

Ella Howard (2013)

Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp.288, \$45

I came of age in suburban New York in the early 1980s, and trips to the city during this time provided my first encounters with homelessness and the Bowery. Here was a stretch of Manhattan marked by haggard old men, seedy surroundings, and empty bottles of Night Train Express wine were littered everywhere. By then the Bowery, one of the best-known examples of the “skid row” homeless districts that marked all large US cities, had almost passed from the urban landscape. With this passing came a transformation of homelessness into its contemporary incarnation and the ascent of this issue to the social problem most emblematic of the post-industrial city. Ella Howard, in her book *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America*, looks to the Bowery as a link between homelessness past and present, and more broadly, as a window to understanding “the complex relationship between poverty and place in nearly a century of the modern city” (p.5).

Conventional accounts of skid row districts such as New York’s Bowery emphasize their unique place in the urban landscape. Skid row was seen as a distinct ecological niche, akin to a reservation for the homeless that defined US homelessness during the post-World War II era. Central to this ecology was a continuum of housing that ranged from low-cost residential hotels, to cheap “flophouses”, to municipal shelters, and Christian rescue missions for the truly down and out. Bars, cheap eats and soup kitchens, pawnshops and used clothing stores, and other institutions catering to the homeless man (skid row was predominantly, though not exclusively, male in demographics and in orientation), were set amidst dreary commercial areas. Welfare bureaus and charity organizations would steer those in need of relief to skid row, and police would see to it that skid row residents, once settled, would know their place. Here place became an extension of the man; spatial and personal dimensions of failure that represented a cautionary tale to a society in the midst of prolonged prosperity.

In contrast, Howard’s approach to the Bowery is an indirect one, viewing the Bowery through the actions of emissaries from the mainstream—chiefly policy-makers, charities, urban planners, and researchers. She picks up her narrative in the 1930s, when the Great Depression exiled tens of thousands of newly displaced

economic refugees to the Bowery and overwhelmed its ecology. The first two chapters provide a thorough and in depth chronicle of local and federal efforts to address this poverty, which was of an unprecedented scale and urgency. She shows how the demands of this widespread destitution trumped the traditional reservations of charity, and transformed welfare policy, albeit reluctantly. Chapter 3 extends this narrative into the post-World War II era. Here Howard continues to follow the municipal response to poverty and homelessness, and expands this view to include the developing field of alcohol rehabilitation as the state of the art approach to responding to the homeless man. Chapter 4 has skid row on the skids, with grassroots interests battling City Hall to determine the nature of the Bowery's demise, and Chapter 5 scrutinizes the expansive research done on the Bowery by social scientists at Columbia University's School for Applied Social Science Research. The final two chapters examine the resurgence of homelessness in the 1980s, this time bereft of its geographic moorings, and link this resurgence to a Bowery that no longer exists.

Contrary to what is promised in the introduction, it is unclear how this monograph lays out any systematic intersection of poverty and place. The first two chapters, while offering compelling narratives in and of themselves, are more general narratives about addressing Depression-era poverty and homelessness and are largely devoid of specific references to the Bowery. But homelessness in New York City was never interchangeable with homelessness on the Bowery. During the Great Depression, hordes of newly unemployed partook of the Bowery's endemic poverty but not of its subculture, and Howard leaves this juxtaposition unexplored. By the third chapter we are in the 1950s, and the wave of newly homeless that commanded public attention in the Great Depression had receded to again leave the Bowery to a reduced number of more stereotypical homeless denizens. But by here it is clear that Howard has abandoned pretences of clarifying any intersection of place and poverty. Instead, she laments about how policy was dominated by a persistent and pervasive viewing of homelessness as "a group of sick individuals" at the expense of veering away "from serious structural analysis of poverty" (p.114).

Such a bait and switch to the tired trope of individual versus structural causes of homelessness gives this book a thematic drift just as it comes to its two strongest chapters. In chapter 4, Howard finally sets her sights directly on the Bowery, as the battleground of a larger conflict between community interests and New York's planners. True to Theodore Caplow's description of the skid row as "a social system [that] adapts to the external environment by not reacting to it" (1970, p.6), Bowery interests themselves were secondary to the outside interests who were the primary players in this struggle for how the area should be redesigned. Ultimately, this battle royal was fought to a stalemate and granted the Bowery a stay from the wrecking ball whose shadow now casts a pall over the district. Here Howard shows how the

Bowery's inconspicuousness, once its key survival weapon, became a liability as different interests had different designs on this district, and questions of what to do with the dwindling number of aging Bowery habitués were secondary to competing visions of what to do with the Bowery real estate.

To answer questions on how to best clear the bums off the reservation, policy-makers turned to social science. Skid row has always been the object of disproportionate fascination among social scientists, a place where, again according to Caplow "for the price of a subway ride, [the sociologist] can enter a country where the accepted principles of social interaction do not seem to apply" (1970, p.6). Led by Caplow and Howard Bahr, the Bowery became the focus of extensive research in a partnership between New York City and Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research. In chapter 5 Howard turns the tables on the researchers with an in-depth view into the processes and findings of this Bowery project. What results is an even-handed assessment of this largely forgotten body of research, done with the benefit of almost fifty years of hindsight. This leads to new insights on this research for those familiar with this literature and an accessible entrée for those who are not. Particularly impressive is how Howard fits this research in with both the social theories and policy priorities of the time, while pointing out the blinders that ultimately limited this research.

And then, with the onset of chapter 6, the Bowery was gone. It is only after Howard spends most of the chapter delving into the crises and politics of the resurgence of homelessness in the 1980s that she returns to the Bowery to examine its demise. Her explanation is basically twofold. First, she argues that by the 1980s the Bowery was lost to the forces of gentrification and, second, that shifting demographics led to a situation where, as the traditional older white male Bowery population declined, a younger, darker skinned, population of both genders, and often with family in tow, emerged to present a much different homeless population. Neither explanation is particularly satisfying. The Bowery was one of the last in a succession of disappearing skid rows across US cities. As Howard shows, predictions of the Bowery's demise anticipated its demise by several decades, and the more interesting question is how skid row was able to hang on as long as it did. The answer to this lies in the political economy on the Bowery, something that is largely missing in this book. Attention to this would paint a different relationship between poverty and place, one where poverty was lucrative enough for Bowery-based commercial ventures to stave off a succession of attempts to clean up the area. Ultimately, this got more difficult with the declining numbers of homeless (of the old, white male variety).

Viewed in this light, there would not appear to be much continuity between the homelessness on the Bowery and the homelessness that has confounded every New York mayor since Ed Koch. The Bowery, both in place and in person, was a

remnant of Depression-era homelessness that passed away. This contrasts with “new” homelessness that came of age in the “double-dip” recession of the early 1980s. Along with their differing demographics, their geography is different as well. Theirs is a post-industrial geography, not rooted in the social disaffiliation of Caplow and Bahr’s Bowery, but rather in the concentrated poverty and hyper segregation of such New York City neighbourhoods as Harlem and East New York.

Given this, what is the legacy that the Bowery, and homelessness past, leaves to homelessness in a more contemporary era? Howard’s response is to give a whirlwind tour of homelessness in New York City through over two decades and three mayoral administrations before asserting that New York’s skid row policies showed “moderate effectiveness” and “public-private partnerships at work” (p.220). At that point such an assertion seems more like nostalgia than argument, as support in the book for such a position is hard to come by. A closer look at the current state of homelessness would also reveal more specific continuities with the past. For example, in the wake of the evisceration of the single room occupancy (SRO) hotel, a Bowery mainstay that kept many skid row residents from literal homelessness, have come new models of housing in which non-profit organizations are essentially rebuilding this SRO stock. Additionally, just as homeless people on the Bowery aged and gave way to a “new” homelessness, there is now evidence that this more recent generation is now aging and declining. In the wake of this decline, another generation of homelessness appears to be massing, rooted in such dynamics as the Great Recession, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and mass incarceration policies (Culhane *et al*, 2013).

In summary, this book casts some welcome attention on the Bowery, an area that has historically sought to be left alone. At its best, Howard introduces the Bowery as a setting for the efforts of public agencies, private interests and researchers to address homelessness. For these efforts, the book is well worth the read. Howard also attempts to frame these elements in narrative which, instead of providing a grander overview of homelessness, conflates homelessness on the Bowery with the more general poverty of past eras and creates tenuous continuities between skid row homelessness and the more contemporary homelessness that succeeded it. This leaves the reader poring over some good history while searching for a promised intersection that never really occurs.

› References

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