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Book Review

DIY Detroit: Making do in a city without services

Kimberly Kinder (2016), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota

238 pages, £53.00 hardback, £15.00 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8166-9709-0

Kimberly Kinder has produced an engaging and clearly written account of her study of four neighbourhoods in Detroit which have contrasting characteristics in terms of population decline, ethnic diversity, household income, strength of community activity, property value and others. Drawing on a student led door-to-door survey of 71 residents and a visual survey of 245 randomly selected vacant plots of land Kinder identified six themes which guided her ethnographic inquiry: seeking new neighbours, protecting vacant homes, repurposing abandonment, domesticating public works and policing home spaces. Data collection included 73 semi-structured interviews with residents, nine interviews with staff of public and not-for profit organisations and participation in 70 community meetings where impromptu conversations were recorded through contemporaneous notes.

Kinder's accounts of the reasons for and the nature of 'self-provisioning', meaning the practical interventions by residents in the physical environments around their homes, make the devastating effects of long term disinvestment tangible. Taking a critical realist, rather than a romanticist, approach to her investigation, Kinder reveals the ingenuity, determination, fears and hopes of those who are trying to live in neighbourhoods that have been abandoned by the market, as well as by citizens with the means to move away and also by the state. Providing a blistering critique of self-serving economic and political elites in the first and final chapters, Kinder links urban theory with findings from her study throughout the book, creating many brilliantly crafted arguments that show with startling clarity the real life implications of information we read about the decline of Detroit. One example is the number of operational street lights reported in the city's statistics: 98% of street lights worked in 1998 while in 2012 this figure was down to 40% (p.124). The lowest number of functioning street lights are now in neighbourhoods with the highest levels of abandonment. Thus the poorest neighbourhoods have to self-provision street lighting by leaving porch lights on throughout the night to make the streets safe and to protect their homes from attack.

Each chapter offers detailed insights into the harsh reality of dealing with the daily threat of arson, drug dealing, 'scrappers' dismantling un-occupied homes and thus rendering them useless, burglary and plain vandalism. Chapter 2 'seeking new neighbours' describes efforts to make people move into vacant homes, either by encouraging friends or family to purchase property where the owner is known or by simply 're-purposing' or 'squatting' them because the owners cannot be traced. Chapter 3 on protecting empty homes provides accounts of residents disguising abandonment by mowing lawns and parking the car outside the abandoned home next door, putting up curtains and leaving porch lights on.

With reference to theory on defending and seizing spaces Kinder explains that residents of Detroit are providing a new perspective on defending and seizing spaces by doing so without legal authority and without resources. Boarding up houses is seen as a last resort, not only because of the expense but also because it signals abandonment, thus making other

properties around it vulnerable to attack by criminals. Dealing with threats from criminals is a theme that runs through all chapters. In 'policing home spaces', chapter 6, Kinder provides examples of resident organised safety patrols challenging anti-social behaviour and giving an official presence on residential streets, referring to design theory of Jane Jacobs' famous studies about the social control of public spaces.

That the poorest residents bear the heaviest burden of abandonment is a point that is made in each chapter in different ways. For example, Kinder shows that a 10% vacancy rate in an affluent neighbourhood of her study equates to 628 empty homes, and that this equates to 1300 empty units in a poorer neighbourhood. As the municipality lacks the resources to tackle this scale of abandonment residents take matters in their own hand. Chapter 3 contains an example of a resident who has been demolishing empty houses in his neighbourhood for 25 years without permission and any input from statutory service providers. Demolishing abandoned property is an effective way to make the neighbourhood safer and as there is no support from public agencies to address the problem residents fill the vacuum left and impose their own spatial authority on abandoned spaces. This includes the establishment of community gardens documented in Chapter 4, which also illustrates how gardening is a means to build community, increase household earnings and generate a sense of safety and hope. In Chapter 5 Kinder shows how abandoned neighbourhoods allow citizens who do not want to join an organisation and work in organised, regular ways can make contributions according to their own rules and when it is convenient to them. Examples given include picking litter from public spaces, mowing grass on overgrown plots, or clearing verges and gutters alongside roads. Other actions require more organisation and are usually addressed collectively, for example collecting money to cut down dangerous trees or dealing with fly-tipping which is endemic.

This fascinating, yet gritty, account of life in neighbourhoods suffering from long term decline will surely become one of the seminal studies concerned with urban regeneration and renewal. While there is reference to possible solutions in the opening and final chapters, these will have to be developed in other studies for which Kinder has provided a rigours and methodologically sound account of urban living without public services.

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