



## RADICAL ATLAS OF FERGUSON, USA

REVIEW 2 OF 2 FOR THIS TITLE

By Patty Heyda

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THE *Radical Atlas of Ferguson, USA* is a gut punch; a heart-wrenching exposé filled with over one hundred maps telling the shameful story of America’s urban blight. The power of these maps—coupled with short, decisive prose—explain how urban growth was manipulated and regulated to create a space of political antagonism and racial violence in a major Midwest metropolitan area. Today, Ferguson, Missouri is synonymous with the 2014 murder of Michael Brown, a Black man, at the hands of a white police officer; and with the riots that followed. The atlas author, Patty Heyda, is a noted professor of architecture specializing in “erasure urbanism,” or the “**processes that erode urban, democratic, and lived space.**” She uses her skills in spatial forensics to challenge her readers to recognize and address the long-standing, systemic issues consistently impeding the well-being of minority residents. Heyda employs a variety of maps and images to weave a complex and often sub rosa story about how one place came to be long denied basic public amenities like parks, daily postal service, or safe spaces for children to gather—things many people in American cities take for granted.

The story told by this atlas; that so many urban planning and other professionals, alongside generations of office holders, worked so closely together over the course of decades to systemically oppress generation after generation of a disadvantaged underclass—and dissembled about it year after year—simply to further and entrench the interests of a privileged elite; is one that I, myself, find unimaginably outrageous. Heyda’s exposé rips aside the polite veils the

powerful usually draw over such conspiracies—it shouts the quiet part out loud.

Spatial forensics offers an essential framework for analyzing the power dynamics underlying urban development; it focuses on the gap between the intended goals of urban design and its actual systemic outcomes by illustrating many of the varied contradictions that can infest contemporary city planning practice. Heyda’s use of this methodological approach allows her to critically examine the intricate interactions between institutional actors—including urban planners, architects, and political administrators—and the lived experiences of urban residents.

The maps’ spatial analyses forensically deconstruct the mechanisms by which municipal infrastructural systems—tax policies, housing and building codes, regulatory enforcement, and assorted administrative variables—systematically undermine the potential for holistic urban livability. These institutional frameworks technocratically shape urban design principles to prioritize metrics of administrative performance and economic productivity while deprioritizing resident-centered approaches. As a result, the lived experiences and needs of local communities are subordinated to narrow systemic objectives. This can, for example, be seen in the way administrative decisions concerning tax incentives (146) and housing codes (Chapter 2) systematically reinforced segregation and poverty. Similarly, policing strategies were structured to prioritize revenue generation over public safety concerns (229). The



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frameworks erected by these approaches burden low-income residents, deepen distrust between the community and law enforcement, and consequently perpetuate a technocratic vision of urban development that marginalizes inclusive and human-focused design principles in favor of functional and economic imperatives.

In the atlas “Foreword,” Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman of **Estudio Teddy Cruz + Fonna Forman** write of their belief “that urban justice must begin with recognizing the contested spatial, political and cultural dynamics that reproduce injustice in the city, recontextualizing histories of racism and urban violence, and piecing together forensically the ways that historical macroaggressions have been naturalized within the official processes of knowledge construction and urban development” and how “*Radical Atlas of Ferguson, USA* shares this aim” (8). “Urban violence” they write, “is rooted in social and economic inequality . . . that . . . is exacerbated by accelerating privatization and public disinvestment from already vulnerable communities,” and that the urban forensics that underpin this atlas expose how “privatization, public defunding, social exclusion and urban violence are causally intertwined” (9). Cruz and Forman go on to observe that the need for just this type of urban forensics “is urgent today not only in war-torn zones across the world but also in mundane suburban landscapes, whose relentless banality masks histories of violence and exclusion.” In reading this atlas, I found it hard not to think of other communities—such as Harlem, Compton, or Flint—that are suffering similar conflicts.

The atlas is divided into six chapters: “Introduction,” “Territory,” “Space,” “Opportunity,” “Politics,” and “Justice”—with a list of maps before the Table of Contents and a list of Sources and Acknowledgments at the end. Each chapter is further divided into topical subsections, each containing one or more maps that serve to illustrate multiple aspects of the overall story of development and decline. The numerous color photos included alongside the maps enrich the atlas further. Heyda, utilizing data from a variety of open sources, worked with students and research assistants over a period of ten years verifying data and building each map. The team made “every effort . . . to use open, publicly available sources, to maintain the full accuracy of what is being shown, include correct dates and give full credit to the original source of the data.” (272).

Each subsection of this atlas explores a specific topic in detail, and includes both explanatory notes on the

situation and on potential solutions to the issues. Take Section 2.1.03 (56–61), “Subdivision and HOAs,” in Chapter 2 (“Space”) for example. The section opens with a map spread illustrating how planned residential districts and homeowner associations enforce governance rules that disproportionately penalize the low-income families that make up the majority of residents in Ferguson. Notes on the left explain that “subdivisions insulate property for wealth accumulation and / or to shut others out” and that “homeowners associations [HOAs] hoard control as they uphold a private system of hyper-localized taxation and rules that benefit only those within the HOA boundary” (56). Four large color photos particularize the situation on the ground (58–61), and also a suggestion that “more connected neighborhoods could be linked to robust public transit to reduce through traffic and make streets safer, while still fostering public life and easier commutes for school kids across and between subdivisions,” (59) and helping to alleviate some of the isolation and desperation faced by these communities.

St. Louis County has eighty-eight separate municipalities, each of which has multiple subdivisions, all of which are overlaid with many administrative organizations empowered to levy taxes. The result is a mosaic of overlapping government agencies with numerous regulatory roles, each enforcing its own arrays of rules, defending its own bureaucratic turf, and regularly acting under the assumption “that the compact that government has concerning economic development is between the state and capitalist elites, not between the state and its entire population” (147). In this, it resembles Chicago and other large Midwestern metropolitan areas. Although the atlas maps “primarily include data from 2014 to 2023” (272), the examination of the area’s political-economic construct is set against the background of the built environment expansion that began in the late 1960s and carried on through the 1970s. Ferguson is a prime example of state-sponsored income inequality brought about through public policy. Heyda’s maps illustrate how these decisions made historic Ferguson into a place where the riots that broke out after the killing of Michael Brown were both predictable and inevitable.

Many atlas readers may be familiar with the notorious and horrific redlining maps that forced Black residents into hazardous areas (marked red on maps) or declining ones (yellow), facilitating and protecting white property accumulation in more desirable neighborhoods. Heyda also identifies something she characterizes as *floodlining*:

a “weaponization of the environment, where private developers inappropriately build affordable neighborhoods in flood zones to exploit access to cheap land and to extract returns” (88)—for example, the very neighborhood where Michael Brown was shot and killed.

Maps and analysis throughout *Radical Atlas of Ferguson, USA* draw from, expand upon, and update concepts Heyda had previously introduced in “Erasure Urbanism,” a paper she contributed to the book *Architecture is All Over* (2017). She defines erasure urbanism as the systemic, planned erosion of place and space that ignores human costs and “sets the conditions for an uneven power grab” (21 footnote 30).

I am familiar with other atlases in this genre, such as Annelys de Vet’s [Subjective Atlas of Palestine](#) (2007) and the [Atlas of ReUrbanism](#) by the National Historic Trust (2016), but I have never before encountered one designed and executed as well as the *Radical Atlas of Ferguson, USA*.

Every urban policy maker—and, in fact, anyone working in city or suburban planning or administration in any

capacity—should have this atlas part of their required reading. I am so certain that this is one of the most important books of the year that I intend to gift a copy to every person I know.

## REFERENCES

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