

**Gordon C.C. Douglas 2018: *The Help-yourself City: Legitimacy and Inequality in DIY Urbanism*. New York: Oxford University Press**

Gordon Douglas's book is a welcome addition to the growing body of work from ethnographers in several fields who are documenting the many unsanctioned uses of property in cities in the United States. Douglas investigates do-it-yourself (DIY) urban design, which he defines as 'small-scale and unauthorized yet intentionally functional and civic-minded physical interventions aimed at "improving" the urban streetscape in forms analogous to or inspired by official efforts' (p. 26). Douglas carried out his ethnographic research over five years in numerous cities, conducting over 110 interviews, observing as a participant, and touring installations and their neighbourhoods. His work adds considerable nuance and complexity to the understanding of such interventions in American cities.

The book's chapters investigate the political economy of DIY urban design, the role of professional knowledge in DIY acts, DIY urbanism's role in reproducing inequality, and the influence of DIY actions on official urban design and planning. Douglas sees DIY urban design as falling into three broad categories: spontaneous streetscaping, renegade renewal and aspirational urbanism. These projects affect anyone who uses the space surrounding them. Therefore, the interventions raise important questions about their role in political economy, democratic decision-making and inequality (chapter 2).

Douglas argues that DIY urban design responds to changing views of desirable cities—especially the rejection of automobile-centric planning—and to the failure of financially strapped city agencies to implement better approaches. At the same time, the illicit DIY acts are a reflection of the de facto redistribution of local place-making to private actors. Many such acts are public-spirited, but one person's view of an improvement does not necessarily match another's (chapter 3).

Douglas found that a majority of DIY activists had technical and scholarly knowledge related to their projects and undertook projects with considerable confidence and a belief that they knew how to do urban design. They nevertheless generally implemented interventions without consultation with neighbours, in ways that are inconsistent with the belief within urban planning that resident participation and the impact of an intervention matter (chapter 4). DIY urbanists were also nearly all white and mostly male. They had little to fear from interactions with the police or from neighbours' suspicions; they acted with entitlement. Black and Latino do-it-yourselfers could not take the same risks and tended to work as part of established groups or organizations. Further, white privilege led some DIY participants to assume that everyone would agree with their view about a desirable intervention, but that was not the case when lifestyles and cultures differed. Some were aware of and concerned about their role in gentrifying neighbourhoods while others dismissed the issue. DIY actors tended, therefore, to presume that they knew best and hence could implement insensitive interventions that violated principles of democratic input and equitable benefits. Consequently, their actions could help to reproduce privilege and inequality in urban spaces (chapter 5).

The interventions of DIY urban designers had an impact on official city planning and development projects. Despite city employees' emphasis on the importance of official processes, many admired the DIY individuals' work using approaches that were faster, easier and cheaper. In numerous cases city officials implemented projects that reflected DIY innovations. These official projects also raise questions about who benefits from the kinds of actions that city planners and urban designers adopt from DIY approaches. Pedestrian-friendly spaces, for instance, often appeared unwelcome to people who were not privileged, or signalled unwanted cultural change in low-income neighbourhoods (chapter 6).

Finally, Douglas points to additional issues that DIY urbanism raises. DIY urban design has implications for social equity in civic participation and demonstrates some limitations of participatory citizenship. The practice forces a rethinking of formal/informal distinctions. Variation in the legitimacy of interventions across space and in neighbourhoods of different socioeconomic status helps explain why the boundaries between sanctioned and unsanctioned actions disappear in some situations and are reinforced in others. Despite the numerous challenges to realizing positive benefits for the many through DIY interventions, Douglas argues for the potential of DIY urban design to offer benefits that city officials cannot provide. If done correctly, he says, the work can avoid perpetuating unequal access, uneven development or displacement (chapter 7).

The depth and nuance of Douglas's analysis is impressive. He has dissected practices that exist in plain sight but that scholars have not thoroughly analysed or have not necessarily noticed. From his sociological perspective, he probes fundamental questions about citizenship, privilege and inequity. His continued passion for the issues comes through in his stories of the many and varied DIY interventions and the people who created them, illustrated by his photographs. The detailed examples leave the reader with a strong sense of the character of these interventions and of the personalities and philosophies of the activists. The result is a highly readable volume that is accessible to many people who are neither sociologists nor urban designers.

Although the arguments in numerous chapters previously appeared in several journals, an edited book and an architecture magazine, readers will find that the book brings together and considerably advances and clarifies the whole of Douglas's observations, ideas and analysis. As other scholars investigate the varied types of unsanctioned use of property, they would do well to consider Douglas's framework for analysis and the questions he raises.

**Margaret Dewar**, University of Michigan

**Amanda Huron 2018: *Carving out the Commons: Tenant Organizing and Housing Cooperatives in Washington, DC*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press**

What are the 'urban commons'? Do they actually exist? If so, how to make sense of their contribution to improving contemporary cities? These are not easy questions. Fortunately, however, Amanda Huron's book offers some very interesting answers. And you know that a book is a thought-provoking one when you underline and add handwritten notes on almost every page. Moreover, given that we often hope we will come across novel ideas concerning current global issues when we read, on that score there is no disappointment here either. The author speaks well to the frightening wave of housing financialization coupled with massive levels of violence, harassment and forced displacement taking place in most urban settings around the world and confronts them in an illuminating manner.

Amanda Huron's work engages with the debates on 'the commons' that have populated critical urban studies and progressive politics over the last two to three decades, with insights from authors such as David Harvey, Silvia Federici, Naomi Klein, Elinor Ostrom, Peter Linebaugh, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt. To a certain extent, the debates about the commons came about in order to replace or expand prior concerns related to 'communism', once this particular worldview fell into disgrace among many left-leaning social scientists after 1989.

In essence, the discussion deals with two key problems: on the one hand, a recognition and explanation of social phenomena based on the collective