

Reviews

BOOKS

The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917

By Jon A. Peterson. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004; xxi + 431 pp., illustrations, photographs, notes, index; cloth \$59.95.



Jon Peterson, professor of history at Queens College, City University of New York, has written a solid history of the city planning movement in the United States from the beginning of significant urban growth in 1840 to the onset of

World War I. This book can take its place alongside planning classics such as John Reps's *The Making of Urban America* (1965), Mel Scott's *American City Planning Since 1890* (1969), William H. Wilson's *The City Beautiful Movement* (1989), and Martin Melosi's *The Sanitary City* (2000).¹ The book concentrates on the genesis of the City Beautiful movement that flourished from 1893 to 1910. The book also documents conflicts of dogma between planners and civic reform activists who were involved in the emergence of city planning as a profession. Peterson analyzes American city planning within the context of the political beliefs of progressive urban reformers, and returns to those themes repeatedly.

Peterson distinguishes city planning, the focus of this book, from earlier "townsite planning" about which John Reps has written. According to Peterson, American city planning "dealt with

already built cities, such as New York, Chicago or San Francisco." By contrast, townsite planning, including colonial planning, was to sell building lots by subdividing a single property owner's land. Indeed, as Peterson observes, this focus on development is what distinguished American city planning from its European counterparts, which were concerned with undeveloped tracts for the purpose of building garden suburbs or town extensions. In that sense, American comprehensive city planning looked at the totality of the urban built environment. It was both aspirational—presenting a unified vision of a future city—and corrective, directed at fixing problems of inadequate sanitation, housing overcrowding and blight, insufficient park and recreational facilities, and traffic congestion. European planning typically had much narrower political and geographic aims.

The book identifies three themes influencing American planning. The first is sanitary reform, which recognized that cities needed pure water, good sewage, storm drainage systems, and other measures, such as the elimination of privies, to create a healthful, disease-free environment. Peterson's discussion of the sanitary reform movement is crisp and to the point in summarizing its central characteristics.

The second theme is landscape values, expressed through the creation of parks commissions and the development of large-scale park systems. Here the emphasis was on creating parks that offered opportunities for exercise and recreation, communing with nature, and contemplating pastoral beauty. A democratic spirit underlay the establishment of the great public parks, like New York City's Central

Park, which were to be the lungs of the city, to be enjoyed by all, not just the wealthy.

The third theme is civic art, and it is here where Peterson turns to the influence of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Overseen by the architect-planner Daniel Burnham, the fair featured great white classical buildings, grand vistas, ponds, fountains, and flamboyant sculpture. "What enthralled the architects," Peterson writes, "was the prospect of fulfilling, in almost pure form, their belief in art as a value in its own right—and as a counterpoint to the materialism of its age." In keeping with the architects' objectives, the fair was an edifying experience that intended to inspire and uplift, and refine the ideals of the nation's people.

The three themes Peterson outlines form the background for the central part of the book—the City Beautiful movement and its eventual decline. Peterson traces the major City Beautiful efforts: the McMillan Plan for Washington, DC, described as the nation's first comprehensive plan, and urban designs for Philadelphia, Kansas City, St. Louis, and other cities. Peterson then turns to profiles of planners and their projects, including Daniel Burnham, John Nolen, Charles Mulford Robinson, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Harland P. Kelsey.

Of the various accounts in the book, the most provocative and illuminating is Peterson's treatment of the career of Benjamin Marsh, "the brash young social progressive who would suddenly streak like a comet through the American planning skies." In 1907, at age 30, Marsh was selected as the executive secretary of the Committee on Congestion of Population in New York. Marsh became enamored with German town planning, which involved purchasing land beyond a city's limits as a reserve for future needs, planning for the conversion of reserve land to urban use, and enacting detailed zoning regulations. In one speech at the nation's first city planning conference in Washington, DC, in 1909, Marsh attacked American planning as "a bonus to real estate and

corporation interests, without regard for the welfare of its citizens," clearly aiming his words at City Beautiful advocates. At the conference, John Nolen and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., were skeptical of adopting German city planning approaches in their entirety. "Although we have an immense amount to learn from Europe, and especially from Germany, in regard to city planning," Olmsted said, "it would be very foolish for us to copy blindly what has been done there. . . . There is need for some caution lest we copy the mistakes."

The anticongestion crusade advocated public control over private property through zoning, and zealous attacks on real estate speculation and the "exploitation of land." Marsh's obsession with the anticongestion crusade proved to be his undoing. Opposition to Marsh by Olmsted and others, including housing reformer Lawrence Veiller, led to Marsh's departure in 1912 from New York City. From there he went to the Balkans as a war correspondent, and never returned to planning advocacy.

Peterson also addresses the emergence of the zoning movement, which began in Los Angeles and New York City, and reached full flower after the endpoint of this book's chronology. Zoning gained ground in New York City, he comments, because planner-lawyer advocates "assiduously cultivated every category of landholder through the entire city, making sure no significant interest group took offense." Zoning, Peterson observes, had a critical flaw; in most cases, it had been established without referring to a city plan for guidance. Peterson quotes St. Louis planning consultant Harland Bartholomew who declared that, in the absence of a plan, a zoning ordinance "becomes largely an instrument of expediency subject to constant and often whimsical change."

The book's has two shortcomings, however: lack of attention to urban planning in the West and the South and to the relation between planning and immigration and race. Peterson touches briefly on western and southern planning efforts, downplay-

ing them because of their apparent lack of significance or effectiveness. The absence of any thorough discussion of immigration and race is more serious. American city planning grew up during a period of increasing anti-immigrant bias that resulted in federal immigration quotas in the 1920s. It was not a coincidence that cities that embraced zoning had substantial, growing immigrant populations. Moreover, the initial goal of zoning was racial segregation, rather than control of use conflicts or overbuilding. Baltimore (1910), Richmond (1911), Atlanta (1913), and other cities adopted racial zoning ordinances.² (Peterson mentions race briefly in a discussion of Harlan P. Kelsey's plan for Greenville, South Carolina, where Kelsey "pleaded for racial segregation in residential areas.") A complete treatment of early American city planning needs to account for regional and social factors as context and motives for the movement.

The Birth of City Planning in the United States is an important book for the heritage field because groundwork laid in the early years of the planning profession continues to influence the survival of historic resources throughout the nation. The book also defines the types of planning heritage that can be found in the nation's cities and towns, which may be worthy of documentation, preservation, and interpretation.

Stuart Meck

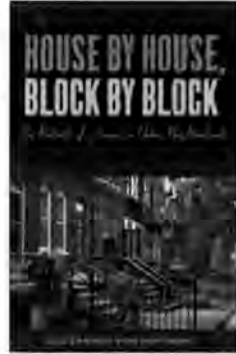
American Planning Association

1. John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

2. See for example, Christopher Silver, "The Racial Origins of Zoning: Southern Cities from 1910-40," *Planning Perspectives* 6 (1991): 189-205.

House by House, Block by Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods

By Alexander von Hoffman. New York and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003; xii + 306 pp., illustrations, tables, notes, index; cloth \$30.00.



In this fine book, Alexander von Hoffman chronicles the near death and amazing revival of depressed inner city areas in several of the nation's largest cities: New York, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. Inner city neighborhoods, home to important architectural and cultural landmarks, were nearly abandoned in the 1970s after government-sponsored urban renewal, public housing, and other urban-oriented programs of the 1950s and 1960s failed to reverse their decline. In the following decades, through a number of fortunate experiments, these neighborhoods were reclaimed and reborn. How this happened holds lessons for urban areas in the United States and other countries.

A professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, von Hoffman provides historical background to this riches-to-rags-to-riches saga. He summarizes the accelerating forces of decentralization after World War II and the sequence of national legislation that sought to rebuild the inner city, such as the housing acts of 1949 and 1954. The historical perspective includes the Great Society's Model Cities Program and the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 that ended the urban renewal and Model Cities programs and replaced them with Community Development Block Grants to local governments. Additional programs included Section 8 of the 1974 act that provided funds to private landlords for families needing low-cost housing and the Urban Action Development Grant program for severely econom-

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Center for Cultural Resources



CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship

Volume 2 Number 2 Summer 2005



CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship
Summer 2005
ISSN 1068-4999

CRM = cultural resource management

CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship is published twice each year by the National Park Service to address the history and development of and trends and emerging issues in cultural resource management in the United States and abroad. Its purpose is to broaden the intellectual foundation of the management of cultural resources. *CRM Journal* is edited in the offices of the National Center for Cultural Resources, National Park Service, in Washington, DC.

The online version of *CRM Journal* is available at www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal. Back issues of *CRM* magazine (1978–2002) are available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/crm>.

Guidance for authors is available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal>.

Manuscripts, letters to the editor, and all questions and recommendations of an editorial nature should be addressed to Antoinette J. Lee, Editor, email Toni_Lee@nps.gov, telephone (202) 354-2272, or fax (202) 371-2422. Incoming mail to the Federal Government is irradiated, which damages computer disks, CDs, and paper products. These materials should be sent by a commercial delivery service to Editor, *CRM Journal*, National Park Service, 1201 Eye Street, NW (2251), Washington, DC 20005.

Views and conclusions in *CRM Journal* are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the U.S. Government. Acceptance of material for publication does not necessarily reflect an opinion or endorsement on the part of the *CRM Journal* staff or the National Park Service.

CRM Journal is produced under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers.

To subscribe to *CRM Journal*—

Online <http://www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal>
email NPS_CRMJournal@nps.gov
Facsimile (202) 371-2422

U.S. Mail—
CRM Journal
National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW (2251)
Washington, DC 20240-0001