

## **BRAVE NEW NEIGHBORHOODS – THE PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACE**

Margaret Kohn. Routledge, New York, 2004, 232 pages.

In her book *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*, Margaret Kohn<sup>1</sup> suggests that democratic politics are threatened by the disappearance of public space. By *public space*, Kohn means “a place that is owned by the government, accessible to everyone without restriction, and/or fosters communication and interaction...places that facilitate unplanned contacts between people” (11). The book is organized around three themes: privatization and political activity; segregation and public space; and the increasing difficulty of distinguishing public and private spaces. Throughout her work, Kohn uses case law to argue that taking away public space is an attempt to silence political views and ideas often not represented in the “corporate-dominated media.” From colleges and universities to airports, malls, post offices, parks, and ordinary city streets, Kohn forces her readers to think about how the privatization of space closes democratic discourse.

For planners, her critiques of New Urbanism, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and the regulation of homelessness should be of particular interest. Kohn sees New Urbanism as more than an architectural design (126). She challenges the notion of public space in New Urbanist developments as they are in fact privately-owned, and they often restrict access to parks, town squares, and other traditional public spaces from those who live outside the development. The author suggests that BIDs challenge democratic polity in that political influence in BIDs is a direct reflection of property values; they increase the business community’s political influence; and their private or non-profit status enables them to create more prohibitions on civil liberties. In her discussion of homelessness, Kohn takes a different direction in articulating how political and public discourse fades away. She critiques the practice of zoning homeless people out of public view by forcing them into certain areas of town (Los Angeles’s “Skid Row,” for example) and the practice of outlawing homeless behaviors, such as panhandling and begging. Here, Kohn attests that if the homeless are not provided opportunities to come into contact with other people, then “there is no chance that they will convince others to make the social changes necessary to meet [their] needs” (184). Planners often are influential in creating policies to address these issues, like the connection between New Urbanism and HUD’s HOPE VI public housing program, or the quasi public-private entities of BIDs and strategies to end homelessness. Kohn’s work provides useful insights to planners and others into how to assess these topics as they relate to restricting access to public space.

The only drawback of this work is that the author is too theoretical in discussing democracy, religious freedom, and the difference of opinions about how to address homelessness. Readers would benefit from examples of planning or design initiatives that work to preserve public space—something that Kohn omits.

Otherwise, Kohn’s account of the different ways in which the privatization of public space infringes on American notions of democracy is well-crafted, smart, and vital to post-911 conversations that center on questions of democracy. What is particularly enticing about her work is that she challenges those seeking to preserve democracy to think about how restrictions on public spaces narrow our traditional ideas of democracy and how important the judiciary is and will be in determining what limitations we will accept. This book could be useful to many—academics, architects, developers, planners, public officials, special interest groups, legal scholars, and everyday citizens.

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