

Urban Design

Urbanism Without Effort: Reconnecting With First Principles of the City

Charles R. Wolfe

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Reviewed by Floyd Lapp, Independent Consultant

The planning profession assumes that the future is open and you can influence your spatial environment. Charles Wolfe's book provides descriptions of the peeling of layers of urban archeology and how they relate to the principles of place. Wolfe argues that naturally occurring aspects of city life create something new within spontaneous places. This book may be one of the best-kept secrets of current planning literature.

Many planning board members, academicians, and practitioners learned and became mired in the principles of city planning from the classic books filled with standards and formulas written between the 1960s and 1980s, such as Chapin's (1965) *Urban Land Use Planning* and Eisner and Gallion's (1993) *The Urban Pattern*. Much more creative literature provided the foundation and encouraged the transition from autotopia to promoting more sustainable places. This literature is encapsulated with the pathfinding writings of Jane Jacobs (1961; *Death and Life of Great American Cities*) and Kevin Lynch (1960; *Image of the City*), among others. Wolfe's book builds upon these classic works by focusing on sustainable principles such as walkable, bikeable, mixed-use neighborhoods and pedestrian-oriented places. He applies a set of interactive factors focused on the intersection of the built environment and the evolution of transportation modes. These include relationships of city-dwellers to their urban surroundings; an organic mixture of built and natural environments; a marriage of movement and settlement; adaptive reuse consistent with sustainability principles; a blending of the hierarchy of transportation modes (based on density, distance, speed, time, and cost); and how these all interplay across the urban landscape. One example Wolfe provides are street corners that serve as natural byproducts of crossroads and travel between places (p. 66). A generous collection of illustrations reinforces the highly creative and informative text by use of what the author refers to as *urban*.

Wolfe discusses worthy examples of reconnecting with the first principles of city planning. Two examples are worth highlighting: adventure playgrounds that

promote unrestricted play with the absence of rigid design and playground equipment and the community gardening movement that promoted the greening of previously bricks-and-mortar landscapes and included the alleviation of food deserts. Many of these sites may be embedded in the urban archeology of former housing developments. These types of spontaneous spaces of transition occur seemingly without effort. Intriguingly, they tend to avoid being obvious, planned, antiseptic places.

Wolfe's text has some limitations, including the need for more examples from the United States other than the usual inclusions of sustainable places from the Pacific Northwest such as Portland (OR) and Seattle (WA). In addition, Wolfe's examples from other parts of the world may be difficult to translate to cases and places in the United States. The United States does not have a shared set of experiences with most of the world. Our urban experience has been shaped by the creation of interstate highways, the controversies over urban renewal and its emergent relocation and neighborhood destruction, the emergence of seminal suburban developments, and important equity issues. As a result of this unique history and archeology, creating neighborhoods "without effort" presents extra challenges.

Furthermore, suburban renewal is not adequately examined, though the suburbs comprise a section of America where most of the population resides. Suburban areas need more discussion and creative initiatives. How can planners respond with more compact development, with transit densities that support more walkable and bikeable forms of mobility near transit stations? How can we peel away the decades of once-thriving and now vacant or underutilized office parks and suburban shopping malls? The book should also suggest using newly discovered suburban archeology to generate smarter and sustainable suburban places.

Wolfe's excellent book provides a set of startup examples for improving American urban and suburban sustainable reconnections. I recommend this book as a continuation of the positive movement toward sustainable communities. In addition, the book enhances the pathfindings of Jane Jacobs and the unifying of Kevin Lynch's original classification of paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. This type of sustainable planning provides the opportunities for the creation of a multi-modal vocabulary of a city's image that Wolfe captures via his use of urban diaries.

REFERENCES

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