Snappy Stories and Boring Thoughts: Urban Studies Today

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Near the end of Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston, a documentary film that I co-produced in 1979, there is a scene shot in the newly opened Fanueil Hall Market that invariably unsettles an audience. A well-dressed young woman looks into the camera and says, "They ought to do this in every city. Just take a run-down area and turn it into the most interesting place you've ever been."

Our emergent yuppie has been set up, of course, in the edit. For what either enrages the audience, if they are from a working class neighborhood, or nervously dismays them if they are of the middle classes, is that her comment follows an extended and tender recollection of Boston's old West End neighborhood. In it we see that this predominantly Italian neighborhood was torn down to make the New Boston, and eventually, Fanueil Market and its adjoining waterfront properties, possible.

Places have meanings for people. It is a constant of our world that often the same place can mean quite different things to different groups of people, and while the symbolic significance of a place may be responsive to distinctly varying needs and uses, the passions engendered may be just as strong. How, then, do we judge what has been lost or gained in the transition, say, from the West
End to the Fanueil Market? Whose use of this space should take precedence? Anyone seeking guidance in addressing questions like these from the three books herein under review will be sadly disappointed by two of them and, hopefully, a little enticed by the third.

*Neighborhoods* is in many ways a comprehensive handbook for neighborhood activists and entrepreneurs. The book tells us that neighborhoods are important places. People know their neighbors... still! People shop there; raise their kids there; buy their homes there; get especially exercised by disorder there. It is true that neighborhoods are hard to define; people tend to identify the space covered by their own personal journeys as the neighborhood... and so consensuses may be hard to arrive at... but then, it's very easy to argue heatedly about the "correct" boundaries of a neighborhood. Yet people certainly share a belief that such a thing exists.

For Howard Hallman, the author of *Neighborhoods*, the subject matter of his book is a "natural phenomena." Accordingly, he only devotes a few chapters to the sociology of the topic, and these are perfunctory at best. That "neighborhoods," or territorial propinquity and co-residence, is the core meaning of community seems so self-evident to the author that little of his attention is exercised by its analytic status.

The reason for his inattention is a cultural and political fact in itself. The last two decades in the United States have witnessed the development of a poignant longing for community that has both coincided with as well as encouraged the development of a number of institutions permised on the notion of neighborhoods as integral communities. These include citizen action organizations; community participation schemes; community-based conflict resolution and dispute settlement processes; non-profit community development corporations, and so on. Hallman is very supportive of these endeavors and has in his own professional work played no small role as a lobbyist. *Neighborhoods* is, thus, not surprisingly, a reasonably complete inventory of the various programs and resources that an aspiring "community professional" may find useful in this line of work. In addition, the book provides occasionally illuminating assessments of the efficacy of, or problems with, one program or another.

If *Neighborhoods* has a central purpose it is to legitimate the legal enfranchisement of neighborhood sized units for political sovereignty of sorts, some revenue collection, and certain types of service delivery. For Mr. Hallman, neighborhoods can and should be integrated more fully and directly into the American governmental system. He makes it clear that the West End would still be with us if neighborhoods were given more power; and that this would be a good thing. Nevertheless, he pays scant attention to the ways in which communities manufacture conflict within themselves; or to the processes by which conflict with "outsiders" can define a community's consciousness. For isn't balkanization as natural a phenomenon as cohesion?

Anthony Cohen would lament the West End, but not for long. The thesis of his *The Symbolic Construction of Community* can be stated simply: