

Book reviews

The Evolution of American Urban Design: A Chronological Anthology, David Gosling with Maria Cristina Gosling, *Chichester, John Wiley, 2003, 280 pp., £34.95 (p/b)*

After reading the brief introduction to this book you can be in no doubt that David Gosling was frustrated with how the discipline of urban design is evolving in the USA. He points to '... a woeful lack of any coherent urban design policy ...' (p. 7) in most urban areas and suggests that decisions about planning applications often have little regard at all to any aspect of their context. It is interesting to reflect therefore on the extent to which academics and development precedents from the USA have impacted on the development of the discipline within an international context even if general practice has not kept pace. American academic writers form staple elements of urban design degrees at least in English speaking countries, and many of the precedents such as the Rockefeller Plaza, the San Francisco Urban Design Plan or the New Urbanist development of Seaside in Florida are well known beyond the shores of the USA. At the beginning and the end of *The Evolution of American Urban Design*, therefore, there is a note of frustration, and a sense that possibly in contrast with continental Europeans, in particular, many people in the USA are not in love with urban form or urban life.

This anthology starts in 1950 and reviews the evolution of urban design thinking, education and development precedents during the subsequent decades. The book starts with 'definitions of urban design' which also considers American precedents such as Charlottesville, subdivisions influenced by the Garden City movement and also Radburn. Chapter Two then examines the 1950s, locating the emergence of contemporary urban design within wider cultural trends. It is suggested that the first urban design conference was held in 1956 at Harvard University, and a review of the individual speakers provides insight into the

nature of the emerging discipline. Schemes like Bacon's and Kahn's plans for downtown Philadelphia are discussed, while emergent critiques of the cities in the USA are also considered.

The 1960s saw the publication of many of the key polemics and studies that were to shape academic thinking within the discipline, including work by Kevin Lynch, Donald Appleyard, Jane Jacobs, Christopher Alexander and Robert Venturi. Chapter Three discusses how and why this work emerged and reflects on its influence, while also considering for example whether and how work by Gordon Cullen in particular influenced the thinking of Kevin Lynch. In addition there is also a review of shopping malls as a developing typology and urban utopias are also explored, including projects like Drop City, where self-sufficiency and anti-materialist lifestyles were pursued in the Arizona and Colorado deserts.

Social unrest towards the end of the 1960s influenced the contrasting agendas and forms of development emerging during the 1970s. In particular the work of Richard Sennett and Christopher Alexander are examined, along with approaches to collaborative planning. This is contrasted with Oscar Newman's work on defensible space and the emergence of gated forms of development. The 1970s is characterised by a wide range of contrasting initiatives which Gosling systematically reviews, but they include the emergence of urban design in public policy, covering work in both New York and San Francisco, as well as inner-city retail schemes such as Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco and the Faneuil Hall Market Place in Boston. These and other initiatives are used to characterise a trend towards urban revitalisation and urban renewal.

The 1980s saw the introduction of Regional/Urban Design Assistance Teams offering their own brand of expert advice to deprived communities, as well as more permanent Community Design Centres. The emergence of New Urbanism is also discussed, and among others the influence of Peter Calthorpe is considered. Urban design education is also covered in some depth, including the influence of Rowe and Koetter's 'Collage City' and Cohn Rowe's approaches to teaching. William Whyte's work on New York's public spaces is fleetingly discussed at this point, as well as the contrasting work of Jonathon Barnett, John Lang and Bernard Tschumi. The work of American urban designers in London Docklands is given a fair amount of

profile, as well as Disney's EPCOT, the development of Seaside in Florida and the influence of American architects in the Berlin (IBA) in 1984. Finally the emergence and influence of deconstruction is also introduced.

The 1990s is characterised by the contrasting focuses of both William Whyte and Joel Garreau. Whyte's 'Street Life Project' is reviewed and its conclusions celebrated, but the emergence of 'edge cities' is given as much prominence as a pervasive development trend. Alexander Garvin's book *The American City: What Works and What Doesn't* is also celebrated. However, the 1990s is characterised as a time of 'transition from optimistic to pessimistic views of the [urban] future', while the emergence of deconstruction theories and projects is given a high degree of prominence, and particularly through the architectural work of Peter Eisenman and Frank Gehry. Finally, the emergence of 'New Urbanism' appears in sharp contrast at the end of the book.

As a journey through time and a reflection on the evolution of a discipline this is a useful book. In particular it is interesting to reflect on the conditions that led to the emergence of particular academic works or development projects, while discussion about urban design education and design awards is also given useful prominence. *The Evolution of American Urban Design* is let down a little by a weak first chapter and subsequently a lack of synthesis. It would have been useful to consider what are the lessons that we can take away from this history but there is no attempt to draw conclusions at the end of each chapter and the conclusion to the book could have been more coherent.

Trends such as the emerging debate about sustainable urban forms were not given enough attention. This might reflect USA practices, but this would be surprising to a European. There was also a tendency to focus on and return to a number of schemes (the author seemed particularly to like Tschumi's La Villette in Paris). The book could have been better illustrated in parts. There are also some significant areas of repetition with whole paragraphs appearing in more than one location in the book—something that suggests that editing should have been tighter.

In general, however, this is a valuable book that does justice to an ambitious task. The legacy of both urban design thinking and practice in the USA has and will continue to have a significant impact well beyond the nation's borders,

and the evolution of that discipline is a subject worthy of consideration.

Reference

GARVIN, A. (1995), *The American City: What Works and What Doesn't*, McGraw-Hill.

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The World of Cities: Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective, Anthony M. Orum and Xiangming Chen, *Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 180 pp., £12.99 (p/b)*

This concise and readable volume is a useful introduction to urban studies appropriate for undergraduates new to the field. It is a broad and systematic treatment of urban theories neatly structured into five relatively short chapters, each with an introduction and review or conclusion, both of which are helpful to students. Also of interest to urban planning students, it is a book about cities as places, which, the authors feel, '... represent the social forms that serve to make us who we are'. The book has a helpful glossary, and good use is made of it throughout the text by highlighting the words in bold print. In addition, Orum and Chen stress phrases essential to the flow of their discussion throughout the volume with bold italic print. Thus, *The World of Cities* is more student friendly than many other introductory books.

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of 'place' in the urban context, while Chapter 2 considers a number of theoretical perspectives on the nature of cities, from ideas about the importance of space and social life, to the emerging global point of view about cities, suggesting how and why new social forces have developed within them. The city is seen from the human ecology perspective, as a growth machine, from the cultural perspective, from the historical and institutional point of view and from a global perspective. Both philosophers and sociologists are reviewed, and the individuals covered include Henri Lefebvre, Edward Casey, Gottfried Leibnitz, Immanuel Kant, Hannah Arendt, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Saskia Sassen, among others. While the authors believe the concept of place to be of minor

significance to both disciplines, they themselves believe, like Casey, that place is of central importance to human existence, and they elaborate their own conception of it. These two chapters might also be of special interest to lecturers looking for a theoretical framework to discuss with students the nature of place within urban design.

Chapter 3 departs from the theoretical base and traces the history of metropolitan growth and development in the United States since the late nineteenth century. Post World War II suburbanisation, the growth of urban inequality, both socially and spatially, racial injustice and gender differences are reviewed in some detail. Chapter 4 then introduces Orum and Chen's comparative view of American and Chinese cities. Although presented as a broad, global comparative view of cities, treatment of cities outside the United States and China is cursory. While there is much of interest in the chapter, especially the treatment of how 'the penetration of global commerce and consumerism and local traditions have created a new and hybrid cultural landscape ...', the lack of insight into regional differences, especially regarding Africa, Latin America, and even the rest of Asia, is striking. The authors would have been better served to explicitly state the comparative nature with regard to just the United States and China. Chapter 5 concludes the volume with some ideas on how cities might be improved as places.

Considering the book as a whole, the chapters do not really fit together as seamlessly as one would want. There is an element of two authors with separate areas of research trying to put them together without enough effort in those areas, which would really merge the two and expand their work. This helps explain the concentration on only the United States and China to the virtual exclusion of Europe and the rest of the world.

Orum and Chen have also provided the reader with very few (three!) and poor quality photographs. These could have been cropped better to highlight their essential aspects and do not appear to have been edited by the publisher. If this were a camera-ready volume, that could be the explanation. Camera-ready books often lack the strong hand of a professional editor to polish the final copy. The point is made because the number and quality of the pictures included could have easily been improved with some effort. Moreover, as a first level university text, better visuals would have been an asset, as

would have been the inclusion of maps (only one small map appears). Their absence in a book on cities, place and space is noteworthy. It would also have been very useful to have had discussion questions at the end of the chapters instead of the annoying endnotes (which should appear throughout the text) along with suggestions for further reading on the subjects reviewed in the chapters.

Despite these editorial reservations, the book is a pleasant read and packs much information into its five chapters. It is an excellent introduction for both university students and the general reader with an interest in urban studies or urban sociology.

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Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously. Economic Development, the Environment, and Quality of Life in American Cities, Kent E. Portney, *Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2003, 284 pp., £43.50 (h/b), £17.50 (p/b)*

The dilemma at the core of this book is that, even though it is generally accepted that sustainable development is a serious issue, this does not mean that cities are serious in their pursuit of sustainability. Ascertaining how seriously cities are pursuing sustainability is, however, difficult as the conceptual literature on sustainability is not altogether useful as a foundation for making judgements and because local contexts differ greatly.

Portney defines a sustainable city as one that is working hard to promote some operational version of sustainability. The United States lags somewhat behind Western Europe in implementing sustainable initiatives so such cities are relatively scarce in the USA. The empirical part of the book therefore concentrates on 24 cities which are well known for their sustainable policies. The emphasis is not on the extent to which they have actually achieved particular environmental results but whether issues of sustainability are clearly and unambiguously on the public agenda. To make a judgement, the author looks at the presence of sustainability plans *and* sustainability indicators. By identifying 34 elements, a 'Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously' index is computed by simply using a

Yes when present and a No when absent, although how these judgements are reached is not always clear. In the various chapters in which the sustainable policies and initiatives of the 24 cities are portrayed, no reference to the index is made whatsoever. In some cases it is not easy to understand why a city gets a Yes or No score after reading about a particular initiative, which calls into question how serious the index is.

The initial intention of the author is to not discuss the results, although this resolve weakens when he is portraying the various elements of sustainable initiatives. For instance, when discussing smart growth approaches Portney doubts whether they actually produce or help to produce a sustainable city. As such, whether or not tangible environmental results can be reached or how difficult the process is does not say anything about the seriousness of cities in their pursuit of these results. This highlights a major weakness of the book, namely the way it deals with the implementation of sustainable policies. The efforts and resources cities put into the implementation process are excluded, while on the other hand there is a lot of attention on what Portney calls the 'communitarian foundations of sustainable cities', the participatory process to build the social capital required for the effective pursuit of sustainability. Portney himself is not convinced of this requirement, although he dedicates a whole chapter to the issue on the grounds that other researchers and some cities think it may have an effect on the results of the policy. This indirect attention on the results implies that implementation does matter, both for the measurement of the seriousness of the commitment to sustainability and the environmental results. The question therefore remains of why implementation does not appear more prominently in the index.

However, moving away from the original intention not to discuss the results also has a very interesting effect. Gradually Portney shifts his attention to the political and social dimension of sustainability, first by considering the role of the participatory process and secondly by addressing the issue of social justice and equity. There is, at least conceptually, a clear tension between pursuing the justice elements of sustainability and adopting local growth controls. According to Portney it is at least possible, based on 'sketchy' empirical evidence, to say that the latter impede the former. Dealing with

the political dimension Portney only superficially raises the issue of the legitimacy of sustainable policies. This is, however, an important subject in the context of the book, because if these policies are not legitimate, then the question arises of whether we can take them seriously.

In the last chapter the index reappears so that correlations can be established between the index and various characteristics of the 24 cities. Unfortunately only a few of the characteristics are correlated with a city's level of seriousness of sustainability, which means that the book ends without clear conclusions. Maybe this is too much to expect from research that is qualified by the author as a 'preliminary inquiry', but it is probably also because the definition of sustainability is naturally broad and value-based.

Nonetheless, with this book Portney has introduced a new and valuable way of looking at sustainable development. Because it is easy to read and contains a variety of examples it can also be used as an introduction to the concept of sustainable development. The reader should remember, however, that this is an American study which means that the title of the book is a little less appealing to readers in Western Europe where sustainable cities are taken more for granted.

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Making Places Better: Stories of Real Places Made Better By Planning, Gene Bunnell, *Chicago, Illinois, American Planning Association, 2002, 588 pp., US\$49.95*

In *Making Places Better*, Gene Bunnell illustrates the success of 10 cities in the United States that improved their urban quality. A promotional book, this is not just for planning professionals and students, but is intended for a 'general readership to help people understand and appreciate how planning has positively shaped particular places' (24). It gives insight into the challenges of complexity, frustration and creativity that face individuals who care about improving their cities.

The book comprises eight chapters. Two introductory chapters explain some of the author's own background and beliefs regarding planning, and his rationale for the book. He

wants to tell the story of successful planning to persuade non-believers of its value. Bunnell gives a simplistic view of planning and its context. While written in measured prose and replete with facts and photos, the book nevertheless is that of a proselytising acolyte. Statements such as ‘places are forever and walking away is not the answer’ and ‘Americans have become fed up with living in communities where there is little or no planning and where development is entirely out of control’ (7) reflect a black-and-white, us-versus-them attitude which omits complexity, nuance and shades of grey, and serves neither planning or communities well. Nonetheless, his colloquial style draws the reader into the case studies, and into pondering their significance.

Chapters 3 to 7 are the individual stories of Chattanooga, TN; Providence, RI; Charleston, SC; Duluth, MN; and San Diego, CA. The case studies are narratives told through the author’s eyes as a planner—Bunnell was a planning director of a New England town and an assistant professor at a midwestern university—resulting from on-site qualitative research, interviews and personal visits to each city. The author respects each city as having its own unique history of hardships and triumphs. The cases highlight the power of people working together for a common goal, portraying collaborative processes between public and private entities that struggled with the pressures of resources, power and politics.

In the course of telling each city’s planning story, there is great emphasis placed on the collaborative working process of the organisations, groups and agencies. However, the author speaks little of the general public, the citizens at large, instead elevating the positions of the planner and of those who had a hand in the planning process.

The selected cases each show the efforts to initiate policies, procedures and guidelines to aid ailing city centres. Once one gets into the readings, the city studies tend to remain relatively focused on the urban centres or areas adjacent to them. In the twentieth century, each selected city has seen its downtown decline and be redeveloped. However, there is a void in the narratives regarding the areas beyond the centre. The metropolis outside the central city is not mentioned, save for the collaborative endangered species planning outside San Diego, a snippet that seems out of place. There is little mention

of planning with regard to suburban growth, even though some readers may see downtown revitalisation as a way to slow urban sprawl.

More information about the cities is given at the conclusion of each chapter in the form of concluding comments, a list of interviewees (116 in total), the planning chronology as well as additional notes. The author imparts an assured command of the facts of each case, one that is belied by unsubstantiated claims such as ‘A large proportion of the 81,000+ local governments in this country have never prepared or adopted a comprehensive plan. Additionally, a large proportion of local governments has not employed a full-time planner, nor have they even hired a planning consultant’ (12). The final chapter in the book analyses the cases for ‘lessons learned’. Fourteen lessons include ‘sustained planning effort’, ‘continuity of planning effort’, ‘make good use of consultants’, ‘the important role of the media’, and ‘you’ve got to believe’: repetitive and facile conclusions for such detailed case examples. This, regrettably, was the weakest part of the book.

The accompanying CD-ROM contains all of the information from the book in addition to the other five case studies not included in the book: Madison, WI; Wichita, KS; Westminster, CO; Burlington, MA by Terry Szold; and Block Island, RI by Philip Herr. The CD is simple and easy to navigate and we found it helpful that it included a text version of the book instead of the standard PDF, which requires outside software.

This book is a positive contribution to helping urban planning students learn from planning successes in the USA. It serves as a counterbalance to theory as often taught in academia. It descriptively illustrates actual techniques of contemporary practice that professionals and citizens can use in their arsenal of planning tools. *Making Places Special* should have been a welcome book—written as it is by a professional with 15 years of experience and a doctorate from a prestigious university. Yet ultimately it will succeed only as a non-critical and descriptive rallying cry for the idea of central city revitalisation, a battle that has been won in the United States.

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