

Book Review

May 2015

Design of Cities: Revised Edition

[Edmund N. Bacon](#), The Penguin Group, NY, 1976.

Summary

Design of Cities is the book one should read when starting a career in design, any kind of design, but building and city design in particular. And, even though “design” is the topic, Mr. Bacon’s Philadelphia experiences permeate the book and strengthen his story.

Mr. Bacon was the distinguished executive director of the Philadelphia Planning Commission from 1949 until 1970. He is personally responsible for the resurrection and enhancement of this great American city.

Mr. Bacon’s approach is to describe the forces and factors of design and then apply them to cities around the world, large and famous, small and little-known. As he describes his purpose:

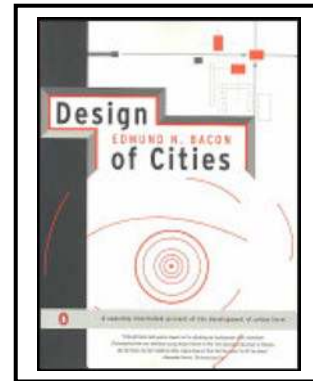
“The building of cities is one of man’s greatest achievements. The form of his city always has been and always will be a pitiless indicator of the state of his civilization. This form is determined by the multiplicity of decisions made by the people who live in it. In certain circumstances these decisions have interacted to produce a force of such clarity and form that a noble city has been born. It is my premise that a deeper understanding of the interactions of these decisions can give us the insight necessary to create noble cities in our own day.” [p13]

Mr. Bacon applies a deeply thoughtful approach to design and city planning; to the extent that he rediscovered, consciously or not, the revolutionary idea of fractals currently in vogue based on the work of Mandelbrot cited below.

An example of his discussion [p41] of design concepts is his presentation of the alternative approaches to design: “endotopic” and “exotopic”.

- ***The endotopic “approach culminates in thinking of the building as a discrete object, created independently of its background, arbitrarily placed in anonymous space. The negative aspects are stressed because so many designers are heavily entropic, but true design involves the interplay of endotopic and exotopic thinking.”***
- ***The exotopic “approach form emerges naturally from the movement systems [earlier described] so that the step of creating capricious shapes doesn’t exist in the design process. A key test of design is whether shapes are arbitrary or derived from the movement systems.”***

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An example of his application of design principles to actual town environments is reflected in his analysis of several small Dutch towns from the 17th century. Specifically, Mr. Bacon relates to Wuk-Bij-Duurstede in central Holland. The idea is the purposeful connection between life's forces, buildings and their placement in the town to honor their importance.

"In the little-known town of Wuk-Bij-Duurstede the principles of design exemplified in Culemborg and Zaltbommel are carried farther in a design structure of great simplicity. The three facets of town life: spiritual force, temporal power and economic energy, are given symbolic expression in three buildings." [p167]

Implications for the American City

Philadelphia is one of the most important cities in America due to its history, its prominence in contemporary culture and its diversity. The challenges of racial, economic and cultural diversity are playing themselves out in Philadelphia; and the forces of equity and social justice are struggling for a sustainable balance. The future of Philadelphia, as with many of our large, multi-cultural cities, will be the future of our American society. Mr. Bacon did his part to preserve and enhance his city; and he left a legacy for the next generation of city designers.

Bacon's strengths were viewing the city as a whole; and caring deeply about the outcome. His combination of intellectual and emotional commitment comes across in his work and his words. He practiced urban design before the term took hold. He professed to want to be an architect and found his calling by being the architect of the city rather than of buildings. He practiced three-dimensional planning, otherwise known as urban design. The lesson to learn is from Mr. Bacon's understanding of places and spaces in four dimension. He supplements the traditional three dimensions of the urban designer with the dimension of time as understood by the planner.

Key virtues: Caring, Knowing, and Understanding the Power of Time.

Youtubes:

Form, Design, and the City (1962)



Philadelphia Department of Records · 7 videos

Published on Oct 4, 2013

Form, Design, and the City is a film presented by the Reynolds Metals Company in cooperation with the American Institute of Architects. The film is an adaptation of a presentation at the 93rd Annual Convention of the American Institute of Architects held in Philadelphia, April 25-28, 1961. Edmund Bacon presents on city planning and changes in Philadelphia.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GGqSkDXOSg>

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Ed Bacon discussing in April 2011 his career and telling his story so young designers can be as effective with their towns as he believes he was with his, Philadelphia.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZw7Yw245Pg>

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Design of Cities

[Edmund N. Bacon](#)

Penguin Books, 1967 - [Architecture](#) - 336 pages

Reviewed by: [Design of Cities - Edmund N. Bacon - Google Books](#)
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In a brilliant synthesis of words and pictures, Edmund N. Bacon relates historical examples to modern principles of urban planning. He vividly demonstrates how the work of great architects and planners of the past can influence subsequent development and be continued by later generations. By illuminating the historical background of urban design, Bacon also shows us the fundamental forces and considerations that determine the form of a great city. Perhaps the most significant of these are simultaneous movement systems--the paths of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, public and private transportation--that serve as the dominant organizing force, and Bacon looks at movement systems in cities such as London, Rome, and New York. He also stresses the importance of designing on the city-dweller. That the centers of cities should and can be pleasant places in which to live, work, and relax is illustrated by such examples as Rotterdam and Stockholm.

Related Books

- ***City Abandoned: Charting the Loss of Civic Institutions in Philadelphia*** – March 11, 2014 by [Vincent David Feldman](#) (Author), [John Andrew Gallery](#) (Contributor), [Kenneth Finkel](#) (Contributor)
- ***City of the Century: the Epic of Chicago and the Making of America***, Donald L. Miller, Touchstone, New York, 1996.
- ***Ed Bacon: Planning, Politics, and the Building of Modern Philadelphia*** (The City in the Twenty-First Century) Hardcover by [Gregory L. Heller](#) (Author), [Alexander Garvin](#) (Foreword)
- ***Lost Philadelphia*** Hardcover, by [Ed Mauer](#) (Author), [Bob Skiba](#) (Author), A nostalgic journey back in time to visit some of the lost treasures that the city let slip through its grasp
- ***Power Failure, Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York***, Diana Dillaway, Prometheus Books, 2006.
- ***St. Louis, The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape***, Eric Sandweiss, Temple University Press, 2001.
- ***The Middle-Class City: Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876-1926***, John Henry Hepp IV.

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