

Book Review: Seeing Cities Change: Local Culture and Class

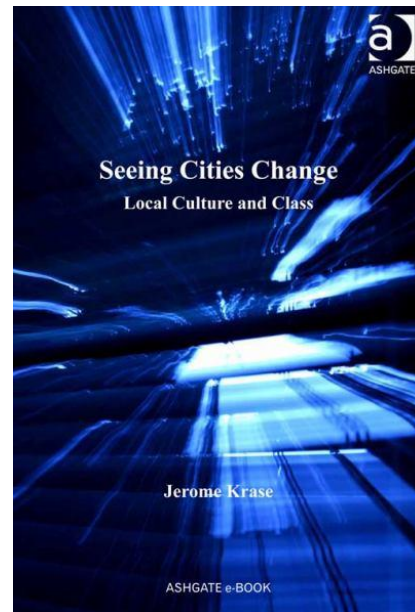
blog admin

Seeing Cities Change demonstrates the utility of a visual approach and the study of ordinary streetscapes to document and analyse how the built environment reflects the changing cultural and class identities of neighbourhood residents. **Ayona Datta** finds this book raises the most important question for urban studies on how best to 'see' cities change through a scholarly lens, however, she is disappointed that it fails to show just how this 'seeing' is structured by the knowledge and power of the researchers themselves.

Seeing Cities Change: Local Culture and Class. Jerome Krase. Ashgate. February 2012.

Find this book

[Jerome Krase](#) is an eminent visual sociologist who has for decades photographed the ways that cities in North America have changed through immigrant life and practices. *Seeing Cities Change* is one of his more important publications which brings together his collection of photographs into a study of urban transformation through photo-documentation. The book is focussed on particular 'immigrant neighbourhoods' such as the Chinatowns, Little Italies and Little Polands in 'western' cities such as New York, Paris, London, Belgium. The author's main argument is that it is possible to visually "read" how the "meanings of urban spaces are changed by ordinary people...and in the process how their agency helps them to become both producers and products of those spaces" (p 250). At the heart of this book is the important assertion that spaces matter, material culture matters, architecture matters in terms of how we understand migration, transnationalism and urban life. Since its publication, this book has been mentioned in [Choice Reviews](#), one of the most prestigious academic accolades ever possible for a scholar.



amazon

Google

Architects or planners might ask however – 'Do we not always see cities change?' 'Isn't that how built environment professionals frame their practices?' The author would argue that it is only when we do this through a rigorous visual methodology that we begin to understand how notions like multiculturalism, diversity and transformation are embedded in local and material contexts and are produced through links to the routes/roots of migrant lives. The aims of the book therefore are both novel and noble in terms of providing a methodological and conceptual alternative to the grand narratives of urban development, gentrification and transformation that has currently proliferated urban studies.

The introduction to the book provides a good mapping of the potential of a visual approach in understanding change. Given that visual sociology is a relatively marginalised stream within traditional sociology, Krase provides us with a comprehensive argument of the importance of the visual in urban studies. This is in line



Little Italy, New York City: Photo by [davidpc_](#)

with recent calls from other urban scholars towards including the sensory aspects of urban landscapes – sound, sight, touch smell and so on. Krase’s argument is that we should attend to the signs and symbols in urban spaces and ‘decipher’ how these are more than aesthetic. In other words, Krase argues that the visibility of urban transformation conveys essential messages to us about who is the product and producer of this place. While Krase is right about the need to mainstream visual sociology, it should be noted though that a number of scholars are already working in the area of sensory urban landscapes without necessarily identifying this as ‘visual sociology’. Indeed in recent years there has been a proliferation of scholarship on what Krase calls “vernacular” landscapes and what is widely understood as visual, participatory and ‘transnationalism from below’ approaches to urban studies. The new and emerging streams of transnational urbanisms and translocal geographies for example make precisely the same arguments that we now need to look more carefully at the material geographies of migrant home and belonging in ways that these are transforming both host and home societies socially, culturally, politically and materially.

The main argument comes across most strongly in the chapters that discuss the transformations in Chinatown, Little Italy and Little Poland in New York. The author distinguishes between these by calling Chinatown a type of ethnic “theme park” while the latter two are called “ethnically defined settlements”. The reason behind this labelling is that while the former is based primarily upon the creation of ‘authentic’ spectacles through food and festivals, the latter two also incorporate residential immigrant neighbourhoods. The notion of these as “vernacular” is repeatedly made by referring to their relationship to integration and multiculturalism within host societies. Related to this is the idea of ‘community’, a perennial sociological ‘problem’. The troubled academic history of ‘community’ is addressed by Krase by aligning it to how residents see themselves as part of a neighbourhood or city. This idea of community and urban change thus challenges some of its more oppressive material manifestations such as in [Arjun Appadurai’s “ethnoscapes”](#) – ethnic neighbourhoods that are both controlled and contested and where urban warfare is waged between the migrants and the state. Oscillating between the visible and the symbolic content of ethnic neighbourhoods, Krase suggests that they are also reminders of the links that migrants make and maintain between ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘then’ and ‘now’, ‘us’ and ‘them’.

As a book that makes a methodological and conceptual contribution, it will be useful to a range of students and scholars from sociology, geography, urban studies as well as architecture and urban planning. However, it also stands out by being controversial in its approach. Sociologists and ethnographers might question the conceptualisation of Polish migrant identities through their links to 'peasant' landscapes and therefore the rigour of this visual methodological approach. They might argue that a project that relies on photo-documentation and semiotic analysis by the same researcher is a double oxymoron. How can one interpret one's own photos of ethnic neighbourhoods through the perceived geopolitical history of those who occupy these spaces? How might these researcher-documented photographs be a product of the researcher's own perceptions?

This book nevertheless raises the most important question for urban studies – is it possible to 'see' cities change through a scholarly and critical lens that goes beyond the tourist gaze? Krase makes a bold attempt at showing us how. In doing so, he joins other urban scholars who are working with critical visual and participatory methodologies to highlight the material geographies of migrant home-making in western cities. However, we also need to attend to how 'seeing' is structured by knowledge and power of the researcher themselves – something that the book is relatively silent on. This is what feminist scholars would call politics, positionality and reflexivity. In other words, who we are, structures how and what we see. Once we acknowledge that, visual sociology can become much more attendant to the politics of power through which urban spaces are presented and re-presented. After all, seeing is political, and urban change is all about the politics of seeing.

Ayona Datta is Senior Lecturer in Citizenship and Belonging in the School of Geography at University of Leeds. Her broad research interests are in the social and cultural processes shaping the politics and practices of citizenship in cities in the global north and south – London, Delhi, Mumbai and Izmir. She uses interdisciplinary approaches from urban studies, feminist geography, and sociology focusing specifically on the connections between social, political, and material geographies of urban spaces. She is author of *The Illegal City: Space, law and gender in a Delhi squatter settlement* and co-editor of *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, places, connections* and has also published widely around cosmopolitanism in global north and south; translocal city, politics of eco-cities, material geographies of home; home, migration and the city; and participatory visual methodologies. [Read more reviews by Ayona.](#)