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Book Review: Just Below the Line: Disability, Housing and Equity in the South

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Just Below the Line: Disability, Housing and Equity in the South. Korydon H. Smith, Jennifer Webb and Brent T. Williams. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1-55728-923-0 (cloth: alk. Paper). \$49.95.

In Just Below the Line: Disability, Housing and Equity in the South, Korydon H. Smith, Jennifer Webb and Brent T. Williams shed a light on the complex relationship between the cultural expectation of home and practical necessities of house. Discussions that have long been mostly in the abstract are now shifted into the concrete, as the aging Boomer population is increasing the conflict between expectations of independence and the reality of such opportunities. In focusing on Arkansas and using it as “a test ground” the authors highlight the unavoidable truth; that changes in health status brought by poverty and aging frequently result in alienation and dependence.

The Smith, Webb and Williams break the discussion into two primary sections: Toeing the line and Redrawing the line. In “Toeing the Line,” a good deal of time is spent defining the parameters in which builders, consumers and policy makers have functioned. The discussion of the medical and social models of disability is a great introduction to a layperson. The explanation of what led to the 2001 change of the WHO’s International Classification of Function Disability and Health to the verbiage of “health condition” flows well and anticipates the idea that such “semantic quibbling may seem trivial.” The chapter on defining the home provides good fodder for the discussion of home as identity and transitions the reader seamlessly into poor design as an impediment to both psychosocial and physiological recovery.

As one might expect, “Redrawing the Line” emphasizes the changes that need to take place. The authors work from the understanding that health is a continuum and that any adaptations that are made in reaction to change must be part of a dynamic process connected to the degree of disability and the different physical and emotional terrains to be navigated. So, as per their example, a healthy active man may find no impediment to climbing the stairs of his home but may find climbing much more problematic after an ankle injury or even more so in the wake of chronic knee pain. Universal Design (UD) could obviously help builders better design structures that anticipate such changes, and there are fantastic plans of prototypes provided.

Yet the politics of the worksite are unavoidable and thankfully these conflicts are not dismissed by the authors. Turf wars resulting from ideological conflicts between UD and other design specialties, as well as the “mutual resentment felt among designers, builders, code officials, and consumers” (143) resulting from “code creep” make it difficult to move forward in a collaborative way. And yet, such collaboration is necessary. Especially as the move toward voucher systems and away from federal owned/-operated housing dictates that people with disabilities must look to housing constructed or renovated by individual builders.

Ultimately the strength of this text lies in the how the authors pull the ideological discussion into pragmatic application. It is obvious, from the introduction, that using Arkansas as a lens through which to look at housing needs and policy change makes sense purely because of the confluence of age and poverty in the population and that one can also widen the lens to include the South as a whole. That being said, it is unclear why the authors felt the need to cheapen their discussion by continually tying things back to anything “Dixie.” Additionally the use of lyrics from Johnny Cash and Dolly Parton and periodical references back to Cash seem tenuous and ruin the rhythm established by the narrative. Had the authors simply left these references out, and continued on with their clear explanation of such a complicated subject, they would have been much better off.

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