

Arnold, Dana: *Re-presenting the Metropolis. Architecture, Urban Experience and Social Life in London 1800-1840*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2000. ISBN: 1-84014-232-4; 172 S.

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When Heinrich Heine enlarged upon his experience of London in his „English Fragments“ written in 1830, he could fall back upon a wealth of metaphors already firmly established to describe the encounter with the first city in the world. Heine spoke of the crowds, of the dynamic of street life, of the near impossibility of the flâneur to keep his calm standing or moving in this surging sea of people rushing hither and thither, commented on the West End with its broad avenues and houses as big as palaces. He particularly noted the way shop windows competed to catch the eye of passers-by to a display of goods, invitingly arranged, shining brightly in a light artificially produced. And he did not forget to mention the juxtaposition of poverty and crime with abundance and wealth. The senses recorded, giving rise to a succession of feelings of a most heterogeneous nature: amazement, pleasure, awe, annoyance, anxiety, fatigue, feelings of distance, isolation, alienation. Heine was reading and interpreting the city, his writings invited readers to follow his interpretation.

The sensual - mostly visual - and emotional experience of the metropolis, its transformations during a period of rapid growth when London emerged as the heart of the Empire and the first modern metropolis provide the background to this study. It is not yet another work of literary criticism, but rather the architectural historian's attempt to understand the city as something more than a collection of buildings, streets, parks, to read it as a representation of an imagined community, as an expression of different kinds identities relating to class, nationhood and gender. Dana Arnold finds her „texts“ in the self-same buildings and streets, or rather in a careful selection of those indicative of the evolution of an urban self-consciousness. How did urban planning, the ways in which the infrastructure and architecture of London changed

in the first decades of the nineteenth century reflect this evolution? With the initiators of major architectural changes in mind the book cannot encompass the whole spectrum of society, and it does well to restrict its point of view to one particular social group. Choosing the urban (upper) middle class has several advantages, not the least of which is to give the book a focus guiding author - and reader - to some new insights.

Drawing on guidebooks, Parliamentary Reports and Enquiries, comments written by contemporary commentators, literary references to the city and, of course, the layout of certain archetypal buildings Arnold covers various aspects of this process that are to fit together like parts of the larger picture. The reader of this book is taken on a number of thematic walks, each offering interpretations of some section of the city's physical reality, some response to it or the „feel of the city“:

- (1) With the bird's eye view of the city from atop St. Paul's Cathedral contemporaries felt they could take in all at a single glance. What else did they set their eyes on but the centre of the country and of the rest of the Empire. To the mostly middle class visitors the panoramic picture of the Colosseum (Regent's Park) presented the same view - unspoilt by rain or fog - and imparting a feeling of mastery or cultural empowerment.
- (2) In the early nineteenth century walking the streets turned into a fashion. Hundreds of thousands of Londoners and visitors brushing each others shoulders on the public promenades in Hyde Park or Kensington Palace Gardens on a fine day. A new public persona with an existence in the crowd but not of it, the flâneur or flâneuse, transformed the experience of street life in the modern metropolis. At the same time, a generous layout of streets, commodious access to the city's parts and from there into the country acquired a new importance.
- (3) When, after Waterloo, London came to be perceived of as the essential location for the national identity, the urban landscape, punctuated with new buildings and monuments as representations of authority and national unity, was turned into an effective instrument to create and enhance nationalist feeling. To the urban middle class, in particular, the city began to convey a strong

sense of belonging. (4) The social and political landscape was changed when the Reform Act of 1832 integrated part of the middle classes into the power structures hitherto reserved for the aristocracy. So were architecture and urban planning, social rituals and cultural practices: all of them signifiers of power in the metropolis, which guidebooks then depicted as the „rational city“. (5) The urban villa, symbol of wealth, status and social aspiration, lured the wealthy middle class, who had fled into the suburbs, back to the city. To tempt them successfully it needed a division of the social classes as well as an architectural style that would effectively establish bourgeois authority. The urban villa and perhaps even more so the buildings of New Street, later to be called Regent Street, fulfilled those requirements, documenting the presence and self-consciousness of the urban middle class for everyone to see. They were built in a style which appropriated the aesthetic vocabulary of antiquity and combined it with a new syntax to create an expressive visual language - the style of the eighteenth-century country house transferred to the city by the urban bourgeoisie. (6) In the emerging consumer society, new classes of society could partake in the increasingly important social activity of acquisition and display. With the opening up of more and more shops, showrooms of manufacturers, museums and galleries, the nature of urban experience gained yet another new facet. The notion of cultural hegemony as well as national superiority was reinforced, particularly with those in the fore of this activity.

Following these „thematic walks“ the reader of this study will get a competently guided tour through the some of the city's developments between 1800 and 1840 that made London the physical and mental home for the urban middle class. However, he or she will neither get a complete tour nor, having finished it, possess more than pieces of a mosaic. And Dana Arnold does well to leave it at that, since the fundamental question - what is London? - eludes the simple answer.

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