



A Review of: City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America, by David Fleming

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Book Review

City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America, by David Fleming. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. 332 + xiv pp.

David Fleming's *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America* is a timely monograph in at least three respects. In the wake of the election of Barack Obama, *City of Rhetoric* analyzes the role of public discourse in residential politics in Chicago's black neighborhoods—the area where the new president once worked as a community organizer. At a time when scholars in many disciplines are directing attention to the design of social space and the politics of place (a trend that Warf and Arias have called the “spatial turn”), *City of Rhetoric* invites readers to consider the relationships between rhetoric and the built environment. Lastly, as anthologies on composition studies are calling for new pedagogies that locate writing as an embodied practice in specific places (Keller and Weisser, Vandenberg et al.), Fleming's book examines the role of geographic imaginaries in the textbooks of the field and draws on his experience as director of the Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst to advance new ways to situate students' rhetorical acts in particular communal contexts.

The project Fleming outlines in his preface to *City of Rhetoric* is an ambitious one: he draws on political theory, urban planning, and rhetorical studies to examine how the “decentralization, fragmentation, and polarization” (xi) of social space are linked to specific discursive practices. In so doing, Fleming proposes to reverse a longstanding failure of these three disciplines to sufficiently spatialize politics and politicize space.

The introductory chapter that follows Fleming's preface focuses on the area of Chicago where the projects popularly referred to as “Cabrini Green” were eventually constructed (and later demolished) in order to sketch the historical, political, and discursive factors contributing to the segregation, poverty, and crime that came to characterize public housing by the 1990s. Fleming devotes particular attention to the racial politics of discourse surrounding the building, deterioration, and (proposed) revitalization of these residences. In previewing the three competing plans to renovate or redesign the Cabrini Green area, Fleming argues that the narratives surrounding these projects shed light on how contemporary urban space is shaped by disparate notions of civic problems and possibilities stemming from competing social imaginaries. Fleming argues that such divergent views need to be interrogated in the public sphere, a realm that he wants to

concretize as particular sites for the “embodied social practice” of rhetoric rather than treat as an abstract context for political discourse (13). Fleming sees the ideal sites for such practices to be urban spaces, arguing that a modern flight from cities has led to increasingly homogenous (suburban) settings for daily life, the demise of a viable polis, and impoverished political and rhetorical practices that depend on diversity and conflict to flourish.

The remainder of the book is divided into three major sections establishing the theoretical and political exigencies for the study, analyzing the relationships between residential planning and public discourse in four different residential sites, and considering how these case studies should inform housing policy, rhetorical pedagogy, and discursive practices in the future.

The first section of *City of Rhetoric* argues that political theory needs to re-imagine citizenship as a specific set of geographically located practices in order to recall subjects’ “embeddedness in, and dependence on, the natural and built worlds” (23) and examines how republican, liberal, and postmodern discourse fails to adequately attend to social space. Calling for both new theories about, and innovative designs for, public places conducive to deliberation, Fleming follows with a consideration of the ideal scale for such sites of engagement. Through a critical reading of the role that the nation (as the primary site of citizenship) plays in several best-selling composition textbooks, Fleming argues that situating discursive practices in such a large and abstract space discourages a desirable level of participation. However, Fleming also concludes that a retreat to neighborhood communities as primary sites for rhetorical practice suffers from a different problem: the tendency toward homogeneity and conflict-avoidance combines with a limited capacity to effect social change to render discursive exchanges in such places both insipid and inconsequential. In place of the nation or the neighborhood, Fleming proposes the “urban district” as a “neglected but potentially powerful scene of politics and rhetoric . . . a category around which we might organize civic projects of importance to us” (56).

The second section of *City of Rhetoric* examines the discursive constitution and spatial design of four very different models of residential space associated with Cabrini Green: the ghetto it became, a suburb (Schaumburg) where impoverished black residents were dispersed into primarily affluent and white neighborhoods, a New Urbanist revitalization project (North Town Village) built to replace an older housing project, and a residential cooperative that operated in one of Cabrini Green’s buildings from the early 1980s to 2003. Drawing on historical records, demographic data, and rhetorical analysis, Fleming argues that Cabrini Green became a ghetto as a result of racially motivated policies and practices that effectively contained, isolated, and then abandoned black residents; suburban Schaumburg profited from white flight from the city and its problems (but not its amenities); and the New Urbanist North Town Village’s integration of diverse residents is only achieved through a whitewashing of political and social inequities that reinforces race- and class-based hierarchies. In contrast to these three sites,

Fleming characterizes the housing cooperative at 1230 North Burling Street as a project initiated and managed by current Cabrini residents, supporting their right to self-determination and encouraging communal ties grounded in shared social identities and interests.

Furthermore, Fleming contends that particular spatial and design features of the four sites *City of Rhetoric* examines work to shape discursive practices that take place in them. For example, he finds the ghetto's high-rises to offer few common areas and the terror, violence, and physical deterioration characterizing them to inhibit any civic practices that might otherwise take place there. While suburban geography differs sharply from the ghetto, Fleming argues that its expansive private lots, curving streets, and lack of public space are fundamentally anti-urban and designed to facilitate a withdrawal from difference, conflict, and the democratic deliberation required for negotiating them. Despite North Town Village's urban architectural style and designated common rooms, Fleming finds the codes governing community propriety and aesthetics as well as its planned social activities (sharing stories to emphasize what residents have in common) to elide diversity and prevent residents from drawing on the social, cultural, and ideological differences that can create conflict and spark robust dialogue. Once again, *City of Rhetoric* depicts the housing cooperative as the best alternative to other models, because it created "against staggering obstacles, a complete and functioning structure of self-government" (170) that did not dilute or silence the voices of minority and underprivileged residents by relocating them to settings where they often meet with disdain (or even open hostility).

City of Rhetoric's concluding section contains a plea for a return to public spaces in urban districts where citizens can contend with difference and conflict, rather than avoid them by fleeing to the suburbs or embracing New Urbanist narratives of community. To prepare citizens for this type of engagement, Fleming advocates pedagogies in public schools emphasizing the rhetorical skills necessary for students to responsibly participate in argumentation and deliberation and locate such practices in specific "civic education" projects. Finally, *City of Rhetoric* includes a brief afterward with an impassioned critique of President George W. Bush's tendency to prioritize military action abroad and ignore the housing crisis at home, which the author links to increasing urban decay and poverty as well as a lack of civic debate around issues of social inequality and social space. Given the status of public housing in national politics and the demolition of Cabrini Green, Fleming acknowledges that the outlook for viable, integrated, and productive residential developments looks bleak. However, *City of Rhetoric* ends with the author's hope that innovative local design, environmental critiques of suburban sprawl, and a generation of students properly trained in rhetorical practices will combine to create new social spaces for citizens to inhabit together.

The merits of *City of Rhetoric* include the way the text draws attention to the role of rhetoric in the constitution of social spaces and the political implications of these operations. Fleming's case studies highlight how some key national trends

of the twentieth century, including suburbanization, residential segregation, urban decay, and the racialization of poverty have contributed to social inequality and also shaped political discourse. In addition, these studies point to specific features of the built environment that may inhibit or enable particular discursive practices.

Unfortunately, despite Fleming's emphasis on the "urban district" as the ideal social space for "binding, effective, political decision-making" (56) and his repeated referencing of conflict as a necessary component of productive engagement, none of the case studies he presents profile such concepts at work. While ample time is devoted to the ways in which public discourse shaped housing policies and perceptions of residents, the purported links between geographic scale, residential design, and rhetorical skills underwriting Fleming's prescription for revitalizing public deliberation are not sufficiently elaborated in *City of Rhetoric*, and we get very little analysis of specific communicative practices of residents living in the areas profiled (even in the idealized space of the housing cooperative). For this reason, readers interested in examining how discourse *about* residential spaces perpetuates racial logics are likely to find *City of Rhetoric* extremely valuable, but scholars who want to analyze how practices *in* residential spaces can foster democratic deliberation (the purported aim of the book) are unlikely to be satisfied. In short, reflecting on the aspirations Fleming announces in the preface, the project does more to politicize space than it does to spatialize politics.

However, to say that *City of Rhetoric* fails to adequately address all of the issues it raises is not to dismiss the contributions it makes. After all, we must admit that "Revitalizing the Public Sphere" is a tall order. Overall, *City of Rhetoric* is an invitation to further study rather than a definitive statement on the relations between discursive practices and residential design. As such, this text helps to lay a foundation for future explorations of the links between rhetoric, politics, and social space on which others may build.

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