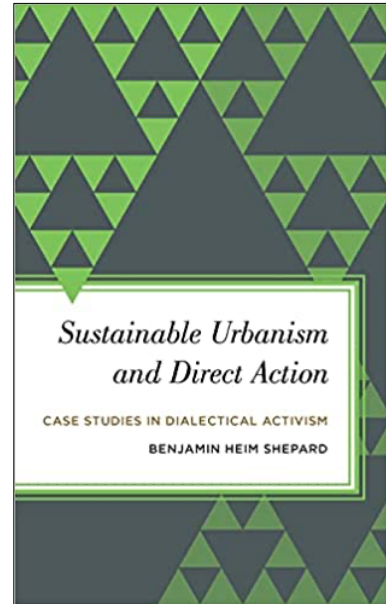


Benjamin Heim Shepard, **Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action: Case Studies in Dialectical Activism**, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, 286 pp., \$115.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
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Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action is Benjamin Heim Shepard's 11th book, and it is one of his best yet. In this collection of essays, the author extends his analysis of New York's changing landscape through a series of case studies that elevate collective action at the center of the kaleidoscope that makes up the urban experience during the age of neoliberal globalization. In 15 chapters and dozens of vivid pictures and figures, Shepard illuminates the seamy sides of capitalism run-amok that characterize contemporary cities, and the myriad ways neighborhood groups and social movements respond to create and sustain vital forms of community in urban America.



Shepard's writing is simultaneously intimate and philosophical, personal and political, literary and scholarly. He engages grand intellectual traditions (Marxism, Anarchism, Queer Theory) and employs a range of analytic tools (dialectics, social theory) to address vexing and pressing challenges (poverty, racism, climate change) facing urban scholars and residents. Primarily using qualitative research methods—ethnography, interviews, participant observation—Shepard engages timeless debates about the interplay of structure and agency, determinism and free will, alienation and connection, labor and environment, theory and practice, Eros and Thanatos. Shepard examines clashing forces through “ethnography and historical narratives” to offer “an investigation into dialectical activism in thought and practice” that explores the “contested nature of the city” through struggles over its public spaces (p. 4).

In *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action*, Shepard invites readers to think about vexing urban problems—and to act—in ways capable of breaking through stale cul-de-sacs of “reform and revolution, use and exchange . . . housing and gardens, bikes and cars, streets and sidewalks, race and class, harm reduction and pleasure, apocalypse and utopia” (p. 2). Shepard's approach, like the field of urban studies itself, is eclectic and synthetic rather than rigid and reductive. Like an actor in improv theater presented with a scenario by another actor, Shepard points to the myriad ways activists don't merely counter one another with a “but” but instead respond with an “and,” *adding* to the mix efforts to shape urban life.

The rich case studies feature diverse groups of residents who keep the heart of neighborhoods beating on a daily basis through their creative and determined efforts to reclaim public space and build community. On good days and bad days, through gains and setbacks, conflicts and alliances, Shepard helps us make sense of the mashup that is urban life in the 21st century. Through evocative stories, Shepard details campaigns undertaken by a wide assortment of organizations and activists struggling to forge viable

pathways to a more vibrant, fulfilling, and desirable future. That is the essence of sustainable urbanism. And that is no small feat.

Several of the book's chapters previously appeared in publications as varied as his analysis of urban subjects, including the *Fifth Estate*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Theory and Action*, *Socialism and Democracy*, *New Political Science*, *Sexualities*, *European Journal of Humour Research*, *French Review of American Studies*, *LOGOS*, *Queering Anarchism*, *Environmental Social Work*, and *Ecosocial Transition of Societies*. Yet, the book does not read like a mismatch of disjointed material; instead, it delivers a powerful cohesive analysis.

The book begins with a meditation on dialectics. Shepard argues that cities, like movements, evolve over time and place, propelled forward by dialectical interactions of countless elements, operating at the individual and collective level, and at the local, regional, national, and international levels. Capitalist accumulation both reflects human activity and shapes human dynamics, as well as the structure of political opportunities in urban neighborhoods. Following Marx and contemporary urban scholars, Shepard points to how new productive forces create new social interactions, new structures of oppression and displacement, which marginalize and immiserate poor people of color, in particular, in countless ways, but also how capitalist dynamics create new capacities for collective action and ownership in urban spaces. Like Marx, Shepard maps out the balance of forces in play—the organization of classes at a particular time—to better assess the terrain on which to craft effective strategies and tactics to wage struggles capable of achieving the desired transformation. Noting that Marx did not predict an inevitable utopia at the end of the road, Shepard similarly acknowledges the future is contingent and dependent, structured by powerful institutions and by collective action. Thus, both Marx and Shepard contend, to wage an effective class struggle, you need viable methods and means, and that requires dialectical thinking and strategic action. Utopia is on the horizon, as is the apocalypse, and we make the road by walking together.

Shepard firmly situates “the lives of activists who have watched their worlds altered as subjects and objects ebb and flow, along with targets, and actors find meaning in different forms of engagement” (p. 9) and make change. Invoking the Highlander Center, Shepard notes that during the 1930s it was engaged in struggles around labor; in the 1950s and 1960s, it was about civil rights; and in the 1970s and 1980s, it was fighting pollution and mountaintop removal. As conditions changed, so did its organizers. This is the essence of “praxis.”

Shepard highlights similar examples of “praxis” in community-based activism in New York. In one prototypical example, Shepard cites L. A. Kaufman's perceptive observation that Black radical traditions and Puerto Rican activism (and activists) were and are evident in contemporary efforts to reclaim public space, such as in struggles over community gardens. Kaufman notes that people involved in the fight for community gardens

were people with activist histories, who had maybe been in the Panthers or were in the Young Lords. You found a lot of people who were in one way or another tied to older radical traditions, especially the Puerto Rican and Black radical traditions in New York. There was a real sense of reconnecting with these older legacies of struggle. (p. 3)

Shepard sees a dialectical process at work in these and other cases, and in so doing, he sheds light on the processes involved in the “continuation of the story, not a gap in radical history. Radical history kept moving, building on the contradictions of history to move forward . . .” (p. 3) in new ways to reclaim public space and build community.

Successive chapters include extended analyses of campaigns to protect public goods from neoliberal global forces that Shepard participated in with a rich array of community-based organizations, affinity groups, labor unions, performance artists, and committed activists during the last two decades, including efforts to save and revitalize libraries, parks, schools, housing, gardens, bike lanes, waterways, hospitals and clinics, museums, transit, vital social services, and much more.

The last chapter explores “manifestations of mutual aid and support,” (p. 239) born as the pandemic raged, following the brutal killing of George Floyd that sparked the largest mass movement in U.S. history. The pandemic created the basis for forms of mutual aid and support that Shepard values and highlights in several case studies, including “emergency responses and food delivery with New Alternatives for LGBT Youth, jail support, activism in the Black Lives Matter Movement in Brooklyn, and food and mutual aid in the City Hall Autonomous Zone” (p. 239). Shepard, a veteran of ACT UP’s battles against AIDs, provides powerful insights into fissures exposed by the pandemic, and most important, relevant lessons about how mutual aid and direct-action strategies and tactics developed by ACT UP help get the goods to meet our current moment. Loss, rage, love, and political action are key players in *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* and our collective future.

In our current moment, filled with peril and possibility, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* is a welcome and timely intervention that casts a needed spotlight on effective ways to be actively engaged in forging a collective future that is more just, meaningful, and sustainable.