Miles Orvell & Klaus Benesch, ed. *Rethinking the American City: An International Dialogue*. **Series in Architecture, Technology and Culture. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-8122-4561-5.**

This book consists of a set of essays on the theme of urban studies by American and European humanist scholars. The essays are based on lectures given at symposium; each essay is followed by discussions among the participants. The discussions were recorded and transcribed so that in effect the reader receives an account of the symposium. This has the benefit of sharpening ideas and also bringing the perspectives of the writers into juxtaposition—a useful tool when the topics of the essays range widely by subject, encompassing many subtopics of urban studies, including contributions from technology and culture, media studies, art and architecture, landscape studies, philosophy, environmental studies, and literary criticism. Urban studies is a growing interdisciplinary field that has been increasingly shaped by geographers, landscape ecologists, and urban planners. This book avoids the jargon and narrow specializations of these fields to raise perhaps the central question that is driving interest in cities today: can the city be understood as a laboratory for the creation of a "socially and ecologically sustainable form of communal living" (xii) in the 21st century? But for our purposes as Americanists, the question is rather more specific: can the book successfully bring together urban studies and American Studies? To what extent is this book a contribution to the study of the American city and to what extent is the city important to the study of America?

Even though the book is a useful and interesting contribution in an American Studies context, one has to draw inferences to see that context. After all, the essays included here, like much cultural studies today, are transnational in scope. Alfred Stieglitz's photograph "City of Ambition" demonstrates a modernist "infatuation" with the tall building that is now experienced "on a global scale" (Lubin, "Aesthetic Space," 101). Electronically mediated culture—now the "smart" phone—has reinscribed urban geographies by "geo-tagging" creating areas of interest in particular places within the city; this applies to Tokyo or London as much as to New York (McCollough, Digital City, 169). There are many such examples.

Nonetheless, I can identify two issues that pertain specifically to the question of the American city, which underlie many of the discussions in this book. First, to what extent does urban form (and the continuity of urban

form) matter in describing and understanding the significance of the city? And second, what is the meaning of urban decay, which is so advanced in the United States?

To take the second question first and briefly, there is a lively debate over the significance of the discourse on ruins. They are understood as important in a cultural studies context largely because they are symbols of a postmodern culture's rejection of the "'normative aesthetic orderings' of LeCorbusian [modernist] space" (Orvell, "Ruins," 77). But perhaps another significance is that they invite us to ask questions about the relation between American capitalism and the city. David Nye suggests that urban decay is best linked to the proliferation of "anti-landscapes"—places that have fallen out of use and have now become unlivable. These comments clearly invite consideration of the prospects of American urbanism as a whole—as opposed to the attention given to a few highly successful cities.

The first question I raised, that of urban form, is paramount for urbanists. In the 1960s, the architectural and cultural critic, Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), who actually favored decentered urban areas and regional cities, was nonetheless compelled to remark that American cities could be likened to a container that has burst its structure and spilled its contents over a vast peri-urban region. The resulting formlessness and chaos will not lead to the transformation of urban form, as he had hoped, but to its destruction. Such considerations are particularly telling in urban planning discourse, though in different contexts. European planners rightfully insist on distinguishing American versus European urbanisms—where continuity of form is one of a number of issues. In the U.S., various ideals of the European city are held up as models for everything from "green urbanism" to the "new urbanism."

Klaus Benesch's essay on mobility, though placed inconspicuously in the book's middle, is actually central to my reading because he (inferentially) links the question of urban form to modernity's theme of transcendence of place through mobility and the more recent attempts to recover place-ness. For most of the 19th century, he argues, place was understood as an "authentic and unchanging" attribute of nature was contrasted to the placelessness of modern society and the modern city (Benesch, "Mobility," 149), described in these terms by the classical sociologists such as Simmel and Durkheim. The rise of cultural studies in the 20th century has instead historicized and contextualized place as an aspect of both built and natural environments. However, the critical question is the character of these historicizations. My interpretation of Benesch's essay centers on a distinction

between interpretations of modern/postmodern thinking. On the one hand, some critics celebrate the continuously changing and diverse qualities of never-to-be-established senses of place, as opposed to those readings "in which place-ness becomes temporally actualized through living practices and practical knowledge" (Ibid.). To relate this to the issue of urban form (and American urban form in particular), the question is whether there are potential actualizations that can address America's urban problems or whether problem solving is this way is impossible given the fluid qualities of (post)modern culture.

One can organize virtually every essay in the book around this issue, but I would like to mention just two. David Nye's discussion of "Energy," i.e. the effects of new energy regimes on infrastructure and urban development in the 20th century, argues that there are two countervailing forces at work: there is the impulse for change driven by technological innovation. Against change, there is the weight of existing urban form – one might say the hierarchies of existing cities considered over time. While there is a clear preference across national lines for faster and more convenient forms of mobility (the theme of modern placelessness, we might say), Nye points out that American business and civic leaders fast-tracked new energy forms and utilized them to drive the world's greatest rate of urbanization, while European cities were slower to use these technologies and were more concerned about maintaining continuity of urban form. On the other hand, when the latest technologies centered on high speed rail which tend to reinforce central urban places were developed European nations have employed the technology much more rapidly than the Americans. Thus technological change is subject to social and political pressures—and addressing urban and environmental problems today requires a shift in strategy that thus far has not occurred in the U.S. A contrasting point of view is offered by Andrew Ross, writing on the quest to create sustainable cities. Dismissing European "green" cities as mere "environmental showpieces" (Ross, "Sustainability" 32), Ross argues that genuine sustainability is less a matter of urban form or of decisions to harness specific technologies than it is reflective of "whether communities can learn how to renounce self-interested hoarding and practice mutual aid" (Ibid. 34). Such concern with the city as an open-ended process of social innovation may not preclude planners' concerns with urban form, but from Ross's perspective it certainly takes precedence over such concerns. The American city is then less a failure to adequately plan and more like a "grand act of improvisation" (Ibid. 39) in Ross's view.

However, improvisations on social practice are unlikely to address the most significant question raised in this book, viz., will American cities succeed in "actualizing place-ness" such that the nation can begin to address its enormous social and environmental problems?

Mark Luccarelli   University of Oslo

Bill Bryson, *One Summer. America 1927*. London: Doubleday, 2013. 557 pp. ISBN 978-0-385-60828-2.

One Summer. America 1927 celebrates the emerging dominance of America in the fields of popular culture, finance and banking, military power, invention and technology. By 1927, America was producing 80% of the world's films, Henry Ford was beginning to develop the Model A, and the television was invented. With the invention of the 'talkies', claims Bryson, 'American thoughts, American attitudes, American humor and sensibilities' were popularized. 'Peacefully, by accident, and almost unnoticed, America had just taken over the world.' Charles Lindbergh's solo non-stop flight from New York to Paris embodied America's new and growing power and dominance in 1927.

Bryson's study incorporates all the above milestones in America's development, and many more, as it takes the reader on detours to the origins of prohibition, the presidency of Warren G. Harding, baseball, boxing, radio and television, to name but a few. Bryson's study is entertaining not only because of its rich variety of events but also its eccentric and flamboyant characters. The reader learns, for example, that a close associate of President Herbert Hoover observed that in thirty years of employment, he never heard the President laugh; Lindbergh's parents never embraced but shook hands before they went to bed; and Jacob Ruppert, the owner of the New York Yankees, kept a shrine for his mother that contained everything she would need should she return to life.

One Summer. America 1927 also describes a darker side of life, including the forcible sterilization of 60,000 people due to eugenicist theories, growing racial violence, and the fact that two thirds of murders remained unsolved. Bryson describes 1927 as 'The Age of Loathing': 'There may never have been another time in the nation's history when more people disliked more other people from more directions and for less reason.'