



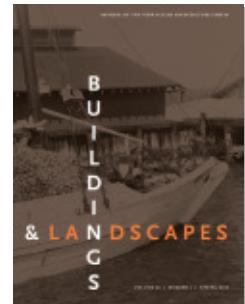
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*The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem* by Brian D. Goldstein (review)

Marisa Angell Brown

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American neighborhoods where the majority of *Detroit Is No Dry Bones* is sited.

As with most of Vergara's projects, the preponderance of the book's photographs is trained on the built landscape, comprising a sort of proto-Google Street View database that Vergara began when Google's Sergey Brin and Larry Page were still in high school. (Because Vergara often photographs from atop a car to get a new perspective, the visual similarity can be uncanny.) In a case of art imitating life imitating art, the technology is working its way into Vergara's process, which he credits as another tool to observe change. Even when he is not in Detroit, he is able to "take frequent time-travel trips through the streets using Google Street View investigating changes and collecting images" that allow him to refine his investigations in a "continuous loop" of physical and virtual visits, augmented by internet searches and phone calls to numbers he sees on the sides of buildings [2].

Although the book reveals many signs of development, it also demonstrates that millions of dollars spent on demolitions have wrought countless derelict lots and a city where unequal development has refocused attention on the politics of racial and class segregation. These observations are refined through Vergara's persistent documentation of folk signs, novel businesses, and urban innovations. Groupings such as these form the core of the book. While he includes public art projects by celebrated Detroit artists like Tyree Guyton and Olayami Dabls, much of the book features work by the uncelebrated and anonymous artists who produce the city's hand-painted business signs, murals of African American leaders, and illustrated plywood panels that cover the windows of the city's abandoned buildings. Special attention is also paid to billboards, especially those offering public service announcements. Vergara has long been interested in outdoor advertising in communities where few commercial advertisers will introduce major campaigns. Against the backdrop of moralizing

PSAs encouraging drug testing and family planning, Vergara includes startling Crime Stoppers billboards that feature a photograph of a murder victim and the charge, "You know who killed me," along with a number to call to report crime tips.

One of the strongest sections of the book—and one that may be of particular interest to readers of this journal—is Vergara's attention to a "kind of fantasy architecture" made possible by new building materials that allow architects and builders (and others) to transform the simple profiles of small churches, Detroit's unique Coney Island hot dog restaurants, and strip clubs into new "ornamental forms" (237), with bold columns, waving roofs, and dramatic curves. These augmentations are exuberantly painted and illuminated by now-inexpensive LED lighting, further distinguishing the buildings from the early twentieth-century structures surrounding them. In sections like this one, Vergara is at his best: organizing the city, revealing new features of the built environment, and linking materiality to time, inequality, and the historical influences of each in the present.

*Detroit Is No Dry Bones* is, by design, not the most spectacular book on Detroit, nor is it the most comprehensive; instead, the monograph elaborates Vergara's deep investigation of the past and present of Detroit through its built environment. It retains the simultaneous flaws and strengths of all his work: his directness, his complicated relationship with ruins. But as the latest contribution to the visual ethnography of Detroit, it is an outlier. It is not a thin (or thick!) book of "ruin porn." It is more in-depth, more anchored, more real than other work by outsiders of the last ten years. It refines our vision of Detroit, and through it, the twenty-first-century U.S. city.

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#### Brian D. Goldstein

*The Roots of Urban Renaissance:  
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383 pages, 39 black-and-white illustrations, and 1 map.

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Review by Marisa Angell Brown

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It is starting to seem as though the nineties killed the sixties rather than the eighties. Emerging scholarship on the so-called pragmatic compromises made by the left at the end of the millennium on many fronts, especially in our criminal justice system, is illuminating the creep of neoliberalism—and revealing that many of the central actors in this trajectory often felt themselves to be heirs to sixties idealism. Brian Goldstein's *The Roots of Urban Renaissance* contributes substantially to this emerging history. It is also a model for architectural and urban historians who seek to understand the complex relationship between our built environment and its social, political, and economic contexts.

The book focuses on citizen-led urban renewal efforts in Harlem in the 1960s and 1970s, which included occupation of spaces slated for redevelopment, squatting, and urban homesteading, and the gradual unraveling of these "urban visions" (8) by the year 2000. Its scope is ambitious. Goldstein bookends the study with a pair of projects that highlight the profound ideological changes that he charts in this forty-year span. The first is a series of designs proposed by the activist group the Architects' Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH) in 1966. Created with community input, the proposals suggested targeted rehabilitation as opposed to "slum clearance," so that residents could remain in their neighborhoods. The book ends with the construction of the Harlem U.S.A. shopping mall in 2000 and the Harlem Center

mixed-use retail/office building in 2002, both on 125th Street. To Goldstein, these projects signify the ascendancy of market-centered neoliberal ideology that Harlem and New York City political and social leaders embraced in the 1990s and early 2000s, and represents a “total eclipse of the radical ideal that the Architects Renewal Committee” had fought for (241).

Chapter 1 tells the story of the founding and early years of ARCH, a fascinating and little-known “design activism” (18) organization established by a young white architect, C. Richard Hatch, in 1964 to assist Harlem residents to produce their own urban renewal plans to counter the slum clearance efforts of the Robert Moses years. Chapter 2 charts the evolution of the organization through the late 1960s as Hatch was replaced by African American architect Max Bond Jr. in 1967, resulting in the addition of more African American board members with deep roots in the community, a stronger position in favor of community control and input, and a more confrontational stance toward outside forces, including Columbia University and municipal offices charged with urban development in Harlem.

These chapters reveal a wealth of primary research, including Goldstein’s interview with Hatch in 2010, and the story of Bond’s program to train black and Puerto Rican youth in the design fields through a summer program called Architecture in the Neighborhoods. At that time, ARCH counted “only 14 black architects in the states of New York and New Jersey combined” (71). These chapters show the extent to which architecture was a lightning rod for debates about race and power—a fact that may be widely accepted but that has been studied too little. Goldstein does an exemplary job of describing Bond’s moving calls for a “black aesthetic” in architecture reflective of black values and black culture, and the book includes illustrations of several ARCH renderings from 1968 that propose an “African museum” and “soul

food garden,” and show Harlemites—some raising their fists to signal support for Black Power, others dressed in dashikis—making these public spaces their own. Discussion of these schemes makes a welcome addition to the literature. Urban histories and sociological studies of this era tend to reference architecture without grappling with the important ways in which design participated in these debates.

One critique I had of these chapters is that, to my eyes, ARCH’s proposals do not match Bond’s rhetoric: to the contrary, the plans he helped generate appear to embody the tradition of modernist planning principles then in vogue with establishment architects and planners. Goldstein does not comment on this discrepancy. Nor does he discuss the wider context of architects and landscape architects in this period whose work also engaged the knotty question of what architecture informed by a “black aesthetic” might look like. What design vocabulary would this architecture deploy, and who was the black public that architects, sociologists, political scientists, the mass media and mass culture imagined? Did a “black aesthetic” require that the designers be black, or did non-black architects have a place in defining this new body of work? These are questions that were asked at the time, and these chapters would have benefited from discussion of them.

The four chapters that follow chart the gradual rise of a neoliberal ideology that favored entrusting the private market with the economic and social development of Harlem. Chapter 3 describes the rise of community development corporations in the 1970s, which were established to enhance community control by ensuring that wealth and property were kept in the hands of local residents, but by the mid- to late 1970s had increasingly bought into a “privatized vision of the future” (110). Chapter 4 relates the short-lived efforts of Harlem community organizers, partly under the leadership of a youth gang called the Renegades, to rehabilitate and inhabit abandoned

tenements, sometimes illegally, but often with the consent of the city. The history of this idealistic and effective movement (Goldstein’s research here is incredibly thorough, and includes photographs of some of the rehabilitation projects in process, which are invaluable) contributes greatly to our expanding understanding of the ideals and achievements of the squatting and urban homesteading communities during this time in New York City. Chapter 5 shows that religious organizations and community development corporations took the lead in rehabilitating Harlem housing stock beginning in the mid-1980s but that a decade later they began to move toward a more pragmatic, less idealistic approach as they embraced income diversity and middle-class gentrification as central to their mission. By the late 1990s, the deck was stacked, and in chapter 6 Goldstein details the demise of radical ideas about self-rule and Black Power in favor of commercial development.

Would that many of our urban neighborhoods have a history like that Goldstein has given Harlem in this period. We live in an apocalyptic time, as we come to terms with the damage we have wrought on the natural world, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the sense that there is little room to right the wrongs of global capitalism. Goldstein’s book, depressing to some as the last few chapters may be, shows us how this devolution took place—gradually, and often led by people who believed they were doing the right thing for their community. It makes one wonder how our own era will be understood by historians thirty years in the future.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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