

BOOK REVIEWS

Daniela Sandler. *Counterpreservation: Architectural Decay in Berlin since 1989*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press and Cornell University Library, 2016, 274 pp., 28 black-and-white illustrations, hard-cover, \$89.95, ISBN: 978-1501703164; paperback, \$29.95, ISBN: 978-1501703171.

Reviewing this book might seem counterintuitive for the house journal of an organization devoted to historic preservation, heritage conservation, and cultural patrimony, for counterpreservation is nothing less than the idea that the pervasive, ongoing decay of historical sites and buildings presents a welcome challenge and an opportunity to engage public debate about the passage of time and thus about the experiential nature of historical change. Yet Daniela Sandler—an urban and architectural historian in the School of Architecture at the University of Minnesota—offers a philosophical inquiry on the nature of permanence and transience that raises important questions about how we evaluate failure and success in preservation and restoration. While she is insistently partisan for the concept of counterpreservation, her argument does engage with the limits and ambiguities of an approach that highlights the destructive processes of dilapidation and decay.

As the study's subtitle indicates, this is a book about the boom in architectural renewal visited upon Berlin after unification in 1990. Based on field research conducted in 2003 and 2004 and again in 2010 and 2011, it presents five case studies of different kinds of counterpreservation proposed or realized in the 1990s and 2000s in Berlin. These are bookended by an introduction tracing how Sandler discovered what she recognized as an unusual insurgent urbanism dedicated to the city's ruins and both a substantive conceptual chapter on counterpreservation as an aesthetics of decay and a conclusion with suggestive remarks about how these ideas might find application in the architectural discourse of conservation. As someone who has observed Berlin's urban evolution for the past fifty years, I was fascinated by the detail in the case studies and by the author's precise vocabulary for describing the experience of architectural space, but I was also skeptical about the larger argument. Berlin's history in the twentieth century, with defeats in two world wars, aerial bombing in 1945, and forty years of ideological division that resulted in the concrete of the Berlin Wall, seemed to

me too unique to scale up to a concept with implications for urban renewal more generally. But having reached the end of the study, I realized how German cities like Dresden and Leipzig and global cities like Detroit, Belfast, Jerusalem, and Johannesburg could also learn something from a dynamic view of architecture that reimagines the functionality of historical spaces.

So what is counterpreservation, understood as an alternative to the dominant trends of gentrification, historical preservation, "integrationist-historical" restoration, and adaptive reuse? According to Sandler there are four distinct but related components. First, based on positive connotations of pervasive and ongoing decay (think of composting and natural fermentation), the poetics of counterpreservation traffics in the anti-chic, cool grittiness, and rough aesthetics. Second, it marks the passage of time as a product of chance, accident, and improvisation, allowing for experimentation and spontaneity based on use rather than market value. Third, dilapidation and structural erosion are integrated as the physical expression of traumatic histories, even at the threat of enduring ruination. Fourth, as a socially grounded practice rooted in the present and aimed at inclusiveness and flexibility, counterpreservation is an open-ended, dialogical, process-oriented experience that invites the visitor or inhabitant of architectural space to extract historical meaning from traces and insists on history as open-ended and subject to change, that is, as incomplete.

Obviously this is a program aimed neither at traditional architectural values of permanence and beauty nor at preservation goals of creating a product and a curated narrative about it. At the same time, Sandler realizes that counterpreservation can emerge within an urban environment only after these more traditional forms of architectural renovation—with all their planning and compromises—catalyze the need for alternative, iconoclastic approaches to historical spaces precisely as a contrast to their more conventionally restored environment. The five case studies in Berlin, focusing on

squatted apartment buildings, art spaces and cultural centers in former commercial buildings, a bold but unrealized memorial project by Daniel Libeskind at an SS site, the Gestapo terrain called “Topography of Terror,” and the Berlin Wall museum and outdoor exhibition, demonstrate in their very transience the fragility of this approach. Indeed, many of these examples, as Sandler documents, have made their own compromises with property owners, institutions, tourist demands, and practical concerns about deterioration that throw their

utopian values into question. Nonetheless, as this book argues, encountering and naming an alternative practice like counterpreservation can highlight a critical way of thinking about history and urban space.

MARC SILBERMAN

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Madison, Wisconsin

Richard Longstreth. *Looking beyond the Icons: Midcentury Architecture, Landscape, and Urbanism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, 288 pp., 158 black-and-white photographs and illustrations, paperback, \$35.00, ISBN: 978-0813936444.

Richard Longstreth’s *Looking beyond the Icons: Midcentury Architecture, Landscape, and Urbanism* contains a curated set of essays and written testimonies exploring conservation of the built environment of the recent past. The volume contains four sections: Style and Taste, Some Challenges of the Recent Past, Extraordinary and Unknown, and Commonplace and Taken for Granted.

The first section, Style and Taste, consists of two foundational essays that anyone familiar with Longstreth’s work will be happy to see again—“The Problem with ‘Style’” and “Taste versus History.” These familiar chestnuts, first published in 1984 and 1994 respectively, are especially useful when it comes to considering recent-past resources. Can we really only use terms like “minimal traditional” when looking at suburban housing? What do we do when a resource is aesthetically-challenged but historic—the “unlovable” building syndrome?

The second section, Some Challenges of the Recent Past, illustrates areas Longstreth identified as particularly tricky—urban renewal sites, landscapes, suburban development, and shopping centers—resource types laden with historic emotional baggage. After all, urban renewal killed history, suburbs are bad urbanism, shopping

centers killed Main Street, and for most, modern landscapes are a mystery. The strength of these essays rests in the impeccable scholarship that underlies the case he makes for the importance of each type. Just the endnotes alone are worth the read, as they provide even more context and information as well as pointing to a wealth of documentation to back up his arguments.

The remaining two sections of the book are case studies drawn from Longstreth’s many years of advocacy efforts in this arena. Each essay brings forth another aspect of the challenge to save recent-past resources, and sadly, the majority of the resources discussed were subsequently demolished. In section three, Extraordinary and Unknown, he examines several ecclesiastical examples—one an exuberantly modern Catholic church in New Orleans and the second a brutalist Christian Science complex in Washington, DC—as well as an Adirondack camp complex. Clearly the star of this section, however, is his essay addressing the complex and difficult debate that surrounded the efforts to save the Richard Neutra Visitor Center and Cyclorama building in Gettysburg National Military Park. Few within the field could have missed the impassioned, internecine debate over the fate of this building that played out within the preservation community.

Longstreth's essay, excerpted from a National Historic Landmark nomination that he helped to craft, documents the significance of this resource and its architect, as well as the role the site played in the broader context of the Mission 66 efforts of the National Park Service. It is a clear and well-reasoned look at one side of this issue—the modern legacy of the Cyclorama and its role both on the site and within the Park Service more broadly. It would be hard to understand the demolition of this building as anything but a loss to history, regardless of your viewpoint.

The fourth section, *Commonplace and Taken for Granted*, showcases resources Longstreth describes as a more “generic” variety. In his examination of a community garden, a shopping center, a commercial district, and a residential subdivision, he seeks to illustrate that vernacular resources are rich in story and design in spite of their more modest origins, an idea increasingly relevant within the discipline. His testimony as it relates to the history of

a Washington, DC, victory garden is particularly important as too often we ignore or dismiss a vernacular cultural landscape because we lack the context to understand it.

Longstreth is a master of his field and his essays set an aspirational benchmark for those in the discipline who seek to use their scholarly powers for advocacy. They establish a gold-standard for future practitioners to emulate in terms of research and form, regardless of the subject matter addressed. That he chose to focus so much of his career toward the conservation of the recent past, the built environment of the postwar years in particular, is a legacy from which we all benefit.

TRUDI SANDMEIER

*University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California*

Caitlin DeSilvey. *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 240 pp., eight black-and-white photographs, paperback, \$27.00, ISBN: 978-0816694389; library cloth, \$108.00, ISBN: 978-0816694365.

In *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving*, Caitlin DeSilvey proposes that letting structures decay—opening them up to the actions of climate, flora, and fauna—is not only a valid approach to heritage, but an increasingly relevant one in an age of obsolete technical facilities and climate change. Drawing from her experiences as a curator, she frames her argument as a prescriptive proposal. At the same time, through rich case studies, she demonstrates that choosing to let buildings go is practically feasible and culturally meaningful. Purposeful decomposition is, for her, not the antithesis of heritage but rather a legitimate, and sometimes the most appropriate, choice.

Her case studies are grouped into thematic chapters that address facets of curated decay: from objects to buildings, engineering works, and entire complexes; from the microscale of germs and rot to animals, plants,

storms, and oceans. The case studies include a farmstead in Montana, a harbor in Cornwall, an industrial complex in the Ruhr valley, and a seminary grounds in Scotland. An introduction develops DeSilvey's theoretical position, and a conceptual conclusion suggests that it is possible to care for a structure without taking active measures to prolong or revive it. In proposing “care without conservation” (184), DeSilvey stresses that curated decay is not the same as neglect, reminding readers that the original meaning of “curate” was “to care,” not “to assemble” (161). For DeSilvey, decay that is cared for, or that represents a caring attitude, is not an oxymoron.

DeSilvey deftly addresses a formidable body of literature on ruins, heritage, and ecology while avoiding the dreaded formulaic lit review. Her evocative prose builds up a vivid sense of places, objects, and materials; even

though there are only eight photographs, the book feels amply illustrated. Refined, nuanced case-study analyses are dappled with references to literary works and personal accounts; the lyrical accretes to the scholarly, poignantly. By moving us, DeSilvey includes us as participants in processes of decomposition and transformation. She intimates that bodies and buildings are connected in inevitable change and decay, not just by analogy but viscerally.

DeSilvey acknowledges other scholars who have explored the natural recolonization of human-altered environments and the intentional appropriation of architectural decay. Her originality lies in combining these two approaches—which are usually separate—by looking at how they act upon each other: where “cultural matter” takes on an “ecological function” (28), where the “distinction . . . between architecture (as discrete and bound) and environment (as dispersed and distributed)” (109–10) is broken. She proposes an “ecology of memory” (44) that recognizes, incorporates, and validates uses and actions “by other-than-human organisms and agencies” (20): plants, germs, animals, chemical processes, weather events. She is aware of the methodological risks of treading new ground at the tangled edges of established fields such as architecture, landscape, heritage, biology, and ecology—but her point is that it is precisely in these liminal areas that reflection and curation are needed. From the growing inventory of decommissioned industrial buildings, to the saturation of conventional preservation that threatens to congeal all things as relics, to the ineluctable forces of climate change, DeSilvey shows a world in need of entropic recycling and creative reuse.

Her argument contains two provocations: one temporal, the other material-spatial. DeSilvey suggests that our notion of heritage as the preservation of built structures is limited by our focus on human action and human lifespans. Our valuation of a structure because it is a few hundred years old, or because it speaks to a certain period, event, or person, is a shortsighted snapshot that misses the extremely *longue durée* of geological eras. Human action is a young (although course-altering) force among others. So DeSilvey presents the history of an English cove not just as a nineteenth-century harbor for industrial-era cargo ships, but as a landscape formed “300 million years ago,” rearranged “through a reworking of ancient geological matter” (51)—stone, which in the future, DeSilvey anticipates, might be rearranged again, disassembled by storms, reassembled in cairns on the shore. For DeSilvey, viewing the 1890s harbor

as intrinsically valuable and worthy of indefinite preservation is an anthropocentric, culture-centric perspective that outsizes human action. She implies that we ignore broader forces at our own peril, since recent storms have been so destructive as not only to threaten the harbor’s integrity but also to render any efforts to preserve it futile. DeSilvey urges us to recognize the intertwining of nature and culture while relinquishing some of our agency to natural forces, which we might neither fully control nor understand.

Yet grappling with heritage, even if through decay, is a human concern; so, is not her ecology of memory irrevocably human, and culturally situated? Why is curated decay claiming its place in the arsenal of heritage now? Wavering between prescription and description, the book only partly accounts for curated decay as a historical phenomenon in its own right, one that connects to economic, geopolitical, and cultural shifts in wealthy postindustrial Western nations. Similarly, her focus on nature sometimes downplays discussions of social and cultural meaning. This is understandable, as her minute attention to ecological processes is a methodological stance that sets her book apart from the more common cultural approach. This leaves a final question unanswered: Where does curated decay apply, and with what consequences? The case studies in her book are all from wealthy Anglo-Saxon nations, and although she briefly discusses the difference between Western and Asian conceptions of heritage, she does not delve into the specificity of North America and Northern Europe, postindustrial regions with particular attachments to identity and national history. What would curated decay look like, or would it even make sense, in the Mediterranean, with its abundance of ancient ruins and a scarcity of resources? Or in Latin America, where, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s words, cities “pass from first youth to decrepitude with no intermediary stage?” (1961, 100). These questions are arguably beyond the scope of her project, and are more related to contextualization than to the central substance of her provocative book.

DANIELA SANDLER

*University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

REFERENCES

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1961. *Tristes Tropiques*. Translated by John Russell. New York: Criterion Books.

Francesca Russello Ammon. *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016, 400 pp., 79 black-and-white illustrations, cloth, \$45.00, ISBN: 978-0300200683.

Let's begin with the title: there's that single, muscular word before the colon—"bulldozer"—suggesting that we are dealing with a kind of biography, a critique, a metaphor. And then the postcolon subtitle, where others often err on the side of prolixity, is here a model of concision and accuracy. Francesca Russello Ammon—who teaches city and regional planning and historic preservation at the University of Pennsylvania—has produced a remarkably engaging scholarly history of the bulldozer, "focusing on the machine and its material applications, the companies that profited from its manufacture and use, and the cultural meanings it produced in practice" (10). More broadly, the book illuminates—for the first time in historical scholarship—what Ammon calls a "culture of clearance," a set of ideals, beliefs, practices, and images gradually developed by a nation that "came to embrace and implement widespread destruction as a means of achieving progress" (3).

Bulldozer—a hefty book with more than three hundred pages of text and sixty pages of notes—is organized into three major parts. Part One encompasses two chapters devoted to "Bulldozers at War," covering relatively unfamiliar territory and laying the groundwork (such metaphors are hard to avoid) for the post-World War II investigations that form the core of the book. In her introduction, Ammon explains that reconnecting the "two moments" of the war and the postwar development was one of her central goals. It is in these war chapters that we first encounter one of the author's most persuasive skills—her nuanced reading of visual evidence, such as photographs and advertising images. A photograph of a Seabee at the controls of a bulldozer in the South Pacific, published in *Life* in 1945, is minutely analyzed, but Ammon goes further, examining the outtakes from the photo shoot to establish the magazine's desire to shape a particular image of the wartime "Bulldozer Man."

The second part—"Bulldozers at Work"—comprises chapters on suburban land clearance (focusing on Orange County, California) and on urban renewal demolition, and an appropriately sprawling chapter on the postwar

highway boom. The chapter on postwar urban renewal focuses almost entirely on the experience of New Haven, Connecticut, a decision by Ammon that must have been driven at least in part by the excellence of the original sources (and which seems apropos, given the book's publisher). The focus, however, does not feel narrow or constricting. Without making explicit claims for New Haven as a universal model, Ammon convinces us that the often-depressing chronicle was mirrored throughout the country. She does this by maintaining a focus on the broader neighborhood scale of New Haven's demolition, without rehearsing the well-worn stories of historic preservation's most monumental losses—the Stock Exchange in Chicago, Penn Station in New York, the Metropolitan Building in Minneapolis. The only "star" preservation story in New Haven, carefully told here, is the much more modest one of moving and saving the tiny but much-beloved "Louis' Lunch" hamburger joint in 1975.

Additionally, Ammon repeatedly and sensitively calls attention to the racial and ethnic dimensions of large-scale land clearance, acidly caricatured at the time as "Negro removal." She writes of the "uneven geography of displacement," the disproportionate effects of both highway construction (at least in cities) and urban renewal on poor ethnic and racial minorities—the building, as one highway opponent wrote, of "white men's roads through black men's bedrooms" (212).

One of the book's greatest strengths is its deft and respectful use of oral history testimony. Rather than appearing in the occasional pithy quote, the testimonies are deployed as extensive, solid evidence, the phrases landing on the page with a sometimes arresting plainness. A highway engineer describes what came to be known as "the Kansas way" of highway planning: "In the early years, you got to go from point A to point B, on an interstate highway, and boy, let's get there and move dirt and put down pavement" (198). Or this from Colorado civil engineer Edward Haase: "Quite frankly, when I was dumped into this thing in Denver, I was surprised and shocked, and wondered what I had gotten into." Haase

was contrasting the challenges of developing I-70 through a dense city—with all of its “people problems”—to his experience in Durango, where everyone “thought highways were the greatest things since sliced bread” (208).

That phrase a few paragraphs back—“often-depressing chronicle”—comes to mind frequently in this book, as it ranges over the wholesale destruction of immensely productive agricultural land to make way for suburbia, the massive scraping-out of older urban neighborhoods, the virtually unimpeded plowing-under of vast swaths of the countryside for interstate highways. This is not to suggest that resistance is underplayed here; quite the contrary: in each case, Ammon offers detailed accounts of opposition to “progress,” such as the rise of full-fledged “freeway revolts” in cities such as Boston and San Francisco. All of this stoked cultural fires as well, leading to an entire literature of opposition, including foundational texts of the preservation movement by Jane Jacobs and Herbert Gans, as well as movies, TV shows, songs, and documentary photography projects. The conflicts also fueled the nascent environmental movement, leading perhaps inevitably to an “us versus them” debate—where all developers

are rapacious and all environmentalists are extremists. In the wake of the passage of federal regulatory legislation around 1970, at least one engineer believed that “the historic preservation people . . . can tie [a project] up so long in delays . . . that you might as well say forget it” (216).

The two chapters that make up the final section, called “Bulldozers of the Mind,” are perhaps the most surprising, a couple of round pegs fitting into a history-of-technology square hole. But of course that’s the point: *Bulldozer* is not your grandparents’ history of technology. Not knowing Ammon’s 2012 *Technology and Culture* article “Unearthing Benny the Bulldozer,” I didn’t expect to see a chapter on children’s books and toys, nor one from the far left field of art history focusing on the notorious earthworks of artists such as Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson. Both chapters are highly sophisticated models of cultural analysis, and form a brilliant capstone to this pathbreaking study.

BRIAN HARRIGAN

Minnesota Historical Society

St. Paul, Minnesota