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Places

Title

Photographing Fitchburg [Portfolio]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2512m57z>

Journal

Places, 12(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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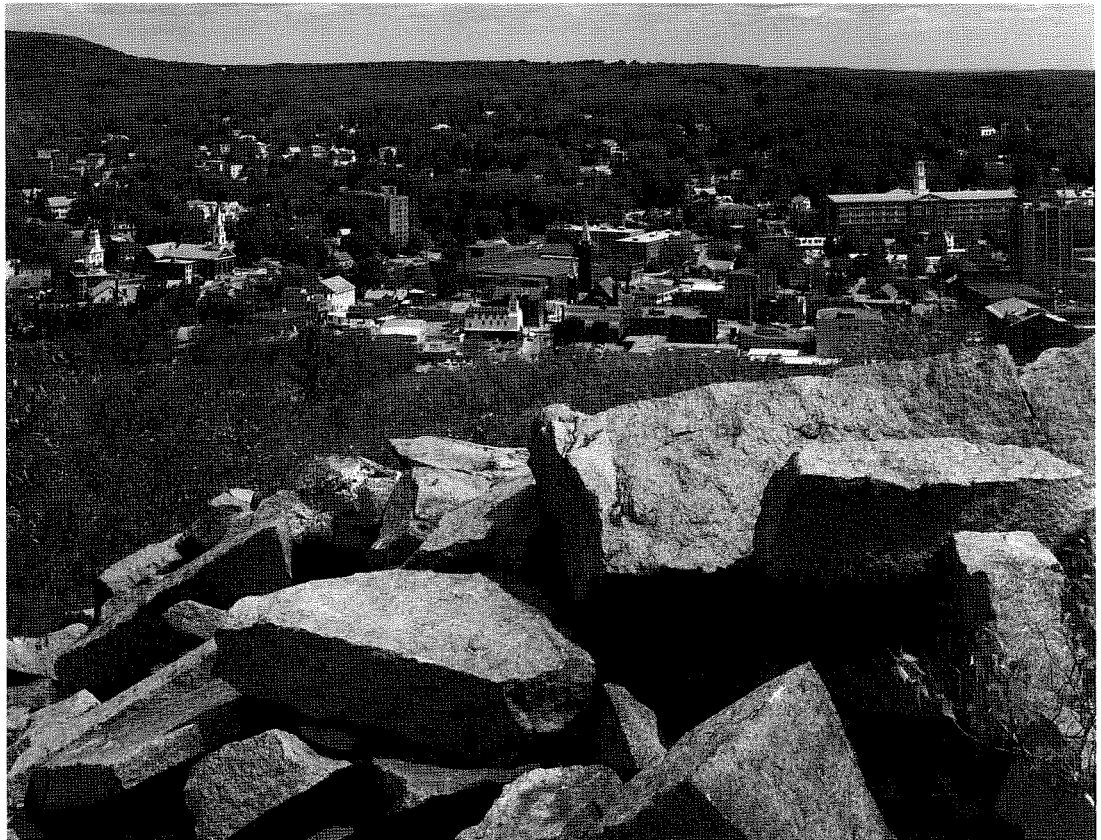
Publication Date

1999-01-15

Peer reviewed

Photographing Fitchburg

Cervin Robinson



How does one photograph a city and portray it as a place, not as an assemblage of separate buildings? How, to be specific, does one photograph Fitchburg, Mass., a factory town that, like many other New England cities, has seen most of its industry leave and has tried to save its main street by tearing down nearby blocks for parking, but still has lost its downtown business to malls?

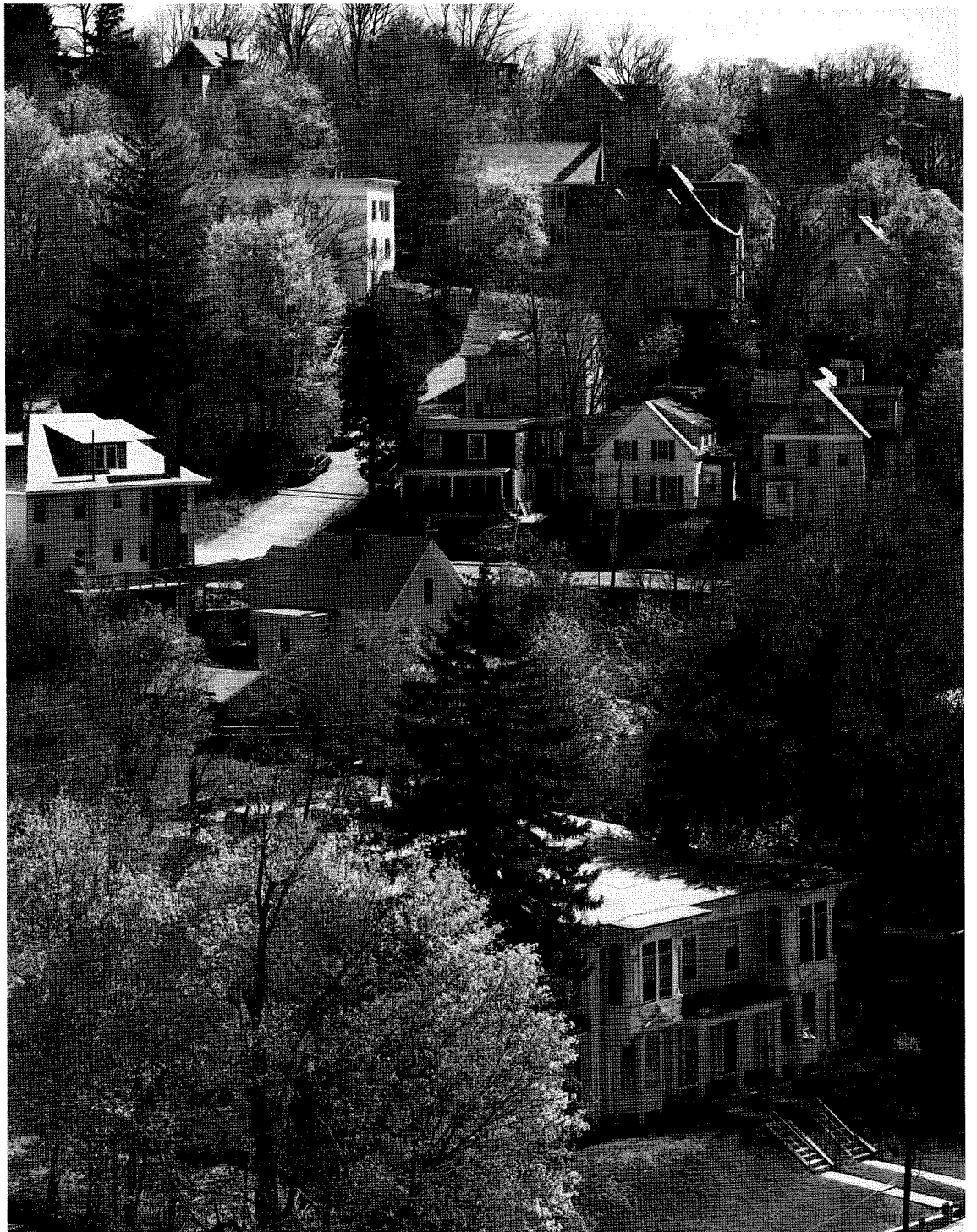
In one way Fitchburg was ahead in its misfortunes even of New York City: before Penn Station was razed, Fitchburg lost a station that should never have been torn down. Fitchburg, which depended in the last century on the power of its river and on its railway to Boston (the one that went past Walden Road), remains a hill town of remarkable topographical beauty, a city where just because of its unsolved predicaments, and unlike many formerly industrial towns that have succeeded in becoming tourist centers, what you see is still always genuine.

How to photograph such a city? Cataloguing, which is done with a view to completeness, is not the way to go. A standard architectural guidebook restates with local examples the accepted history of American building development but misses whatever is unique. And a landmarks commission must catalog valuable buildings, but it misses the sense of actual place (though it may create the illusion of another simply by its selectivity). Whereas catalogues of the parts of a city are factual, what one wants is a sense of truth, not necessarily unpleasant truth, but one with an edge.

One photographs a city like Fitchburg by juxtaposing essential parts that do not sing the same song, even better, ones that contradict each other. The point of truth with an edge is to earn the attention of the viewer's eye.

I took the photographs reproduced here during two residencies at the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire.

Fitchburg from Rollstone Hill, May 1996



Jay Street neighborhood, May 1996



Moran Square, April 1996



Twin Cities Plaza, May 1996



City Hall, May 1996



Law offices and high school, May 1996



Fitchburg Municipal Aripport, April 1998