



## BOOK NOTES

**Ecological urbanism: the nature of the city** by *Susannah Hagan*, Routledge, New York, USA, 2015, 174pp. ISBN 978-0-415-50668-7. The urban sustainable development agenda is particularly about reducing the environmental impact of cities and increasing their resilience to climatic change. This is an attempt to delineate and name an approach to urban design and city planning that is seen as emerging in various contexts, though under a variety of names. It addresses the inter-relationships ‘between built culture, its makers and its inhabitants, and the physical city and its bio-environment’. It is argued that the translation of ecological criteria and ecosystem performance principles into urban forms calls for a results-oriented heuristic approach, anchored in the local social and cultural realities. Three planning models that seek to redefine the relation between ‘nature’ and the built-up city are assessed, looking into current iterations as well as to their historical precedents. The *garden* model stemming from the seminal work of Howard’s Garden City, revisited in Abercrombie’s Greater London Plan and then by current proponents of Transit Oriented Development, fosters the principle of ‘centralized decentralization’. The *boundary* model develops the idea of ‘compaction’ as epitomized by Le Corbusier’s *Ville Contemporaine* and the present-day compact city paradigm. The third model, termed the *continuum*, is anchored in the work of Geddes and McHarg, and in more recent ecological approaches to urban development. It is deemed to encompass the previous two models, while tackling some of their shortcomings.

**Where we want to live: reclaiming infrastructure for a new generation of cities** by *Ryan Gravel*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, USA, 2016, 236 pp. ISBN 978-1-250-07825-4. This is about the genesis, outcomes and lessons learned from one of the most interesting

planning experiments in the USA in recent years: the *Atlanta Beltline*, as seen through the eyes of its initiator Ryan Gravel. It is a collective effort to reclaim and change the purpose of a 35 km ring railway. The project is devised around the idea of reintroducing light rail transit. It aims at revitalizing surrounding neighbourhoods, while absorbing the influx of new residents and ensuring the provision of affordable housing, the redeployment of retail and community services and amenities, and the expansion of the green space network. An account of the project’s history considers the social and political conditions that favoured the creation of a coalition of a variety of stakeholders. There is a broader reflection on the impact of infrastructures on city living, and their potential as catalysts for urban transformation. Arguments are presented on the deleterious social, environmental and health impacts of sprawl, and a fresh perspective is proposed on how its spatial characteristics preclude incremental transformation and adaptation of its tissues. Such inertia compromises the long-term economic viability of such environments, though the costs associated with their spatial inadaptability are not yet fully known. But beyond these important economic and functional considerations, it is contended that ambitious infrastructure reclaiming projects have the potential of changing not only urban form, but the way in which populations see their own cities.

**The inevitable specificity of cities** edited by *ETH Studio Basel*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich, Switzerland, 2015, 311 pp. ISBN 978-3-03778-0. This is an original exploration of the urban forms of eight ‘ordinary’ cities and regions: Napoli, the Nile Valley, Belgrade, Nairobi, Hong Kong, the Canary Islands, Beirut and Casablanca. Detailed case studies, conducted with the help of students of the ETH Studio, are accompanied by texts and essays written independently

or in collaboration by Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Marcel Meili, Jasmine Kastami with Christian Schmid, Mathias Gunz, Shadi Rhabaran with Manuel Herz, and Rolf Jenni. The whole enterprise is based on the postulate that globalization forces, though extensive, do not entail the homogenization of urban forms. The theoretical framework revolves around the concepts of *territory*, *power* and *difference*, and is best described in the essays by M. Meili and by C. Schmid. The characteristics of each city, it is argued, stem from their differing processes of urbanization. Urbanization is understood as the transformation of a natural space into a 'second', fabricated nature. Social life is what makes a second nature a *territory*: the 'material foundation for activities and interaction'. Schmid recognizes in particular his debt to Saverio Muratori and the French and Italian schools of urban morphology. *Difference* arises from interactions 'between the particularities of people and places'. Neither inherently positive nor negative, difference could produce opportunities, or threats, depending on the context. The eight case studies illustrate how the *power* dynamics as well as the modalities pertaining to the production of a *territory*, and of *differences* within it, are variously intertwined, and how an effort to untangle these can help explain the intrinsic specificity of each city. Schmid concludes that the 'variety of socio-spatial patterns and modalities for the control or mediation of differences, [...] are as specific to individual cities as a fingerprint'.

**Understanding urban metabolism: a tool for urban planning** edited by *Nektarios Chrysoulakis, Eduardo Anselmo de Castro and Eddy J. Moors*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2015, 224 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-83511-4. A city's metabolism is conceived as a system of energy and material flows. It is determined by the quantification of inputs and outputs of materials and wastes, in the form of, for example, energy, water, carbon and pollutants. Current sustainable development practices aim at emulating nature and replacing linear flows by cyclical flows, hence favouring the reuse and recycling of waste. *Understanding urban metabolism* is the product of the collaboration between academics and

research groups from twelve European countries. It summarizes the EU research project BRIDGE, an acronym for 'sustainaBle uRban plannIng Decision support accountinG for urban mEtabolism'. The first part of the book introduces the concept of urban metabolism, and outlines the desired characteristics of a decision support system in planning before presenting the BRIDGE approach. Part two details and evaluates a variety of methods to measure and model physical flows. Part three introduces social and socio-economic considerations. It presents pilot projects involving 'communities of practice', namely prospective end-users of the decision support system. The fourth part is concerned with the prospects and efficiency of the approach as a decision support system for the assessment of planning alternatives. Part five offers a short conclusion, highlighting three key BRIDGE contributions. First, the project developed a framework allowing researchers from different disciplines to analyse the physical environments and socio-economic conditions pertaining to material and energy fluxes. Secondly, in relation to 'information flows', it developed specific means to communicate multidisciplinary research results to stakeholders involved in the planning process. Thirdly, it helped to narrow the gap between biophysical science and urban planning.

**Speculations transformations: thoughts on the future of Germany's cities and regions** edited by *Matthias Böttger, Stefan Carsten, and Ludwig Engel* and translated from German by *Christopher Jenkin-Jones*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich, Switzerland, 2016, 272 pp. ISBN 978-3-03778-478-5. Stemming from a 3-year research project entitled *Baukulturatlas Deutschland 2030/2050*, this is an exercise in prospective planning for Germany. Instead of focusing just on the built environment per se, the researchers have concerned themselves more broadly with the *lived environment* to consider 'what the catalysts and driving forces behind spatial development might be and which societal arbitration processes lead to a particular built environment'. The product of their reflections is laid out in four sections: *analysis, speculations, reflections*

and *transformations*. Sixteen experts discuss the challenges of German cities and regions, and identify major factors that might affect the future. Contributors are from the design and planning fields, and also from social sciences, engineering and climatic change research. Themes range from the reorganization of work, migration and immigration, sprawl and rural decline, to energy transition, transportation and urban and architectural retrofitting. The analytical section is complemented by 25 diagrammatic maps that present statistical data in a graphically innovative format. The country is divided into 7269 squares, each of approximately 60 km<sup>2</sup>. For example, one such map illustrates the current wind energy production and wind energy potential, and another illustrates car ownership and population density. In *speculations*, three scenarios cover different spatial distributions of population and economic activities, associated with varying economic circumstances. In *reflections* the three scenarios are further developed and adapted to six cities and regions. Finally, in *transformations* three normative paradigms (renewable energies, alternative prosperity and decentralized production) are considered in relation to possible futures.

**Dream cities: seven urban ideas that shape the world** by *Wade Graham*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, USA, 2016, 323 pp. ISBN 978-0-06-219631-6. In plain language accessible to non-specialists, *Dream cities* traces a cultural history of familiar and ubiquitous built environments, such as the *mall*, the *suburb*, and *concrete slab buildings*, by delving into their historical precedents, initial conception, and successive reinterpretations. Key ideas, it is argued, crystallize in canonical planning texts, exhibition and competition entries or by being embodied into seminal projects. From there, they become subject to endless interpretation, manipulation, and more or less faithful translation. Tracing parallels with European romanticism and eclecticism, as well as with the nascent movie industry, the author considers the experiential and synaesthetic qualities of domestic environments that served as counterpoints to the harsh realities of the industrial and capitalistic world that the city's productive and

managerial centre represents. A similar thesis is developed on the origin and more recent evolution of the mall and other places of mass consumption. Though less original when addressing the origins and later iterations of the dispersed city, the manifestations of the *City Beautiful*, or the rationalist and modernist city architecture and infrastructures, the discussion is effective in stressing the contradictions between the initial intentions of the architects and the later incarnations of their ideas. Cases in point are the pleas by Jane Jacobs to embrace the complexities of urban material, economic and social contexts in their criticism of the modernist city, and the response articulated by New Urbanism.

**Practicing Utopia: an intellectual history of the new town movement** by *Rosemary Wakeman*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA, 2016, 376 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-34603-8. This is a strictly analytical – as opposed to normative – perspective on new towns. The expression ‘new town’ combines the notion of novelty, with its inherent utopian flavour, and the concept of ‘town’ is understood here as conveying the sense of a totality – something other than mere city expansion schemes. The period under scrutiny is from 1945 to 1975. The interpretation is informed by an exploration of historical roots. The author posits that besides the obvious, yet important, precedent of Ebenezer Howard's garden city, new town development stems from practices that developed in the contexts of reconstruction efforts following the Second World War. Numerous other sources of influence include the CIAM socialist ideas. The author sees enough overlapping themes, methods, and manifestations to justify identifying a wide array of experiments with a common planning programme. And an impressive corpus of cases is provided from all the inhabited continents. For Wakeman, the new town movement is permeated by utopianism and the desire to imagine a future world, first on paper and then materially in cities built from scratch. It has been instrumental in shaping the general attitude of the population in favour of the broader modernization project and its ambitions for technocratic control.