Reviews / Comptes rendus

Sex and the revitalized city: Gender, condominium development, and urban citizenship

Sex and the revitalized city offers a theoretically and empirically grounded examination of how condominium development, ownership, and governance affect the daily lives of female condominium dwellers in the city of Toronto. Drawing on a variety of sources, ranging from published journal and newspaper articles to condominium advertising, planning documents, interviews with female condominium owners, city planners, and representatives of condominium development firms, Leslie Kern sets out to explore the discourses that shape urban revitalization in Toronto, issues of housing tenure, and the definition of community inside and outside the condominium. She argues that new-build gentrification in the form of condominium development embodies a neoliberal economic and political strategy to reshape the urban and social fabric of downtown Toronto to attract new middle-class residents, especially women, to whom they are marketed as a means to gendered emancipation. According to Kern, they fall short of this goal and, in fact, reinforce patriarchal relations through “property relations, security features, and the promotion of consumption-oriented roles for women, none of which fundamentally challenges traditional domestic or public roles for middle-class women” (p. 201).

Chapter One interrogates the discourses and policies that shape urban redevelopment in Toronto. These discourses refer to the city’s need to enhance its tax base and become more competitive to attract knowledge workers for the post-industrial economy. Kern argues that a neoliberal ideology drives such policies, which are “designed to open the city to flows of capital investment. … to encourage new heights of consumption, and above all to create a widespread consensus that urban revitalization through intensification is a natural, beneficial, and effective solution for Toronto’s current challenges” (p. 25). Chapter Two explores the issue of tenure, arguing “the home ownership element of condominiums reflects a neoliberal expansion of the spaces of capital accumulation in the city” (p. 13) and that advertising and media promotion of condominium ownership conflates gendered freedom with financial security reflecting neoliberal ideals of autonomy and self-governance.

Chapter Three examines how planners and developers, by framing new-build gentrification positively as community building and environmentally and socially progressive, have removed the social impacts of high-rise or high-density living from the arena of public debate. Kern shows that, despite the rhetoric about community building, condominium development, the targeting of specific segments of the population, creates “new geographies of inclusion and exclusion that help to define who is thought of as a community member or fellow citizen” (p. 93). She goes on to show how condominium development may in fact undermine the ideal of stable community by attracting a highly mobile population that view condominiums as a route into ownership that may lead to a detached house elsewhere.

The final two chapters consider the securitization of urban space and how condominium marketing works to promote a myth of urbanity that positions urban living as a progressive rejection of suburbia and a morally, socially, and environmentally superior choice. Kern argues that security features help to open otherwise risky areas of the city to investment, and work to “sell women on marginal neighbourhoods” (p. 138). She goes on to suggest that women, by moving to such neighbourhoods, purchase a “commodified, privatized, and securitized” (p. 150) lifestyle and engage in an identity-making process that positions them as ideal, desirable citizens in contrast to marginalized groups located outside the secured boundaries of the condominium. In this sense, security features operate as real and symbolic community boundaries, suggesting that condominiums are not fully expected to become part of the wider surrounding community.

Contemporary media accounts tend to frame urban redevelopment and gentrification in a positive light. This book forces the reader to view the development process and its outcomes more critically and to ask important questions about urban citizenship and community. While Kern does suggest that residents do challenge developers’ and planners’ objectives in the city, she fails to explore this in any great detail, leaving the impression that condominium purchasers are manipulated by condominium marketers, discounting the democratizing power of consumerism. Overall, this book provides a welcome addition to the North American literature on urban development and should appeal to geographers and urban theorists.

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