

Carolina Planning Book Review

Redesigning Cities: the cure-all to what ails your built environment

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Redesigning Cities: Principles, Practice, Implementation, by Jonathan Barnett, FAICP, is intended as a cure-all to what ails today's built environment. Barnett explains that the problem with today's built environment is not due to substandard conditions such as inadequate plumbing or poor insulating materials. Instead, "the problem is in the public environment, in the way our homes and lives fit together" (27). The book provides solutions and historical context to a gamut of today's planning issues, from the decline of public space to urban sprawl to the concentration of poverty. The book also provides effective tools for building community and creating healthier, more vibrant cities.

As the title suggests, Barnett's book is divided into three major sections: Principles, Practice, and Implementation. *Section I: Principles* is structured around five basic design issues: community, livability, mobility, equity, and sustainability. In this section, Barnett enlightens the reader on the importance of the public space in building a community, how highways and parking lots fragment development, and the roots of concentrated poverty in deed restrictions and redlining. The chapter on sustainability covers the recent concepts of sprawl, smart growth, and new urbanism. Although this section contains some recommendations for rectifying the problems that Barnett describes, it mostly serves to provide the reader with a fundamental

understanding of the issues that the subsequent sections attempt to address.

In the opening lines of Section II: Practice, Barnett writes: "People can make a neighborhood out of different kinds of places, but the design and physical condition of the community have a big effect on whether people create neighborhoods or not" (95). This concept of neighborhood sets the stage for the section, which goes on to focus on the methods to improve various aspects of a location: new and old neighborhoods, suburbs, commercial corridors, downtowns, and even edge cities. For each of these categories of urban spaces, Barnett devotes a chapter of examples of methods to improve conditions, ranging from simple and cheap to elaborate and expensive. Here, Barnett also discusses such concepts as gentrification and neighborhood self-help, approaches to improving commercial strip zoning, and retrofitting edge cities. In the chapter titled "Reinventing Inner-City Neighborhoods," Barnett educates the reader about efforts to create successful public housing towers through renovations and a careful mixing of tenants. Using large, black and white photo montages, he highlights Hope VI projects in Washington, DC, Cleveland, and Boston, and the scattered site public housing efforts of Mayor Joseph Riley in Charleston, South Carolina. Recommended solutions and carefully selected examples of success receive the same treatment in other

chapters. His recommended methods for improving neighborhoods often tend toward the traditional. Examples include his suggestion to create a historic district to preserve neighborhoods and prevent failing downtowns, and the idea to reclaim natural systems to provide an improved setting for inner-ring suburbs.

In *Section III: Implementation*, Barnett narrows his discussion from broad policy concepts to improve a location to specific design-related suggestions. In "Designing the Public Environment," he summarizes principles for the design of public spaces from planning theorists such as Richard Whyte, Jan Gehl and others into nine statements that include everything from planning for a pleasant microclimate, to providing food, and designing for walkable distances. In the next chapter, he suggests particular changes in development regulations, especially modernist zoning codes, and emphasizes the need to incorporate environmental factors. Leaning heavily on New Urbanist ideas, he recommends various special types of new zoning, including mixed lot-size residential districts that will replace traditional residential zones. In his closing chapter, Barnett outlines ways in which his recommendations can be implemented.

In his efforts to encompass all of the major issues in planning today, Barnett may initially seem to be tackling an overwhelming amount of information. Yet amidst the seemingly overload of issues, there are several recurrent themes that provide a helpful framework: (1) the importance of pedestrian-friendly places and a human-scale environment to build community, (2) the need to change policies and regulations to be more in tune with people's social, not just functional, needs, and (3) the necessity to preserve downtowns, historic buildings, and public spaces. As may be evident, the underlying influence for many of Barnett's solutions is New Urbanism (NU). From beginning to end, we see the major themes of NU: walkability, community-building, historic preservation, and environmental sensitivity. Indeed, Barnett leans heavily on the ideas of others, including architects Jan Gehl and William H. Whyte, the

Congress of the New Urbanism, and even Jane Jacobs and Ian McHarg. In his book, Barnett synthesizes the leading ideas in planning and helps the reader to understand how each idea relates to the other.

From the opening story about the creation of Wildwood, Missouri, to the closing chapter entitled "Making the Designed City a Reality," Jonathan Barnett's *Redesigning Cities: Principles, Practice, Implementation* is an educational guide to modern-day planning and its history. Written in straightforward language that is as easily understood by the layperson as by an experienced planner, *Redesigning Cities* attempts to bridge the gap between planning and design. Ideal for amateurs and experts alike, *Redesigning Cities* will equip anyone interested in planning with the preliminary background knowledge and technical solutions to take action to improve the condition of today's urban form.

References

Barnett, Jonathan. *Redesigning Cities: Principles, Practice, Implementation*. American Planning Association, Planners Press. Chicago: 2003.

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