

Book Reviews

The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl

Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton

Reviewed by Trey Akers

With over 60 years combined planning experience in both the public and private sectors, urban designer Peter Calthorpe and researcher/author William Fulton bring together a stunning array of knowledge regarding urban planning and practice. At the heart of their argument lies the city, but their central focus pertains to the region as a whole—a complex but coherent economic system including labor pools, networks, transportation and land-use patterns that drive today’s global economy. The goal: connect these broad relationships with a regional vision undergirded by human-scaled design and policies. Only at this scale, the authors claim, will effective policies and planning produce the greatest change.

Though published in 2000, *The Regional City* offers comprehensive insight into the current form and function of cities. According to Calthorpe and Fulton, only three *true* regional cities exist in the United States: Portland, Seattle, and Salt Lake City. The distinguishing factor among these three relates to each city’s explicitly *regional vision bolstered by local policies at the municipal/metropolitan level*. Specifically, these regions each contain policies that delineate urban boundaries and encourage interconnected land-use and transportation patterns (63).

The book also profiles many other metropolitan areas across the United States, including three of the largest—New York, Chicago, and San Francisco—and illustrates the regional dynamics of each. At the state level, the authors discuss the innovative approaches of Florida, Maryland, and Minnesota, which have pioneered regional responses to growth-related issues. Yet each of these instances is missing key elements of true regionalism. For, the authors maintain, many policies successfully address one part of the city or economic sector (jobs, housing, social disparities, etc.) while ignoring the rest. Rather, planning must address the region *holistically* with a citizen-driven, consensus vision backed by projects, policies, and institutions that embody this vision *and* support local development efforts.

Despite laudable attempts, up until now many cities’ efforts to reinvigorate distressed areas or manage

development hotspots have fallen short because such targeted improvements lacked a unifying regional framework to oversee progress. Instead, complicated and uncoordinated ad hoc processes have hindered large-scale change capable of benefitting entire regions. The Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts of the 1960’s and 1970’s demonstrate this point, representing isolated responses that contained federal mandates but lacked regional direction (22). The result: fragmented places and incoherent systems unable to function as a whole. Alternatively, the authors present the region as a “layering of networks” (open space, economic, and cultural) that fosters interconnectedness and cooperation, not isolation and competition (6).

So, how exactly are cities to accomplish these objectives? The answer lies in human-based planning; or, designing cities for people. Focusing on the city as a region guards against missing the big picture, while human-scaled design ensures that planning doesn’t forget the person. Good design starts by creating a strong sense of place, a part of *each* fundamental community element—civic places, commercial uses, housing opportunities, and natural systems (46). As the authors note, “Civic life starts at the neighborhood level,” and encourages ownership of individuals’ larger place within the region (38). The book’s illustrative case studies showcase design principles that reinforce land-use/transportation connections, highlighting opportunities for access and connections at the neighborhood, local, and regional levels (59). In fact, these examples are one of the book’s outstanding features, providing ingenious insight into real planning challenges. Chief among the design features are pedestrian-scaled, mixed-uses applied across a range of urban environments—from suburban redevelopment to public housing infill—with the authors emphasizing design that expands individual housing and transportation choices in each scenario.

Trey Akers has completed the first year of the master’s program in the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill, where he is specializing in Design and Preservation. He has worked as a planner for The Lawrence Group, a Davidson, NC-based firm specializing in new urbanist, LEED, and smart growth practices, and TND Partners, a traditional neighborhood developer in Durham, NC.

Most importantly, the policies espoused in *The Regional City* combine administered guidelines with market-based incentives to promote regional coherence. For example, Section 8 neighborhoods are re-designed as mixed-income, human-scale communities *and* coupled with housing vouchers to allow for residential choices *across the region*. It is this mix of policy and incentive that make these strategies viable. Far from being a utopian construct, *The Regional City* “builds on the reality of the existing metropolis with all its complexities and contradictions” (276). The book can be used to address the often simplified arguments of sprawl proponents, as it directly counters such claims at several points. Ultimately, however, *The Regional City* provides an invaluable “armature” of “comprehensive alternatives” to rebuild the city as a region.

EcoVillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture

Liz Walker

Reviewed by Jess Brandes

This accessible book by Liz Walker tells the story of the decades-long journey to imagine, create, fund, sustain, and manage a low-impact, highly connected community. EVI, as it's called, is one of the earliest and best known communities in the worldwide eco-village movement. Begun in the early 1990s by visionary Joan Bokaer and by Walker herself, the story of EVI is told by Walker with a mix of factual explanation, descriptive stories, and personal reflections.

EcoVillage at Ithaca is set on 175 acres and includes two neighborhoods, an organic farm, Common House, community garden, forested land and several waterways and ponds. The organic farm and much of the forest and open space are protected by conservation easements. Only ten percent of the property is eligible for development under EVI's plan, compared with 90 percent under Ithaca's original land use plan. The organic farm is set up as a CSA, and therefore benefits not only residents at EVI, but those in the town of Ithaca located just five miles away. The village follows the co-housing model begun in Denmark in 1968, a model that combines private home ownership with shared common spaces. Strong community participation and governance by group consensus are also integral to life at EVI.

Walker explains from the outset that this book is not a how-to book, and will not explain all the legal and financial nuts and bolts of a project like EcoVillage at Ithaca. Having been the director of EVI since its founding, however, she does share a great deal about the

difficulties in financing the project and the struggles to keep it afloat. With a background in community activism, Walker describes in detail the many techniques used to gather agreement and foster a spirit of communication during all phases of the process of building EVI. She explains the brainstorming sessions, and small group formation that made for extremely effective envisioning meetings. She outlines conflict-resolution techniques used at EVI and includes lots of examples ranging from negotiations with the City of Ithaca about a water tank on EVI land, to the crisis that ensued when a family of geese chose to nest on the banks of the swimming pond.

Also of interest to planners and planning students is Walker's description of the creation of EVI's land use plan and guidelines for development. Driven by the desire to live in harmony with the natural systems already in place, EcoVillage residents did extensive topographical studies of the land and its water systems, as well as tedious cataloguing of the land's plant and animal species before drafting a plan. Part of the plan also included how the village would function socially and financially, and how the organic farm, orchards, and berry patches would fit into the life of the village. This comprehensive, whole-systems approach to planning is explained in a very simplified way, which makes for greater readability but also leaves some unanswered questions.

At its best, EcoVillage at Ithaca is engaging and hard to put down, filled with vivid descriptions about real personalities and struggles. At other points, however, Walker goes overboard with florid depictions of life at the village, such as her description of neighbors dancing around a Maypole with “eyes sparkling and heads encircled by bright wreaths of forsythia and daffodils... Our ceremonious dance honors the joyous energy of Eros that springtime brings.” Such sentimentality comes off as contrived, or at least certainly not a description of a community in which everyone would fit. This being said, the book is still valuable to those interested in a real-life example of sustainable co-housing. For example, the final section is about EVI's outreach to spread its message of sustainability, and contains particularly compelling accounts of the ways EVI has partnered with other organizations, and the way that the community has actively involved its local colleges and universities in its work. Overall, Walker's account of the development of EVI is worth a read. It's an inspiring tale of the commitment and determination of a group of average people who want to live their lives in a better way, and it has practical implications for planners as well.

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