conventional places such as city parks, plazas, community gardens, and other planned or landscaped spaces. The insurgent activities occurring within these spaces now stretch beyond the popular imagination of public protest in the city. Taking on a new challenge, Jeffrey Hou expands and re-defines insurgent public space to include 'self-made' urban spaces, temporary events, and even 'flash mob' spaces, which vary greatly by culture and geography.

As the book's title coyly suggests, insurgent public space is at once spontaneous and radical, yet also planned and progressive. Actions in these public, urban arenas typically have no particular leader or associated bureaucracy but rather they are shaped decisively from the bottom-up through a collective grassroots consensus. Hou observes that guerilla urbanism is fostering "smaller yet grander" public spaces. The book features many case studies demonstrating how marginalized and under-represented groups are now staking claims in the public realm.

Hou presents 20 articles on insurgent actions in public spaces, organized into six chapters based upon a typology of interventions:

- 1) Appropriating,
- 2) Reclaiming,
- 3) Pluralizing,
- 4) Transgressing,
- 5) Uncovering, and
- 6) Contesting.

The first chapter, 'Appropriating', looks at how people tactically use open space and imbue it with new meaning, while the second chapter, 'Reclaiming', looks at how underutilized and oft-abandoned urban spaces have been revived to be newly productive. A chapter on 'Pluralizing' examines how different ethnic groups interpret and transform meaning and function within open space, creating a more heterogeneous spectrum of spatial realities. 'Transgressing' examines how public-private domains of open space have been infringed upon, traversed, and negotiated by groups of people. 'Uncovering' gives examples of public spaces that were reconfigured and rediscovered, through the uncovering and revealing of latent and hidden memories in the urban landscape. The final chapter, 'Contesting', brings to light the struggle for identity and rights within the public realm.

Although Hou's typological organization proves interesting, one wonders if a geographical grouping of the articles from a place-based, contextualized basis would be more insightful and comparative. For example, both James Rojas and Michael Rios investigate cases of Latino Urbanism in the United States. Whereas Rios analyzes the role of Latinos making collective spatial claims in the city through three theoretical frameworks of a) adaptive, b) assertive and c) negotiative spatial production, Rojas chooses to analyze how Latinos have used space in a functional sense, by focusing on Latino mobility, business and home, and use of open space from a cultural, every-day urbanism standpoint. Given the increasingly topical nature of immigration in the United States, a side-by-side pairing or commentary is warranted. Similarly, there are five articles that focus on Taiwan, many of which focus on gender or increasing Southeast Asian immigration. Yung-Teen Annie Chiu's article on the preservation of the Wenminglo brothel in Taipei, Taiwan stands out as an extraordinary case study because it challenged the traditional eligibility for historic landmark status. Chiu's case illustrates the clash of private sites and bodies with public memories, and the challenge to acknowledge geographies of illicit desire.

Hou does utilize place-based comparison to some extent, for instance, three articles from Japan are paired together under the 'transgressing' chapter. This chapter provides rich fodder for understanding Japanese cultural conceptions of private and public space, and the human relations within those spaces. Isami Kinoshita's article capitalizes on the Japanese concept of *gai-roju* (street trees), by introducing the concept of *niwa-roju*—private gardens that embellish and frame the public realm. Inherent in this clever 'play-on-words' is the notion that homeowners can creatively enhance and contribute to the Japanese public streetscape through the design of their private gardens and trees.

The different articles presented vary widely in their journalistic and scholastic integrity. This variety ranges from Caroline Chen's

methodologically robust essay on public spaces appropriated for *Yanggye* dancing in Beijing, to more descriptive, playful pieces, such as Blaine Merker's narrative on Park(ing) Day interventions in San Francisco. Some pieces are more design-oriented and deal directly with the built environment, as exemplified by Erick Villagomez's graphic typology urban residual spaces. However, others are more policy and process-oriented, such as Andrew Pask's critique on public space activism in Vancouver and Toronto. Among this variation is Hou's own piece documenting the community design process that led to the creation of Seattle's night market, a once obscure phenomenon that has become popular in major cities in the Pacific Northwest.

Although the geographic focus of the book covers cases in the United States, Canada, Japan and Taiwan, one of the book's clear shortcomings is that it overemphasizes case studies from the Asia-Pacific region. This over representation of the Asia-Pacific region is likely due to Hou drawing heavily upon a compilation of working papers from the 6th Conference of the Pacific Rim Community Design Network in Quanzhou, China. As a result, the book does not represent a truly global perspective and leads to wondering about the rest of the world. Additional case studies are surely worthy of further investigation in the realm of new insurgent spaces—especially given the recent divisions and dissension spawned by the Occupy movement.

Due to the book's broad range of articles, the book will appeal not only to serious scholars, students and academics, but also to working professionals and citizens whose personal interests touch on the public realm. The discussion on public defiance has broadened to include more people and a more nuanced understanding of public spaces, and Hou's book offers a refreshing, critical glimpse into these acts of spatial resistance.