

# Publication Reviews

## *On the Ground*

On the Ground bills itself as "The Multimedia Journal on Community, Design & Environment." Preparing to open this quarterly publication for the first time, I was curious what a multimedia magazine would look like. Would sounds of freeway traffic come issuing forth from the pages? Would pictures suddenly spring to life as video clips? Alas, the multimedia content appears to be confined to the magazine's web site, which includes extra articles and links to other sites referenced in the print portion of the magazine.

That's not a problem, however, since there is enough thoughtful reading material in this journal to keep anyone interested in planning occupied. The editors of *On the Ground* are obviously interested in the ramifications of metropolitan form and urban design, but they broaden their scope to include many other perspectives as well. Personally I found the editors' efforts to meld physical design considerations with social and economic issues refreshing, emphasising the city and region as physical fact, rather than statistical abstraction.

The current issue is sponsored by the EPA's Urban and Economic Development Division, and the theme for the issue is regionalism. Among the issues often addressed from the regional perspective are economic development, transportation, and growth management, and in fact these are the focus of most of the articles. The topics discussed range from urban sprawl to business clusters to designing community friendly superstores.

Many of the articles are reprints of essays, talks and papers that first appeared elsewhere, making *On The Ground* a sort of *Utne Reader* (or *Reader's Digest*) for the planning and urban design set. Represented are several heavy-hitters such as Florida growth-management guru John DeGrove and urban policy authority Anthony Downs, as well as former HUD secretary Henry Cisneros.

The issue opens with an interview with Anthony Downs concerning regional leadership. The

interviewer and Mr. Downs often talk past each other, the former obviously interested in urban form issues and the latter speaking from a more purely policy-oriented perspective. Nonetheless, this interview does serve to highlight many of the more disturbing social, economic, and political trends that will be confronting American cities in the near future, and sets the tone for much of what follows.

*On The Ground* is also to be commended for incorporating a diversity of viewpoints. For example, unafraid to speak the unspeakable, Robert Burchell of Rutgers writes "sprawl development, in the short run, is not all that bad for the region." A reprint from a Wendell Barry book argues against current notions of cultural pluralism, preferring to advocate a "pluralism of settled communities," a seemingly reactionary idea that nonetheless fits well with many planners' notions of community.

The main fault with *On The Ground* is its reliance on secondary material. To the extent that the magazines editors can locate unique and hard-to-find pieces of writing and bring them together into one place, however, the magazine does fill a useful role. It is up to the reader to decide whether this mix merits the publication's \$8.50 price tag.

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*Ken A. Bowers received a Master's in Regional Planning from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1997.*

## *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability*

By Myron Orfield, Brookings Institution Press/  
Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1997

In the forward to *Metropolitics*, David Rusk calls Myron Orfield "one of the most revolutionary politicians in urban America." Orfield shows why he deserves such accolades with his first book, *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability*. In his text, Orfield presents a comprehensive analysis of socioeconomic patterns in the Twin Cities

metropolitan area and then takes the reader step-by-step through the legislative agenda he pioneered in the Minnesota Legislature. He concludes with a chapter on how to apply the lessons learned in the Twin Cities region to other parts of the United States.

Currently representing southwest Minneapolis and serving his fourth term in the Minnesota House of Representatives, Orfield brings a scholarly approach to his legislative plan. An attorney by trade, he has practiced in the public and private sectors. He also serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota Law School. During his tenure in the Minnesota Legislature, Orfield became concerned with the inability of the central cities to adequately address the growing needs of their residents. He began to research extensively the patterns of decline experienced by other older metropolitan areas, and then carefully compiled data on the Twin Cities. This book is the result of his research, using maps to highlight important patterns in metropolitan development and emphasizing coalitions as a powerful tool for pursuing legislative solutions to central city decline.

As Orfield sees it, every metropolitan area in the country is facing the same problem—the push of concentrated need in the region's core and the pull of concentrated resources to the region's fringe. Influenced by Jack Kemp's 1991 report "Not In My Backyard," Orfield again points out that central cities and inner suburbs are saddled with concentrated poverty, disinvestment, and decline, while outer suburbs are experiencing sprawling growth, job creation, and growing tax bases fueled by major infrastructure improvements.

Utilizing a powerful tool for expressing these socioeconomic trends, Orfield uses colorful GIS maps to show how the Twin Cities are not immune from the forces described above. These maps, reprinted in color in the publication, show clearly the concentration of poverty in the core cities and schools;

soaring property values, job creation, and tax base in the favored southwestern suburbs; and how infrastructure improvements like roads and sewers primarily serve the southwestern suburban areas at the expense of the core. These maps proved to be an essential instrument for transforming complicated data into understandable graphics, allowing voters and other representatives alike to interpret the complex issues more easily.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this text is Orfield's analysis of the political relationship between the central cities and the suburbs. For years, urban studies scholars have highlighted the differing agendas of these two groups, essentially pitting them against each other and framing the debate as "the city versus the suburbs." With this outlook, it would be nearly impossible for central city representatives to amass enough votes in the state legislature to pass reform measures powerful enough to relieve the pressures on the cities. Orfield, however, used this analysis to build a new coalition. With no federal policy left to address the socioeconomic polarization Orfield uncovered, he set out to implement a set of localized policies. "The suburbs," Orfield says, "are not a monolith." Rather, the fully developed inner ring and developing areas with low tax bases face the same problems as the central city, and do so with even fewer resources to address the problems. By forging a coalition with representatives from these districts, Orfield was able to push forth a legislative agenda not previously possible.

Orfield's solutions include six substantive reforms and one structural reform. He indicates that the three most important reforms include fair-share housing, regional tax-base sharing, and reinvestment. The other three reforms—transportation/transit, welfare/public works, and land-use planning/growth management—complement the first three and help ensure balanced, coordinated growth. Orfield suggests that these changes could be best administered and

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enforced by an elected regional governing body. (The Twin Cities currently have such an agency, the Metropolitan Council, but its membership is appointed by the Governor rather than popularly elected.) Finally, he advocates “a panoply of tax and public finance reforms...to overturn the perverse incentives created by generations of a highly fragmented, over-regulated local marketplace.”

His account of the development and various compromises concerning these measures as they moved through the Minnesota Legislature provides great insight into the powerful forces and personalities who oppose regional reform. Orfield candidly reports on the difficulty of advocating regionalism and of sustaining coalitions over time. Yet he met success three times in passing fair housing legislation, and twice in tax-base sharing bills, only to be vetoed by the governor. He continues to actively pursue this agenda.

Throughout the text, Orfield points to similar

mapping analyses on other cities around the country that he has performed via the Metropolitan Area Program of the National Growth Leadership Project, which he directs. Maps of Philadelphia, Chicago, and Portland are included. In each case, he has identified similar patterns of concentrated need over a favored sector of developing suburbs.

This book is important for anyone interested in understanding metropolitan polarization. Its analysis of polarization is specific and thorough, and the first-hand descriptions of the behind-the-scenes politics of reform are engaging. Most notably, it goes beyond past literature on regionalism by advocating a specific policy agenda and demonstrating the political viability of that agenda.

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*Angie Bernhard is a candidate for a Master's in Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill. She previously worked with Representative Orfield for three years in the Minnesota Legislature.*

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- Producing resource materials promoting sustainable solutions to economic development problems.

SA's philosophy is that community organizing is central to organization's work. Community organizing builds a broad consensus for change and the political power to execute a vision.

SA's members include membership and coalition groups; education, policy, planning, and research groups; technical assistance providers; as well as religious groups, unions, community groups, government agencies, and responsible businesses. The majority of their members deal with local issues, but many also deal with state, national, and international issues. Their work focuses on many aspects of environmental issues; labor and workplace organizing; human/civil rights and women's issues; trade and money politics; social, environmental, and economic justice issues; leadership and community development; and religious and cultural issues.

SA has two levels of membership: Organizational Members (with voting privileges) and Associate Members (without voting privileges). There is a sliding scale membership dues structure. A General Assembly comprised of representatives from active organizational members meets annually to determine the priorities and elect the leadership. The leadership

consists of a 25-30 member Coordinating Committee, an 11-13 member Board of Directors and officers. SA's Executive Director is the spokesperson for SA and oversees the national office, located in New York City, which is responsible for providing policy and programmatic guidance and facilitates overall coordination of SA activities.

Sustainable America's vision and program places the organization squarely at the nexus of:

- increasing sustainability—ensuring that the cumulative effect of our actions does not decrease the quality of life for future generations and our ecosphere;
- increasing justice—minimizing suffering and inequities as we build economic security for all segments of our society; and
- increasing democracy—maximizing citizen control and leadership in all affairs.

For more information about Sustainable America, visit their web site at <http://www.sanetwork.org> or call (212) 239-4221.

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*Elaine Gross is Executive Director of Sustainable America.*