

Review: MetroGreen: Connecting Open Space in North American Cities

By Donna Erickson

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Now that more than 80% of the world's population lives in cities, and in 2008 the United States crossed the 50% mark, Donna Erickson's exploration of open space in North American cities comes none too soon. Erickson's research comes out of her work on national greenways at the University of Michigan and, through a Fulbright, at the University of British Columbia.

Erickson looks at ten cities in the United States and Canada, paired to illuminate five central aspects of open space function: ecology, recreation, transportation, community, and green infrastructure. The metropolitan areas range in size from the more than 6,000 square miles of Minneapolis-St. Paul to Vancouver at just 1,100 square miles; and in population from Chicago's more than 9 million inhabitants, to Ottawa's just over 1 million. The chosen cities' open-space plans share four factors: 1) they are "a web of linear" areas; 2) they all cross jurisdictional boundaries; 3) they fulfill multiple functions; and 4) they have all gone beyond planning and into implementation (p. 43).

The case-study methodology Erickson uses succeeds in demonstrating the effectiveness of thinking globally and acting locally. "While each story is unique, there are themes that cut across the cities and inform efforts in other places" (p. 41). The method respects each city's historical, geographical, and contemporary specifics. At the same time, it draws out the general lessons that can be learned from each city's responses to sprawl, gridlock, and pollution.

This well-written, compelling work presents a broad canvas, but Erickson finds the telling detail, such as Garden Drive, Vancouver, where a boulder creates a round-about to calm traffic. Brief vignettes stud each chapter to offer windows onto particular projects, such as Hank Aaron Trail which "will nearly complete Charles Whitnall's [1923] vision of linear parks along Milwaukee's river system" (p. 125). These nuggets are set into a strong historical perspective. Readers will find that North American city planners concerned themselves with urban open spaces surprisingly early, as with Denver's 19th century parkway scheme, and will see the effects of the pursuit of City Beautiful goals and "lungs of the city" at the beginning of the 20th century.

Erickson does not ignore the urgency of urban sprawl. She reports that between 1982 and 1997 alone, the US population increased 17%, but the "amount of urbanized land...increased by 47 percent" (p. 5). The effect on cities' environment is drastic: "In the 1980s it was estimated that 78 percent of Calgary's native wetlands had been lost to development. Today the estimate nears 90 percent" (p. 143). While cognizant of the difficulties, Erickson avoids the twin pitfalls of hopeless despair or utopian commandment. Instead, the studies offer options that can be taken up as localities choose.

Important questions arise. Portland, OR's 1934 recommendation to allocate "1 acre of city parkland for each 100 people, or 10 percent of the city" to parks (p. 191) invites discussion of what constitutes an appropriate balance between humanity and the environmental systems made up of and supporting all other life on Earth. The chapter on green infrastructure does not measure up to the other sections, though Erickson notes Europe is far ahead of North America in that regard.

This book can inform a general reader as well as suggest new avenues to planners, architects, and citizens' groups. Inevitably, it cannot be all-encompassing, but it brings together striking examples to touch on an admirably inclusive range of questions, from defining open space to considering the human-environmental interface to generating effective plans to building coalitions for implementation. It would serve as an excellent introduction to classes in urban planning across disciplinary boundaries.

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