

*The Archaeology of American Cities*

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Words do not begin to capture what makes a city a city. As Nan A. Rothschild and Diana diZerega Wall point out early in their book, *The Archaeology of American Cities*, the old sociological definition that emphasized “size, density, permanence, and heterogeneity” does not adequately account for what is distinctive about urban life. Rothschild and Wall add humanizing details. Cities, they say, “contain most human activities and practices and many ethnic, racial, and class groups.” They “superimpose the cultural world on the natural, and they give the illusion of isolating humans from nature. They incorporate the future and the past, express hope and fear, wishes and anxieties; they connect and fragment their populations” (pp. 3–4). While recognizing that structural complexity has a great deal to do with becoming a city, the authors also recognize the human complexity and argue that historical archaeology can meaningfully add to the understanding and history of both.

Following an excellent chapter on the history and practice of urban archaeology (chap. 2), Rothschild and Wall introduce the idea that urban archaeology has contributed substantially to an understanding of cities on both the macro and micro levels. This idea serves as a kind of organizing principle for the remainder of the book. They distinguish

between cities as artifacts and the evidence for the detailed human activities within them. Laid out in chapter 3 of the book, this distinction makes it clear that urban archaeology is much more than finding troves of artifacts. Beginning with a discussion of grid plans and how they repeatedly break down, they contrast the Spanish-influenced plan of Santa Fe with the French style of Mobile and New Orleans, and further with cities like Trenton and New Amsterdam that were not planned at all, but “grew organically” (p. 47). They describe 17th-century archaeological evidence for baroque town planning recorded in St. Mary’s City and Annapolis, Maryland, and go on to consider evidence for various activities that influenced the transformation and growth of cities in the 19th century including landfill, railroads, utilities, and highways. What is wonderful about this book is the breadth of coverage—from one coast to the other and from the 17th century to the 21st. It is a true testament to how much urban archaeology has been accomplished in the last 30 years or so and how much has been learned.

The breadth of coverage is also evident in the chapter about trade and manufacture (chap. 4). While we archaeologists who spend years on a single site thought there would never be time for comparison, Rothschild and Wall have done it in spades. I especially love the comparison of Winan’s grocery, excavated in New York City in 1984, and Hoff’s Store, excavated in San Francisco in 1985. Both succumbed to fire—Winan’s in 1835 and Hoff’s in 1851. From Winan’s the archaeologists learned about the scope of New York City’s involvement in international trade in the

second quarter of the 19th century, while the excavation of Hoff's produced "a vivid image of a thriving San Francisco retail establishment on a single day at the height of the Gold Rush" (p. 86). The excavations were done just a year apart, but it has taken many more years to bring them together, which is, after all, one of the purposes of this series of books about the "American Experience in Archaeological Perspective." With this series, editor Michael Nassaney has provided the opportunity for us to see where we stand, to summarize what we know, and contemplate future directions to pursue.

Rothschild and Wall make lots of comparisons, between the archaeological investigations at Fort Orange in Albany, New York, and investigations at Hermann's warehouse in lower Manhattan; between taverns in Boston and a tavern in Williamsburg; between shipping facilities in Philadelphia and ships found beneath landfill in San Francisco; and they use the archaeology done in Paterson, New Jersey, and at the Boott Mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, to discuss the effects of industrial capitalism. The rise of industrial capitalism is one of the themes that run through the book and it is interesting to see how much more there is to talk about than consumer choice.

The chapters about "Race and Ethnicity in the City" (chap. 5) and "Class and Gender in the City" (chap. 6) show how urban sites, most of them investigated as cultural resource management projects, have been used to bring long-gone neighborhoods to life. They look at African American sites in the East and Chinese American ones in the West and compare how residents (and archaeologists) interpret the meaning of material goods differently. There is a discussion in chapter 5 of a Mexican American household in Tucson, how its members used Native American ceramics

before the railroad arrived and European ones afterward. Contrasted with this is how the Irish at Five Points in New York City and in Paterson, New Jersey, used ceramic and glass to suggest an identity shift from immigrant to citizen. Employing the methods and work of social historians in addition to archaeological methods, urban archaeologists are building a picture of life and lives that were sometimes forgotten and often misunderstood. This book goes a long way to showing how much urban archaeology has added to the social historical project.

Many urban projects have produced evidence of 19th-century middle-class life, and much effort (including Wall's own) has been spent interpreting the meaning of the rich material assemblages recovered from privies, cisterns, and wells on urban lots. The recovered materials provide the opportunity to address questions of gender from the use of tea sets in the creation of the cult of domesticity to the practice of prostitution in brothels. While studies of gender have generally been concerned with women—as participants in domestic reform, as inmates in almshouses, as housewives and mothers—several recent studies described in the book deal with the expression of masculinity and there will hopefully be more in the future.

The last major chapter in *The Archaeology of American Cities* reflects one of the challenges that has faced cities that planned construction in areas that were once cemeteries. These projects have also been challenges for archaeologists who have had to learn to excavate in the eye of the public and work productively with descendant communities. In the instance of the African Burial Ground, found in New York City in the early 1990s, the project was politically charged from the beginning and, as pointed out by Rothschild

and Wall, it “was the first instance where members of a descendant community took control of a historical archaeology project and affected its outcome” (p. 177). The African Burial Ground and numerous other cemetery projects have provided invaluable data on all sorts of issues, from attitudes toward death to nutritional stress, and they have also influenced how even noncemetery projects are now conducted. Because urban projects are done in public view and may involve interested parties, some kind of public component is expected (and required), be it a viewing platform, site tours, blogs about ongoing work, lectures, or a pamphlet written for the general public. The president’s house project in Philadelphia, which attracted thousands of visitors to a viewing platform above the excavation, is a prime example and is described in some detail in the book.

*The Archaeology of American Cities* is a very good book, both for people who do urban archaeology and people who wonder why we bother. It is impressively comprehensive and in addition to describing how it is done, the authors go a long way to justifying why it is worthwhile. The book dips into many cities and many archaeologists’ work to illustrate

what can be learned on both the macro and micro levels about urban growth and change over time. While this far reaching comparative approach is effective, there is a missed opportunity to discuss the in-depth approach to one city taken by Alexandria Archaeology. Beginning in 1977, Pamela Cressey implemented a “city-as-site” approach and from the very beginning worked closely with community members to incorporate archaeology into the interpretation of the city’s history. Many of the things we do today—public outreach, oral history, volunteer involvement, artifact processing in public view—Alexandria Archaeology did first. What is perhaps most notable about the work in Alexandria is that it is not always crisis driven. An historical and archaeological context developed over many years provides a context for evaluating the effects of pending construction, an ideal that would be wonderful for other cities to follow. Without such plans, however, and even in cities as huge as New York, much has been accomplished, and Rothschild and Wall’s book recounts the exciting results.

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