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Book Review: Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change, and the Modern Metropolis

Delano Greenidge-Copprue

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Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change, and the Modern Metropolis. Edited by Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach. 2002. London: Routledge. 316 pp. Photographs, illustrations, bibliography and index are included. \$39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Delano Greenidge-Copprue⁷

*The mother art is architecture. Without an architecture
of our own we have no soul of our own civilization.*

--Frank Lloyd Wright

This anthology considers the idea of utopia, from Plato's Republic to Cyberspace, in terms of gender, specifically the notion of the body politic and the politics of the body. One of the fundamental principles of utopia is that it is an imagined space that includes and excludes certain bodies. But, exactly how does this process of inclusion and exclusion work, and what can gender studies teach us about art and architecture?

One of the chief questions *Embodied Utopias* investigates is how gender roles are determined by utopian visions and architectural spaces. The fine introduction by the editors and the fifteen accompanying essays analyze the relationship between the metropolis, gender, and social change. The findings and the arguments are often startling. In particular, this anthology focuses on modern architecture of the twentieth century. With its proliferation of wars and imperialism, the twentieth century offers us useful terrain for thinking about the relationship between the politics we preach and the buildings we build. To this end, *Embodied Utopias* deals with reform as well, as some attention is given to the nineteenth-century reform movements and the utopian experiments in the American context.

The range of discussion is international in scope, exploring such metropolises as Washington (DC), Hanoi (Vietnam), Tysons Corner (Virginia), and Bangkok (Thailand). As a result, we witness in Bangkok, for example, the difference between the Thai and Western concepts of "face." With its comparative analyses, this collection helps us to explore how the roles of men and women are shaped in urban spaces, and suburbia. Along the way, the collection provides useful meditations on postmodern cities, cities where there is no time, but timelessness and nostalgia, such as Disney's Celebration, personal cities that are designed to be experienced from your car, such as Tysons Corner, and even invisible cities, spaces that exist in alleys and behind the faces of public buildings.

Scholars of gender and art history will be fascinated by the discussion of Le Corbusier, particularly his views of architecture and design as purely "masculine" and everything else as "feminine." Scholars of gender and post-World War I Europe will be interested in the feminization of Berlin. Students of reform in the United States will find great interest in reading the discussion of Jane Addams' Hull House Settlement. Americanists will be shocked into recognition when reading about the Mall of Washington, DC and the "building" of American citizens in the image of white bourgeois males. This project of rebuilding the nation's capitol, a supposed utopia, brought with it

⁷ Delano Greenidge-Copprue is a Humanities Professor, Manhattan School of Music.

the displacement and alienation of thousands who did not fit within the ideal image of the body politic, creating dystopic chords within the nation's First City.

This study stretches across disciplines--anthropology, literary study, art and art history, along with social work and social history, just to name a few. The result of this interdisciplinarity is an anthology that meaningfully explores how we view the world and ourselves, bodies bound by space and time. Moving from essay to essay, this anthology alters the way we see, read, think, and experience the world. Each argument raises evocative, authentic questions honestly traced out, with no critical sleight of hand. The essays critically analyze such concepts as urban, suburban, and pan-urban in terms of gender, ranging from the inner city and shelters to Disney's utopia of Celebration to the dystopias that accompany such settlements. The collection also considers how late capitalism brought with it urban design that we think of as postmodern, resulting in disembodied architecture.

The editors and essayists have taken on the task of locating the connection between gender, the metropolis, and social change. To this end, they have done a fine job. Each essay builds upon the next, stripping away the layers of hidden meaning behind urban design and architecture. The essays as a whole never settle for easy formulations. While the collection is called "embodied utopias," the anthology concludes with a section on haunting and cyberspace, a section that disrupts the claims made earlier that there has never existed a utopia that has been "embodied" because urban design includes and excludes. As a result, such classic studies like Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* come into play to help us understand how architecture works to include and to exclude, and cities create centers of inclusion and edges of exclusion. The great strength of this anthology is its scope, ranging from the United States to Europe to Asia, showing us how architectural motifs resurface in different contexts with different meanings.

There is much to praise in this collection by Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach, including the wide range of contributors bridging the humanities and the social sciences, the abundant illustrations, and the bibliography that invites scholars to continue to read beyond this anthology. Scholars will feel encouraged to design courses that put some of the works cited here into dialogue, in lectures and seminars on college campuses, and perhaps in advanced placement classes on the secondary school level. These essays are useful to any scholar or teacher interested in architecture, the visual arts, art history, anthropology, literary study, cultural study, urban planning, public policy, women's studies, gender, popular culture, modernism, postmodernism and history. Any classroom that explores the idea of modernity and cities would benefit profoundly from this collection, especially its treatment of gender and space.

Like all good works of criticism, this collection requires us to rethink our ideas about utopia, even to go so far as the disavowal of the need for a utopia. The foundation of this collection lies in the writings of Plato and Sir Thomas More, and the roots of western thinking about utopia, meaning both "no place" and *eutopia*, meaning "happy place." And this foundation is constantly questioned. One of the chief contradictions of the phrase "embodied utopia" is that it does not exist because bodies are always excluded, marginalized, alienated. After all, the rupture between buildings and bodies create the dystopias that necessarily accompany our so-called utopias.

As the focus of this collection is social change, there remains a healthy skepticism about the idea of creating utopias, of enclosing a plot of land and people, in the first place.