

enjoyable read that will prove informative and stimulating to those interested in the cultural history of New York, the ‘infrastructure turn’ or the history of urban subjectivity.

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**Tom Allbeson**, *Photography, Reconstruction and the Cultural History of the Postwar European City*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021. xvii + 272pp. 66 figures. £96.00 hbk. £29.59 eBook; \$124.00 hbk. \$39.96 eBook.  
doi:10.1017/S0963926822000256

In his book *Photography, Reconstruction and the Cultural History of the Postwar European City*, Tom Allbeson tackles the question of how urban photography contributed to the formation of western Europe during the years immediately following World War II. In four loosely chronological chapters, he reflects the shifting issues concerning urban recovery, internationalization and transnationalization: imagery of destruction and reconstruction in ruin photobooks (focusing on the years 1944–50), photographs of modern housing projects during the housing crisis in war-shattered cities (c. 1947–57), the imagery of celebration and solidarity, aspiration and leisure in the illustrated press (c. 1949–55) and of modernist monuments in the spirit of internationalization (c. 1955–62).

The core argument that takes shape over the course of this book focuses on the ‘image of the city’ as a ‘key symbol which facilitated both a negotiation of past conflict and a vision for future cooperation’ (p. 19). It explores the way in which ‘architecture and photography were crucial facets in the national cultures of, and transnational cultural exchange between, the three comparator nations [Germany, the UK and France]...within the network of intersecting local, national, and transnational cultures’ (p. 19). This comparative approach allows Allbeson to unearth insights that reach beyond dimensions of aesthetics in urban photography and their reading as expressions of a static representation of national or regional sentiments. Instead, he focuses on assessing an entire field of knowledge, which he describes as ‘the impact of cultural exchange and political climate on the meaning and significance of urban space as mediated through its photographic representation’ (p. 235).

This approach is convincing and turns out to be effective for three reasons. First, it places Allbeson in a school of thought about the photographic image that understands it as more than an aesthetic documentation or mere illustration, but as a dynamic agent (as discussed in the work of scholars of visual and critical studies such as Roland Barthes and W.J.T. Mitchell, who serve as frequent point of reference for Allbeson). Secondly, Allbeson embraces architectural historical research of the past decade or so that understands urban and architectural photography as ‘photographic architecture’. This concept, coined by the architectural historian Claire Zimmerman in her 2014 book *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth*

*Century*, shaped the understanding of photographic representations of modernist architecture not only as exceeding the conventional formulae of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architectural documentation, but as actually surpassing the significance of the built structure itself in its formative role for architectural modernism. Finally, by intertwining this understanding of architectural imagery with the notion of urban photography as a medium with agency, Allbeson builds a strong argument for the book's comparative and internationalist approach. This approach positions its intellectual framework in political science and in research that explores phenomena such as the relationship between unique national characteristics and nationalist tendencies, as well as each country's embracing of a transnational understanding of a shared culture and humanity in western Europe. As he taps into that perception of the years between 1949 and 1961, Allbeson captures this era's spirit of despair and nostalgia, the ideological tensions between former war allies and enemies, but then also its enormous potential for optimism and renewal.

Analysed by examining the visual histories of the changing political climate in Germany, the UK and France, post-war history becomes palpable and three dimensional in a way that a historical or art-historical narrative alone would not be able to provide. Both a transnational comparison of images and their circulation and this understanding of the image as active agent support a political anthropology through photographs, a Geertzian 'thick description' of sorts. This approach reveals layers of meaning that emerged in the immediate post-war years and that, according to Allbeson, provided the ground for 'remarkable traction and unprecedented opportunities for pre-existing ideas...that came to reshape domestic, regional, national, and international politics in postwar reconstruction' (p. 235). The book thus is also a compelling piece of historical analysis, which makes it a fitting contribution to Routledge's series titled *Photography, History: History, Photography*.

The book dissects the evolution of Europeanization in its most sincere and utopian moment in the decade and a half after the war had ended, and places this evolution into a broader historical context. Its subject and central concern for the creation of a European identity out of tremendously difficult circumstances turns out to be particularly timely: the devastating war in Ukraine, but also Brexit and other nationalist secessionist aspirations within the European Union, remind us of the fragility of European unity and of the idea of western democracy. This diligently researched and engagingly written book will be a valuable resource and model for urban historians, historians of visual culture and all those interested in the fascinating inter-relation between history, urban transformations and the role that photography played in complicating that history.

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