

6-21-1985

Book Reviews: The Endangered Metropolis

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Recommended Citation

Hogarty, Richard A. (1985) "Book Reviews: The Endangered Metropolis," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol1/iss2/10>

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Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden*. New York: Basic Books, 1984. 275 pp.

Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*. New York: Random House, 1984. 232 pp.

George Gallup, Jr., *Forecast 2000*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1984. 157 pp.

Gary Gappert and Richard V. Knight, eds., *Cities in the 21st Century*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1982. 348 pp.

WHAT ALL OF THE ABOVE BOOKS have in common is the futuristic glimpse they give us into urban life in the twenty-first century. In approaching such a milestone, one can be either an optimist or a pessimist. These authors present a balanced mixture; they bring tidings of good news *and* bad news. As one of them aptly puts it: "In the present lies not only the nightmare of what the city will become if current trends continue, but also the dream of what the city could be." With this thought in mind, it behooves us to examine both the dream and the nightmare. It is the purpose of this essay to review these books for their substantive message and at least suggestively to evaluate their importance for tomorrow's world.

Cities are both the product and the producers of technology, and therein lies a key to comprehending the city of the future. Throughout history the city has provided the most basic necessities of life: food, shelter, water, energy, and safe waste disposal. But the modern city is also a center for art, beauty, and learning—a carrier of culture in literature, music, and philosophy. And for all its anonymity and alienation, the city can be a place of fascinating variety and excitement.

On the assumption that a look backward will illuminate the way ahead, it is good to remind oneself of how the city evolved from its origins down to the present century. Archeologists indicate that the transition from the primitive village to the city first took place about 5,500 years ago, when, through the increased specialization of functions made possible by technology, people no longer had to spend all of their time gathering food and protecting themselves physically. As Lewis Mumford points out in his monumental book *The City in History*, "Grain cultivation, the plow, the potter's wheel, the sailboat, the draw loom, copper metallurgy, abstract mathematics, exact astronomical observation, the calendar, writing and other modes of intelligible discourse in permanent form, all came

into existence at roughly the same time, around 3000 B.C. give or take a few centuries." With these accomplishments the city became possible, and in six scattered regions of the world, urban settlements had their beginnings—first in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley, later in Mediterranean Europe and China, and still later in Central America.

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By the middle of the twentieth century, the upper and middle classes in America began to flee the central cities in large numbers. The "white flight" to suburbia was hastened by the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which provided a convenient escape route for the affluent. Thus, in the words of former mayor Richardson Dilworth of Philadelphia, we in effect threw a "white noose" around the necks of the cities. Moreover, we are now artificially segregating cities not only racially but by class as well. In many ways, the city has become the refuge for millions of "marginal" citizens, both black and white, who live on the fringe of the economic system and cannot escape. Although the gentrification movement that commenced in the decade of the 1970s supplies a new dimension, it is too soon to tell whether the return of middle- and upper-class professionals to the central city will significantly reverse the earlier trend.

If cities evolved from a technological base, so also have they prospered. It is no exaggeration to say that they may also cease to exist because of technology, which now raises the specter of their cataclysmic self-annihilation. Without stopping to brood over the gloomy possibility of a nuclear catastrophe like the one that nearly occurred at Three Mile Island in 1979, it is reasonable to construe the signs of contemporary urban industrialism as self-destructive in less dramatic ways. As a society, we proceed with reckless abandon to squander incredible amounts of resources and to create intolerable levels of pollution, thereby engendering the capacity to produce a fatal imbalance in the ecology. By far the most ominous threat is the "silent spring" that followed from the indiscriminate use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and herbicides; the careless disposal of refuse in landfills; and the clandestine dumping of poisonous toxic wastes. These heedless practices contaminate and diminish groundwater supplies, and they also seriously endanger public health. The perfect illustration of this was the Love Canal incident in New York. Municipalities, hard-pressed to provide adequate services within their shrinking budgets, balk at investing in new, improved waste treatment. In short, we take the cheapest way, and let the other fellow pay—the other fellow, in this case, being the citizen's health.

New England's air becomes acidic from the industrial smokestacks of Midwestern cities. Acid rain formed from coal burned hundreds of miles away is killing fish and plant vegetation in rural lakes and forests. As a result of such pollution, we are in danger from the air we breathe and the water we drink. Not only that—we live in cities that border on bankruptcy or continually depend on deficit financing; where taxes are so high that a rate increase actually reduces revenue because of property abandonment; where schools fail to educate and instead become the scenes of strikes and riots; where parks and playgrounds are neglected and vandalized; where whites race for suburbia at the appearance of a black family on the block; and where crime, drugs, official corruption, and generations of poverty are endemic. Add to this horror show the unreliability of public transportation and the electrical power failures that often leave city dwellers either stranded in elevators or having to cope with a night of complete darkness. Urban nightmare? If this doesn't qualify, then I don't know what does. Some urban specialists believe that we are running the risk of making the city an uninhabitable domain by one means or another. At the moment, the odds on getting there appear very favorable.

Like the late Rachel Carson, Anne Whiston Spirn sees and understands most clearly the implications and destructive consequences of these ecological dangers. Her naturalistic conception of the city as a fragile urban ecosystem was influenced by her earlier career in art history. Before becoming a landscape architect and environmental planner, she studied the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, the famous nineteenth-century landscape architect who designed a series of magnificent parks and parkways that took advantage of nature to alleviate the city's social and environmental problems. He was largely responsible for creating Boston's Emerald Necklace park system, which ranks as a masterpiece in park planning. In so doing, Olmsted helped transform the American city in the post-Civil War era. Following in his footsteps, Anne Whiston Spirn has adopted his ideas and methods and has applied them to the modern city in a most salutary way. Much to her credit, she has greatly expanded and refined them in her own vision, but the principles remain essentially the same.

In *The Granite Garden*, Spirn recognizes the unique planning opportunity that is available for restoring older cities whose infrastructures are in desperate need of replacement, and for guiding newer cities that are still in the process of construction. If these cities are to be healthful, vibrant, and aesthetically delightful places in which to live, she argues, they must be designed in concert with nature so as to maximize its positive forces and minimize its negative ones. Such considerations as air flow, topography, water dynamics, and plant and animal life should be taken into account. All of them combine to play interdependent roles in her formula for shaping a safer and more beneficial urban habitat. City dwellers, in her view, are dependent upon the natural environment to support them just as much as rural and suburban residents are. When the potency of these cycles is ignored or subverted, cities court ecological disaster. Still, her message is one of hope and not of despair.

Drawing on many academic disciplines in her study of urbanization, Spirn has sought the fullest range of conditioning forces as the basis of her analysis. She omits nothing: climatology, geology, hydrology, soil conservation, aesthetics, civil engineering, botany, zoology, culture, politics, architecture, and history—all

factors that contribute to making the city what it is are considered. Only by analyzing detailed information on all these various aspects of urban life can the city be realistically understood in its totality. She also reveals the essential interrelationships among cities, the suburbs, and the rural countryside.

Ancient cities in Greece and Rome, much like modern ones, had trouble with the disposing of wastes and bad air created by dense populations, but the ancient Greeks and Romans neither realized the ultimate dangers involved nor had the technology to cure the problems. We have long known the risks inherent in these situations, and today we do have the technology to remedy them. This is precisely the crux of Spirn's argument. She makes a convincing case that "the barrier to building a better city is not lack of knowledge, but refusal to apply that knowledge." It is a difficult assertion to refute, in view of the comprehensive data and evidence that she has collected to substantiate her position. The real villains are greed, indifference, and a multiplicity of powerful special interests.

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A practitioner as well as scholar, Spirn believes it is not enough to observe, analyze, and theorize about the urban process from the sideline; putting thought into action is equally important, to which end she has defined a broad range of urban design problems and prospective solutions. For example: To detain storm water and prevent sewerage system overloads, she recommends the strategic placement of parkland. To make downtown open space more aesthetically pleasing, she advises using public space as the framework for private development. To reclaim abused vacant land where soil is depleted, she urges the use of composted sewage sludge to make new topsoil. She believes that cities should learn from their past mistakes. She cites the construction of tall buildings like the Prudential Center and the Hancock Tower in downtown Boston as having exacerbated the city's wind problem and created hazardous conditions on some street corners. The wind problem was also worsened by the plaza at Government Center, so much so that Boston now rivals Chicago, says Spirn, for the title Windy City.

Surely no one denies the value of Spirn's notion that the city and its region should be managed as an integrated system. But I doubt that such a goal is in the political cards. In the first place, there is no general citizenry of the metropolis; there are citizens of hundreds of local governments within the metropolitan areas, but a commonwealth of the metropolis just does not exist. The region is too sprawling, too diverse in its interests and characteristics to be considered a common entity. To be sure, there are innumerable problems that are shared by the entire area, but they arouse too many parochial interests to permit a unified governing system.

In this sense, Spirn's logical analysis ignores political reality and human fallibility. The metropolis has reached the point at which decisions are made more in response to the crisis of the moment than according to any general doctrine of urban development or any well-conceived master plan. The totality of communal concerns cannot be brought to bear on decision making for the simple reason that the complexity of forces involved has become so preponderant that no individual can correctly conceive of what the metropolitan entity is, much less acquire the authority to make the kinds of integrated and encompassing decisions that would be necessary. Put plainly, it is my contention that the large metropolitan area is too politically fragmented to be a rationally governable entity, at least if any semblance of democratic government is to be maintained.

Spirn strikes me as being a little naive politically in another respect. She assumes that the objective of politicians is to promote the well-being of the community. This is not always the case, especially in a state like Massachusetts, where petty politics and irrational behavior prevail more often than might normally be expected.

Despite these criticisms, I think that Spirn has definitely made a significant contribution. Casting a wide net professionally, she has broken new ground that is both breathtaking in scope and extraordinary in vision. Her book is a first-rate scholarly production, well conceived and well written. It is a landmark in urban design analysis and is particularly important for Boston, since it contemplates the next several decades of the city's growth. Some say that Spirn's pioneering work has already launched a new field of urban ecology. Be that as it may, she has an excellent sense of the public interest, an integrity, and a commitment that allows her to be sophisticated without being cynical. And that is what makes her approach and style so refreshing.

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In 1961, Jane Jacobs argued in her book on the American city that neighborhood councils were imperative to allow local people some say about what was to be done to their neighborhoods—particularly in the areas of planning and physical development. She remains a staunch urban advocate in her latest book, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, but this time from an international perspective. Indeed, this book is essentially a study in comparative international politics and urban economics in which Jacobs challenges some of the myths and shibboleths of yesterday concerning the rise and decline of nations. She has developed some interesting new theories and has worked from them toward a more relevant and applicable body of research.

According to Jacobs, it is not so much what national governments do by way of proposing policy that determines the ebb and flow of their economic well-being; rather, the thing that counts is the economic productivity of their cities. Or, to rephrase it slightly, as its cities fare with economic production, so fares the nation, and when the cities and the nation fare well, everyone is said to benefit. This is the old trickle-down thesis. No one claims that the benefits are equitably distributed, of course, and little is made of the fact that one-half of one percent of our nation's population controls a quarter of our nation's wealth. In 1982, the richest 20 percent of Americans received more income than all those combined in the bottom 70 percent. As she did in her earlier book, *The Life and Death of American Cities*, Jacobs stresses that there are cycles of centralization and decentralization that regularly succeed each other, and that only through extensive decentralization can local democracy be realized.

But the complexities of decentralization and democracy, I am afraid, cannot be reduced to an either/or proposition. Neither of them is that simple. If the national government were no longer to provide local governments with the financial resources which enable them to deal with problems that are essentially national in character, the effect would be to prevent the cities and states from responding to what their citizens may want and need, thus blocking the expression of local democracy. It is difficult to see how local democracy could have much meaning if the capacity of local governments to act were precluded by a national policy of fiscal starvation. There are also serious problems of equity involved because of

the vast disparities in wealth among the states and localities. When federal financing is curtailed, as we have seen in the Reagan Administration, many vital programs on which people depend are terminated.

In a society of the size and complexity of modern America, and in a world of impersonal rules established to control behavior in a huge, technologically complicated, urbanized community, pressure will continue to be exerted to move some controls downward, toward the very local area. Since this kind of pressure is being felt around the world—Japan, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Italy, France, and Yugoslavia are countries where the process of decentralization has recently been instituted or whose citizens have vociferously demanded that it be—we may deduce that in the future, there will be much need for fruitful analysis of the decentralization problem. The point is that we cannot afford not to develop more effective ways for center-city residents to get involved in making the critical decisions that affect their lives so deeply.

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My chief criticism of Jacob's most recent book is that her discussion fails to recognize the enormous power and control that are vested in American corporations, whose managers may use that power over capital in ways that are good for their corporations but harmful for the society as a whole. Moreover, corporations occupy a more dominating position here than in other countries, since such a small proportion of American business is nationalized. Corporations have used government in the past to minimize their losses and reduce their risks while keeping other aspects of the system under their control. Note, for instance, the steps that were taken by the government to bail out the Chrysler Corporation. It was a case of government saving capitalism from itself.

There are also problems with booming economic production that go beyond the inequality of its distribution. One of them is the persistent and permanent problem of *externalities*. The term refers to the spillover effects of economic activity. Costs of negative externalities can often be avoided by corporations. The American coal industry is one of the best examples of the externality issue. Mining in the United States has a disastrous safety record. Over the years, some 120,000 miners have been killed and countless others maimed and otherwise seriously injured. The dangers are on all sides, from roof cave-ins, underground explosions, electrocution, and the operation of dangerous machinery in confined spaces and in dusty areas where visibility is limited and black lung disease is prevalent. Other examples of negative externality are the asbestos industry, auto exhaust emissions, nuclear energy, and the massive quantities of dangerously toxic substances that are being dumped with little or no concern for the consequences. This is corporate evasion of responsibility at its worst. And the problems remain long after the corporation is gone. So-called solutions are extremely expensive, as in the nuclear reactor industry. (All of this was graphically documented in the recent ABC television program entitled "The Fire Unleashed.")

If we sought to give power to the people in central cities and devised governmental structures to enhance their role and influence, the probable consequences would be minimal, as long as corporate power over the economic and social conditions of people continued unabated. Underneath all the political rhetoric about government facilitating economic growth, reducing unemployment, and bringing new jobs to constituencies, the truth is that elected officials in cities and states have little opportunity to alter the forces that determine the well-being of their

districts. Those who create and eliminate jobs often command government from the outside; they are not, for the most part, within government. When cities and states like Massachusetts got into fiscal trouble in the seventies, it was bankers, heads of corporations, and corporate lawyers who were authorized to put their finances back in order. Ironically enough, the poor were usually made to pay for the restoration of solvency. If we are serious about enhancing the power of the people, a way will have to be found to overcome the force of corporate power that determines what opportunities shall be made available to the city's poor population, and who shall be left out on the fringe.

George Gallup, Jr., is the son and namesake of the well-known public opinion pollster. He succeeded his father as president of their worldwide polling organization. In *Forecast 2000*, he has written a provocative book in which he attempts to predict the future. His predictions are based primarily on an extensive set of surveys and interviews that were conducted by the Gallup Poll firm with some 1,346 national opinion leaders in America. The identities and occupations of these leaders are never revealed, but a sampling of the poll results can be found in the appendix to his book, which is useful for understanding the methodology of his research.

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Among the threats to the viability of democratic society that seem to abound in our age, Gallup raises some issues of prime importance, such as overpopulation, the threats of terrorism and nuclear war, the economic pressures of inflation and unemployment, the double-edged sword of technological progress, the environmental crisis, the narcotics traffic and drug abuse, the increase in crime and violence, the decline of religion and morality, and the faltering role of family life. In his predictions of what the future holds, he is both an optimist and a pessimist. First his bad news: he sees a bleak picture of social and economic problems staring us in the face in the twenty-first century, and "If swift, forceful steps aren't taken to defuse the political and social time bombs facing us, we may find ourselves on a track that could lead us to the destruction of civilization as we know it." And now his scrap of good news: "We mustn't be paralyzed by the dangers that threaten the future. If we recognize them and act appropriately, we still have time to step in and change the direction of events toward a better and happier outcome."

Yet nowhere does Gallup offer a sensible plan for intervention, nor does he suggest alternatives to present policies. Instead, he believes that Americans will be able to cope with the so-called nine Future Forces through their traditional moral and spiritual values and through their spirit of individualism and freedom. In searching for answers, Gallup argues that our continued commitment to education, religion, and volunteerism will provide them. In brief, he has prescribed a curious mixture of bromides, palliatives, and glib generalities. For example, in his prognosis for American politics, he claims that the forces of frustration, apathy, and activism will somehow mysteriously combine, enabling us to band together and work for positive social change. I contend this is a fallacious conclusion not only because it presents an untenable conception of the political process but also because it derives from faulty reasoning. Let me briefly illustrate.

For anyone wishing to effectuate a policy, the dispersal of power to the bureaucracy is highly significant because it often serves the ends of those who can

benefit the most from the inactivity of the state. For the polluter to get away with his antisocial conduct, it may only be necessary to resort to obfuscation and legal delay or literally to depend on the bureaucrats to do nothing in order to have his way. In truth, the dispersal of power to the housing bureaucracy, urban renewal authorities, the police department, and welfare agencies has done much to bring to climax the current conditions of the large city. Furthermore, such dispersal is a major contributor to our incapacity to do anything about some of the most chronic problems in our society, such as racial discrimination, poverty, and the imbalance of the criminal justice system.

As a futurist, Gallup cannot compete in the same league with the likes of Herman Kahn, Alvin Toffler, and John Naisbitt. His book suffers from simplistic assumptions about political causation, the pervasiveness of institutional arrangements, and how social systems behave and interact. If he were not so intent on summarizing the statistical data from his polls, he might be able to perceive better some of the ways in which the blows of "future shock" could be cushioned. By oversimplifying and evading the complexities of reality, Gallup has rendered much of his effort meaningless. At best, *Forecast 2000* gives us a fairly good indication of the trends, attitudes, and expectations of American public opinion, and of the direction in which the society is headed—but not much more.

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Cities in the 21st Century, edited by Gary Gappert and Richard V. Knight, is an interesting collection of essays dealing with the anticipated renaissance of American cities. Its twenty-four contributing authors are a mixed group of economists, sociologists, and urbanologists who have a relatively bright outlook on the subject: they do not belong to the gang of gloom and doom. Space does not permit a review of each of the book's nineteen articles, and it probably makes more sense to highlight randomly their major ideas and contributions.

Optimism is warranted for some cities, according to Arthur Shostak, because of forces that will influence urban development during the next twenty-five years, such as:

the emergence of a new urban leadership that views the tasks of government as technological, managerial, and highly manageable;

an increase in energy and fuel costs that discourages living in suburbia and driving to city jobs;

the continued slowdown in any significant migration of underprivileged blacks and whites off the land and into northern cities;

the steady acculturation of all previous newcomers to the cities, as exemplified by the stabilization of public-school test scores and the reduction in family size of low-income urbanites;

the steady improvement in America's race relations, as demonstrated by Gallup Poll data and by the recent absence of violent racial confrontations;

the seeming gains in teenage maturity, as evidenced by the sharp decrease in teen gang killings and by the ability of thousands to coexist peacefully at major entertainment events; and

the persistence of ethnic and racial pride in neighborhood ambience and well-being, as exemplified by the large and growing number of block associations, neighborhood organizations, and so forth.

With these prospects in mind, Shostak presents various scenarios of urban change that are likely to emerge in the years ahead. Conflict City represents the current status quo for many cities, especially those of the Midwest and Northeast. Wired City is the logical extension of the high-tech industry, while Neighborhood City is the expression of the new urban ingenuity represented by the "urban home-steading" movement. International City is a scenario already manifest where the headquarters of multinational corporations reside, and it reflects a new business urbanity. Regional City, in turn, is less common, its rarity explained by its role as the expression of new patterns of political power sharing and cultural-leisure interaction. And Leisure City represents a precursor of a new form of recreation engendered by the time released from work routines through new technologies, by new forms of work organization, and by the prolongation of longevity among the elderly.

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Some demographic realities of the Sun Belt states are discussed by Kathleen Butler and Ben Chinitz, while Warner Bloomberg and Rodrigo Martinez-Sandoval focus on the implications of Hispanic urban newcomers in the border regions of the Southwest. Harold Rose presents a historical analysis of the emergence of large black ghettos and comments on their future. These population impulses will provide for both substantial continuity and considerable change.

Jon Van Til examines the forces of urban transformation and discusses the problems of an energy-short city; Joseph F. Coates analyzes the impact of technology; and Larry Hirschhorn reports on changing arrangements in industrial organizations in the year 2001. In a similar vein, Susan Saegert reviews issues associated with gender identity and speculates about an "androgynous city" in the future. These authors indicate that cities will become even more complex in the next century.

With regard to urban public services and finances, James Alm and Jesse Burkhead conclude that for most cities a fiscal safety net is not yet in place and that the prospects for such look dismal. Deborah Bickford and Charles Vehorn consider the ways in which cities are likely to respond to cutbacks and shortfalls. They identify four likely consequences of reductions in public services—innovations, lowered expectations, increased disparities, and new private-public partnerships. In the final chapter, the editors suggest the need for a new philosophy of urban development, for new urban managerial skills, and for a complex "urban futures" management model.

Admittedly, the preceding has given a broad overview of *Cities in the 21st Century* and is intended to be only suggestive of its content. Its authors collectively have made a superb contribution. In an increasingly urbanized society, their interpretations and models of the future city can become the basis for both serious thinking and advance planning. In short, they have performed the futurism act admirably. To the extent that their paradigms stand for different understandings of what the urban system may hold in store for us, they serve a valuable heuristic purpose.

I turn now to my final point of discussion, which is achieving the livable city. Only if we can fashion more sensitive values and create, in effect, a moral comprehension of the conditions we are in, only then is there a chance of providing technological answers to the ecological overload we are placing on the urban ecosystem. Whether any such solution is feasible, one can only guess. Perhaps the contemporary city, as Lewis Mumford suspects, has become a necropolis, and doom lies ahead. If perchance Necropolis has not already been created, then there is still hope. But the human stakes are high. To quote Anne Whiston Spirn: "Somewhere a visionary may persuade his or her city to take on the challenge of managing the entire urban natural environment. The reasons are compelling. At issue is not just the creation of a more secure, more beautiful, more efficient and cost-effective city, but survival itself." It remains to be seen whether all the king's horses and all the king's men can restore the city to its full flower.