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A.Harding, ed., Artists in the city: SPACE in ’68 and beyond (London, Space, 2018)

Review by Andy C Pratt, City, University of London

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The relationship of artists to the city has had a rather rough ride in recent years. On one hand the discussion of Florida’s ‘Creative City/Creative Class’ has apparently lauded artists, on the other hand the gentrification that has followed the ‘opening up’ of derelict parts of the city by artists has led to them being priced out of the city. Rather belatedly, Richard Florida has issued his ‘mea culpa’ which just lends support up what many critics have said about his approach especially they way that it has been taken up by urban development agencies, namely that art and culture have been instrumentalised, and artists used as ‘cannon fodder’ for regeneration.

This book is thus a timely reminder of the possibility, and actually existing, alternative relationships that artists may have with the city. Anna Harding (who has been Chief Executive of SPACE since 2005) has done a great job editing a variety of snapshots of the 50 year story of an organisation, and a movement: SPACE. SPACE is an acronym for Space Provision (Artistic Culture and Educational). It was, and is, what it says on the tin: but SPACE is further animated by the idea “that studios could go beyond being sites of individualistic expression” (p55). The narrative written by key figures in SPACE’s history documents its origins in the heady year of 1968, arising as part of the politics of the time. The merging of interests of the Art Information Registry (AIR) and SPACE and in a more minor role the Arts Lab and the AntiUniversity: the key figures were Peter Sedgley and Bridget Riley. The founding project was the transformation of 160,000 sq.ft. of two warehouses in St Katherine’s Dock. This project eventually provided studio space for 170 artists (with more than the same again on waiting lists), and was host to many performances not only by artists but by key musicians of the time.

This initiative at one stroke created a new epicentre for art in the city. Characteristically, we can see how this site, an empty and rotting Ivory warehouse leased by the GLC is now the site of a mini marina, upmarket shops and apartments. However, this was not the usual story: what the artists involved in SPACE achieved, as this book documents, in a lively text and with period photographs, was the creation of an organisation and a model for working art spaces in the city that was sustainable and resilient. The core idea is outlined in Alicia Miller’s chapter ‘Artist-led initiative to Arts charity’ which demonstrates the organisational idea of the artist as trustee, and the artist as advisor: a charity by and for artists. Although initially this was a governance approach, using rented property (albeit at a peppercorn rent) the next big more was to purchase property for the charity. This step took the property ‘out of the property market’ (that is artists were not subject to the same rising rents as in the private sector, or were they subject what were regarded as the unreliable actions of local authorities who generally didn’t understand this way of working). The Arts Council

was involved and supportive of the activities, but as Ana Took notes in a chapter with a great title ('Joining a struggle, not a mailing list'), the political activities about women rights, and the politics of race and representation, including an Artist's Union, and an 'Artists' Council' (NOT the Arts Council) highlights the vibrant political engagement.

I have mentioned the common trope of gentrification that haunts artists, and one way in which SPACE created a model (subsequently copied around the world) of art space provision by and for artists (currently SPACE has 17 studio complex buildings in London; another provider uses a similar model, ACME). The question remains: what is the relationship of artists to the community? SPACE was not an organisation to deny this, but confronted it head on, as noted by the chapter by Larne Abse Gorarty. She highlights the pioneering work of Martha Rosler in New York who turned the question into an art work: "If you lived here…". Rosler's thesis wonderfully elaborated in the archly titled book 'Culture Class' (Rosler 2013). Her practice was one of "working alongside residents, activists and artists dealing with homelessness, public space and regeneration".(p180-1)

Chapters by Mel Dodd and by Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt document the contemporary situation of artists in the city. The problem has not gone away, there are more artists, and there are more studio spaces: but, there are not enough spaces, and prices are rocketing. Moreover, the internal contradictions of government agencies often leave artists caught in-between, and not regarded as residents. The long struggle over the London Olympic site and the fate of the artists in Hackney Wick is emblematic, as was the ACME space in Carpenter's Road (now Stratford waterfront tin he projected site for new cultural and education institutions such as London College of Fashion, UCL, the V and A, the BBC, etc.). The irony is at some times exquisite: real artists working in and as part of the community being evicted to make way for a new cultural district which will regenerate the community (and struggles to connect to them).

What this book illustrates is that we need to reaffirm the 'right to the city' of artists: it is not simply artists AND the city, but artists IN the city. As SPACE the authors discuss early on, in an avant la lettre nod to contemporary performativity theory, the space allowed the development of a wider definition of art as performance and the active definition of space- 'the capture of space', and working out the 'terms of our presence' (p53) in the city. All in all this collection presents a refreshing 'reality check' for politicians and policy makers to respect artists for what they do, and to support them in those actions (even if it means just letting them get on with it).

References

Rosler. M (2013) Culture class, Sternberg Press, Berlin