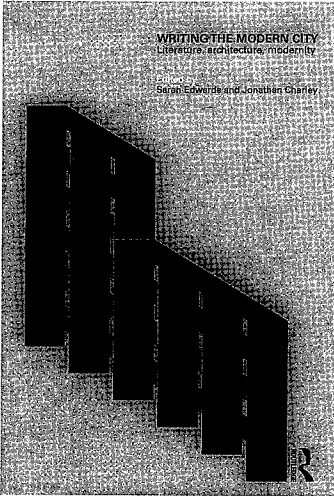


Writing the Modern City: Literature, Architecture, Modernity.
 Edited by Sarah Edwards and Jonathan Charley. New York:
 Routledge, 2012. 240 pp.



With textual roots that range from antiquity's decadent images of Alexandria and Rome to Augustine's eschatological city of God, the city has been a central theme in literature for millennia. Though the spatial turn that first focused literary studies on the geography of narrative is hardly new, the thirteen essays in *Writing the Modern City: Literature, Architecture, Modernity*, edited by Sarah Edwards

and Jonathan Charley, offer a unique perspective insofar as they move beyond literature's intersection with urban space to its intersection with architecture. The volume is divided into three thematic sections: "Memory, Nation, Identity," "Movement, Culture, Genre," and "Narrative, Form, Space." A common thread that runs through the whole is the attempt to articulate the various ways that literature and architecture each embody the experience of modernity.

In "Memory, Nation, Identity," the book begins with the early twentieth century and a consideration of the relationship between the modern city's literary and architectural narratives. The written artifacts addressed include maps, guidebooks and treatises, in addition to more expected genres like the novel and autobiography. In all cases, the authors' arguments are tied to the interplay between textual and architectural discourses. In Brian Ward's chapter, "Poets, Tramps and a Town Planner," for example, it would be expected that the 1909 treatise *Town Planning in Practice* be discussed as a document that was instrumental in creating the popular image of the town planner. It is also hardly surprising that the text was influential in shaping the design of large areas of residential landscape in twentieth-century Britain. More interesting, however, is Ward's argument that the book was significantly informed by a romantic notion of the vagrant inspired by Walt Whitman's figure of the nomadic "great poet," an idea then mobilized to democratize the design processes of municipal planning.

The section's other two essays, by Mark Mukherjee Campbell and Victoria Rosner, shift to India and Rhodesia under British colonial rule. Here colonial identity politics are tied to private interior spaces in ways more complex than may first be imagined. Even if the imposition of British domestic designs on foreign landscapes participated in the loss of

indigenous architecture and memory, the authors argue that it was not a complete erasure. To this end, Rosner examines the conflicted representations of southern Rhodesia in Doris Lessing's autobiographical fiction. The contradictions of British settler culture are drawn out of Lessing's work through an interrogation of how she chose to represent her childhood home. The vernacular architectural form in precolonial Rhodesia consisted of a circular arrangement of multiple round huts. Here, the outside space was just as much a part of the home's living quarters as the huts' interiors, with little distinction between inside and outside. In contrast, newly arrived English colonists were advised to build a homestead dominated by straight lines and a stark distinction between the family's inner domestic space and the unfamiliar land on which it stood.

Once in Rhodesia, Lessing's family quickly constructed a "temporary" house in which they then lived for twenty years. Though the structure was long, rectangular, and "sliced across to create rooms," it was also built using native materials, erected using pole and thatch, and had the crevices of its walls filled with mud (p.81). As a child, Lessing loved the house's organic qualities, while her mother exerted every effort to make the home's interior conform to the norms of her native England. It was thus filled with "silver tea trays, English watercolors, Persian rugs, the classics in their red leather editions . . ." (p.83). Her mother's denial of her environment and inability to reconcile the home's interior with the bush outside is a theme to which Lessing frequently returned. Yet in the end it would seem that it was the colonial legacy which was effaced. Rosner cites a moment from one of Lessing's later texts, *Alfred and Emily*, that recalls a trip to the site of the family's home in the 1980s. The house was long gone, and in its place Lessing found a drunk Zimbabwean who insisted it had never been there at all.

There is much more of value in *Writing the Modern City*. Part II's essays on the particular ways in which the urban is evoked in modern genre fiction — the crime, sci-fi, and dystopian novel — will surely be of interest to the many critics who have recently turned their attention to these popular narratives. Though the individual essays do not quite always work harmoniously to shape the collection into a coherent whole, they nevertheless make the point Charley raises in the volume's first chapter: "There is no work of literature that does not have some spatio-temporal dimension nor any building that doesn't possess a plot" (p.10).

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