



Book Reviews

Places of Nature in Ecologies of Urbanism *Anne Rademacher and K Sivaramakrishnan (eds)*. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2017, pp. xi +255 (ISBN 978-988-8930-60-1).

As the title suggests, the book expands the editors' concept of 'ecologies of urbanism', developed in a previous volume (Rademacher & Sivaramakrishnan, 2013), also published by Hong Kong University Press. The editors state that the aims of the book are to: 'refine our understanding of when, how, and why nature is "brought back in" to specific cities in Asia' (p. 11); chart the changing relationships between the natural and social; and understand the political practices shaping urban space and resource distribution. At first glance, the reader may ask what differentiates ecologies of urbanism from existing urban political ecology approaches? For instance, Acciavatti's chapter on the history of tube well development in Northern India seems to integrate well with political ecology studies examining the role of water infrastructure in urban development and the social inequalities bound up with such projects (e.g. Swyngedouw, 2015). In this sense, one can also question what new theoretical advancements are gained through the ecologies of urbanism approach. However, Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan argue that the intention is to add a more humanistic focus on the role of sensory experience, religious attachment and subjectivities in shaping urban natures, which are not typically the focus of urban political ecology approaches. They argue that such a focus allows us to form a different perspective on how and why urban change occurs, and the roles that place, culture and 'nature' play to achieve this.

To this end, there are some novel contributions to the volume. For example, Toland's innovative chapter on Hong Kong's urban transformation since the 1980s asks what urban ecologies might look like if we take into account the projected, speculated and imagined infrastructural plans of the past. Even though many of these schemes were not realized for various reasons, he argues that they still allow us a glimpse of the 'infrastructural imaginaries' that continue to shape these urban places. Importantly, it focuses on the economic and political strategies that are mobilized through the transformation of the local landscape into a more 'desirable' form. On the other hand, Landy's study of leopard populations within Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park makes a potentially valuable contribution to literature on 'more than human' political ecologies, but this potential is unfortunately not fully realized. For example, the fact that animals have agency (e.g. their refusal to stay within the prescribed boundaries set by humans, or in shaping urban policy) has already been well documented (e.g. Dempsey, 2010). Moreover, it echoes many of the existing criticisms of protected areas, such as the privileging of animals over people, and that the management of such spaces are contested.

One valuable aspect of this book is its interdisciplinary approach to studying ecologies of urbanism, and the socio-cultural, historical and biophysical processes bound up in making urban natures. The book could have gone deeper, however, by including a contribution from environmental sciences or urban/landscape ecology, which could have provided a more holistic (and literal) understanding of the *ecologies* of urbanism. The editors did make an attempt of this by reviewing other studies on urban ecological research, but integrating such approaches to the volume would have aided the book's

stated goal of ‘joining studies of urban biophysical patterns of change with sophisticated studies of social context and processes’ (p. 7).

One disappointment with the book was the lack of a conclusion to tie together the diverse insights assembled throughout the volume. This is especially important due to the seemingly eclectic topics covered in the collection, ranging from eco-socialism and ‘green-city’ making in Vietnam, to animal-sculptures in Delhi, and stream restoration in Northern India. While this overview was attempted in the introduction, it would have been useful to have a summary of the arguments advanced, and remaining research to be done in achieving the books ambitions. This omission left me wondering what the implications of the book as a whole are for tackling the serious urban problems outlined in the introduction. Secondly, though the editors state in the Preface that the purpose of the book is to broaden the scope of their previous collection on *Ecologies of Urbanism in India* (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan, 2013) by including a greater diversity of Asian cases, most of the chapters in this book still focus on Indian cities (6 of 9). This is especially perplexing given that the editors state in the introduction that ‘most Asian urbanization has been driven by China and India’ (p. 2), yet, there are no cases from mainland China. While the editors acknowledge this omission, claiming that they were more focused on scale rather than geopolitical boundaries, the book still reads as a mere extension of the initial volume. As such, I would have liked to see more East Asian cases, which would allow the book to better reach its aim of capturing the geographically variegated forms of place making bound up with the (re)imagining of Asia’s possible futures.

Nonetheless, there are several thought-provoking and innovative chapters contained within the book, and it does embark on an important intellectual project of charting the role of place-specific physical environments in shaping people’s experience of the urban environment; as well as the potential social and political interventions that may emerge in the assemblage of more sustainable urban futures. The collection can thus make an important contribution to literature on urban natures and urban political ecology, and is therefore important reading for scholars in urban and environmental studies, environmental history, human geography, and related disciplines.

Reference

- Dempsey J (2010) Tracking grizzly bears in British Columbia’s environmental politics. *Environment and Planning A* **42** (5), 1138–56.
- Rademacher A, Sivaramakrishnan K (2013) *Ecologies of Urbanism in India: Metropolitan Civility and Sustainability*. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong.
- Swyngedouw E (2015) *Liquid power: water and contested modernities in Spain, 1898-2010. Urban and industrial environments*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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The South China Sea Dispute: Navigating Diplomatic and Strategic Tensions

Ian Storey and Cheng-Yi Lin (eds). ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2016, pp. xii + 307 (ISBN 978-981-4695-55-8).

This volume is a useful, concise resource for the keen student of international relations who are beginners into the inquiry about the South China Sea (SCS) disputes. The