

Book Review

December 2013

The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840 – 1917

Jon A. Peterson; The Johns Hopkins University Press; Baltimore and London; 2003.

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Summary

There was a time when city governments determined the patterns and qualities of urban development. Professor Peterson focuses on the period from 1840 to 1917 as the “birth” of city planning; some may put the beginning of the end of it at 1949 with the U.S. OMB’s advent of the Standard Metropolitan Area, or SMA which brought a new unit of measure into the lexicon and diminished the centrality of cities. Interstate highways soon opened the door to the suburbs.

Jon A. Peterson
Professor of History,
Queens College,
City University of New York.

The author credits the City Beautiful Movement as the procreator of city planning, and rightfully so. The Progressive Era was in full flower and many causes of civic altruism tied their destinies to cities and city governments. The first National Conference on City Planning was held in Washington D.C. in May, 1909. The pioneering works of John Nolan, Daniel Burnham and Fredrick Law Olmsted highlight this period.

The City Beautiful Movement focused on tasks city governments could do unilaterally to make the public realm both beautiful and functional for residents and businesses. Cities focused on:

- The civic center,
- The gateway railroad station,
- The processional boulevard,
- The belt parkway,
- The convergence of park system design and civic art, and
- The public playground.

The post-Civil War period must be remembered for its coincidence with the closing of the American Frontier in 1890, the “Gilded Age” and its Robber Baron; and the many changes wrought by the Second Industrial Revolution, not the least of which were steel frameworks for buildings, elevators, electric service to businesses and homes, and the many other innovations unveiled at the Chicago World Exposition in 1893.

On the 100th anniversary of the first Planning Conference on City Planning, APA published a great article excerpted below:

American Planning Association, Planning & Environmental Law; Commentary — April 2009

A Familiar Ring: A Retrospective on the First National Conference on City Planning (1909)

Stuart Meck, FAICP, and Rebecca C. Retzlaff, AICP

“The conference was the start of a new era in planning in several respects. It represented a transition from planning by laypersons and professionals in allied fields to planning by professional planners. This was a shift from planning supported by the citizen activist- and business-dominated City Beautiful movement to the view that municipal governments should assume planning functions and hire professional city planners.² It also came at a time when cities were beginning to experiment with new methods of comprehensive planning and development regulation...”

Read more at:

<https://www.planning.org/centennial/aprilpelcommmentary.htm>

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Professor Peterson distinguishes the period of city planning from its predecessor system and its aftermath of urban planning thusly:

- **Pre-city planning period** was characterized as having:
 - special purpose plans for utilities or roads, not comprehensive plans,
 - a focus on new towns on the frontier that benefitted from the standard grid,
 - pre-auto transit systems, many of which were private,
 - an absence of municipal authority over land use,
 - “factories” and their owners that dominated the policies in the factory towns, and
 - planning decisions and policies in the hands of business leaders and volunteers, not professional planners.
- **The City Planning Movement** was characterized by:
 - the closing of the American frontier in 1890,
 - the comprehensive plan,
 - the profession of city planning, and
 - the “City Beautiful” and the ideals of the Progressive Period.
- **The Urban Planning period** is characterized as:
 - city planning was pre-auto; urban planning is post-auto,
 - post-auto urban development must be multi-centric,
 - planning, being a process, rather than a physical plan, and
 - allowing curved lines in the city rather than putting them only in the country [suburbs] where they belong; reserving straight lines for the city. [p10]

YouTube: No YouTube presentations were found for this book. If one is available, please forward it toTheAmericanCity.org.

Published Reviews

This book has been amply reviewed by Amazon, Google, the American Public Works Association and Project MUSE of Johns Hopkins University, among others, including H-Net. His analysis is generally praised while his conclusions are questioned.

H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online, Michigan State University

Reviewed by Daphne Spain (Department of Urban and Environmental Planning, University of Virginia)

Published on H-Urban (March, 2005)

Lofty Ambitions, Limited Achievements

“Jon Peterson's *Birth of City Planning* is a traditional history that expands his earlier work on the City Beautiful Movement (1893 to 1910). It differs from the previous work by identifying sanitary reform and the civic art movement as antecedents to the City Beautiful (hence the "1840" in the title), and by tracing the contributions of the City Beautiful Movement to the emergence of city planning as a

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profession responsible for the public good. The birth of city planning is dated variously as 1901, with Charles Mulford Robinson's book, *The Improvement of Towns and Cities*; as 1902 with the McMillan plan for Washington, D.C.; as 1904 with a New York City comprehensive plan; as 1908 with popular usage of the term; and as 1910 with the ascendance of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.'s vision for planning. Peterson chose 1917 as the "end of the beginning" because it marked the point at which, he believes, the ideal of the comprehensive plan died."

"In addition to differentiating the City Beautiful from city planning, Peterson makes a somewhat forced distinction between "city" planning and "urban" planning."

Read more at: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10265>

Implications for the American City

The H-Net review, above, criticizes Professor Peterson for the very point that seems fascinating and useful... "Peterson makes a somewhat forced distinction between 'city' planning and 'urban' planning." The essential point is that for anything useful to happen, there must be a governance system to get it done. There are no "urbans" with any legislative or funding powers; cities are the governance unit of choice. County governments are next.

Understanding and recognizing the contextual importance of urban areas is undeniable. Enacting programs, policies and capital improvements requires an entity with those powers. Planning cannot detach itself from the enacting entities – city and county governments. Professor Peterson's point is very basic, to the point of being fundamental. Planning is a tool for directing local government action, not an ethereal occupation or a theoretical exercise. The recent resurgence of cities will reassert city planning's role as an equal to that of urban planning.

Related Readings

1. ***A Clearing in the Distance, Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century***, Rybczynski, Witold, Scribner, 1999.
2. ***American City: St. Louis Architecture: Three Centuries of Design (American City Series)***, Robert Sharoff (Author), William Zbaren (Photographer), The Images Publishing Group, Pty Ltd, Victoria, Australia, 2012.
3. ***Arrival City, How the Largest Migration in History Reshaped Our World***, Saunders, Doug, Pantheon Books, New York, 2010.
4. ***City of the Century: the Epic of Chicago and the Making of America***, Miller, Donald L, Touchstone, New York, 1996.
5. ***Community and the Politics of Place***, Kemmis, Daniel, The University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

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6. ***Power Failure, Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York***, Dillaway, Diana, Prometheus Books, 2006.
7. ***St. Louis, The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape***, Sandweiss, Eric, Temple University Press, 2001.
8. ***The City in History, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects***, Mumford, Lewis, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961.
9. ***The Company Town, The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy***, Green, Hardy, Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group; New York, 2010.
10. ***The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present***, Martin V. Melosi, [Abridged] [Paperback], The Pittsburgh Press, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA, 2008

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