

BOOK REVIEW

Li, Na

Kensington Market: Collective Memory, Public History, and Toronto's Urban Landscape
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At the centre of Na Li's *Kensington Market* is the provocative idea that collective memory both shapes, and is shaped by, the urban environment. Li confronts this notion as an urban planner, and animates it as a practical and methodological problématique by asking, how can collective memory be accessed and incorporated into planning theory and practice? Taking the reader through an empirically rich historical tour of the unique Kensington Market neighborhood in Toronto, she develops and deploys an innovative methodological response to bringing collective memory into the planning process—the Culturally Sensitive Narrative Approach (CSNA).

Li's CSNA is a call for planners, policy-makers, architectural designers and others to situate their practice within the specific historical context of the neighbourhoods they work in. For Li, community history is something to be experienced through the built urban form, the history of buildings, and the collective stories neighbours tell about those spaces. In order to operationalize this—to access and enter into the historical context of a given community—Li's CSNA leans on the techniques of oral history. She readily admits that canvassing local residents for oral histories, as part of the planning process, is a tricky and time-consuming proposition. Yet she nevertheless insists on it. As she puts it, "we need to spend a great deal of time in the field, with humility and diligence, and allow residents to tell their own stories at their own pace and in their own terms" (7).

Li recognizes that this approach to planning—or any approach, for that matter—is never politically benign. The danger in curating histories and operationalizing them through urban planning practice is that marginalized stories and experiences could be lost and familiar power relations reproduced. Thus Li urges diligent CSNA practitioners to be reflexive, and to ask of themselves, "Whose past and whose memory are we trying to interpret and preserve? Which version of history are we choosing to remember or neglect?" (6).

The middle three chapters of Li's tidy monograph put into operation aspects of the CSNA summarized in the introductory chapter. Li's approach comes alive against the vibrant backdrop of the ever-changing Kensington Market neighborhood. Li weaves together a historical narrative of the area while adeptly drawing on archived textual material, participant observation, and interviews. What emerges is a very readable book with a wide appeal—likely of interest to urban planners, urban historians, urban anthropologists, and faculty and students from cognate disciplines.

As a work of scholarship, the book makes two primary contributions. First, it adds to the body of work focused on excavating the history of the venerated and idiosyncratic Kensington Market neighborhood. Second, Li's work makes a methodological intervention into the urban planning discipline. Li's *Kensington Market* largely succeeds on both counts. However, in the latter respect, her anthropologically-inflected approach is not beyond scrutiny. In her defense, Li makes clear that her CSNA is a qualitative approach, focused on "the intangible, the immeasurable, the priceless" (82). In her desire to bring the particularistic into the planning process, however, Li may be inadvertently miscalculating the impact of broader structural trends on the process of urbanization. She portrays the dynamics of urbanization as untethered and specific, yet as many critical urban planners and theorists have amply demonstrated, as capitalism became generalized across the globe, so to did the processes of urbanization. It would be unfair to expect Li's book (or any, for that matter) to resolve the ontological tensions between—to put it far too simply—human-centered and structure-centered approaches. However, the challenge nonetheless remains: How to design a progressive, culturally sensitive and particularistic planning methodology which *also* takes into account the broader structural geography of global capital? Though

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she's silent on this matter, Li's approach—grounded as it is notions of justice and place—provides readers with a sturdy foundation upon which to build.

Michael Classens

Michael is a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Geography at Western University.