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Book review

REVIEW OF *THE URBANISM READER: DESIGN, TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE AND THE FUTURE OF CITIES*

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Al, S., & Verebes, T. (Eds.). (2025). *The urbanism reader: Design, technology, culture and the future of cities*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

The Urbanism Reader critiques postmodern urbanism as a reaction to modernist minimalism, focusing on diversity, responsiveness, and complexity in city design. Edited by Stefan Al and Tom Verebes, the anthology includes over 40 curated texts exploring urban theory since the 1960s. Topics range from spatial diversity, non-linear planning, density, public health, and informality to technology, AI, and environmental concerns. While the book includes minority and ecological perspectives, it lacks deeper political economy critiques. Ultimately, it offers a rich, if selective, overview of current urban discourse, highlighting the intersections of design, technology, and society as tools for navigating urban complexity.

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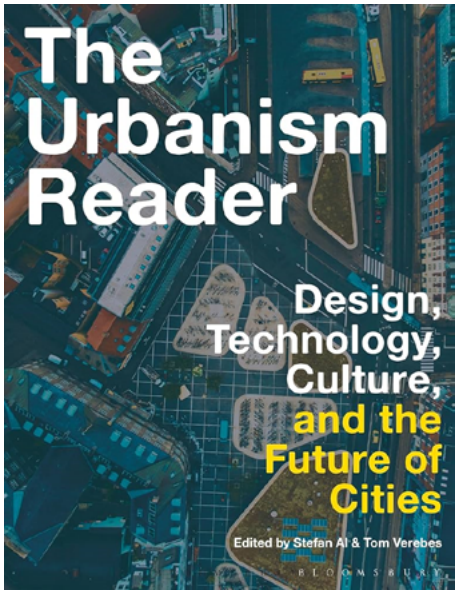

Modernist urbanism ended, at least according to historian Charles Jencks, on "July 15, 1972, at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruit-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite." Jencks later admitted he invented the exact timing for dramatic literary effect, but his point was clear enough. The spectacular, televised demolition of Minoru Yamasaki's dilapidated and crime-ridden Pruit-Igoe housing project in Saint Louis, Missouri, was the symbolic end of postwar urban-renewal strategies premised on the austere ideals of daylight, air, rationality, and repetition that ultimately trace back to Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse of the 1920s. The postmodernist backlash to the purportedly alienating effects of modernist minimalism and utilitarianism, the reintroduction of color, decoration, figuration, history, variety, and specificity, is where this book begins. Indeed, the ubiquitous, megalomaniacal visions that dominate recent urban histories – those of Le Corbusier and Ludwig Hilberseimer, the Japanese Metabolists and the Russian Disurbanists, even the radical suburbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City – are conspicuously absent, or mentioned only in passing. Instead, there is a more fractured, heterogeneous, and responsive lineage, one that takes seriously the social, technological, and environmental pressures shaping cities today.

The editors are both New York-based architects and educators: Stefan Al, originally from the Netherlands, now Associate Professor at City University of New York, and Tom Verebes, originally from Canada, now Professor at the New York Institute of Technology. Both were previously colleagues at the University of Hong Kong, and have long been involved in scholarly discourse on urbanism. Al is known for his pioneering fieldwork on new urban conditions in China, notably in illustrated surveys of Hong Kong and Macau, not to mention a fascinating book on the Las Vegas Strip, as well as research on issues of density, mobility, and climate change. Verebes has long focused on what

he calls "computational urbanism" and the potentials for new technology – in particular, parametric software – to aid in the production of more responsive, flexible urban and architectural forms.

Comprising more than 40 selected texts divided into 10 chapters that more or less correlate with the historical evolution of urban theory since the 1960s, the topics alternate between formal issues and social issues, emphasizing their points of overlap or intersection. The target audience is primarily students and scholars, and those in need of a synoptic overview of the current state of the discourse and its immediate sources. The introductions to the texts are substantial and informative, allowing Al and Verebes to give historical context, frame the questions to which the collected texts are intended as answers, and provide contrasting models and positions, as well as including some shorter quotations and references to texts that didn't make the final cut. Usefully, most of the selected texts have been judiciously edited – not merely cut down to only the most relevant pages, but precisely redacted at the level of individual paragraphs and sentences. This has effectively turned some of the selected essays into sequences of aphorisms that crystalize the original author's intended message, and are no doubt perfect for the mental digestive capacity of a generation raised on social media.

Some of the authors and texts are relatively unknown, particularly in the latter sections of the book that deal with current social exigencies – pandemics, protests, pollution, racism, sexism – but most of the earlier texts are obvious, unavoidable classics. The first chapter, "Spatial Heterogeneity, Diversity and Difference After Modernist Planning," begins with excerpts from two canonical books: Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*, and Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City*, both of which document the plurality of the city as found, as opposed to the homogeneity of the idealized modernist city, thereby implicitly setting principles and directions for a postmodern urbanism. These two pieces are followed by Kenneth Frampton's "Critical Regionalism," taken from his seminal *Modern Architecture*: *A Critical History*. While the former two texts are explicitly urban, proposing a liberating and sometimes mischievous rejection of order and harmony (whether classical or modernist), the latter is a strictly architectural, if not anti-urban, essay written by an author who has always vociferously opposed postmodernism, though it does suggest possible sources of inspiration for a postmodern urbanism. The chapter concludes with an excerpt from Bernard Tschumi's *Architecture and Disjunction*, a work of radical theory that provides specific techniques for introducing formal and functional variety to the city while introducing literary and philosophical voices to the discourse.

This first chapter and its four texts touch upon the legacy of modernism and advocate new approaches to diversity (formal, cultural, spatial), effectively setting the groundwork for the thematic chapters that follow. Chapter two deals with complexity and non-standard geometries, comprising polemics against orthogonality and hierarchy, with the obvious starting point of Christopher Alexander's "A City is not a Tree." Arguing that cities are semi-lattices of interwoven relationships, Alexander challenges reductive planning models, encouraging designers to think of urbanism as organic, relational, and emergent. Written before the appearance of our current digital technologies, it acts as a benchmark against which later arguments about networks, flows, computational urbanism, and parametric design can be evaluated. The implicit nonlinearity is then made explicit in an excerpt from Manuel de Landa's innovative philosophical treatise, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. Stan Allen's influential essay "From Object to Field" is accompanied by some very useful diagrams, followed with two philosophical speculations on the implications of diagrammatic thinking and emergence written by Peter Eisenman and Sanford Kwinter. Chapter three deals with flows, connectivities, and networks (social and infrastructural), with Frei Otto and Michael Weinstock giving historical overviews of the development of paths and the consequent urban forms. The inevitable contribution from Manuel Castells is primarily a descriptive text, but importantly it augments the earlier discussion of material flows with the concept of information. This is followed by examples of instantiations of flow, at the urban level in Hong Kong and at the architectural level in the Yokohama Port Terminal, the texts and graphics alike demonstrating a liberation from the historical constraint of the ground plane.

Chapter four addresses density, opening with a pragmatic endorsement of compact cities by Richard Rogers, who makes the counterintuitive but demonstrably true point that dense urban regions are greener than dispersed suburbia. This is followed by Rem Koolhaas's celebration of the programmatic complexity induced by the density of Manhattan. Chapter five is on issues of "green" environmental design and resilience in landscape and infrastructure, including Anne Whiston Spirn's poetic description of our planet, Charles Waldheim's concatenation of landscape and urbanism, and an overview of Chinese landscape concepts from the late, lamented Kongjian Yu. Chapter six deals with public health and somewhat controversial notions of equity, liveability, inclusivity, and social justice. Together with the inevitable text by Jan Gehl on public spaces, human scale, and walkability, there are strongly worded manifestoes against ethnic and gender biases. Chapter seven looks at the global south while returning to notions of informality, including so-called "tactical" interventions and bottom-up "emergent" processes. Ananya Roy's "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning" effectively extends the anthology beyond Western planning orthodoxies, treating informality as an epistemic lens for questioning accepted norms, power relations, and practices of urban life that occur without official regulation. Admittedly, Roy's arguments are largely theoretical rather than practical, but she is one of the anthology's key

corrective voices, a reminder that all too many urbanites live under less than ideal conditions, and that design must respond to power relations and epistemological pluralism. The obvious oxymoron of describing any object at all as "informal" is convincingly solved by Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner in their text "Rules of Engagement: Caracas and the Informal City": "We do not believe 'informal' means 'lacking form.' It implies, for us, something that arises from within itself and its makers, whose form has not yet been recognised, but which is subject to rules and procedures potentially as specific and necessary as those that have governed official, formal city-making."

The final three chapters engage fully and unapologetically with technology and computation (including an excerpt from Verebes's earlier book *Masterplanning the Adaptive City*), addressing parametric design, algorithmic processes, cybernetics, virtuality, and, unavoidably, the ethical, political, and environmental implications of AI for architectural and urban design. Kate Crawford's "Atlas of AI: Power, Politics and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence" is not overly optimistic nor is it a design manifesto, but does expose the ways in which AI systems have become embedded in resource extraction, labor exploitation, energy consumption, geopolitical power dynamics, and citizen surveillance. As the final text of the anthology, it balances the more optimistic or speculative pieces with a sober reminder of the ecological and ethical costs of technology. She entreats urban thinkers to ask: who benefits, who is marginalized, what infrastructures are invisible, and what long-term burdens we are placing on future generations?

A comprehensive book that touches upon almost every topic relevant to the contemporary city, it is not without gaps. There is a notable lack of political economy critiques – no David Harvey or Edward Soja, no structural Marxism, no radical urban geography or real estate financial analyses – to counterbalance the prevailing technological optimism. To be sure, there is a welcome inclusion of ecologically minded and minority voices, though these are mainly descriptive rather than prescriptive texts. For the most part, cities are framed as sites for creativity, resilience, inclusion, and computational governance, with design employed to fix, or at least ameliorate, what capitalism has damaged, though generally without challenging its basic motives.

Demanding that an anthology such as this one cover every possible topic would make it impossibly large, of course, so the readers must necessarily accept the biases and expertise of the writers. Indeed, that is the point of an anthology like this one: to have someone else do the enormous amount of necessary background research and then give us their selected highlights. A panoramic survey, the book may lean toward a latent digital neoliberalism, but does an excellent job of mapping where urban design theory and practice are now, particularly at the intersections between design and technology, as well as the natural environment and emerging virtual realms. Cumulatively, *The Urbanism Reader* is less a definitive canon than it is a provocation, a reminder of the need for design techniques and political principles adequate to the complexities of contemporary urban life. To that extent, it succeeds not only as pedagogy, but as disciplinary self-reflection.