

Ioana IACOB

THE IMAGE OF NEW YORK AS QUINTESSENCE AND UNIQUE REFLECTION OF URBAN AMERICA



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-An analysis of the city's emergence in
the post World War II period-

Lumen

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Editura Lumen este acreditată CNCISIS sub nr 003

www.edituralumen.ro, www.librariavirtuala.com

Redactor: Morariu Irina Maria

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale:

IACOB, Ioana

The image of New York as quintessence and unique reflection of urban America

-An analysis of the city's emergence in the post World War II period-/Ioana IACOB

-Editura Lumen, Iași

Bibliografie

Pag. 153

ISBN: 978-973-166-099-8

94(73 New York)

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Pagin 1 sat goal inten ionat

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INTRODUCTION

In its unremitting quest for the elusive destination of an ‘all-encompassing’ locus, the American city forges a panoramic view dominated by a history of diversity and cosmopolitan specificity. The breath-taking odyssey that carried the urban space from a gregarious pragmatic community, to a cultural promoter of the nation’s artistic mission and eventually, to an economic leader of the global democracy, reads as a vortex in which identities, architectural revolutions and ideological mobs joint inside the pot of America. Its ramifying story of acceptance, assimilation, rejection and stereotypy brought the city at a stage where one can only hint at the complexity that governs the metropolis’s structure in terms of democratic narrative. Indeed, growing simultaneously with the transforming conception of American freedom and pursuit of achievement, the city never stops its trajectory, becoming, instead, a centripetal force that causes both prosperity and grievous distress upon America. New York’s story of the wealthy and the indigent, the heralded and the forgotten, the corporate magnate and the thirsty consumer, depicts precisely the discourse of a nation that cast its web over an ocean of differences and obtained a fruitful hegemony.

It is, therefore, the purpose of my dissertation to explore and analyze the congruencies between the urban phantasmagoria and its social, cultural and economic repositories, on the background of America's image. Asserting the manner in which New York, as the epitome of an urban nation, enacted internally and shaped its core representation according to the shifting times of the second half of the 20th century, is salient for a global comprehension of why and how America always appears to be prompt in its reactions. In this respect, what is the specificity of New York's politics of conquest when acquiring the position of a global locus? Furthermore, how does the city pertain to organizing its material distribution and its soft imagination so as to address, in a politically correct manner, the issue of a melting pot city? And consequently, is the cultural approach to the multiple identities the proper one?

The focus is on representing the image of New York through the lens of the soft city as a construct of imagination and symbolic representation, respectively, of the hard city as it materializes its architectural format, and, eventually, through the filter of ethnic diversity, as an engine that applies the city its creative plural label. The thesis will present these instances through which the city functions, by referring to the cultural and architectural innovations that the second half of the century has

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applied to New York's ideological corpus. Accordingly, the endeavor to analyze the urban representation and the displacement of a plain collective identity to characterize the city will be pursued in three distinctive chapters.

The first chapter outlines the frame that encompasses the soft city as a counterpart of the palpable material construct, by an analysis of New York's contemporary legacy of recurrent symbols and myths in the urban representation. While cropping the symbols as defining tags for a city that is recognizable through a plurality of metonymic and urban myths, the narrative of New York appears as a projection of imagination of its inhabitants. Consequently, a debate on the identity of the New Yorker follows, in which the purpose was to ascertain how the city defines one's identity through the cosmopolitan frenzy and the fast-pace lifestyle. Eventually, the chapter tackles the image of the city at night and the city as an imaginative façade, by showing how New York reads as a dual narrative.

With an accent on the architectural representation of post-war New York, the second chapter presents the exposure of the hard city and the means by which the diversity of styles still allows for a cosmopolitan and appealing disposal of the urban space. The hegemony of the skyscraper on the New York skyline and its inherent labeling of the city as a wealthy, prosperous and

neutral giant forges a synthesis between the aesthetics of postmodernity and the American pursuit of power and economic supremacy. At the same token, despite its architectural diversity and sky-high dominance, New York is bereft of the community spirit, being torn between the image of the Manhattanite high-life and the dystopian urban frontier.

The aim of the final chapter is to concentrate on representing the cultural diversity of New York by projecting the focus on how the city is built as a store house of ethnic images and identities. In order to depict New York following this pattern of ethnic diversity, it is mandatory to understand how distinct identities can be bridged through the clashing theories of the melting pot and the salad bowl, and respectively, how the urban frontiers enact upon the racial and ethnic entities as pressure forces that bereave individuals of their voice. Eventually, an overview of the celebration of diversity is tackled in the last section of the chapter, in which the purpose was to analyze how the ethnic and racial life spectacle encompasses the status of an urban popular culture and sets the tone for cultural revival(or revolution, for the same token), resorting, in the end, to the assimilation in the larger compound of America.

The interest in New York as an epitome and unique image of Urban America in the specified timeline roots in the

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appreciation of the city's distinct character standing at the core of American complexity. Furthermore, the sphere of this domain allowed for an original and analytical introspection in the appearance of the American city, which led to further wanderings in the realm of a city that is both plural and rigid. Such a space of urban imagination, combined with the material and socio-political representation, serves as an effective means of reading the identity of a contradictory construct and of interpreting the ideological corpus that governs modern America.

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1. Soft City of Illusion: Symbols and Myths that Shaped New York

*What sphinx of cement and aluminum backed open their skulls and
ate up their brains and imagination? Moloch whose buildings are judgment.*

Allen Ginsberg

Envisaging the urban American spatiality as a conundrum for the fusion between the palpable and majestic architecture and the abstract socio-cultural identity, the city claims its hegemony. With a history that crosses the temporal extension of two centuries, the American city outgrew into an entity that now owns its private identity, being a mammoth made up of multiple fragmented particles. Even if the materiality of the lived spaces that transform into either metropolises or middle-towns appears as a prerequisite for a thorough definition of the city, it must be emphasized that the imaginative compound of the American city is becoming more and more a matter of central interest, and, consequently, integrates in the debate of understanding cities.

Indeed, such a representation (a non-material one) is mandatory for portraying the identity of the American spatial distribution, since cities, no longer a simple utility-purpose sphere, project personalized images of the American democracy and creed. Nevertheless, when such cities enlarge to the status of becoming global spaces, in which the melting pot no longer dissociates among its private identities, nor do the myths have any clearly-stated roots, the conversion towards universalism seems to be an ultimate step.

The American city of the 20th and 21st centuries appears to have taken in fact several steps ahead, by letting loose of its static and architectural design and directing towards a more libertarian and creative hub of consciousness. Accordingly, nowadays existence of city narratives and their consequent embodiment into an urban discourse, accounts for the assertion that the city is much more the projection of imaginative, creative, social, cultural, political and economic artifacts than the result of material constructions and architectural design. With a plethora of imagination and representation, the city, therefore, become a soft creation, one that is molded according to its inhabitants, to its cultures of the underground, to the public imagery and to the new symbols that forge the cradle of the ever-evolving civilization. (Drafting significance through symbols and icons

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requires a referral to the difference that marks the two concepts, specifically, that “symbols are signs that stand for ideas-truth, beauty and goodness-and icons are signs which have certain properties that the object it denotes also possesses.”¹⁾

Discussing the soft city as a dimension of both the conscious representation and the merge of desire and imagery, the representation of the urban transforms into a never-ending retexturing. In this respect, New York City perfectly embodies the complex image of the city, a super-structured yet inherently chaotic locality of the American spirit, in which fairy-tales of urban myths transform into perverted harsh realities at the same pace as consumerism simultaneously engulfs and expands the creative sparkles of imagination. New York is America’s “imperial city, its art nexus, but at the same time a frightening Oz to its inhabitants”²⁾, a city that is permanently seized by a venturesome boldness and an ethnic collage. With a dualism(with respect to the soft and the hard city)that surpasses any other standard urban settlement, New York is the unique image of the bohemian, cosmopolitan and capitalist mingling, being, without doubt, the assumed centre of the world.

¹ Charles Morris, *Signification and Significance*, 1964, apud. Browne, Ray B., Fishwick, Marshall, *Icons of America*, Popular Press, Ohio, 1978, p. 38

² Neal R. Pierce, Jerry Hagstrom, *The book of America: inside 50 states today*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1983, p. 31

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sau din librăriile noastre partenere.

Extras din volumul:

Iacob, I. (2008). The image of New York as quintessence and unique reflection of urban America. An analysis of the city's emergence in the post World War II period. Iași, România: Lumen.



ISBN 973-166-099-2



9 789731 660998

Conținutul acestui volum nu
reprezintă în mod necesar
punctul de vedere al Editurii
Lumen sau al finanțatorilor

Publicat cu finanțarea:

media
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