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Book Review: Derelict Paradise: Homelessness and Urban Development in Cleveland, Ohio

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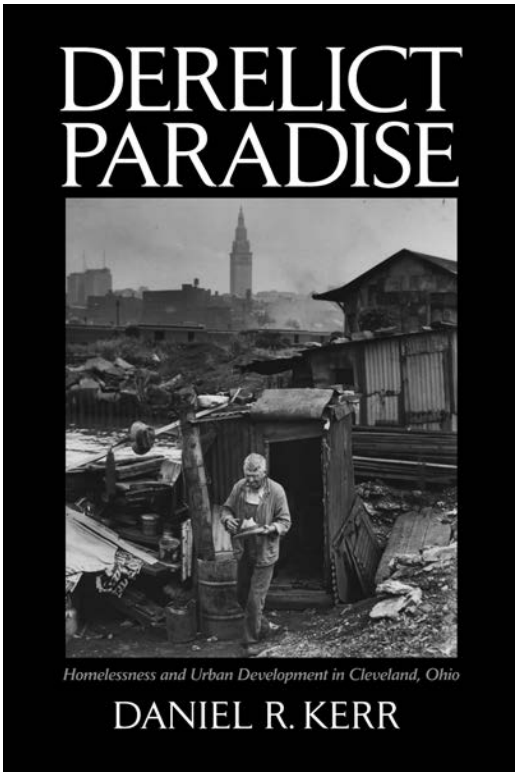
Derelict Paradise:

Homelessness and Urban Development in Cleveland, Ohio

Daniel R. Kerr

In *Derelict Paradise*, Daniel R. Kerr explores the history of homelessness in Cleveland from the end of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 to the early twenty-first century. The book fills a gap in the historiography of American cities by situating homelessness firmly within the context of the rise and decline of American downtowns, inner-city neighborhoods, and industries. Kerr argues pointedly that homelessness was not only advantageous to city leaders' vision for what the city should be but also part of their strategy for achieving their vision. He connects homelessness to the destruction of affordable housing and provides sustained analysis of how the "unhoused" resisted those in power and carved out autonomous spaces where they could exercise some control over their own lives. Moreover, he contends that the city's elite, many of whom directed major industrial firms, also constrained public- and private-sector responses to homelessness through their control of charitable organizations and reliance on employment agencies to deliver the most desperate class of workers to their plants and mills. Kerr's carefully constructed account draws on an impressive range of archival and newspaper sources and at times provides a strident rebuke of most aspects of American urban development since the Second Industrial Revolution.



Daniel R. Kerr. *Derelict Paradise: Homelessness and Urban Development in Cleveland, Ohio*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. 295 pp. ISBN: 9781558498655, $80.00 (cloth).

Kerr advances some important even novel insights. The notion of the "undeserving" poor has long constrained charity work. Kerr's examination of the Associated Charities' use of the woodlot as a screening procedure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the persistence of the longstanding practice of subjecting the homeless to high levels of surveillance to contain them, makes a compelling case for a long thread connecting early charity movements and more modern public-private methods of institutionalizing homelessness. He also demonstrates that although leaders failed to create a large middle-class zone to connect downtown and the suburbs, they succeeded in removing nearly all truly affordable housing through decades of municipal demolition campaigns and private sector-driven housing projects that revised ever upward the metrics of affordability.

In the process, they pushed city housing out of the reach of those who most depended on low-cost homes. Perhaps Kerr's most stunning discovery is that the damage wrought by arson in the 1970s, coupled with ongoing demolition, did far more damage to the city's housing stock than two race riots in the 1960s. Beyond its sheer originality, *Derelict Paradise* easily offers the best chronicle of the many plans for downtown and housing redevelopment in twentieth-century Cleveland.

Kerr's book will have lasting value that cuts across several subfields of history and the social sciences, but it is not without flaws. First, his repeated assertions that Cleveland leaders sought to make downtown into "a leisure resort for the well-to-do" (59) often give readers the wrong impression. Until the 1980s civic leaders' primarily focused on trade shows, industrial expositions, and regional and national conventions. Kerr's repeated characterization of downtown as an elite "playground" may reflect his decision to emphasize the homeless as producers (typically underemployed) and the city's affluent leaders as consumers of leisure. Second, in making urban pro-growth coalitions bear the brunt of responsibility for homelessness, Kerr makes a range of civic leaders complicit in a conspiracy with control of the impoverished the driving force rather than a fringe benefit. In focusing so heavily on leaders' pervasive methods of social control, he may unduly diminish the role of mental illness, substance abuse, and other personal problems in homelessness, although great value lies in bringing previously neglected explanations to the fore. Third, Kerr argues convincingly that a local focus best reveals social relations, but he also misses opportunities to connect Cleveland to developments in other cities. How typical was Cleveland's history of urban development and homelessness? Readers could turn to Kenneth Kusmer's *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (2002) to situate Cleveland's history of homelessness, but Kerr might have drawn more comparisons. His fascinating consideration of arson also begs the question of whether it played a similarly important role in reshaping other postwar American cities. Finally, and possibly a reflection of the publisher's need for economy, *Derelict Paradise* is frustratingly opaque in its documentation, withholding much potentially revealing information about both newspaper and archival sources.

Kerr helps us understand the inseparability of industrialists, downtown boosters, city government, charitable organizations, and employment agencies—all with something to gain from homelessness as long as they could leverage or contain the un-housed. The efforts of Cleveland leaders to expand downtown to attract offices and conventions, revitalize neighborhoods amid a population exodus, and redress the city's relatively high labor costs to retain manufacturing were not entirely misguided, but *Derelict Paradise* instills a heightened appreciation of the social costs (not to mention the ineffectiveness) not only of charitable initiatives but also of both growth policies and responses to decline.

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