Reviews


Alison Bain’s *Creative Margins: Cultural Production in Canadian Suburbs* is a book about the real contours and possibilities of big-city suburban cultural production, defined here such that the category “cultural worker” is essentially a cognate of “artist.” The inner-suburban examples of Etobicoke and North Vancouver and the outer-suburban examples of Surrey and Mississauga are presented from varying angles of observation: as represented when lumped pejoratively into greater “suburbia” from an antagonistic position of socio-spatial centrality; as pragmatically considered in planning and policy; as related to by resident cultural workers in both the banal terms of everyday (in)conveniences and as a site for art-making and engagement; and, as complex places “under construction” and ripe for re-imagination.

There is much to recommend Bain’s book. Particularly well realized are discussions of suburban cultural infrastructure and planning, which follow urban scholars such as Ann Markusen in refusing the reduction of the arts to consumer amenities or to just another ingredient in the synergistic cocktail on offer from the hawkers of “creative cities” discourse, as well as in advocating policy steps that would address the context of production and the real needs of cultural workers and communities. Explorations of the selected suburban case studies, beyond the inherent difficulties imposed by a spatially dispersed built form, range from questions of planning and resource allocation at the level of the urban region to fine-grained evaluations of particular cultural facilities within relevant suburban borders (and much in-between). While the Mississauga Living Arts Centre is found wanting for its financial inaccessibility and deployment as much as a venue for corporate and private events as for any other purpose, less ostentatious venues—i.e., “informal, multi-purpose community cultural service hubs in retrofitted storefronts, strip malls, and schools … maintained often through voluntary reciprocity” (p. 153)—are highlighted for their potential both in supporting dedicated artistic pro-

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duction and in facilitating exchange and community participation at varying levels of interest and commitment. A strong emphasis falls upon the need to attend to, and consider avenues of support for, the latter sorts of venues.

Bain’s discussion of the “almost formulaic” (p. 108) policy prescriptions often favoured at the expense of such alternative priorities seeks to juxtapose the (actual and potential) vitality of spatially dispersed nodes of activity in suburban cultural networks against planners’ and officials’ frequent preoccupation with developing cultural quarters, leveraging cluster effects (first and foremost among commercial firms), and chasing up the symbolic and economic payoffs imagined from spectacular flagship buildings and events. What matters most, she argues, are the “unspectacular” sites and exchanges that arise at the intersection of “commercial, domestic, and community economies,” characterized by elements of “generosity and conviviality” (p. 9), that stand in contrast to market and promotional logics. Warning against both the triumph of the experience economy in its spectacular mode and against the self-serving tendencies of municipal governments seeking to render concrete their professed commitment to cultural development in the form of iconic or “talismanic” landmark projects, Bain writes: “[c]reativity does not need to be extroverted, visible, or concentrated to be authentic, transformative, or powerful” (p. 139). The “consumptive and spectacular” mode must cede place to “production and practice” (p. 151). These discussions, straddling Chapters 5 and 6 (and suffused in the framing of the larger project), fit together very nicely. Bain does well at articulating the particulars of each suburban case, and though the broad contours of debate here arise significantly from the attempted transposition of neoliberal “creative cities” templates conceived around metropolitan core areas onto such contexts, their suburban elaborations are richly explored.

Other chapters reveal or offer a particular gloss on other facets of the broader question of the suburbs’ specific significance with respect to the sphere of cultural or artistic production—in both symbolic and practical dimensions. With sometimes mixed results, Bain addresses the articulation of (sub)urban spatiality with hierarchies of cultural value and with popular and academic representations of the figure of the artist, the locational advantages and disadvantages perceived by a modest sample of suburban-dwelling interviewees (it seems that home-owning, middle-class suburbanites with “artistic” occupations largely share the middle-class locational preferences that lead other middle-class suburbanites to home ownership in the same sorts of suburban locations), as well as the uses and implications of networked communication technologies for suburban cultural producers, et cetera.

Bain wishes to defend the proposition that suburbs are “complex, creative, and innovative places,” and claims to reveal “the practical, hidden, temporary, and spontaneous dimensions of the everyday working lives of cultural workers in suburbia” (p. 4–5). Thus, the author seeks to deal simultaneously with the terrain of representation and the emplaced activity of cultural producers.

With regard to the former, both the exposition of perspectives that underwrite a coding of urban space that marks the suburb as “sub-creative” (p. 4), as well as the arguments aligned against these, make for fascinating reading. Extended treatments—crossing the boundaries between popular and academic discourse—of the metaphors
of symbolic centrality and peripheralization, of the feminized character of many pejorative characterizations of the suburbs, and of contrasting representations of the artist as a “pioneer” roughing it amidst the bustle and grit of their naturally-not-yet-gentrified central city environs meditate on the symbolic significance of the spatial ordering of the city and assert the unfair partiality of many common accounts.

The range and variety of accumulated sources is striking, and the rejection of de rigueur dismissals of bland conformity—“too standardized, too bland, too conformist, too hierarchical, too conservative, too patriarchal, too straight,” in David Ley’s laundry list quoted on page 54—is apt enough, though the basis of the rejection is sometimes itself ambiguous. When Bain writes that “it is cultural workers who are at the forefront of challenges to, and reconfigurations of, the (mis)perceived banality of suburbia” (p. 154), the statement appears ambivalent as to whether suburbia is to be characterized as a site at which (some) residents experience the banality of human existence in a certain kind of late capitalist landscape (an experience that provokes contestation), or if the notion of suburban banality itself is just a harsh stereotype (an object of contestation on the terrain of representation). This is an ambiguity that might have been resolved, in part, by recourse to more critical discussions of specific aesthetic products and projects—a tactic that would also have rendered more fully convincing repeated assertions that the legitimacy, authenticity, or critical edge of specifically suburban artistic production are unfairly maligned. Such a focus is oddly absent, save in a virtual aside on the Arbour Lake School, a youthful collective (located not in any of the case study suburbs, but on the fringes of Calgary) that deploys their suburban residence and immediate surrounds as a site of intervention against the boundaries of cookie-cutter privacy and propriety (though this is an excellent example, and does lend some prima facie credence to broad claims about the potentially transformative “place-making” role of suburban artists).

With reference to more concrete matters, Bain makes a point of the assertion that suburbs are not classless, as per a certain homogenizing image, but she has relatively little to say about either classed experiences of the suburbs and of suburban cultural scenes and amenities (though her emphasis on “unspectacular” sites of convivial exchange seems to point in a useful direction vis-à-vis such issues) or about how socio-economic stratification affects cultural workers (who, as an occupational category, even if limited to suburban residents, are probably not almost 100% homeowners, as is revealed to be the case for Bain’s interviewees). Given, on the one hand, the accumulation of research on trends related to the suburbanization of poverty, as manifested in parts of Etobicoke or Surrey, and on the other hand, calls to acknowledge a degree of “class struggle within the ‘creative class’” (Krätke, 2011, p. 147) as well as an emphasis on the kind of precarity that would typically preclude such things as homeownership, these might stand out at productive directions for future explorations of the terrain of cultural production in the suburbs.

Ultimately, though, whatever idiosyncratic particulars a reader might point to as possible lacunae, Creative Margins stands out in its extension of a topical focus that is often trained squarely at more socio-spatially central locales, in its thoughtful contemplation of the polarized cultural dimensions of the city/suburb distinction, in its range of practical considerations, and in its fine-grained exposition of problems and possi-
bilities at different levels of analysis. Those with an interest in (sub)urban geography, cultural policy and planning, and the arts as occupation will find much to appreciate, to consider, and to debate.

Reference

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