



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Expansive discourses: urban sprawl in Calgary 1945 – 1978** by *Max Foran*, Athabasca University Press, Edmonton, Canada, 2009, 276 pp. ISBN 978-1-897425-13-8.

Calgary, Alberta is a city that perhaps exemplifies, within the Canadian context, sprawl. Since the end of the Second World War, it has spread outward in the form of low-density suburbs composed primarily of single-family houses. While not nearly as shocking as the sprawl found in many places in the United States, Calgary's urban form has attracted criticism for a number of reasons: excessive land consumption, destruction of farmland, increase in auto-dependency, lack of options in house type, and low quality of much of the public realm. How this has occurred is an important question, as it reveals much about the planning paradigms that have influenced city growth, and is also a commentary on the social and cultural values that produced these ideas and forms.

Max Foran, a historian and long-time educator, currently teaching at the University of Calgary, has painstakingly reconstructed the who, what, when, where and why of Calgary's suburban development during the period 1945-78. Author of many books and countless articles, Foran is at his best when recounting the stories behind the many deals that created the city. His research is impeccable, his love of intrigue and drama is obvious, and he brings alive the sequence of events and processes that eventually became the pattern of development now taken for granted.

Although many readily blame the development industry for Calgary's urban pattern, Foran identifies 'five influencing factors in the suburbanization process', including the City of Calgary and the land development companies, the policies pursued by the provincial government and the Central (later Canada) Mortgage and Housing

Corporation (CMHC), and, importantly, the house buyer.

Essentially, the decision by the City in 1953 to allow the private sector to finance and construct the emerging suburbs signified the beginning of what was to become an extended age of design-by-default by the developer. Several development companies were poised to take advantage of this situation and were well equipped to plan and construct the neighbourhoods that were required by the booming and newly affluent population.

Foran organizes the book chronologically, with Part One covering the period between 1945 and 1963, documenting the origins of the patterns that were established. Part Two deals with 1963 to 1978, describing the continued expansion of Calgary's suburbs through the process of annexation, which is Calgary's method of choice for dealing with growth. The City has a practice of maintaining a 30-year land bank, and satisfies that by annexing land for future growth. This guarantees that the city will continue to spread as low-density suburbs, making the provision of public transportation more difficult and expensive. Foran explores the relationships between the City and the development industry, including one map showing the development industry's land holdings outside of the city limits prior to one annexation.

Calgary has always been friendly to the interests of developers, and it is also a city with a history of rejecting progressive plans, from the Mawson Plan of 1914, to the Urban Design Plan of 1978, to the 2009 process known as Plan-It Calgary. This last plan was intended to be a radical departure from the status quo, and was based on visionary principles about sustainability and urban quality. However, what was eventually adopted was a severely watered-down version. Much of the opposition to the goals of the plan, which would have gone a long way towards combating patterns of sprawl, came from the development industry, which is now

highly organized, politicized and institutionalized.

As is usual with his work, Foran has provided a highly detailed account of the historical events leading to what we see today and many stories about the personalities who were involved, but the contribution to the planning and design disciplines is limited by some errors and omissions. First, it is frustrating that Foran stops at 1978. The greatest value of this book is likely to be in the lessons learned but, since it ends with events 30 years ago, the application to today is missed. The evidence is there just waiting to be elucidated, and it is to be hoped that Foran is busy on a second volume. Although the book is about urban development, there is relatively little discussion of physical urban form, and no comment on the qualities of the built environment – just underlying assumptions that what was produced was bad. There are far too few photographs and maps to complement the text and help the reader to see what the processes, decisions and policies produced. There are also several errors in the captions to the photographs (for example, those on pages 48 and 66 identify the directions incorrectly), some of the maps are graphically crude (particularly the maps showing Calgary's annexations), and many of the photographs are too general, or are unlabelled (for example, the cover photograph of the 1990s suburb of Royal Oak in north-west Calgary, is not identified in the text).

These limitations aside, *Expansive discourses* is an important book. The audience who would probably benefit the most includes City officials and the development industry. Students and professionals in the environmental design disciplines would benefit from consideration of this book alongside another that includes more graphics that illustrate the city's evolution, so that they could more completely understand the physical results of these many years of deals and decisions.

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**City and cosmos: the medieval world in urban form** by *Keith D. Lilley*, Reaktion Books, London, UK, 2009, 256 pp. ISBN 978 1 86189 441 0.

The distinguished historical geographer Keith Lilley, well known for his leading research on

mapping in the Middle Ages and the geography of urban form, has produced a stunning new volume that explores the idea of the city in the medieval imagination. In a finely-detailed yet compelling account, Lilley considers the powerful and enduring link between medieval conceptions of the city and geometrical forms that expressed the work of God, highlighting the place of urbanism within a divinely ordered hierarchy. It goes almost without saying that such concerns have been marginalized in traditional morphogenetic town-plan analyses, and this treatment is an immensely welcome means of injecting extra life, colour and – above all – a flavour of the lived-in experience of the medieval world into the field. Nonetheless, it is a great merit of this book that it has been written by a scholar with a strong record of empirical research in the field of urban morphology, which is also drawn upon to good effect.

The coverage is principally north-west European, with England and France particularly well represented. The text is divided into three parts, each of two chapters. Part I deals primarily with urban form as revealed by medieval map-makers. The image of heavenly Jerusalem in particular is seen as an underlying model for an idealized Christian imagining of medieval urban form, and a variety of geometric forms – circles, squares and especially crosses that recur in town plans – are shown as redolent with rich religious and other symbolism. Here as elsewhere, the range of case studies covered is excellent, with English *burhs* and French *bastides* standing out as particularly compelling examples. Part II looks at the multiple meanings of town foundation. The agency of lordship in town planning is examined critically, and a persuasive model for the processes of medieval town planning and surveying is developed. The underestimated symbolism of the material culture of town planning – in particular reed and compass – also stands out. Part III examines what are styled the 'moral topographies' of towns, and demonstrates how town plans were also backcloths for performances and religious processions that lent a sense of unity to urban identities which were in so many other ways fractured. The metaphor of the city as akin to the body is a persuasive one: this section looks at the impact of urban laws on the social and moral organization of towns and explores the active marginalization through acts of town planning of sectors of the community, including prostitutes, lepers and displaced ethnic groups.

The volume is handsomely produced and richly illustrated. A sixteen-page full colour section