



Building the Black city: the transformation of American life

by Joe William Trotter, Jr., Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2024, 1 + 212pp, \$27.95 (hardback), ISBN 9780520344419

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BOOK REVIEW

Building the Black city: the transformation of American life, by Joe William Trotter, Jr., Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2024, 1 + 212pp, \$27.95 (hardback), ISBN 9780520344419

Joe William Trotter Jr.'s *Building the Black City: The Transformation of American Life* (2024) is fundamental and exceedingly significant to the interdisciplinary canon of African American Studies/AFAM History/AFAM Urban Studies. Trotter's subtext is most alluring: "The case for reparations must include a profound appreciation for African Americans working on their own behalf" (1).

This convergence of African American urban studies shining a spotlight on Black self-reliance and racial uplift to fill a crucial gap in the reparations argument makes the book innovatively momentous. He does this by exposing the legacies of Black unpaid wage labor as it operated in the making and maintenance of the metropolis. Like many African American urban studies specialists, Trotter rightfully underscores the problem that needs to be corrected: is to recognize, give credit to, and acknowledge African Americans as integral, creative, vital city-architects and city visionaries.

The book "integrates the creative role of African Americans as city-builders into an overall case for reparations for descendants of African people enslaved in America" (8). This is certainly forging new groundings. Trotter's thesis focuses "on the different ways that African Americans have influenced the built environment of American cities" (2).

The "seat of the trouble", as another preeminent historian, Carter G. Woodson, would affirm, is the issue of *historical reductive analysis*. Historical reductive analysis takes on many forms of (anti-Black) scientific racism. For this case, it is a white gaze convention in urban studies of making African Americans, in their encounter with the metropolis, *non-contributors* and not visionary role players in the conception and manifestation of the "modern/contemporary shared metropolis". Trotter's text is thus revolutionary as an intervention to a common complacency of miseducation. He connects how the built environment for whites in the "main city" was inherited (though unpaid and uncredited) from the Black city.

Recent interrogations of the Black Metropolis conceived assert that the definitional problem of the "Black city" has been misleading. This critique, however, bears introspection because it assumes the Black city's construction solely rests in African Americans having (full) control of "the resources and power of urban spaces" (2).

We know this has never been the case. As Trotter demonstrates, the Black Metropolis was simultaneously erected despite and because of these disruptive forces of municipal white domination. One should be quite aware that the jury is out on how African Americans made *ways out of no ways*. By this cognizance of persistent infrastructural agency, we can begin to parse out the Afro-enlightening developments of the "Black city building process". Ultimately, we discover anew, and again, that the white derailment of Black progress in the troubled Black metropolitan encounter was not completely successful.

Part of tackling this problem arises in the histo-geographical erasure of the African American presence in pioneering city spaces. Take the case of Seneca Village, condemned by the New York municipality, wherein African American homes and institutions were destroyed to make way for the now-famous Central Park. This burying of the Black presence under the "free range" of white sovereignty, luxury, and privilege constitutes more of (non-Black) America's unpaid and uncredited ingratitude and debt to African Americans. Trotter poses an important critical inquiry through these kinds of juxtapositions, excavations, recoveries, and confrontations. Does this

lack of *full power and control* invalidate how Andrew Williams during 1825 (an African American bootblack), by his role in building Seneca Village, not only succeeded in constructing a Black city space but “influenced the built environment of the larger predominantly white city” (207).


Trotter illuminates how African Americans’ creative strategies and adaptive vitality (withstanding the confrontation of this white hegemony, still) gained access to space and “constructed urban communities [undeterred by] their own internal [divisions and conflicts]” (207). Challenging ongoing historical reductionism of African American accomplishments, Trotter emphasizes that these (Black) systems additionally served as a launching pad. This launching pad “forged powerful civil and human rights movements” (207), which toppled the institution of slavery and its “reinvention” of Jim Crow.

Its richly layered research content comprises the strength of the text. It concretely reveals the “Black city building process” to have several shaping factors, such as the emergence of African American churches, the African American press, the acquisition of land for burial grounds, African American renters (even though Black people as renters have been stigmatized as non-contributors and not productive to Black progress), homeownership, African heritage mutual societies, Black businesses and other Black institutions.

One may normally think about the Black business infrastructure and independent Black institutions as the main fulcrum for which the Black city exists. Yet, Trotter pinpoints that the acquisition of burial grounds, in particular, established “informal African-inspired social and cultural relationships that would later power the construction of African American churches, fraternal orders, and businesses” (125). This tradition of acquiring burial grounds in the African American city ties a direct link back to a paramount African society practice. Its practice and importance “strongly reinforced the city-building process and helped to spur Black communities across the Northwest” (125).

These factors show that full control of municipal resources and power is not necessary for the Black city to develop. Readers will resolve for themselves that the Black city is a co-existential manifestation. To this level of comprehension, the Black city is not only a “city within a city”, it is a city alongside a city. The increasing confluence/influence of the African continuum and its African descendant population through its racial uplift politics set into motion “mainstream” practices embedded in the modern city. Ultimately, Trotter exposes that the preservation of “the old African ways” specifies a prime characteristic in the making of the Black city in “an area that was theirs alone” (125).

Trotter’s text documents African American urban life over three centuries. It never falls short of its goal for the broad spectrum of its reading audience: “to see much more clearly how the Black city, built by Black people [marks] an extraordinary achievement” (212). Sooner or later, the American sane, rational mind is going to have to come to terms with the debt owed to African Americans. Trotter corroborates superbly for us why African Americans have a cherished penchant for saying, “We built this country”. Faced with a constant volatile mixture of white arrogance, resentment, and its obsessive forces to replace (whitewash) our memory, this testament overwhelmingly bears no cultural delusions. In unison with Trotter’s necessary Black urban awareness-raising, it recognizes historical truth is a precious commodity in a time where truth itself is under attack.

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