was deliberate—they have left to us the task of imposing individually useful categorizations on the wealth of material in this book.

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The Human Experience of Space and Place. Edited by Anne Buttmer and David Seamon. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980, 199 pp., figs, refs., index. $27.50.

This is one of those books you wish had been printed on exquisite handmade paper and luxuriously bound in full leather in an edition strictly limited to the contributors and their parents and close friends. A collection of six skimpy essays distilled from doctoral dissertations completed under Anne Buttmer at Clark University in the 1970s, sandwiched between two of her own pieces, and garnished with a pair of mawkish reminiscences by the editors (“It was a bleak rainy afternoon in September 1970 when I arrived in Worcester . . .”), The Human Experience of Space and Place may also appeal to a minute number of sympathetic (and well-heeled) Clark alumni. Buttmer herself calls the tome a “souvenir.” I guess you had to have been there.

It is the stench of broken promises that gets to me. Of the eight substantive contributions—it is impossible to regard the foreword, introduction, and afterword in this light—five in one form or another are already in print: Buttmer’s “Social Space” appeared in these pages; her “Home, Reach and the Sense of Place” in those of a Swedish journal; much of Breitbart’s material on Spanish anarchism ran in Antipode; and the complete dissertations of Rowles and Seamon were published as books, the first by Westview Press, the second by St. Martin’s. Furthermore, Godkin’s work was presented to the Sixth World Congress of Psychiatry, an audience that presumably found it a great deal more useful than most of this book’s audience will. This is not obscure stuff. In fact, it is old hat.
A page count is even more damning: Less than a quarter of this not inexpensive little volume will not already be in most of the hands that will ever hold it, and much of that is fluff. If university and public libraries—who will buy most of the copies of this book that will ever be sold—were flush with cash, perhaps it would be different. Perhaps. But they are not, and many are against the wall. To ask them at fourteen cents a page to buy scribblage largely already in their possession is unconscionable.

It's the broken promises: I wouldn't ordinarily raise issues like this till the end of a review, but a book that preaches a phenomenological conscientiousness cannot expect to be treated like a book espousing an analytic modeling approach to the study of geomorphology. How am I to take Buttmer's contention that her inability "to take a culturally relativistic attitude toward the placeless landscapes of reach" (i.e., the United States) "derives from a nausea about values which make machines, commodities, movement and salesmanship more important than human encounter," when she manifests precisely these values in her editorship of this shoddy, redundant commodity? As a joke? Or am I to imagine a sad tale of entrapment by a rapacious publisher?

Fondness would urge me toward the latter reading, but the text gets in the way: It's as littered with contradictions and violated compacts as the landscape Buttmer so loves to hate. Consider her attempt

over the past few years to develop a method of investigating my own experience of home and reach in the two contrasting milieux where most of my time has been spent: the Glenville home and an apartment building on Main Street, Worcester, Massachusetts. The aim was to stand as objectively as possible inside my own experience and through sharing an inquiry with those who lived in the same apartment building to arrive at some understanding of the insider's world there.

If this paragraph may be taken as granting any insight into her conception of the problem, it is no wonder that—like so much of her work—"this study has not been altogether successful," for not only does she prejudice the case by thinking of her place in Glenville as "home" and her place in Worcester as "an apartment building," but she slips all too readily from the promise of the first person ("my own experience") to the dreary reality of the third
("the insider's world"). Nor does she make much attempt at understanding. Incredibly, for an article described by David Seamon in his afterword as articulating the need for an approach "to elicit and interpret these and similar experiences in a way whereby the appear as they are in themselves rather than as the researcher makes them out to be because of theories, assumptions, personal background, or some similar set of blinders," Buttmer has no hesitation in writing of her fellow residents that "although a good number of my fellow residents were elderly and retired, they scarcely ever thought about place at all." And instead of imagining that this might be because of her bizarre theories or unwarranted assumptions—or because they have, in their strong sense of place, no need to belabor endlessly what she in her ceaseless jetting among Ireland, Sweden, and the United States has not—she concludes that they "had become much better adapted to placelessness and individualism than I."

As many times as I have read these lines I still get so angry I want to throw things. It is not simply, or even, that I too lived in an apartment building overlooking Main Street in Worcester in the 1970s and know how baseless are her asseverations (but of course it was my home, not my pied-à-terre in the States); nor that she shields her methods from criticism by failing—as is common in her reports of her own work—to reveal them (for I am curious to know how she knows what her fellow residents thought); nor even that she blinds herself to her most obvious blinders in an article about seeing her blinders. No, it's the unbridled arrogance of her contempt for her fellow residents and the world they live in, which, because she cannot see it, must not exist—a contempt she manages despite having only paragraphs earlier moutheed such pieties as these:

For both insider and outsider, perhaps the greatest challenge is pedagogical: a calling to conscious awareness those taken-for-granted ideas and practices within one's personal world and then to reach beyond them toward a more reasonable and mutually respectful dialogue.

A couple of paragraphs from a single paper you will say. But—Graham Rowles's paper aside—all the paragraphs of these papers
are like this! They excel in telling me how to go about my business, but fall on their faces when they themselves attempt to carry into practice the high-sounding words. It is the very essence of the failure of humanistic geography: Its adherents want to get inside others, but will not let others get inside them; they want to share the outsider’s world, but not let the outsiders share theirs; they want to pry and pick at the life of the housing project resident, to listen to the stories of the elderly, to crawl beneath the skin of the alcoholic, but express no interest whatsoever in exposing to the excruciating scrutiny of the wondering world the ways of the graduate student and the college professor. It is not the hypocrisy that bothers me—though that is intolerable—but the possibility that the issues addressed are less aspects of the world than of their characteristic situation. If Buttmer, in her earlier Glasgow study, finds “a peculiarly squalid landscape” invisible to its inhabitants, if she is attuned to “the demise of place,” if Relph and Seamon envision a trend “toward an environment of few significant places—toward a placeless geography, a flatscape, a meaningless pattern of buildings”—can it not be postulated that the vision is nothing but a vision, a chimera, an eidolon apparent only to gadding graduate students and peripatetic professors? Perhaps it is only those refusing to sink down roots who find rootlessness everywhere, only those unwilling to collaborate in the making of place who despair of its ever being made. Wandering from university to university, haunting the airport corridors in their nomadism of meetings and conferences, lodging their sense of identity not in streets and landforms, place ballets, and autochthonous diets, but in the trajectories of their individual careers, these academics strike me as uniquely inept students of the human experience of place. The Academician’s Experience of Space and Placelessness is the title of a book whose subject I have some confidence they could write about with insight and conviction and on whose basis they could begin to erect an understanding of place in the experience of others. But understanding, like other virtues, begins at home, and it is quite clear that the authors of these papers haven’t the foggiest idea of what that means.

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