

## From the Planners' Bookshelf...

# Why Cities Look the Way They Do 1st Edition

by [Richard J. Williams](#), Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 2019.

### CharacterTowns.org.

Mr. Williams' book rightly points out that every city needs a strategy for prosperity based on authentic and unique assets that do not destroy the essence of the town. It seems we are too easily carried away with success based on factors that have long-term destructive powers. Too much of a good thing...

CharacterTowns.org has long extolled the virtues of small cities and towns; an approach that finds some credence in this book.

### The Guardian's Review.

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## Why Cities Look the Way They Do by Richard J Williams review – are global cities best?

Beyond Venice's splendours and the skyscrapers of Manhattan ... cities in the future should aim to be more distinctive and less spectacular

### PD Smith

Sat 8 Jun 2019 05.00 EDT



'The true spectacle of the contemporary Venice is the tourist industry itself.'

Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

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Richard J Williams begins his study in what was once one of the greatest trading cities on earth: Venice. He feels that, as someone who knows art history, he should relish the experience of walking around its architectural splendours. Instead he admits: “I hate Venice” – a city that clings to the image of gentle decay and aestheticised ruination that first attracted 18th-century tourists. Prevented from modernising by its heritage status, it is today defined by the circulation of tourists: “The true spectacle of the contemporary Venice is the tourist industry itself.”

In this slim and insightful book, Williams explores cities as the function of financial, social and political processes rather than as the result of “design and intention”. His focus is on the cities that aim to attract capital from across the world with glitzy shopping malls, bars, restaurants and galleries that feel disconcertingly similar from Beijing to New York.

Williams believes too much attention is lavished on headline-grabbing skyscrapers, such as 432 Park Avenue, Manhattan (“a place to park money, not people”). Instead he takes us deep into the city’s “forest of signs” in order to reveal “the city hidden in plain sight”. In six fascinating chapters he examines the way in which money, work, political power, war, sexual behaviour and culture shape the appearance of cities.



A place to mark money not people ... 432 Park Avenue, New York.  
Photograph: dbox/CIM Group & Macklowe Properties

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The chapter on work starts with the idea that “the evisceration of industry is one of the great defining processes of the global city”. It moves on to Amsterdam’s *broedplaatsen* (breeding places) – a groundbreaking scheme to seed creative startups in a disused shipyard – and concludes with Silicon Valley (“a state of mind more than a city”), referring to *Seinfeld* and *Sunset Boulevard* on the way. In the chapter on war, he describes how, as the era of total war segues into the war on terror, “a city ostensibly at peace may in reality be violent”. In the 1990s, Rio de Janeiro had a higher murder rate than the besieged city of Sarajevo. On sex, he notes that red light districts have often been subsumed by zones of sexual tolerance, “key signifiers of globality”. From Manchester’s Gay Village to São Paulo’s Pride March, “the capacity of gay culture to generate urban spectacle – and the attendant capital flows – is certainly astonishing”.

In his conclusion – which feels like the polemical heart of the book and could be so much longer – Williams rightly observes that the future of urbanisation may well lie not in spectacular megacities with their soulless towers for the global superrich, but in medium-sized cities such as Leicester. Leicester is, he says, a city “remarkable for its lack of spectacle”. And in its “mixture of grit and neon that flouts conventional good taste”, he finds a visual richness and authenticity that is lacking in many urban areas that strive for global status: “It has built a life in spite of itself.”

• To buy *Why Cities Look the Way They Do* go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.

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