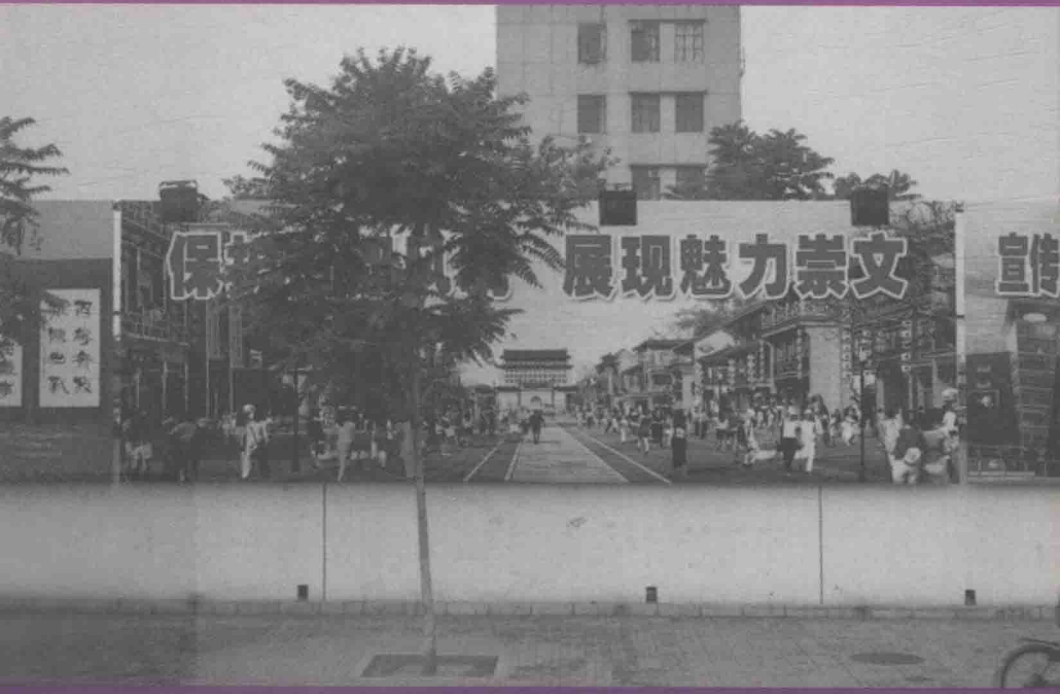
URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY SERIES

ASHGATE

Seeing Cities Change

Local Culture and Class

Jerome Krase



Seeing Cities Change

Local Culture and Class

JEROME KRASE
City University of New York, USA

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East
Union Road
Farnham
Surrey, GU9 7PT
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington
VT 05401–4405
USA

www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Krase, Jerome.
Seeing cities change : local culture and class. – (Urban anthropology)
1. Urban ecology (Sociology) 2. Visual sociology. 3. Social change. 4. Streetscapes (Urban design)–Social aspects. 5. Ethnic neighborhoods–Case studies.
I. Title II. Series
307.3'16-dc22

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Krase, Jerome.
Seeing cities change : local culture and class / by Jerome Krase.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4094-2878-7 (hbk. : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4094-2879-4 (ebook) 1. Ethnic neighborhoods. 2. Cultural pluralism. 3. Ethnic relations. 4. Urban sociology. 5. Social change.
I. Title.
HT221.K73 2011
307.3'362089–dc23

2011031891

ISBN 9781409428787 (hbk)
ISBN 9781409428794 (ebk)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group, UK.

SEEING CITIES CHANGE

Urban Anthropology

Series Editors: Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato,
University of Kent, UK

Urban Anthropology is the first series of its kind to be established by a major academic publisher. Ethnographically global, the series includes original, empirically based works of high analytical and theoretical calibre. All volumes published in the series are peer-reviewed.

The editors encourage submission of sole authored and edited manuscripts that address key issues that have comparative value in the current international academic and political debates. These issues include, but are by no means limited to: the methodological challenges posed by urban field research; the role of kinship, family and social relations; the gap between citizenship and governance; the legitimacy of policy and the law; the relationships between the legal, the semi-legal and the illegal in the economic and political fields; the role of conflicting moralities across the social, cultural and political spectra; the problems raised by internal and international migration; the informal sector of the economy and its complex relationships with the formal sector and the law; the impact of the process of globalization on the local level and the significance of local dynamics in the global context; urban development, sustainability and global restructuring; conflict and competition within and between cities.

Other titles in the series

Citizenship and the Legitimacy of Governance
Anthropology in the Mediterranean Region
Edited by Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato
ISBN 978 0 7546 7401 6

Multiculturalism's Double-Bind
Creating Inclusivity, Cosmopolitanism and Difference
John Nagle
ISBN 978 0 7546 7607 2

Beyond Multiculturalism
Views from Anthropology
Edited by Giuliana B. Prato
ISBN 978 0 7546 7173 2

Acknowledgements

This modest volume is a product of almost four decades of walking around and photographing city neighborhoods all over the world. Therefore, the first to be acknowledged are those who made the travel possible. Foremost among these is Murray Koppelman, who generously endowed professorships at Brooklyn College to recognize faculty for outstanding service to the College and to the Brooklyn community. I received the honor and award in 1999 and he kindly funded subsequent visual expeditions. Support was also given by the Office of the Provost of Brooklyn College, as well as the Professional Staff Congress/City University of New York Travel, and Faculty Research, Awards Programs. Others who provided support for the global research and images presented in this book were, in chronological order, the University of Pisa, the Kosciuszko Foundation and Polish Ministry of National Education, the Government of Shenzhen, the University of Trento, the University of Rome La Sapienzia, the Croatian Commission for UNESCO, The University of Western Australia, the International Council of Museums, Europe and *Centre de Documentations sur les Migrations Humaines*, Berlin, the provincial Government of Puglia, the Cities Programme and Urban Research Centre at the London School of Economics, the Commission on Urban Anthropology of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the Institute for Independent Studies, St Petersburg, the Center for Diversity Studies at the University of Cologne, and the French Community of Belgium. I am grateful to all those who allowed me, a total stranger in most cases, to walk around in their neighborhoods to look, to see, and to try to capture glimpses of the incredible power of ordinary people to change the world by altering its appearance. Although I focus here on rather mundane sights, there is often much more than meets the eye. Changing what is seen in a public space, such as being seen on the streets or in the squares, may not seem like much to the uninformed, but those who have stopped wars and toppled oppressive regimes know exactly what it is that I am really talking, writing, and showing about. It is the power of ordinary people to produce the change that we social scientists so feebly comment upon that incites the imagination of students and professors alike.

As might be expected, many of the ideas crafted and grafted together in this book have been presented elsewhere. Given the scope, from my 1973 dissertation to 2011, it would be unwise to list them all here but they can be found in the References section under Krase, J. Although this has been a solitary effort, ultimately it was my colleagues, such as Timothy Shortell and others in the CUNY Academy of Humanities and Sciences Feliks Gross Seminar on Urban Ethnography, whose advice, even if unrequested and untaken, gave me the sense that the effort was worth the time, and vice versa. Finally for herculean patience I am eternally grateful to my wife Suzanne Nicoletti.

Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

In this introduction the theories and methods that are employed in the subsequent chapters are discussed in the greatest detail. It covers much of the range of approaches that are used to study the city, from Cultural Anthropology and Geography through Urban Sociology and Planning. Some of the central topics are aspects of the Cultural Landscape, such as Vernacular Architecture and Landscapes. Visual Ethnography, with special attention to Visual Sociology, will of course be a major focus. Spatial Semiotics, Symbolic Interactionism and other phenomenological approaches, as well as major classical to contemporary structural theories about urban change, must also be touched upon. Although the book starts out by looking at American cities, they are only a starting point for cross-cultural and comparative urban analysis. *Seeing Cities Change* is therefore an appropriate title to indicate the global scope of the project.

When we pass through urban spaces such as a residential neighborhood we haven't visited before, we are like tourists using our eyes to decipher the clues and cues that loudly and quietly surround us. We might ask ourselves, Is this a safe or a dangerous place? Am I welcome here or should I leave before it is too late? What kind of neighborhood is it? Are the people who live here rich or poor? What is their race, ethnicity, or religion and how (or why) does it matter? Some things are easy to tell on a street, such as whether there are things for sale. Legitimate merchants make it obvious that they are seeking customers with signs that compete for attention, but for the sale of illicit goods, the signs vendors give off are subtler. Yet it seems that for the knowledgeable customer they are in plain view. This reading of the "street signs," so to speak, is not merely an aesthetic exercise. What we see makes a difference in how we respond to the places and the people we encounter in our increasingly complex and changing urban surroundings.

I have chosen here to emphasize and accentuate those theories, methods, or simply ideas that are in one way or another "visual" and to weave them together in a sort of narrative. To start, I would argue that society, and therefore the study of society, is essentially dependent on the visible. Our first experiences of life as "social life" are mostly visible ones, as when we encounter, recognize, and differentiate between people. It has also been consistently argued in the Social Sciences that face-to-face (therefore also eye-to-eye) interactions in primary groups are the building blocks of subsequent social life. True, one might dispute the primacy of the visual and insist that it is the sense of smell that is more primal than sight, but one can hardly imagine complex scent-based sets of social interactions that would evolve into the kind of full-blown societies in which we currently reside. A world based on scent should look different, I suppose.

I think of this book as part of my own yet unfinished "Arcades Project" mimicking Walter Benjamin's attempt to establish a theoretical connection between spaces and society in nineteenth century Paris. There Benjamin tried to reconstruct the social life that was enclosed within the glass- and iron-covered passages that, in a sense, represented the evolving consumer economy. The arcades were constructed in the early part of the century and inadvertently set the stage for the distinctive street life of the period inhabited by the likes of *flâneurs* who strolled them in order to both see and be seen.

Similarly, this much more modest book of my own has a long history that began with taking my first Urban Sociology course as a doctoral student at New York University in 1970. The class was taught by Alan Blum, who convinced me that the way we look at things, such as cities, subtly, but powerfully, influences what it is we think we see. As a result of his intellectual intervention I wrote a dissertation, "The Presentation of Self in Urban Society," that employed various phenomenological, especially Symbolic Interactionist, perspectives to examine the urban world I was simply taking for granted. These, at the time unconventional, ideas helped me to explain why, among other things, the otherwise perfectly "normal" mostly middle-class, but distinctly Afro- and Caribbean American (i.e. "black"), Brooklyn neighborhood in which I lived was considered by outsiders as, for want of better words, a dangerous "slum" or a "ghetto." At that time, the 1960s and 1970s, ordinary people as well as urban experts were convinced that American cities, especially their inner recesses, had only the bleakest of futures. As a result the term "changing neighborhood" became almost in vogue as a code or metaphor for the racial integration of local communities. The growing urban exodus called "White Flight" puzzled me, particularly since, when I looked at the neighborhoods, and the neighbors, what they were fleeing there seemed to be so little to fear.

As today, at that time I didn't spend a great deal of time in the "Ivory Tower" and my work continues today to be informed by social activism. As I delved deeper into my doctoral research I realized that I was becoming more of a participant in, than an observer of, the issue. As a result, I became a pragmatist who felt the need to synthesize theories and meld them with practical work. When I first began teaching urban sociology some three decades ago, the Chicago School of Urban Ecology was offered as the only way to approach the study of the city. As part of the '60s generation, naturally I attacked its politically conservative, Spencerian, implication that the plight of inner-city residents was caused by some "invisible hand," or even worse their own actions. My dissertation attacked this seemingly insensitive determinism from a perspective that combined the more critical approaches of Phenomenology and Symbolic Interactionism. Central to my activist arguments was the work of Erving Goffman (1959), who at the time was considered by the scions of Sociology as anathema. Essentially I tried to show that neighborhoods occupied by nonwhites were stigmatized as such. In turn their discredited appearance limited the moral capital of their local leaders and organizations as they appealed to public and private authorities for social

justice. Practically speaking, I devised and taught dramaturgical methods for "The Presentation of Community in Urban Society" by those stigmatized people living in stigmatized places (Krase 1973, 1977, 1979). About a decade later, leading texts divided the field of urban sociology into various Social Organization, Urban Ecology, and Social Psychology perspectives. Today we see the domination of Political Economic and World Systems approaches in the theoretical debates between proponents of the "New" versus "Old" Urban Sociology, or as described by Flanagan, the culturalists who "explore the cultural, organizational, and social psychological consequences of urban life," and the structuralists who "are concerned with the wider economic and political impact of the city" (1999, 385–98; see also Kleniewski).

Anthropologists and sociologists whose primary approach is visual do not have a monopoly on otherwise visual approaches to urban life and culture. As appropriate, in the chapters that follow visually vivid descriptions of what journalists, poets, and writers have seen on city streets will be called upon to add depth as well as patina to those offered by academics. In his book chapter "The City Observed: The Flaneur in Social Theory," David Frisby announced that, despite Walter Benjamin's own harsh criticisms of the field, he "revealed himself to be … a sociologist" (30). Flanerie is reading visual and written texts that note people as social types in social and spatial contexts. Frisby suggests, as do I, that

> An exploration of the *flaneur* in social theory should therefore turn to an examination of the contributions of those who were not recognized as sociologists at all, such as Benjamin, or those whose work has often been incorporated into the negative caricature of formal sociology, such as Simmel, or those who were installed in sociology's "shirt-sleeved" hall of fame, such as Robert Park, or those whose sociological contribution was seldom even acknowledged in Anglo-American discourse, such as Siegfried Kracauer. (30)

Some have argued that seeing and spatial memory are inseparable, as shown in Alexandra Horowitz's *New York Times* book review of *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* by Joshua Foer (2011) where she notes:

> The art of memory is credited to the ancient Greek poet Simonides, who was able to perfectly recall the scene in a banquet hall moments before the roof collapsed, simply by reviewing it in his mind's eye. The "method of loci" assigns distinctive images to anything one wants to remember, placing the images in familiar rooms or buildings. Recalling, then, becomes a matter of traveling through those locations, or "memory palaces," and noting the images assembled there. This seeming sleight of hand—memorize X in order to remember Y—takes advantage of a simple fact of human cognition: we naturally remember visual images. Take a moment to imagine your own living room; a detailed description of everything in sight is effortless.

If we think of the everyday places in which we live, outside of our living room, the same logic applies, although the accuracy of our visual memory will be challenged of course by the scale and complexity of the larger spatial arrangements. For example, in his classic *The Image of the City* (1960) Kevin Lynch made the perceptions of ordinary people of their own city's places and spaces and their resultant "mental maps" a central concern for urban planners, as well as for environmental psychologists and other social scientists. Lynch saw these maps as a network of "paths," "edges," "districts," "nodes," and "landmarks." Paths are routes through which people move such as sidewalks. Edges are borders that are not paths such as fences or walls. Districts are identifiable parts of city such as neighborhoods. Nodes are focus points of concentrated activities like well-used plazas. Landmarks are objects such as buildings that act as reference points for negotiating the layout of the city (1960, 46–90; see also Sundilson 2011).

I continue to emphasize in my work the sociological *verstehen* (understanding) method pioneered by Max Weber (1947). In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Weber argued that human society is made possible when social actors can imagine themselves in the place of the others with whom they interact, and thereby correctly anticipate the others' behavior. We might think of our own social worlds as dependent on such common, or shared, "text." In my own case, the texts I analyze and write are composed of, and framed by, visual images. I also insist that images just don't sit there; they "do things," they have effects. Regardless of the perspective one takes in studying society, the fact is that urban change takes many forms and is the result of many factors. What I discovered in the course of my work in cities around the globe, is that individual decisions by ordinary city dwellers, as well as those made by powerful public and private authorities, were partly a consequence as well as a cause of images: those in the mind and those on the ground. Therefore I believe that it is necessary to employ a visual approach, in addition to the usual methods and theories, when explaining and describing how cities change racially, ethnically, religiously, and economically as the consequence of powerful social, political, and economic forces. Here we will look at worldwide phenomena such as gentrification as well as the ethnic changes that result from immigration and globalization. For example, it is clear that there is an essential visual element in the early twenty-first-century debates in both Europe and the United States regarding immigration from Moslem countries given the special attention that is given to the style of dress of Moslem women in public spaces and the construction of large places of worship.

Students and practitioners of urban studies are simultaneously blessed and cursed with competing theories and methods for describing the post-modern, post-industrial metropolitan urban scene. But throughout all the theoretical, methodological, and ideological questions characterizing the fields, the central organizing construct for urban studies has consistently been expressed in one form or another as "space." Therefore, explaining how these real and imagined spaces are used, contested, and transformed by different social groups has been a crucial goal. As sciences are described in terms of their ability to produce cumulative

knowledge, obviously something has been sorely needed to tie together so many disparate threads. One may also inadvertently notice how often proponents of competing perspectives on the city and society have echoed each other but without acknowledging the voice of the "other".

Admittedly, weaving a seamless sociological garment is an overly ambitious goal. However, taking into account such things as vernacular landscapes in ethnic (e.g. Italian or Chinese) neighborhoods could provide some continuity from the "Old" urban sciences to the "New," and from the pre- to the postmodern urban scenes. Contemporary urbanologists sometimes suffer from parallax vision. One eye, perhaps on the "right," sees the "natural" spatial form and function of the city as a biological analogy, as did Robert Ezra Park and Ernest W. Burgess. The other eye, perhaps on the "left," sees these same urban places and spaces as commodities, reproductions of power, and circuits of capital à la Manuel Castells, David Harvey, and Henri Lefebvre. Ever since Park and Burgess published their classic research on Chicago that described "how" residential neighborhoods follow a distinct ecological pattern, generations of urban practitioners and theoreticians have been drawing their own community metaphors while simultaneously arguing with each other about "why" they are spatially distributed.

What is a Visual Approach?

Visual approaches to the study of places and spaces in society, especially our cities, are nothing new. Georg Simmel early on established the central role of the visible in theorizing about the complex and constantly changing metropolis in the early part of the twentieth century in Europe. This attention to the visual continues as a tradition in all the urban sciences, if only as a powerful subtext. A century ago Simmel wrote that "[m]odern social life increases in ever growing degree the role of mere visual impression which always characterizes the preponderant part of all sense relationships between man and man, and must place social attitudes and feelings upon an entirely changed basis" ([1908] 1924, 360). This work has also been greatly enhanced by the urban studies of Lyn H. Lofland and the theoretical perspective of Symbolic Interactionism that she employs. Lofland had noted that her fellow interactionists have made significant contributions to knowledge about urban worlds by demonstrating how all sorts of people communicate through the built environment, for example, by the common practice of seeing settlements as symbols (2003, 938–9; see also 1985, 1998). Individuals and groups interact with each other in the city through visual images that effect what people see on the streets. The meanings of what they see however come from a different source—meanings of symbols learned through socialization. Lofland also argued that "the city, because of its size, is the locus of a peculiar social situation; the people found within its boundaries at any given moment know nothing personally about the vast majority of others with whom they share this space." She added that, "city life was made possible by an 'ordering' of the urban populace in terms of appearance

and spatial location such that those within the city could know a great deal about one another by simply looking" (1985, 22). This need to create order is especially true today of the, increasingly transnational, home territories that modern migrants seek to create and modify.

In "History, The City and The Interactionist: Anselm Strauss, City Imagery, and Urban Sociology" (1991), Lofland notes her puzzlement by the apparent lack of significant interactionist contributions to the field of urban sociology despite its roots in the Chicago School. It was especially odd given the broad collection topics on which the "urban" label could be attached. However, she argued, if a more "analytically rigorous" definition of the field was used, it was clear that the interactionist Anselm Strauss played an important role in pointing out the role of urban imagery.

> In approaching the city—the urban settlement form—as a research topic, Strauss eschewed the standard questions of the time. He did not ask whether urban people are necessarily alienated and estranged from community or whether cohesive and integrated neighborhoods could be found. Nor did he ask how the typical division of American cities into "natural areas" came about or how population movements affected land values and patterns of land use. Instead, Strauss approached the city *as* a research topic in a manner that is quintessentially interactionist: he asked about *meaning*. He asked about "what Americans think and have thought of their cities" (1961, viii); he asked about the "symbolic representations of the urban milieu" (Wohl and Strauss 1958). He asked how Americans define the urban situation; how they interpret the kaleidoscope of sights and sounds and smells that is the urban environment. He asked, in sum, about urban imagery. (207)

Most of us think that Visual Sociology is merely using a camera for collecting data in social research, or simply, and more interestingly, illustrating a particular finding that was arrived at by using other, non-visual, methods. Apropos of this last point are the frequent announcements by contemporary textbook authors and publishers calling for photographs to illustrate, or otherwise represent, their written text. Seldom do we see text requested to illustrate a photograph. Not quite to the contrary of this position, Douglas Harper has argued that the field is divided into at least two different types: "Visual Methods," which includes any project where researchers use photography to study social worlds, and "Visual Studies," in which researchers conduct analyses of cultural images. It is in this latter approach that sociologists might explore the semiotics of systems of visual communication. Harper also identified four modes of research: the "scientific," where one categorizes the world and creates data; the "narrative," where the data is structured into accounts; the "reflexive," where data is built from the point of view of their subjects; and the "phenomenological," in which researchers use their own subjective experience as a source of data (1988).

John Grady expanded the scope of the visual perspective on the social with a three part, "Pragmatic Definition" (1996). The first is "'Seeing': how sight and vision help construct social organization and meaning." The second, "Communicating with Icons," looks to how images and imagery can both inform and be used to manage social relations. The third, which I have found most valuable in my own work on vernacular urban landscapes of all sorts, is "Doing Sociology Visually" or "how the techniques of producing and decoding images can be used to empirically investigate social organization, cultural meaning and psychological processes." It is in this last area that the techniques, methodologies and concerns of Visual Sociology are the best known and where the camera and other techniques of representation play crucial roles in the analytic process (14).

Finally, as to the basic foundations of Visual Sociology, Jon Rieger noted that, among many other advantages in research, such as freezing a complex scene or enabling unobtrusive measurement, "[p]hotography is well-suited to the study of social change because of its capacity to record a scene with far greater speed and completeness than could ever be accomplished by a human observer taking notes" (1996: 6). Given the rapidly changing metropolitan landscapes, which in some cases simply whiz by unnoticed by researchers, there is clearly a value in visual methods and techniques. And since, both actually and virtually, neighborhoods are geographically immobile, they are excellent venues for sociological reconnaissance of globalization and de-industrialization. The changing worlds around them become visually apparent on the street scenes inside the neighborhood.

Despite what some people might see as an "innovative" visual approach in this book, it is quite conventional as to social scientific investigation and analysis. Such an approach is not universally held in esteem by leaders in the many fields of visual studies. For example, Sarah Pink sees her own "reflexive" approach as a departure from the "scientific–realist" paradigm, and gives less value to the foundational emphasis on inter-subjectivity and, indeed, reflexivity in the development of the sister disciplines of sociology and anthropology.

Pink's antithesis, if you will, is:

> The approach of those visual sociologists who have aimed to incorporate a visual dimension into an already established methodology based on a "scientific" approach to sociology [here she lists Grady 1996; Prosser 1996; Prosser and Schwartz 1998] does not allow the potential of the visual in ethnography to be realized. Their proposal that visual images should support the project of a scientific sociology suffers from the problems of perspectives like equality feminism: it must subscribe to the dominant discourse in order to be incorporated. The advocates of this conservative strategy are those obliged to prove the value of the visual to a scientific sociology that is dominated by the written word, thus effectively evaluating the worth of images to research on the terms of a sociological agenda that has rejected the significance of visual meanings and the potential of images to represent and generate new types of ethnographic knowledge. (2006, 5–6)

On the other hand, the need to anchor visual work firmly inside a discipline is emphasized by Marcus Banks:

> Visual anthropology is coming to be understood as the study of visible cultural form, regardless of who produced them or why. In one sense this throws open the floodgates—visual anthropologists are those who create film, photography, maps, drawings, diagrams, and those who study film, photography, cinema, television, the plastic arts—and could threaten to swamp the (sub)discipline.
>
> But there are constraints; firstly, the study of the visible cultural forms is only visual anthropology if it is informed by the concerns and understandings of anthropology more generally. If anthropology, defined very crudely, is an exercise in cross-cultural translation and interpretation that seeks to understand other cultural thought and action in its own terms before going on to render these in terms accessible to a (largely) Euro-American audience, if anthropology seeks to mediate the gap between the "big picture" (global capitalism say) and local forms (small-town market trading, say), if anthropology takes long-term participant observation and local language proficiency as axiomatic prerequisites for ethnographic investigation, then visual studies must engage with this if they wish to be taken seriously as visual anthropology. (1998: 11)

Anthony D. King (1996) is neither a Visual Sociologist nor Anthropologist but also speaks of cities as "text" to be read. The ethnic and other kinds of vernacular landscapes that make up a good portion of this book are crucial yet often ignored parts of that urban text. In basic agreement with King, Sharon Zukin noted that the emphasis and interest of many urbanists has been on the geographic battles over access and representations of the urban center. In that regard she wrote, "Visual artifacts of material culture and political economy thus reinforce—or comment on—social structure. By making social rules 'legible' they represent the city" (1966, 44). As a visible sign of decline, for example, Zukin offered that, "In the long run vacant and undervalued space is bound to recede into the vernacular landscapes of the powerless and replaced by a new landscape of power" (49). In his American planning classic, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch introduced notions of "legibility" and "imageability" in order to help understand and to plan for those aspects of the physical environment that comprise mental maps made by ordinary people (1960, 1–13).

David Harvey extensively discussed Henri Lefebvre's "Spatial Practices" to note that those with the power to command and produce space can also reproduce and enhance their own power. It is within the boundaries created by these practices that the local lives of ordinary urban dwellers take place. For Harvey, "Different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways. This elemental fact is often overlooked by those theorists who presume a priori that there is some ideal-typical and universal tendency for all human beings to construct a human community of roughly similar sort, no matter what the political or economic circumstances" (1989, 265). In a related vein, Pierre