

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### A new urban historical atlas: viewing the best of the past

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Seasholes, N. S. (2019) *The atlas of Boston history* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 57 plates, 209 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-63115-8 (cloth), 978-0-226-63129-5 (e-book).

Historical atlases, as offerings of highly distilled and visually accessible cultural knowledge, represent a unique literary class. Historical atlases of cities – our most complex and spatially concentrated forms of settlement – are even more rarefied, considering the taxing challenges their creators face in displaying intricate urban patterns on pages of finite dimensions. Broadly speaking there are two types of historical atlases of cities. On the one hand, there is what might be called the ‘found-map’ model of historical urban atlas – reproductions of the cartographic record in roughly chronological sequence that document a city’s history to the extent that cartographers in the past had reason to create published or manuscript maps showing some particular set of features, and that have survived the ravages of time. The second type of historical urban atlas, termed here the ‘thematic-coverage’ model, consists of completely new maps, specially compiled and designed to show subject matter that presents a city’s evolution through a structured and coherent sequence of defined urban themes that in their balanced variety and coordination convey a conceptually integrated sense of complex urban processes working themselves out in space over time.

City atlases following the found-map model, when compiled with a keen eye for the increasing diversity of subject matter, can speak to the velocity of cartographic innovations that the growing complexity of cities has brought about. In the North American context, *Chicago in maps: 1612 to 2002* by Robert Holland (2005) and the *Historical atlas of Toronto* by Derek Hayes (2008) serve as good all-round examples. As a more

chronologically and morphologically focused example, the treatment of the New York City Commissioners’ street plan of 1811 in *The greatest grid*, edited by Hilary Ballon (2012), might be mentioned. This genre highlights not only a city’s broad spatial character at the time the maps were made, but it can also offer insights into the history of changing mapping techniques and stylistic design. Almost of necessity, atlases of this type are largely confined by the content the original mapmakers thought to portray, and thus are generally limited in the kinds of conceptual themes that can be examined.

By contrast, urban atlases of the thematic-coverage type set out to answer questions about the spatial dimensions of whatever may be considered by their authors to be the important social, economic, and physical-technological developments that have shaped a city’s history, whether or not prior maps elucidating these themes exist, and consequently require far more conceptualization and historical research to create and present. It is not intended here to make invidious comparisons between the two types of historical urban atlas, for each has its value; but the effort needed to create the second type calls for a very different investment of intellectual effort in planning and production. So a key basis for judging such atlases involves assessing the originality and value of the thematically new maps they have to offer.

The University of Chicago Press has recently published a major contribution to this second and more demanding form of cartographic examination of a city’s past, *The atlas of Boston history*, conceived and edited by Nancy S. Seasholes, a celebrated independent

scholar based in Boston. The creation and production of such atlases is rare in any cultural context, and while the record of the publisher in the erudite field of the history of cartography is internationally known, it is the first time the press has undertaken a project of this specific character. It would have seemed natural for a Boston-area university press to have nurtured the atlas as a matter of local pride and support, but the book found an editorial home in Chicago. *The atlas of Boston history* ranks now as the first historical atlas of one of America's oldest great cities, and by far the most ambitious, research-based cartographic exploration of urban history in the United States.

While the atlas deserves review on the full range of its merits as general urban history, it is particularly fitting that its attention to morphological subject matter be recognized here, given this journal's readership as well as the scholarly history of the book's editor. But, first, it helps that assessment to note the intellectual lineage through which serious thematic-coverage urban historical cartography can be traced and to which this work belongs.

### Intellectual lineage

Atlases from the dawn of printing have from time to time contained urban plans, but it is only during the second half of the twentieth century that major advances were made in the way urban history has been portrayed cartographically. After the Second World War, in part reflecting a cultural urge to reaffirm the lineaments of common humanity and the shared roots of European society, a new standard of socio-spatial urban history emerged that found a special role for thematic maps. Emblematic of the new map designs were three publications relevant in the present context. An early and highly innovative leader was the *Westermanns Atlas zur Weltgeschichte* (Steir *et al.*, 1953–6), which contained among its many regional-scale maps an extraordinary collection of 101 full-colour, originally-conceived urban maps and plans of cities from

classical times to the mid-twentieth century, depicting their physical and functional form at moments in time, as well as maps distinguishing growth patterns and other temporal features of cultural interest. Concurrent with this, a long-term international programme, begun in 1955 by the European-based International Commission for the History of Towns, developed a multinational, fascicle-based atlas series of newly-created, historical urban maps detailing their physical evolution, based on painstaking archival work (reviewed in Conzen, 2008). These collective efforts were complemented by periodic monographic studies, impressively represented by the map-rich study of Vienna by Bobek and Lichtenberger (1966) with its outstanding number of deeply researched and sophisticated maps of social, economic, and morphological patterns of the city. To these publications was then added the remarkable *Atlas of Jerusalem* edited by David H. K. Amiran (1973). These and similar studies placed in the public domain precedents that through their very existence arguably influenced later authors contemplating urban historical atlases or urban sections of historical atlases of their own. While not arising directly from this European scholarly activity but certainly cognizant of it, a dramatic advance occurred in North American publishing with the appearance starting in the 1980s of the three-volume *Historical atlas of Canada*, replete with highly innovative urban coverage (Kerr *et al.*, 1987–93). The historical geographers who shaped this contribution to defining Canadian national culture drew explicitly from the best of European conceptual mapping, including the representation of cities. Nancy Seasholes states, in her preface to *The atlas of Boston history*, her intellectual debt to the Canadian atlas as the model that from the outset inspired her.

The Boston atlas, therefore, takes its place in an evolving international record of thematic urban history atlases, yet, within the United States, as a cartographic interpretation of a major city it stands almost alone. A very creditable, smaller-format historical atlas of New York City along similar thematic lines was published by Eric Homberger (1994)

decades ago, but that, however, is at long last wholly eclipsed by the scope and depth of original research evident in this Boston book. Both volumes share considerably more interpretive text accompanying the maps and other illustrations on each two-page spread than the more succinct extended captions of the Canadian plates. What this reflects is a demonstrable trend over the last century to leaven the austerity of maps-only atlases with explanatory text in order to reach audiences unaccustomed to grasping sophisticated thematic map content simply through perusal of the maps themselves.

### Mapping Boston

Boston, like any aged metropolitan centre, has generated a rich historical literature, including interpretations of its morphological development (Whitehill, 1959) and history of cartographic depiction (Grim *et al.*, 2008; Krieger and Cobb, 1999). The personal origins of the new atlas under review lie in Seasholes's earlier study of the city's ever-changing shorelines, *Gaining ground: a history of landmaking in Boston* (Seasholes, 2003). That work stands as a ground-breaking exploration of the economic, political, and social mechanisms by which the city adapted a quirky peninsula site within a topographically complex multi-fluvial estuary to become the vibrant core of a globally significant metropolitan port. The book's acclaim spurred Seasholes to reach for an even bigger prize, an interpretive atlas of the broader panoply of the city's history. Begun in 2010, the project to create the atlas involved coordinating the research of 35 scholars to produce 57 full-colour, double-page plates (Figure 1), backed up with truly exhaustive notes on sources and credits. The atlas's steering committee and large cadre of plate contributors brought together historical expertise across a wide spectrum of knowledge concerning the city's demographic, economic, socio-cultural, and technological past, and drew on well-established facts as well as numerous more recent discoveries. The contributors represent a cross-section of historical

scholars based at local research institutions and other academic centres. Responsibility for the content of plates reflects strong cross-fertilization of ideas among their authors. While 39 plates list single authors, eight authors contributed to three or more plates; and the editor is listed as a contributor to 18 plates and sole author of fully nine plates. This last calculation says much of the commanding role that Seasholes played in the conceptual shaping of the entire atlas. Fortunately for her, the atlas's long drawn-out development costs were ultimately covered by an 'anonymous angel'.

The one declared bias in selecting subject matter was to de-emphasize political history in favour of physical and socio-economic themes. Given the prevalence of politics in the city's standard histories and its challenge to cartographic creativity and spatial interest, this is hard to criticize. The quality of the original research underlying the plates, and their evident refinement through multiple phases of editing (as noted in the preface), is reminiscent of the authoritative character of the Canadian atlas. One detail that might easily be overlooked by the casual reader is the precision with which the shorelines on all relevant maps have been rendered to match the dates of the subject matter shown. Such care makes these maps particularly reliable for any future research on Boston's urban morphology.

### Atlas content

The atlas presents Boston's history in eleven sections, essentially chronological, but unafraid to devote more space to some eras than others depending on the speed and intricacy of spatial development of some periods relative to the stagnation of others. The sections, sometimes strain but generally succeed in encapsulating the cultural significance of the time periods, processes, and events they encompass under crisp headings, such as 'Athens of America' (for the early national/pre-Civil War era), 'Decline' (for the city's long depression from 1920 to 1960), and 'The New Boston' (coming to fruition during the



building materials), first inhabitants, European explorers, first European settlers' English origins, Atlantic fish trade, global trading networks, Revolutionary hotspots, land use patterns at various times, retrofitting the city with railroads, early landscaped spaces, residential geography of Boston's literati and social reformers, Irish immigration, tidal flat drainage and landmaking, business district conflagration, city annexation, social geography of streetcar suburbs, public transport, utility systems, parks and recreation, entertainment, social service institutions, public housing, expressways, suburbanization, urban renewal, school busing and desegregation, growth of higher education, medical infrastructure, high finance, tourism, and environmental challenges. All these themes and more find coverage at a range of mapping scales, from local district to metropolis. When one considers how much primary research underlies almost every plate in the atlas, the true scope and effort behind it comes into undeniable focus.

### **Morphological content**

For urban morphologists there is much of interest in this work. Of direct value are the plates showing the progress of landmaking that occurred during three extended periods: 1794–1828, 1828–80, and 1880–2003 (Plates 14, 25, and 43 respectively). The original narrow peninsula site of Boston, facing steeper headlands around the estuary (Charlestown, Cambridge, Roxbury, South Boston, and East Boston), necessitated early efforts to bridge the water gaps, often in conjunction with associated wharf development and tidal-flat drainage, all of which quickened the city's commercial growth. These plates present the distribution of every unit of additional land with such precision that their extent could be matched to plot boundaries on modern large-scale plans if desired. What heightens interest more, beyond the start and end dates of the major land-filling projects, is the classification of each land addition by land use. For the first period, colours identify projects carried out for commercial, industrial, residential,

new-street layout, institutional, military, and revetment purposes. There is a striking contrast between the numerous wharf extensions around the main peninsula and the infilling of the tidal Mill Pond as a grand new city district. Landmaking during the central period of the nineteenth century (Plate 25) depicts expansion throughout the estuarine zone, most notably the areas known as Back Bay and South End. Interestingly, the land use categories now include projects undertaken for transport, pollution cover, public works, parks, and 'other' purposes. The Back Bay project took three decades to carry out by distinct stages, and gave rise among other things to the elegant district centered on Commonwealth Avenue Mall, thus meriting a detailed map of its own (Plate 23). The third landmaking period map depicts the final shrinkage of the estuary, dominated by the massive port facilities of South Boston and Logan International Airport. Here, too, the classification of land uses is expanded to show trash dumps, which paved the way among other things for an oceanside university campus.

A second source of morphological interest is encapsulated in a clever feature of this atlas, namely, the periodic overlay of land use and occupational data upon reproductions of historic maps that are themselves of special interest. The most spectacular case is Plate 7 (Boston in 1676), which displays *all* public buildings, churches, burying grounds, military installations, taverns, industries, and retail shops, superimposed upon a unique base map showing all buildings and plot boundaries across the entire town in 1676. This base map is the first publication (by reproduction) of a manuscript map compiled in the early 1900s by Samuel Clough, an amateur historian who worked for the Boston Edison Company, representing a detailed cartographic reconstruction from archival property records. The resulting atlas plate is a stunningly original contribution to Boston history, and a revealing look at the urban morphology of one of the British Empire's biggest North American port cities during the seventeenth century. Additional examples of superimposing land use and occupational data from directories,

tax lists, and other sources on historic base maps are those for Boston in 1743 and 1800 (Plates 10 and 13, see Figure 1).

A third atlas feature relating to the city's urban form over time is the sprinkling of architectural drawings of building types dispersed throughout the book, an idea borrowed from the Canadian atlas. These are scaled drawings of building elevations and some plans of representative forms in different periods of the city's growth. They include public buildings, houses of the upper, middle, and working classes of the Federal, Greek Revival, and Italianate stylistic phases, beginning with Boston's 'Town House' of 1657, and the sole surviving private residence from the seventeenth century, the Paul Revere House, and ending with immigrant tenements and the famed three-decker frame houses so quintessential to Boston from the early twentieth century. Together with print images of early railway stations and a few industrial establishments embellishing plates here and there, collectively these drawings provide a distinctive visual summary of building type evolution. They cut through the considerable visual clutter of lithographic cityscape views and street photographs that populate and complement the thematic maps of the atlas plates throughout.

If there is any single take-away for the urban morphologist studying this atlas, it is the complex interrelation of the irregular and grid components of the city's ground plan, not to mention the rich and differential patterns of survival in the building stock over three centuries. It is remarkable how little systematic morphological investigation Boston has attracted (Conzen, 1990). The surface has barely been scratched in mining this lode with theoretical questions in mind, but which could almost certainly yield new insights about urban morphological causality within an American context.

### Commentary

It is not easy to critique a work such as this, which seeks to be comprehensive enough to

offer a coherent, integrated, and yet variegated picture of a 400-year-old city, while at the same time limiting itself to 57 plates. This atlas is by any measure a signal success in offering an original conceptualization of Boston's past, and will long stand as a challenging perspective on its urban history. Any different committee of scholars or creative editor could have produced an alternative schema. Any number of alternative plates could be envisioned, but within the given parameters the choices made and priorities implied are broadly admirable and include numerous interpretive innovations. The strategic editorial decision to focus on the political city of Boston as the main spatial arena clearly left much theoretical ground uncovered, especially the suburban rings of towns that have for most of the region's history been intimately tied to the urban core in countless ways. While a few plates depict the city's external relations with the wider world (mostly in the city's earliest growth phases), there is much that could fill imaginative plates speaking to Boston's position in New England, or its role in western U.S. development, or national industrialization, and more.

But even within the defined scope of the atlas there is one comment that must be made: the idea of urban neighbourhood as a vital spatial unit with its own special geographical character within the larger urban whole is almost absent. There are some local maps of specific urban conditions, such as the morphological transformation of the city's heart around Scollay Square between the 1880s and 1963 (Plate 33), and inner-city urban renewal between 1949 and 1974 (Plate 47). But there is no attempt to portray the emerging or transformative character of any of Boston's iconic neighbourhoods *per se*, such as the fabled North End (severed from the central business district by the Central Artery expressway of the 1960s), or 'Southie', that little kingdom built by the immigrant Irish in South Boston on one of the city's glacial drumlins, that had such socio-political relevance during the city's school busing crisis in the 1970s. Neighbourhood labels appear on many maps in the book, appropriately positioned, but all too often sit astride abstract spatial zones

within citywide distributions of one economic or social factor or another. To be fair, however, the atlas ends with a thoroughly revealing coloured dot map of the 2010 ethno-racial patterns of the City of Boston (only, Plate 57) that hints at the severe racial shifts that have been occurring across the city's neighbourhoods over the last half century or so. A fuller remedy would probably have been an atlas of 80 plates, at a heftier price, taking even longer to reach publication. Or perhaps that simply remains a challenge for another scholar to tackle in another setting.

Two remaining points merit mention. One is to re-emphasize the depth of research and collective editorial care that went into the choice of the atlas's content and its presentation. The balance between thematic maps and other graphic components (images of scenery, urban structures, art objects, and statistical graphs, for example) is lively throughout the volume, and conceptually more original in the earlier plates for which history has bequeathed less archival material to work with than for more recent, well-endowed times. A brilliant case is the modern photograph of Boston's distant skyline in Plate 1 (The Boston Basin, before 5000 BP), showing the elevation, at 4000 feet above the city skyline, of the top of the glacial ice sheet that once covered the region – the equivalent of five John Hancock skyscraper towers stacked one atop the other! Also, part of Plate 1 is a classic geological column representing the region's bedrock and glacial materials showing their colouration and textures, but spliced together as if they were all visible in a single quarry exposure, giving instant orientation to some of the city's classic building materials. Another of the reviewer's favourites is Plate 7, discussed earlier. By far the most stunning photograph in the entire volume is surely the contemporary panorama of the ruins following the 1872 Fire that gutted the city's business district (Plate 24), extending fully 50 cm across the double page spread. Also included on this plate – may the reader allow the reviewer to note, with approbation – is an eye-catching map of the fire's spread that, in its concept and colour design (showing hourly advances) appears to replicate a

cartographic technique first presented in a map of the great Chicago Fire of 1871 which this reviewer contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Chicago History* (Grossman *et al.*, 2004). And lastly, among the maps that stand out for their striking appearance, is the aerial photo-map of central Boston and its estuarine neighbours showing oceanic flood risk from likely sea level rises in Plate 56 (Environmental Challenges in 2014). An astounding proportion of the present land area would disappear under up to six feet of water. Even a 100-year storm event, as the accompanying caption points out, would submerge 30 per cent of the city's land area by the middle of this century.

### The bigger picture

Finally, there is the question of where this Boston atlas fits in the evolving genre of urban history atlases in general. The question arises because this book is a fine example of a very rare breed indeed, and considering its long gestation period, together with the luck in finding a private sponsor, and the inroads the internet has made on traditional scholarship and scholarly publishing over the last two decades, it does not seem far-fetched to question whether the physical character and quality of the genre, especially in the print version, is likely or not to continue, with future atlases of the thematic-coverage type added for other great cities. The digitalization of knowledge has upended much of the economic underpinning of printed books, leading many research products to reach publication only through the fickle medium of the internet. The medium itself has encouraged the shortening of human attention span in a variety of educational and social contexts, and the economics of digital design and distribution may not necessarily or easily support the kinds of intellectual investments reflected in *The atlas of Boston history*. The very basis of knowledge and understanding is in some arenas undergoing redefinition, with the explosion of 'information' as data, including, of course, all manner of historical data, putting increasing pressure

on interpretation to make sense of it all. Inventories are so much easier to compile than analytics.

In the joint realm of cartography, statistics, and history, websites are proliferating that present maps as physically curated data, often in the absence of any substantive interpretation, making mapped information widely available as a social good. Three simple examples of cartographic data websites illustrate the point: the USGS Historical Topographic Map Explorer; the Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network; and the 'Boston plans' site of the Boston Planning and Development Agency.<sup>1</sup> Such websites are a boon to historical urban research and are to be lauded, yet they are not in themselves repositories of historical understanding. At the same time, we have seen the beginnings of a remarkable rise in digital sites offering sound and stimulating historical cartographic interpretation, primarily from not-for-profit organizations with an educational mission. The various thematic essays demonstrating the insights to be gained from historic maps showcased on the internet by the Herman Dunlap Smith Center for the History of Cartography at the Newberry Library in Chicago is but one illustration.

At the same time, the very psychophysics of computer screens and web design, with their capacity for visual turbulence and instability, are changing the way people see and respond to visual images, often in new and fascinating ways. The receptiveness of the blogosphere to commentary and repackaging of historical understanding, usually in bite-sized nibbles and often with inadequate historical references, has filled the medium with alternatives to scholarly research that crowd the internet. The argument here is not that any of this is inherently unwelcome, rather the contrary for its inclusionary value, but it raises the question where, amid the cacophony of the digital world, does the traditional historical atlas fit in this new environment? *The atlas of Boston history* is a testimony to the desire and commitment of Nancy Seasholes to give to her city one of the best, most comprehensive, and sophisticated interpretive atlases possible that historical expertise, elegant cartographic

design, and civic consciousness could muster. Will we see similar atlases for other world cities of this type in the future? In the context of the belief that civilization will continue to need print books alongside the internet, for any number of reasons, I certainly hope so. And therein lies the challenge for the future posed by this impressive work.

### Note

1. <https://livingatlas.arcgis.com/topoexplorer/index.html>, <http://www.philageohistory.org/tiles/viewer/>, <http://www.bostonplans.org/3d-data-maps/historical-maps/the-boston-atlas/single-sheet-historical-maps>, accessed 3 August 2020.

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