Review: City Choreographer: Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America

Anthony Raynsford, San Jose State University

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Alison Bick Hirsch
City Choreographer: Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America
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City Choreographer constitutes the most comprehensive monograph to date on the well-known landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, whose often-dramatic designs for fountains, plazas, and interconnected pedestrian pathways helped to change the faces of various American cities during the 1960s and 1970s. From the perspective of current planning policy and preservation, this monograph is timely insofar as a number of Halprin’s best-known works, notably Denver’s Skyline Park (1974) and Minneapolis’s Nicollet Mall (1968), have recently been destroyed or altered beyond recognition. Other Halprin landscapes remain in a state of disrepair or planning limbo. Part of the purpose of the book, reiterated in the introduction and conclusion, is to make a plea for the ongoing recognition. Other Halprin landscapes remain in a state of disrepair or planning limbo. Part of the purpose of the book, reiterated in the introduction and conclusion, is to make a plea for the ongoing recognition of Halprin’s stated intentions and the works he actually created, in particular the paradoxical difference between his desire for indeterminate openness and the relatively closed or fixed nature of his urban compositions. While valid, this critique does not touch on the most pressing historical question implied by the book’s subtitle, Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America.

The specter hovering at the periphery of this monograph is what was known in the 1960s as the “urban crisis”: the decline of historical downtowns, violent civil rights protests, racial tensions, inner-city disinvestment, and the wider resistance to top-down planning by experts and politicians. What happened when Halprin’s version of urban choreography collided with the various reactions to postwar urban renewal that began to appear in the 1960s and ended in the demise of modernist certainties during the 1970s? The picture that emerges in this book is that of an aesthetically innovative landscape architect, steeped in the forms and rhetorical tropes of 1950s modernism, forced to adapt to the rapidly shifting ground of the 1960s and 1970s in order to survive and succeed. Employing the language of ecology and experiential immediacy, as well as the social experimentation of “encounter groups,” Halprin was effectively able to sustain a foothold in the California counterculture and thus mediate between the demand for a grassroots, community-based design and the more traditional apparatuses of city planning commissions and commercial property interests.

This portrait enlarges and refines our understanding of urban and landscape design during and after the crisis of postwar urban renewal. However, the reader has to extract this narrative with a degree of effort. The book weaves back and forth between reiterating Halprin’s theory of “choreography” and presenting a critique of the difference between Halprin’s stated intentions and the works he actually created, in particular the paradoxical difference between his desire for indeterminate openness and the relatively closed or fixed nature of his urban compositions.
a sequence of examples or case studies that are only very loosely tied to any overarching historical narrative. Many passages contain lengthy block quotes, sometimes nearly a page long and sometimes almost back-to-back, with the result that the author’s own voice often becomes muted, buried under the sheer weight of archival detail. At other times, the author’s critical voice seems to disappear behind that of Halprin’s own discourse, as when we are repeatedly informed that this or another example of Halprin’s design “invited participation.” The quantity of examples and thickness of their descriptive detail become inversely proportionate to the analytical clarity of the larger argument, and it is often easy for the reader to miss the forest for the trees. Moreover, because the book is thematically divided into three distinct parts, each with a different narrative and main point, one almost has the sense of reading three separate books on Halprin’s work side by side. Each part can easily stand on its own, and there is little sense that the parts build or depend on one another. This tripartite structure is perhaps more reflective of a desire to divide up conveniently a vast amount of material than of an attempt to generate a single, compelling story about Halprin in the context of urban renewal America.

Under the general heading “Introduction,” the first part of the book contains a lengthy biographical essay detailing the formative influences and theoretical development of Halprin’s work. Hirsch argues here for the significance Halprin’s wife, Anna, a successful dancer and choreographer in her own right, in the theoretical development of landscape as choreography. This section certainly provides a useful supplement to what is already known from Halprin’s own explanation in The RSVP Cycles. However, Anna Halprin’s role largely disappears in the sections that follow, titled “Built Work” and “Community Workshops,” in which various partners and designers within Halprin’s firm become much more prominent.

“Built Work” consists of a roughly chronological assessment of Halprin’s urban projects, beginning with Ghirardelli Square (1962–65) and Market Street in San Francisco (1962–75) and ending with Seattle Freeway Park (1976) and Manhattan Square Park in Rochester, New York (1975). Urban renewal appears in this section mainly as a peripheral context for these examples. In some cases, such as the sequence of designs for Portland, Oregon, Halprin’s firm played the role of ameliorating the alienating conditions of an existing urban renewal project. Likewise, Seattle’s Freeway Park was intended to “heal” the condition of a freeway cutting through the heart of the city. In such projects, Halprin’s designs served to soften, or “humanize,” urban renewal. In other cases, such as the design for Rochester, Halprin’s work was supposed to act as the generating core for an urban renewal development that never materialized. However, most of Hirsch’s analysis here has to do with Halprin’s aesthetic intentions, recounting his transition from designing shopping mall landscapes for Victor Gruen to designing large, often spectacular abstractions of rivers, cliffs, and waterfalls intended to create interactive urban environments that brought metaphors and experiential equivalents of nature into the midst of the city. Despite the particularity of Halprin’s imagery, there are formal and rhetorical echoes here of both British Townscape designs and Garrett Eckbo’s work for Victor Gruen at the Fullerton Mall in Fresno.

It is only in the final part of the book, “Community Workshops,” that a more detailed and critical examination of urban renewal and its politics emerges. In chapter 5, titled “Facilitation and/or Manipulation: The Challenges of Taking Part in Fort Worth, Everett, Charlottesville, and Cleveland,” Hirsch explains how Halprin and his firm orchestrated participatory planning workshops in order to arrive at conclusions closely matching the firm’s preconceived ideas of the design issues and corresponding solutions while at the same time forestalling grassroots resistance by appearing to derive the designs from popular consensus. Thus, by “choreographing” the ideas and movements of a selective cross section of the urban population, Halprin could reconcile the pluralism and awareness of social difference that increasingly marked the tumultuous politics of the 1960s and 1970s with the universalism that was key to his aesthetic ideology. While one might wish that these and similar critical insights had been woven into a more coherent narrative project for the book as a whole, it could be argued that the extensiveness and relative “open-endedness” of the author’s engagement with the Halprin archive provides plentiful fodder to be taken up by future historians.