

Zachary J. Violette, *The Decorated Tenement: How Immigrant Builders and Architects Transformed the Slum in the Gilded Age*

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Blanc's conclusion is particularly relevant for senior union leaders in Canada who lean heavily on polling data and expensive consulting firms for their strategic analysis: "Rather than moderating one's politics to accommodate a mythical center, the only way to truly test the potentialities of popular support is through systematic organizing and the process of mass action itself." (81)

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Zachary J. Violette, *The Decorated Tenement: How Immigrant Builders and Architects Transformed the Slum in the Gilded Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2019)

IN THE FACE OF climate change and a housing affordability crisis, efforts to increase housing density have become among the most politically fraught issues facing North American cities today. These efforts have run up against an array of regulations and bylaws aimed at ensuring the continued dominance of the single-family home, justified by a desire to preserve the cultural (and socio-economic) character of the middle-class, residential suburb. Opponents of densification sometimes allude to the enduring image of the New York City tenement and the evils that many perceive to be associated with it: overcrowding, crime, pollution, disease, and the threatening "other".

It was within this political context that I was excited to review Zachary J. Violette's new book *The Decorated Tenement*. The book is a re-evaluation of this iconic architectural form which continues to loom in the public consciousness as they still do over the streets of lower Manhattan. In his account of the emergence and spread of tenement buildings throughout late-19th century New York City and Boston, Violette finds

familiar dynamics: rapidly growing cities in which working-class immigrants seek decent, affordable housing that reflects their tastes and lifestyle, and an established upper class threatened by multi-family living who turn to government regulations as a way of reinforcing class boundaries.

Violette uses the term "decorated tenement" to describe the highly ornamented multi-family residential buildings that came to dominate the streets of New York City and Boston. He argues that these buildings represented modern, innovative solutions to housing the urban working class that made use of the latest amenities and incorporated elaborate aesthetic flourishes that appealed to a working-class desire for social mobility. Indeed, the buildings were built and designed *for* working-class immigrants *by* working-class immigrants. Violette points out that landlords often lived in their own buildings alongside their tenants. In this sense, he distinguishes decorated tenements from the mid-19th century "slum landscape" that they replaced. Prior to the rise of immigrant-built tenements, working-class housing consisted of dilapidated and haphazardly converted colonial-era buildings typically owned by wealthier, absentee landlords who wanted little to do with their properties and even less to do with the people who lived in them.

There is much to recommend in this book. The earlier chapters present a comprehensive account of the rise of the tenement in New York City and Boston, and how these buildings raised the living standards of the working class. This is followed by detailed descriptions of the decorated tenement itself, inside and outside. Discussions of room layouts and their role in working-class family life are accompanied by dozens of floor plans and interior photographs. As well, an entire chapter is dedicated to discussing the

aesthetics of the facades, making use of contemporary and historical photos and architectural drawings.

The book then examines the production process of the tenement building, which is presented through the biographies of several important immigrant families who became builders and architects. This analysis reveals the basic practices, relationships, and motivations of a series of different groups including the architects, builders, and suppliers (among others). In doing so, Violette identifies the role that tenement construction played in the upward mobility of many immigrants.

Most interesting is Violette's analysis of the upper-class response to the decorated tenement, based on the writings of housing reformers like Jacob Riis and an analysis of the actual "model tenements" that reformers built for the working class. Violette highlights the reformers' obsession with simple living and aesthetic austerity that contrasted with the elaborate ornamentation and latest technologies that were popular among immigrant builders and their tenants. He attributes this contrast not only to snobbery, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, but to a desire among reformers to reinforce class boundaries in an era of rapid social mobility. The ambitious aesthetics of the decorated tenement, made possible through mass production and new materials, was perceived as a threat by reformers because it lessened the visual distinctions between working-class and upper-class neighbourhoods.

Then, as now, the upper class often promoted an "anti-urban...nostalgic agrarianism" (63) in opposing higher-density, working-class housing. In contrast to the American veneration of the isolated cottage, Violette points out that many immigrants arriving from continental Europe were far more community oriented. (96) The importance of community was

embodied in the external aesthetics of the decorated tenement, which was designed to express "group identity, sometimes with explicit references to national, historical, or religious discourses." (96) It was also evident in the design and construction choices of the immigrant builders who, Violette claims, understood the "preferences and aspirations" of their own community and designed their tenements accordingly. (116)

Addressing the "preferences and aspirations" of the working class is perhaps the one weakness of the book. Unlike the reformers, who published their opinions in books and magazine articles, working-class voices are harder to access. Violette relies primarily on inferring working-class preferences from the material culture that surrounded them. Reformers argued that decorated tenements represented nothing but the desire of unscrupulous builders to maximize profit over quality. Violette, by contrast, asserts that the buildings should be seen as accurate reflections of what the working class really wanted. The builders, he argues, were simply responding to the tastes of their tenants. This is a shaky assumption for a core part of the book's central argument, and it raises the tricky question of whether consumer taste *shapes* or is *shaped by* markets.

This criticism aside, the book contains a wealth of information and important insights into this iconic piece of the urban landscape. The writing is engaging and accessible and is supported with fantastic photography. I anticipate that this book will be of interest to a wide readership but should hold particular appeal for historians of cities and social scientists interested in housing and the urban built form.

In the epilogue, Violette provides an excellent, whirlwind account of the fall of the decorated tenement, as immigrant communities moved to the suburbs, the

rapid loss of these buildings in the urban renewal era, and the rediscovery and rehabilitation of those that remain during more recent periods of gentrification. He ends by drawing lessons for the current moment in which cities are struggling over housing issues:

While many of the decorated tenements themselves have been rehabilitated, not so the image of those who built and designed them, a fact that has significant consequences for the crisis of housing affordability that again plagues these cities. The image of the builder and designer of low-cost housing as greedy and incompetent, so promoted by the reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has remained remarkably persistent. And these biases against multi-family housing remain encoded in zoning, housing maintenance, tax, and building codes they promoted, and in the discourse they encouraged. (228)

At a moment when cities desperately need to rethink how we provide housing, Violette's book is a welcome contribution.

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Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 2019)

IN JARED ROSS HARDESTY'S follow up text to his 2016 *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston*, Hardesty returns to the topic of slavery, but with a different interest in trying to connect the entangled histories of slavery, colonization, and emancipation in New England. *Black Lives, Native Land, White Worlds* is organized around the single theme of connections. Hardesty considers "New England slavery was actually part of a wider world of slavery and colonization in the Americas,

and was important for the emergence of American industrial capitalism." (xv) The wider world Hardesty engages still allows him to pay "close attention to the lives of those enslaved in New England and how their experiences related to larger historical processes." (xv) *Black Lives, Native Land, White Worlds* is the first synthetic treatment of New England slavery since Lorenzo Johnston Greene's *The Negro in Colonial New England*, and Hardesty's monograph attempts to build on the recent momentum of scholarship on New England slavery and colonization by providing a "short, readable, introduction to New England slavery." (xv) Hardesty has a keen eye on highlighting the lives of and connections built by enslaved New Englanders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Key to Hardesty's argument is how New England, though never a slave society, was heavily connected economically to slave societies. Hardesty pushes back against essentialist views about New England's complicity in slave labour practices by connecting how "through interactions with the West Indies, New England found a ready market for commodities and captives, purchased slaves, and learned how to institutionalize slavery." (17) Although never a large destination for trafficked Africans in comparison to the Southern colonies and the West Indies, the slave trade helped finance lucrative economic opportunities for largely, though not exclusively white men. Hardesty uses the example of Mary Bowen, a white woman who in 1793 "purchased a share in a Rhode Island slave ship." (30–31) Slave societies in the American South also were connected to New England slavery. Hardesty connects them by discussing an early eighteenth-century fugitive slave advertisement about "two Carolina Indian Men-Servants." (39) Hardesty asks, "why were Indians from Carolina enslaved in early eighteenth-century New