

BOOK REVIEW

Street Science: Community Knowledge and Environmental Health Justice

by Jason Corburn
MIT Press, 2005, 304 pages

Reviewed by Duane De Witt

One hundred years after Jane Addams published her classic 1895 book *Hull House Maps and Papers*, another book that could become a classic for urban planning and public health disciplines has been published by Dr. Jason Corburn of Columbia University. His recent book *Street Science* has received positive reviews as Corburn has sought to “reconnect” or “recouple” the fields of public health and city planning. These fields of study grew into separate professions during the twentieth century. Now, in the twenty-first century, Corburn addresses the realization that “local knowledge” can be a helpful component of good contemporary city planning, just as it was one hundred years ago.

Corburn was a community organizer in Seattle who went on to obtain a Ph.D. in urban environmental planning from M.I.T. in 2002. *Street Science* grew out of his research in Brooklyn from 1996 to 2002 starting when he was a senior environmental planner with the New York City Department of Environmental Protection from 1996 to 1998. He was also a mediator for the Consensus Building Institute and dealt with environmental and public health disputes.

He uses the term “street science” to describe the combination of professional and local community knowledge as a means to seek solutions to environmental health issues. He accurately describes how there is a tension between technocratic professionals such as city planners, public health practitioners plus other public policy makers such as politicians, and the community residents who seek to be involved in the resolution of environmental health problems. He seeks “democratically robust problem solving” and makes recommendations for how community members and professional practitioners can cooperate successfully. The book details four distinctly different “street science episodes” as case studies to illustrate instances of environmental difficulties helped by community input of local knowledge.

In the introduction he briefly “situates” where these examples of street science took place, and are continuing to take place: the Greenpoint/Wil-

liamsburg section of Brooklyn. Here he also defines street science as “a practice of knowledge production that embraces the co-production framework...and is also a process that builds on a number of existing participatory models of knowing and doing” (p. 8). He points out previous researchers have coined the term co-production in the field of science. He uses the term “to suggest that scientific knowledge and political order are interdependent and evolve jointly.”

Corburn describes community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action research (PAR) before telling of the “science on the streets of Brooklyn.” He also mentions though there are a “plethora of hazards in the neighborhood, few public health studies have focused on Greenpoint/Williamsburg.” The environmental health controversies in Brooklyn he highlights are air pollution, asthma, childhood lead poisoning, and the risk of subsistence fishing from the contaminated East River. Each case is given a full chapter in the book and all of them are quite intriguing. They are also provocative in that they demonstrate how the current “technocratic” model of urban planning that weighs the “costs and benefits and informs policymaking” can sometimes be “captured” by private interest groups. He feels this is usually to the detriment of the greater community at large.

Corburn asserts that this situation can lead to potential conflicts with the public so there are times “the analysts or planners often decide that the tacit operating rule is that the best public is a quiescent one.” The first chapter of the book gives an historical account of how citizen-based groups from the past have risen up to question technocrats and experts over pollution and its effects on their communities. He explores the link between environmental justice and street science while pointing out “a fundamental aspect of environmental-health justice is the creation of a more democratic partnership between professionals and the public.” Corburn believes street science is a practice “of science, political inquiry, and action.” Due to the fact that street science evolves in a community, its social character is an important aspect of the concept.

With a democratic aspect to planning for environmental health, Corburn unabashedly seeks to reconnect urban planning and public health “around a social justice agenda.” His book is written in a prose that is accessible to lay people at the same time as it focuses on the highly technocratic world of city, state, and federal agencies dealing with the environmental health of a neighborhood. Though the neighborhood he has chosen is in a big city, the same scenarios play out across the nation in communities large and small.

The book serves as a clarion call to professionals in city planning, public health, and public policy making to reserve spaces at the public policy

bargaining table for members of the community and their local knowledge. As Corburn states, "Street Science offers a way for environmental-health decisions to draw from the best science has to offer while also upholding the democratic ideals of participation and justice."

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