

The Skycourt and Skygarden: Greening the Urban Habitat, Jason Pomeroy, 2014, Routledge, 304 pages, £34.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-415-63699-5.

Green roofs, living walls and high-rise gardens have garnered a large amount of praise within academia and elsewhere in recent years. And indeed, who could reasonably be seen to argue against the idea of greening the stiflingly concrete spaces of our uncomfortably crowded cities? Certainly not those advocates who consider this to be an expedient, ad hoc solution to what is a wicked and widening litany of problems associated with climate change and urban sprawl. Urban greening has consequently become a fundamental component of the sustainable development agenda, and conveniently, it also appears to offer an amenable attractive and profitable pathway to sustainability to boot.

On this premise, Jason Pomeroy has produced a feature book on the implementation of urban greening initiatives taking examples from Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia. The underlying argument made by the author is that inclusion of green spaces in high-rise buildings can not only produce environmental benefits but, to borrow language from the sustainability discourse, also offset any democratic deficit occurring on the ground as a result of the creeping privatisation of streets and squares. According to the author, 'skycourts' and 'skygardens' can potentially serve as 'social spaces in the sky' (p.44). A practicing architect with a studio based in Singapore and academic links to University of Nottingham, Pomeroy has been involved in the realisation of a number of luxury development projects in the Philippines, Malaysia and Myanmar *inter alia*. Projects such as Trump Tower and Paris Hilton Beach House conspicuously celebrate vegetation and water by incorporating these natural elements into building structures, although I am not entirely

sure whether the author's portfolio of high-end developments reflects appropriately on his normative propositions.

Nevertheless, drawing upon this practical experience, the author makes a case for urban greenery and the low carbon credentials of these developments in this appealingly illustrated and produced book, which is divided into four sections. In the first part, Pomeroy considers the physical and conceptual demise of the public realm in city life. Engaging with the ideas of familiar figures in this debate, Richard Sennett, Jurgen Habermas, Henri Lefebvre and Sharon Zukin amongst others, Pomeroy outlines the causes of this deleterious trend and its adverse psychological and political impacts. The author demonstrates with illustrative examples how the demise of public life is an inherently spatial as well cultural phenomenon, concomitant with a general reduction in urban greenery, which provides a tantalising if somewhat abbreviated foundation for a subsequent discussion of the 'vertical urban realm' (p.270).

The second part extends the author's thesis by considering how the sky court and sky garden may provide contemporary, uniquely elevated equivalents to traditional predecessors of the 'semi-public realm' (p.30), the court, arcade and lobby. Again, instructive examples abound through which Pomeroy effectively weaves an increasingly sophisticated argument. Tracing these urban design features back to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the author proposes to address an extant gap in the literature by examining their 'multi-faceted nature' (p.38) in terms of socio-spatial characteristics, environmental effects, psychological advantages, economic benefits and legislative objectives. The integration possibilities and projected effects of each facet is graphically depicted using a reoccurring architectural figure, enticing the reader to imagine an urbanscape of the vertical and verdant with zigzagging staircases,

floating thoroughfares and secluded niches. Tropical islands, shorn and spruced, appear to miraculously manifest in the homogeneous fabric of the city.

Constituting the overwhelming majority of the book, over half the length in fact, part three is essentially a catalogue of forty development projects that exhibit these design features. This section is divided into four subcategories listing projects that have been completed, are under construction, on the drawing board or currently exist as conceptual imaginings. Each case study is amply outlined over two double-page spreads, accompanied by line drawings, graphics and photographs. This arrangement is conducive to the casual reader who can quite effortlessly flick through the case studies to appreciate their architectural and aesthetic attributes. Whilst there is favourable continuity between the entries, provided of course by their incorporation of vertical green spaces, perhaps a more diverse typology of building functions and landscaping techniques would push this concept in different and more challenging directions than its largely commercial focus.

The final section underlines the necessity of a 'vertical urban theory' (p.243) that can envisage and propose 'people-centred and yet environmentally responsive high-density solutions for the city of tomorrow' (p.256). Pomeroy suggests that our understanding of sustainability may have to be broadened and redefined as cities become more populated and vertical, invariably private spaces proliferate. Resembling something of a manifesto, the author identifies six parameters through which thinking on 'skyrise social spaces' (p.258) can be conducted going into the future. This manifesto for vertical living proposes that architectural innovation can encourage mixed use of space, freedom of circulation and democratic forms of social interaction, particularly when supported by progressive legislation. Linking this back to his central argument, the author contemplates through a

series of examples how the skycourt and skygarden can facilitate this transition whilst simultaneously rendering buildings more environmentally responsive and benign.

Overall, the book contributes to ongoing discussions within urban studies by making explicit the links between architectural design, urban nature and politics. On a more practical level, Pomeroy provides an important service by introducing the less familiar reader to contemporary typologies and the 'new architectural vocabulary' (p.37) of high density buildings and green urbanism (e.g. passive design, bio-climatic buildings). The expressed intentions of the author are indeed commendable, which leads Pomeroy to consider the emancipatory potential of green urban design. To follow through on this conviction, Pomeroy does attempt to find an appropriate balance between case studies and conjecture. But unfortunately, there remains a distinct and discordant disconnect between the author's use of critical theory and the examples he provides, which I would argue constitutes a fundamental weakness that irrevocably negates the normative arguments of the book.

Although Pomeroy quite clearly acknowledges that his focus will be on the semi-public rather than public realm proper, this downgrading of ambition immediately brings into contention his initial mobilisation of critical democratic theory. More seriously, this contribution could be criticised for incongruously undermining the very objectives it aspires to advance by lowering the bar of expectation for the defence of actually existing public space. The case studies Pomeroy draws upon to substantiate his theory of vertical democracy are largely private commercial ventures based around high-end retail, entertainment and luxury housing. But shouldn't we as architects, academics and activists be striving for significantly more than a shopping mall to provide our sites of civic interaction? When buildings such as Marina Bay Sands, The Shard and Commerzbank stand

in as architectural emblems of democracy, one must surely begin to question the inclination of the author which here tends timidly towards compensation and compromise. Furthermore, Pomeroy could have unpacked exactly what he means by the term 'greening', which appears to be more concerned with urbaneness than urbanity in a wider, more inclusive sense. In sum, this book will presumably provide those readers interested in the principally architectural benefits of high-rise greenery with plentiful opportunities for reflection. For others of a more critical persuasion, however, the book could regrettably come across as greenwash at its most wincingly worst.

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