Book review

Family Fantasies and Community Space

Stuart C. Aitken, Rutgers University Press, 1998, 241 pp, £15.95, ISBN 0 8135 2462 8

Stuart Aitken's latest book reflects the author's genuine concern about the myth of the ideal family and the effects of this family fantasy on community space. The images of perfect families and secure communities portrayed by contemporary Western societies and, more particularly, North America, are nostalgic, emotive, even unnatural, and for the most part, unattainable. His argument is that the series of myths surrounding family and community identities does not account for the changing nature and diversity of daily experiences that construct and re-construct the spatial relations within families and between families and communities.

Aitken begins inside the nuclear family and the first three chapters explore the spatial power relations between men and women and how these are negotiated before the birth of a first child. He examines the feminist and post-structuralist theory surrounding gendered spaces and the patriarchal bargain theory. Unusually and refreshingly he differentiates between gender roles and gender relations, the former term often being used where the latter is more appropriate as it offers insights into how men and women negotiate activities that relate to space. Chapters Four and Five focus on the changing nature of family space relations after the birth of a child. Political cultures are reproduced through the child and Aitken uses this study to illustrate how children link family and community as they reach beyond family life to find a place. The concluding chapters concentrate on the suburban and private communities that are developed as reflections of the family fantasies that dominate residential urban space.

The value of the book lies in its theoretical base. It brings together theory from geography, planning, urban design, psychology, women's studies and child development to address the problems encountered and issues raised in the spatial relationship between family and community.

The ideas of Lefebvre, Winnicott and Butler are detailed and form the basis of the discussion and comparisons in the last section of the book. However, this multi-disciplinary theoretical base is somewhat compromised by the small section of society that form the case studies illustrating the study. Although the author's intent was to provide a sample that was geographically representative of communities in San Diego, this sample does not go far enough in upholding or challenging the wider issues expounded so well in the discussions on theory that make up a large part of the book. The interviews, questionnaires and follow-up surveys are summarized in limited statistical representations in Appendix B which do not give justice to the amount of data that Aitken gathered by following the lives of several hundred people over a three-year period.

The data are used well in terms of providing the occasional lively passage of dialogue with the participants and this provides valuable emotive insights into the nature of the individual families and their struggles to uphold the myth of family life. This insight would be lost in a more structured statistical analysis of the complex shifting pattern of spatial interpretation embraced by families and communities. The identities of those interviewed are brought to the fore in the narrative and Aitken uses them to convey to the reader the importance of identity when making sense of people, places and events.

The last few chapters are of direct relevance to the urban designer, whether in practice or academia, yet the issues covered in the first section, gender identification, the patriarchal bargain and the issue of children's space should not be ignored. The extensive bibliography is an added bonus, covering the many disciplines that Aitken uses in his study of the spatial politics of family and community life.

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