

Do It Yourself: A Handbook for Changing Our World. Edited by The Trapeze Collective. London: Pluto Press, 2007. 306 pages. £12.99 (Paperback)

It could well be argued that cities have never been more successful. With property prices soaring, and inner cores bustling with art galleries, bars and cafes, the urban renaissance projects of the 1980s and 90s have surely triumphed over inner city dilapidation and suburban expansion? But, as any critical geographer knows, it is not that simple. The economic success of the postmodern city is arguably a function of the social exclusion and environmental destruction left in its wake, where the project of neoliberalism expands ever outward, marketising then rationalising all areas of everyday life. Likewise, conservative authorities do their best to efface any remaining countercultural spaces whether Copenhagen's Christiania (see Milmo 2007) or the current furore surrounding London's Critical Mass cycle ride. So, as Swyngedouw and Kaika (2003) argue, it is only from the "cracks and fissures" of contemporary urbanism, the people and places evading the domination of conservative, neoliberal forces, that hope for just, diverse and exciting cities may emerge. Further, as the Trapeze Collective suggest in their excellent *Handbook*, it is not revolutionary activity which is going to change what, as they rightly observe, is *our* world, but gradual shifts in our everyday thoughts and actions.

Do it yourself: a handbook for changing our world is not a book of urban theory. Indeed, it does not have an avowedly urban slant, although much of its content is highly germane in that setting. Instead, this is a book which takes as its substrate the products of critical academic theory, digesting it into practical, instructive advice on how that theory might be applicable to one's everyday life. Covering fields as diverse as health, education, media subversion and direct action, the *Handbook* provides an informative introduction to potential alternatives to the status quo, with well referenced and diverse guides to further reading at the close of each section. Individual topics are discussed in couplets of chapters, with the first outlining the cause and scale of the proposed problem and the second examining in detail possible ways through which the situation might be changed. The subject matter is diverse, and as such, one is offered an instructive commentary on running a committee or society by consensus in one chapter, and only pages away, presented with illustrations that demonstrate the construction of an eco-friendly composting toilet. Contained in all chapters are rich boxed-out case studies or examples which elaborate clearly on the themes presented in the main text. Each couplet is authored by individuals or collectives expert in their various fields, with the book edited by the Trapeze Collective, of whom one is the radical geographer and activist Paul Chatterton.

Through the design, content and style of the work, it is clear that this text is not aimed squarely at an academic audience. However, in spite of the jargon free approach, the text has no qualms in presenting complex and highly critical arguments. While not advocating change through revolutionary tactics, the authors write from an unambiguously Marxist perspective. However, in so doing,

the authors emphasise their key thesis of individual responsibility. Instead of presenting complicity with the corporate greed inherent in capitalist economies through abstractions such as 'the public', the understandings from a Marxist purview are traced to their inevitable, personified, conclusion. Such linkages have the capacity to be disheartening as the world may become inscribed as a place of insurmountable difficulties, however this is a text full of hope. The authors are realistic in their observation that on occasions one is forced to compromise one's standpoint, though the overarching message elucidated throughout the book is one where "[d]oing something is better than doing nothing at all" (p5).

Given the book's tenuous connection to both urban theory, and even geography (in its formal, academic sense at least), one would be forgiven for querying the place of this review on an urban geography website. This is a text designed to be dipped into and as such, the cover to cover reading required from reviewers and undertaken unthinkingly by academics, feels somewhat mechanistic. However, as I progressed through the work I increasingly felt that I, both as an individual and as a geographer, ought to be taking action. So, while I consider trenchant critiques aimed at subfields of the discipline, such as Hamnett's (2003) attack on cultural geography, largely misguided, I certainly believe that there is space for significantly more work of a critical bent. Thus when seeking to reference wider reading that critically documented the process of gentrification (p204), it was disappointing that the authors were forced to list Zukin's *The Culture of Cities* and Davis' *City of Quartz*. While both excellent texts, that they are now fifteen and seventeen years old respectively, is cause for concern. Given the unique position of geographers to comment from an informed, critical perspective upon urban processes, it is disheartening that the authors evidently felt unable to reference more modern, or indeed more Eurocentric, work. Further, I believe that the nature of critical work produced needs to be brought into question. It is at this juncture in the discipline therefore where I feel the Trapese Collective's *Handbook* is of greatest professional utility to academics. For academic geography to remain relevant, it is necessary that it responds to the critiques it produces. Of course "scholarship cannot be used at all unless it is written in the first place" (Mitchell 2004: 25), however significant gains can be made by strengthening the connections between activism and the academy – a notion demonstrated by the recent triumph of the living wage campaign at Queen Mary where cleaners, union leaders and academics worked together to ensure a living wage and benefits could be assured to all working on the university campus. The *Handbook* offers inspirational starting points to potential campaigns backed up with solid practical advice which could form a strong basis for a collaborative research methodology.

That is not to say that this book is perfect. Before reaching the meat of the work one must struggle through the somewhat pedestrian opening chapter entitled 'Why we need holistic solutions for a world in crisis', in which a mythical, halcyon past of ecological stability and social cohesion are compared to a dystopic present. Against such a backdrop, proposals such as community gardening, which I certainly believe are of real value, instead come across as somewhat mundane. The work is thus open to accusations of advocating light green, middle class friendly solutions to issues that require far tougher and more radical approaches. However, I am convinced that the work suitably negotiates such potential critiques. The focus on lessening one's individual impact and involving

the wider community in such actions is admirable. One has to start somewhere and, with its largely well written, well researched and practical emphasis, the Trapese Collective's *Handbook* makes for an informative read and a useful reference for both academics and students moving into the realm of applied radical geography.

Olly Zanetti
Queen Mary, University of London

References:

Hamnett, C, (2003) 'Contemporary human geography: fiddling while Rome burns?' in *Geoforum* 34, 1-3

Milmo, C (2007) 'On the barricades: Trouble in a hippie paradise' in *The Independent* 31.5.2007
<http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article2600246.ece> (accessed 18.7.2007)

Mitchell, D, (2004) 'Radical Scholarship: A Polemic on Making a Difference Outside the Academy' in Fuller, D and Kitchin, R (eds), *Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a difference beyond the academy* Praxis (e)Press:
<http://www.praxis-epress.org/availablebooks/radicaltheorycriticalpraxis.html>
(accessed 18.7.2007)

Swyngedouw, E and Kaika, A (2003) 'The making of "glocal" urban modernities: exploring the cracks in the mirror' in *Cities* 7, 5-21