

Kimberly Kinder (2015) *The Politics of Urban Water: Changing Waterscapes in Amsterdam*. Athens, GA & London: University of Georgia Press. 208 pp. US\$69.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8203-4794-3.

The contiguity of water, islands and cities is as ancient as cities themselves. Innumerable scholars in disciplines such as history, geography and anthropology have long provided research on diverse themes related to islands in the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Mediterranean and elsewhere. These have all been, *ipso facto*, island studies, even if there was no express theorization of the nature of islandness. The contemporary disciplines of island studies and urban island studies seek to foreground the permutations that define islands as islands, on their own terms. It is in this context that Kinder's study of Amsterdam will be considered.

This book has not been positioned overtly as falling within the island studies genre – in this regard, it is much like many other studies that have considered coastal cities, waterfronts, ports and estuarine settlements. But this is not to say that this volume has no relevance for urban island studies. Amsterdam is a city that had its origins on an island and, as Kinder ably shows, has had a historical relationship to water, shorelines and land. The city has been shaped by layered processes of islanding, de-islanding and re-islanding over its long history.

The book is economically organized in just six chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion, and is very deftly argued. Kinder's focus is on the politics of the social groups and governments that have molded Amsterdam's waterfront since the mid-20th Century – occasionally with a backward look to earlier centuries. It is not organized in a rigidly chronological format, but is thematic, with chapters respectively devoted to Hippies, Queers, Heritage Buffs, Planners, Ecologists and Investors. The political focus of the text means that there is a keen engagement on the part of the author with the complex processes of negotiation, activism, legislation and occupancy by which these multivariate groups interacted with each other about water. Of course, the common locus of these interactions was the intersection of waterscape and landscape of Amsterdam, at scales as small as a houseboat and as large as the creation of islands or rebuilding entire waterfronts.

Notwithstanding the thematic, people-centered approach, broad strands of chronology do emerge – and it is clear that many of the actors, actions and events not only changed over time, but also actually overlapped, influencing each other and sometimes feeding off of each other's momentum. Kinder's narrative begins with the houseboat movement of the 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the de-industrialization of the city, and the shifting of much of the city's shipping facilities to Rotterdam. Canals that had fallen into disuse became sites where squatters who took over the occupancy of derelict houseboats from an earlier era, converted major transportation arteries into informal housing zones. Kinder identifies these groups as being countercultural in ethos and activity, and by appropriating the houseboats, they had found a solution to the problem of homelessness for the city's poor.

The decades of active houseboat occupancy unleashed political processes that would show up again in other contexts. There were conflicts of interests – in this case between the rights of the squatters versus the legitimate waterfront homeowners, and the inevitable conflict with government regulations regarding public space. The squatters exploited the ironic

loophole that such regulations referred to land, as opposed to water, and thus the houseboat movement gained significant traction. Ultimately, the claims to rights of occupancy by “hippies on houseboats” were overridden, for the most part, by the more established claims of real estate developers and their impetus to gentrify the canal fronts.

Kinder’s main argument regarding the houseboat squatters is that, while they may, for the most part have ‘lost’ their battle against city legislators, real estate developers and the occupants of gentrified canal houses, these informal occupants can be credited with sparking public interest in water as a living space in Amsterdam, and with the water image that was central to the city’s identity. The thread of this argument continues into the second chapter with coverage of other groups that contested the rights to use and occupy the city’s surface water. These included the Gay Pride movement, which initiated waterborne festivals in the 1990s – a trend which caught on amongst numerous event organizers. Like their predecessors on the houseboats, the festive organizers were able to exploit the gaps in city regulations as far as water was concerned. And just like these predecessors, their activities actually brought the potentials of urban water into the sights of real estate developers and urban regulators.

The third chapter discusses the activities of a group that had a very long engagement with the articulation of Amsterdam’s architectural artifacts – this consisted of preservation experts and historians, whose interests overlapped and conflicted with those of the houseboat occupants and pleasure boaters. Preservation interests were directed at protecting canal-front houses and structures, including the restoration of filled in canals and renovation of canal bridges. Preservationists sought to rescue the city from the modernist and industrializing construction of the earlier decades of the 20th Century, and their sense of the aesthetic and the authentic directly clashed with those who sought to reside permanently on the water, or to clutter the aquatic space with noisy festivals.

All these interests – conflictive though they may have been – paved the way for the planners, architects, ecologists and investors who are discussed in chapters four, five, and six. These groups were responsible for the major construction projects that renovated and even reshaped the Amsterdam waterfront, including its old Docklands, creating a variegated pattern of postmodernist and neo-modern upscale architectural interventions. The old waterfront docks and warehouses, factories and workers’ houses, and their subsequent dereliction, gave way to high-end commercial, residential and infrastructural projects. Urban water shifted from purely instrumental purposes to framing an aesthetic of luxury and sophistication within a scenography of water. Kinder works deftly through these chapters, compressing masses of archival data, to show the contours of political conflict and clout that shaped the changing waterfront.

However, interesting though all the chapters may be, it is in chapter five, ‘Ecologists on Islands’, and again in chapter six, ‘Investors on Floodplains’, that the book becomes especially useful to readers who are grounded in island studies, and urban island studies. These chapters treat respectively, the subjects of the creation and regeneration of the artificial islands of Amsterdam, the re-flooding of tracts of land and creation of floating buildings. Kinder demonstrates a firm grasp of the ecological and technological imperatives of Amsterdam’s peculiar integration of land, water and people, and the politics that surround the protagonists.

Chapter five gives an overview of the Netherlands' history of reclaiming land, and describes the Ijburg development project, the IJssel Lake District ecological projects, the "greening" of water and the regeneration of the older artificial islands, as well as the creation of newer islands of reclaimed land. Chapter six explains more about responses to climate change and rising sea levels through allowing the water to come inland and flood areas that had been dredged in the past, replacing the older preoccupation with creating dry land with waterscapes and floating architecture.

In her conclusion, Kinder reiterates her central argument, that despite the obvious 'win' of big development objectives and gentrification in re-engineering and reconstructing Amsterdam's shorelines, it was the contesting actions of fringe groups that actually showed the potential for exploiting urban water. While she does not advance any overt theoretical affinity to island studies, or 'islanding' as a concept, her detailed and sensitive treatment of the multiple ways in which Amsterdam owes its ecology, architecture and image to its engagement with water, certainly makes this a very useful book, from an urban island studies perspective.

She has captured the quintessence of Amsterdam as a construct that has relied on processes of islanding, de-islanding and re-islanding in various configurations during its existence. Kinder appears to have been very thorough in her usage of existing archival sources, in a wide range of media – fortunately it seems that the Dutch are very good at documenting their politics. She states, "waterfront transformation [...] involves countless small, distributed shifts in social norms, policy frames, and investment practices" (p. 139) and that "shoreline transformation also emerges through the reconstruction of laws, social norms, symbolism and spatial props." She emphasizes that "the rich history of water in postindustrial Amsterdam" embodies a "pluralized waterscape" (p. 141) that was intricately interwoven with politics, with activism, market forces and with innovation.

Are there any shortcomings to this volume? The paucity of images and maps certainly is an issue, though it may well be argued that there are other books that are much stronger in this regard, and which can be used to fill in the visual gaps. The few maps and images, in black and white do manage to illustrate key themes. However, with such a complex coastline, engaging with sea, islands and canals, it would be useful, especially for readers who might not be familiar with Amsterdam, to orientate themselves visually, within the water and landscapes that are being discussed.

On the whole, this is a good book, easy to read, and useful to readers with an interest in urban regeneration, waterfront redevelopment, and of course, urban island studies. For readers with specific island studies interests this book provides data that is relevant to islanding themes, and to the concept of island cities. What becomes very clear from this text is the interplay between a romanticized, scenographic celebration of water contexts, whether sea, inlet or canal on the one hand, and on the other hand, the hard-nosed political and investment processes that finally determine what shape the islands, coasts and built environments would take.

Perhaps the most revealing image is on page 124, showing the Dura Vermeer (2001) proposal for a floating city outside of Amsterdam. These proposed islands are certainly not the randomly shaped and related entities of natural archipelagos. These are highly geometric,

rational constructs, orthogonally devised and with planned relationships with each other and the 'mainland'. This makes very clear the very essence of artifice, and the rational, not just in that proposal, but also in the entire history of Amsterdam's islanding processes. Nevertheless, this rational impetus clashes with what Kinder calls "messy, incremental and rhizomatic pathways" that "generate countless subtle shifts in waterscape assemblages" (p. 139).

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