

BOOK REVIEW

Planetizen's Contemporary Debates in Urban Planning

**Edited by Abhijeet Chavan, Christian Peralta, and Christopher Steins
Island Press, 2007, 208 pages**

Reviewed by Michael B. Teitz

Planners, both academic and professional, have good reason to be grateful to Christopher Steins and his collaborators for creating and sustaining *Planetizen*, the lively and provocative web site devoted to ideas and practice in urban planning. *Planetizen's* appearance in 2001 was a landmark in moving planning into the internet era, and it continues to be a valuable asset for the field. Now, together with co-editors Abhijeet Chavan and Christian Peralta, Steins has produced a book that provides a sampling of *Planetizen's* past offerings cast into the form of debates in planning. To pull this off and to review the results are no mean tasks. In 183 pages, the book manages to include essays by no less than 31 authors, in addition to comments by numerous anonymous respondents to the original website postings. Some essays were written specifically for the book, but the majority date from *Planetizen* postings during the years 2001 to 2006.

To handle this traffic jam, the editors have organized the book on the basis of debates in planning across five areas: sprawl vs. smart growth, transportation, urban design, disaster planning, and society and planning. The treatment of the areas varies in breadth, ranging from four essays on disaster planning to seven on sprawl vs. smart growth. Each gets a reasonable amount of space, though the essays are short, generally no more than four pages long. The essays are a mixed bag, ranging from the truly insightful, to the tired recapitulation of ideology, to the downright awful. Each group of essays is preceded by a short introduction by the editors.

The book presents itself as a series of debates, but that aim is hard to achieve in all cases with the material that the editors selected. Sprawl vs. smart growth is mostly presented as a contrast between Smart Growth and Libertarianism. Anthony Flint's contribution, apparently written for the book, presents a level-headed view of the issue in a remarkably short space. In contrast, Wendell Cox's piece from 2001 seems tired. In many ways, *Planetizen* is a newspaper, and it is rare journalism that can withstand republication. Much the same can be said for the essays by Joel Kotkin on the New Suburbanism and Randall O'Toole on the American Dream.

Perhaps this is an indicator of their success in getting their message out in other ways. The editors drew on three other authors for original pieces for the volume. Michael Woo gives us a shopping list for smart growth in an urban context; William Fulton is typically clear and to the point on paying for growth; and Harriet Tregonning warns of a coming oversupply of single-family housing. Altogether, it is an interesting collection, but the debate is mostly supplied by some thoughtful respondents.

Much the same can be said for the following section, namely, Transportation. It opens with another shopping list, this one written by Dan Burden for walkable communities. Donald Shoup applies his insight into pricing parking to street parking. Peter Samuel makes the case for time-based road pricing. Kenneth Kruckemeyer imagines how temporal variation in street use might help offset global warming, and Michael Mehaffy provides a lesson, by example, for making TODs work. Each essay is interesting, but debate it isn't, though the whole issue of pricing might be.

Urban design might be expected to provide more debate, given the often contentious nature of the field. Alexander Garvin issues a thoughtful call for recovery of the urban public realm, but it is followed by Jeff Speck's shopping list of rules for designers. Andres Duany's "principles essential to the renewal of architecture" gives us yet another list, ranging from the sensible to the fatuous. Just about the only thing he does not see as essential is public input, as pointed out by a reader. Christopher DeWolf provides a brief, but pithy critique of New Urbanism and Fred Kent calls for rejuvenation of urban parks.

The section on Disaster Planning is more specific than any of the others. Presumably, it was motivated, in part, by the huge impact of Hurricane Katrina. Thomas Campanella's masterly essay on recovering New Orleans is superb, but it is followed by James Howard Kunstler and Nikos Salingaros on the end of tall buildings, an absurdity that should have been consigned to oblivion. Edward Blakely's essay draws on his work on gated communities to reflect on fear, and Robert Olshansky gives a concise tour of planning for recovery.

The final section addresses Society and Planning with essays on gentrification, by John Norquist and Charles Shaw, which really do debate the issue, though making it very clear that agreement is unlikely. Similarly, the "debate" on the Lone Mountain Compact (yet another shopping list) between Kenneth Orski, G.B. Arrington, Patrick Condon, and John H. Hooker revisits once again the libertarians versus the government advocates to little effect. Sandwiched in between these are a nice essay on Kelo by Samuel Staley, and a plea for sanity in school design by Constance Beaumont.

By now, it should be evident that this book is a mixed bag—not quite “planning lite,” but not what it might have been. The irony is that over these years, *Planetizen* has addressed many planning issues that are more important and less parochial - for example, urban poverty, urban growth in developing countries, and climate change. Fixating on the libertarian versus government divide just might not be the best reflection of reality in the twenty-first century. Perhaps it’s time to change the channel.