

Review: Skinny Streets and Green Neighborhoods: Design for Environment and Community

By Cynthia Girling and Ronald Kellett

Reviewed by [Kathy Piselli](#)

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Cynthia Girling and Ronald Kellett. *Skinny Streets and Green Neighborhoods: Design for Environment and Community*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005. ISBN: 1-59726-028-2. ISBN 13:978-1-59726-028-2 \$60.00 trade cloth. ISBN:1-55963-337-9 ISBN 13:978-1-55963-337-6 \$35.00 trade paper.

The oil embargo and energy crisis of 1973 trained a high-beam headlight on the wasteful way America had become accustomed to getting itself to work in urban areas. Though suburbs had been the major urban construction project since the end of World War II, good planning was rarely used in building them. The result was a combination of cookie-cutter architecture, poor land use, and automobile-dominated transportation networks resulting in sprawl, dramatic loss of green space, horrendous traffic situations for commuters, and even fines on some cities for Clean Air Act violations.

More than a generation later, can it be said that anything has changed? In the majority of areas, the answer is, sadly, no. But there are exceptions. This book showcases examples of good contemporary thinking in urban planning. Focusing on the neighborhood rather than one building or region, these promote urban ecology and good environmental design.

A preface provides concise but critical background, introducing neophytes to the lingo of urban architects, terms such as "gray", "green", and "infill". In the same concise language it explains why neighborhoods should bother to incorporate environmental concerns into planning.

One section profiles each case study with color illustrations. The case studies are a collection of developments located in large cities and suburban areas. One is in the eastern U.S., three in the Midwest, and six in the west; four are in Canada. All but two date from the late 1990s and the newest was initiated in 2005. Several are "brownfields", built on former industrial sites. One has methane gas beneath it, a common problem when building on or near a wetlands or landfill. Many incorporate wetland restoration into their design. All make decisions about ratio of gray to green.

In two other chapters, the issues of gray and green building are treated in more depth, using the case studies as illustrations. The chapter on gray

fabric deals with the urban planning issues of transportation, housing density, and "complete" neighborhoods that concentrate services locally to lessen the need for driving. The chapter on the green networks explains urban ecology concepts and shows how good planning can conserve land and preserve water quality, which not only helps the birds and the bees but also helps communities spend less on health care and environmental remediation. One interesting discussion is about the so-called "skinny" streets of the book's title, which have been associated statistically with traffic safety.

This would not really be a book to convince a lawmaker or bureaucrat, for example, of the imperative of using good environment to keep people healthy. It starts with that as an assumption. It will be more interesting to those in the disciplines of urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture, and some bits veer close to the academic. Also absent is a discussion of economics. Communities that are contemplating large-scale in town development projects, like Atlanta's Beltline, will not find, for example, any discussion of the pros and cons of incorporating "workforce housing" into these pedestrian-friendly neighborhood concepts. But the greatest part of the book is taken up with the illustrative case studies, and these are fascinating to read.

The book's strengths are its focus on the neighborhood level, concise manner of imparting information, illustrations and tables, and the pulling together of diverse and interesting examples of good planning.

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