Rob Sampson’s research has important implications for how we understand cities, in the way urbanites themselves understand each other. Sampson demonstrates that perceptions of urban disorder are fundamentally tied to the hard facts of racial and economic inequality, which is to say that the visual evidence of disorder is projective rather than deductive (in psychoanalytic terms). This means we are processing something other than what we see directly.

In one way this finding is not surprising, but in another it is quite original. Not surprisingly, urbanites, like all human beings, possess a code for analysing sense data. Surprisingly, Sampson shows us that most urbanites use the same code. A purely interest-based or identity-view would suggest that poor blacks see less disorder in their own environments than do rich white outsiders. Sampson’s research demonstrates that a common yardstick of malaise defines urban perceptions. Originally, he shows the variability over time in these perceptions, as patterns of race, wealth, and migration re-configure the city.

His work has implications that go beyond measures of perception. The immigrants and migratory processes which diversify cities in time also promise to diminish the fear of disorder; that is, the more dynamic a city can become, the less fearfully chaotic it will seem. In British and American terms, this means looking at immigrants as a positive source of urbanity. This is not how police officers think, but Sampson’s conclusions ask us as planners to stop thinking like police officers.

Because Sampson quotes my early book, *The Uses of Disorder* (Sennett 1970), I’d like to add a note on where I see the issue of urban disorder today, 45 years after writing the book. When I wrote it, I wanted to affirm the positive vitality of certain forms of perceived disorder: these perceptions can stimulate awareness of others as much as arouse fear and desire for withdrawal. All truly adult experience negotiates tension and dissonance, rather than seeks, as younger human beings necessarily must do, for a more fixed sort of security. In the America of the 1970s, the built environment – rigidly segregated into zones,
its buildings and territories self-contained – diminished this kind of adult negotiation of difference. In the past two generations architectural and planning practices have in some ways made the problem only worse, as in the rise of gated and guarded communities. But the enormous influx of immigrants into British and American cities has countervailed, producing the kind of dynamism Sampson notes.

When I wrote *The Uses of Disorder*, I had used one yardstick of order/disorder: a contrast between definition and ambiguity in urbanites’ perceptions. What I had not understood then is that disorder can also be defined in terms of perceptions of decay. A life-time of travel in non-Western cities has led me to think this alternate yardstick is equally important – which is to say that the broken windows, broken plumbing, dirty sidewalks of places which have been abandoned are perhaps more important visual and physical measures of urban chaos than the police officer’s definition of disorder purely in terms of crime. The poor are condemned to the sensate realm of decay, a consequence of being left behind, of being forgotten.

Sampson’s thoughtful research suggests that, like wilfully broken windows, the realm of decay may be a shared yardstick of inequality. In the immigrant spaces he celebrates, though the inhabitants are resource-poor, the use of those resources such as they are – spaces for commerce, sociability and family – is intense; these spaces certainly mark poverty, but they do not convey a sense of social collapse; they are well-kept, well-maintained for the purposes of survival. In sociological terms, immigration increases a city’s cultural capital, though the people who bring this increase have little money. If I’ve read Sampson right, therefore, we ought to welcome the vitality of urban migration as a resource for the city, rather than trying to ‘stabilize’ the urban environment by keeping outsiders out.

(Date accepted: December 2008)

**Bibliography**

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