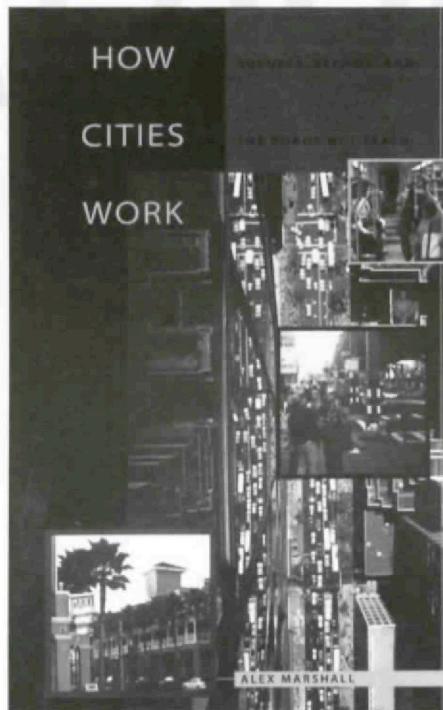


HOW CITIES WORK



PLANNING, POLITICS, AND PEOPLE

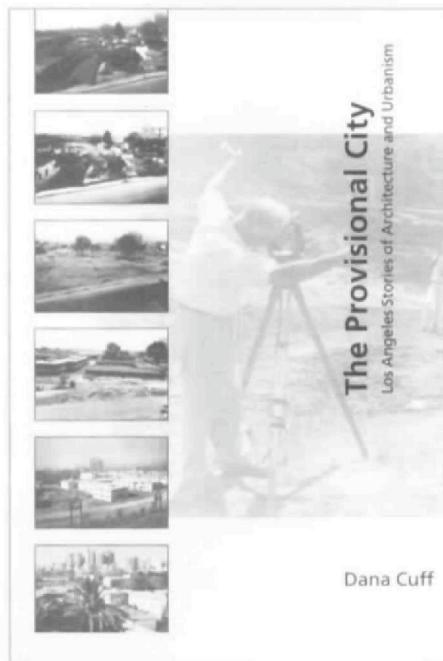
How Cities Work: Suburbs, Sprawl, and The Roads Not Taken by Alex Marshall. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000. 243 pp. \$50 hardcover, \$24.95 paperback.

The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism by Dana Cuff. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 380 pp. \$40.

Reviewed by Terrence Doody

Ask a cabbie how to get to Carnegie Hall and he'll answer, "Practice, practice, practice." Ask a retailer the three secrets of success and she'll say, "Location, location, location." Ask Alex Marshall and Dana Cuff the essence of urban planning and they are likely to answer, "Politics, politics, politics." Otherwise, Marshall's *How Cities Work* and Cuff's *The Provisional City* have little in common. Marshall is a journalist whose book reads like a long series of feature articles. Cuff is a professor of architecture and urban design at UCLA; her book is built of a long, theory-formed introduction to the detailed histories of five large-scale housing developments in Los Angeles from the 1930s to the present. Both in the end are mildly hopeful that we can learn from their analysis of our mistakes, but I am not sure their hopes can bear the weight of the evidence they present.

In *How Cities Work*, Marshall argues that they do work when they set the right relation between a place's basic economy, its internal and external transportation systems, and the governmental decisions that affect especially the means of transportation. Marshall calls cities creators of wealth. What a city can make depends on the transportation systems that control materials and products and that get the workers to and from the job; and transportation depends ultimately on government, the only entity large enough to lay the streets and freeways and operate the ports. The core of older cities was of course pedestrian, then expanded with trains, cars, and highways, which moved business and industry out of the core and into the suburbs, where the people had moved already. And though it is the automobile that made suburban life possible, it is not cars, he points out, that cause sprawl; it is freeways that cause it. So



urban planning has to begin with a vision of the whole and the power to organize on a large scale.

To illustrate his points, Marshall examines four "cities": Celebration, Florida, a New Urbanist development outside Orlando that is owned and operated by Disney; the Silicon Valley; the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens, New York; and Portland, Oregon. Only Portland, obviously, is a city by any classical definition, and that is one of Marshall's points. Things have changed. And Celebration is not a city by any definition but that of Andrés Duany, New Urbanism's chief ideologue, and that is one of Marshall's points too. New Urbanism is most successful as a rhetorical construct, Marshall thinks, and Celebration is nothing more than another car-bound suburban subdivision. Its main street is a highway; it does not have a real commercial center or its own economy; it doesn't even have its own government. Disney rules. And the homeowners' association and other forms of Common Interest Development that it exemplifies Marshall considers

NEW AND NOTABLE

The City in Mind: Meditations on the Urban Condition by James Howard Kunstler. The Free Press, 320 pp., \$25. The author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, in which he declared suburbia "a tragic landscape of cartoon architecture, junked cities, and ravaged countryside," now trains his mordant eye on the urban condition. Through stories as compelling and diverse as Louis-Napoleon's renovation of Paris, the bloody fall of Tenochtitlan, the grandiose schemes of Albert Speer, and the "gigantic hairball" of contemporary Atlanta, Kunstler discovers what is constant and enduring in cities, and explores the terrible perversities of history that have brought cities to grief.

The Nature of Order: Book One, The Phenomenon of Life by Christopher Alexander. Oxford, 480 pp., \$75. In a new four-volume essay, the author of *A Pattern Language* identifies a common set of well-defined structures that are present in all order, from micro-organisms and mountain ranges to the creation of good houses and vibrant communities. *The Phenomenon of Life*, the first volume in this masterwork, ponders the nature of order as a basis for a new architecture and argues that living structure is at once personal and structural, related not only to the geometry of space and how things work, but to human beings whose lives are ultimately based on feeling.

Case Study Houses by Elizabeth A. T. Smith. Taschen, 464 pp., \$150. A unique event in American architecture, the Case

Study House program, which oversaw the design of 36 prototype homes in Los Angeles between 1945 and 1966, sought to develop plans for modern residences that could be easily and cheaply constructed. Some of modernism's greatest talents — Richard Neutra, Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and others — generated highly experimental homes whose influence extends to the present. Here is a monumental retrospective of the program, with comprehensive documentation, brilliant photographs from the period, and, for houses still in existence, contemporary photos.

Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping by the Harvard Design School Project on the City & Rem Koolhaas. Taschen, 1,000 pages, \$50. In 1997 and '98, Koolhaas and his graduate students studied shopping as a defining element of the modern city, and, in many cases, the reason for its existence. Targeting the U.S., Europe, and Asia, the students explored retail technologies, marketing strategies, and the hybridization of retail and cultural/recreational environments. The result is a selection of essays ranging from "Disney Space: Urban Template" to "Three-Ring Circus: The Double Life of the Shopping Architect," as well as hundreds of diagrams, floor plans, and photographs that illustrate the ways in which shopping has refashioned the contemporary city.

— Michael Kimmins

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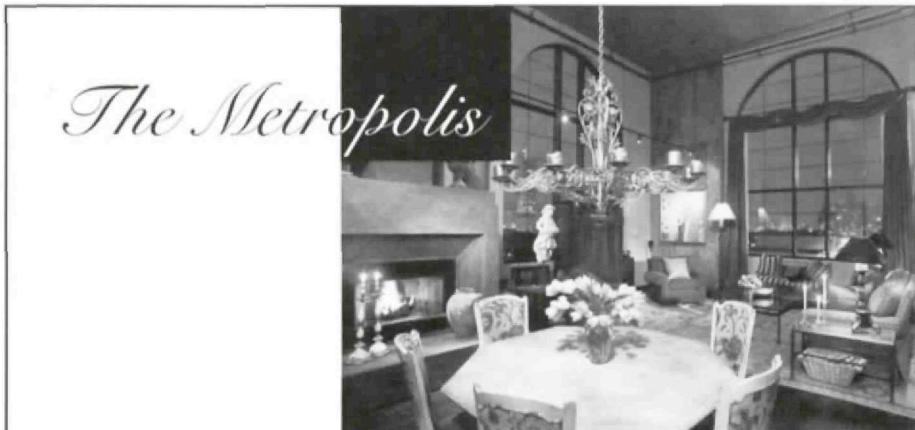
Exterior of Cy Twombly Gallery, designed by Renzo Piano

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“corporate fascism.” He doesn’t like New Urbanism, but distinguishes Eastern versions of it such as Celebration from Western versions such as Portland that have grown out of the environmentalist movement. His arguments against Duany’s pretense are very satisfying.

The Silicon Valley, which used to be the Santa Clara Valley, is a city in function but not in form. It has generated enormous wealth, but its shape is the unintended byproduct of California’s highway system. Marshall uses the Valley to discuss several issues: the ways the city and suburbs have exchanged roles; the differences between European sprawl and American; Lewis Mumford’s prescience about the effect of cars on urban organization; and the fate of the carless poor in Palo Alto and San Jose. One of his most telling anecdotes comes from a woman who has worked for 30 years in Menlo Park, where the old town center has been revived by restaurants and boutiques. On the two-block-long downtown, arugula is available in 37 different restaurants. “I just wish there was someplace to buy a bra or some underwear,” she says.

Marshall is very good with vignettes like this; he is less so, I think, in trying to discuss what he calls the Death of Place, because he doesn’t quite have a definition of place to begin with. It exists in nostalgia, but he strongly implies place must also be a densely centered area that is easy to visualize. The Silicon Valley has many lovely visual aspects, but it is more a concept than a field of appropriate images and, therefore, a lesser place than Jackson Heights.

Which isn’t a city either, but a neighborhood in a great urban complex. Jackson Heights is important to Marshall’s argument because it is an “anachronism” that still works as a portal for immigrants to enter the city’s economy and the middle class. Unlike the poor in East Palo Alto, the newly arrived in Jackson Heights have a pedestrian center that gives them access to stores, services, and the public transportation that makes cars for everyone unnecessary. It has not become a slum, nor has it been turned into “a giant fern bar” like so many of the townettes across Northern California. Jackson Heights is the historical and moral opposite of Celebration and a clear example of the role government plays. Real estate developers do not do El-trains and subways, and their developments are not initially hospitable to Koreans, Haitians, and Columbians. Marshall points out that a lot of older suburban sections have become ethnic enclaves as their original populations have moved even farther out, but this again is proof of Jackson Heights’ rarity and the changing roles of city and suburb.

And Jackson Heights wasn’t planned to be what it has become. It has evolved with its populations and without the

large-scale convulsion Dana Cuff examines in *The Provisional City*. Portland, Oregon, wasn’t exactly planned, either, Marshall wants to say, because its “urbanism” is the successful offshoot of environmentalists’ concern to save the surrounding Willamette Valley. To do this, urban growth boundaries were established by Oregon’s regional and state governments: exactly Marshall’s essential point about the place of politics. Portland was turned in upon itself, density was fostered, and affordable housing and public transportation were assured. They even wiped out parking lots to build buildings. Yet one of the reasons Portland has worked so well is that there are very few minority citizens there. It is not the sham Celebration is, but it is not Jackson Heights, either.

Marshall’s argument — about the economy, transportation, and government — is so clear that it eventually seems self-evident, until you realize his four prime examples are not entirely representative of American urbanism and its problems. Boulder, Colorado, tried to do what Portland did and failed. Marshall is also very repetitious. I would have liked, in place of his redundancies, more passages like this:

To survive, retail needs an astonishingly large potential customer base. ... A Wal-Mart Supercenter can require a customer base of a half million households within a 20-minute drive. But even a small restaurant or pharmacy requires high traffic volume ... by foot or by car. Traffic volumes depend on transportation systems. Wal-Marts are located around key freeway interchanges because it allows them to access a regional population base. Small stores can succeed in an urban neighborhood, but it requires at least 10,000 families within walking distance, which means a gross density of at least ten homes in an acre. ... Manhattan can support retail in almost every block because it can pack 10,000 people into one block.

The Provisional City is suffused with such details. Cuff’s argument is denser and the question of politics not so simple. Her stories of architecture and urbanism in Los Angeles are stories of the long conflict between the progressive ideals of public housing and the practical victories of private developers. Here is how she describes her project:

The present exploration of architecture and urbanism emphasizes the disruptive over the continuous, the spontaneous over the planned, short-term instability over long-term stability, the circumstantial over the referential.... Eruptive building in cities dominates our phenomenal observations, while the historian’s long view digests such episodes with narra-



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tions of constancy and progress. I will make the case for postwar urban change as multiple convulsions, weakly linked in the Los Angeles context by ideology, regulation, and infrastructure.

The convulsion occurs to a part of the urban body which then becomes a discrete zone, operating with greater independence from its surroundings.

But it is an extreme version ... a violent upheaval in geographic, social, and individual [histories] that concerns me. I argue that these convulsions result from the political economy of property, urban policy and its federal appropriations, and contemporary design ideology.

There is a great sense of loss throughout this book, and the politics are complicated by several forces these quotations only hint at. In her theoretical prelude, Cuff explains the deep conflict between America's investment in the theory of individual property rights that derives from John Locke and the conflicting right of the government's eminent domain. This, moreover, is not simply the opposition between private and public, because the government has often ceded eminent domain to private developers, who claim public land for themselves in the name of progress and the single-family dwelling. To do this, it is very often necessary to "create" slums. These, like Duany's theme parks, are also rhetorical constructs: not merely older buildings in poorer neighborhoods, but moral zones defined by their inhabitants' turpitude, uncleanness, ethnicity, and race. Slum clearing she calls "racial cleansing." Slums, she says, are "conceptualized epidemiologically." And public housing is also offensive to American property values because it makes the private public (which is the reverse of ceding eminent domain to developers), favors the renter over the owner, sponsors multifamily developments instead of single-family units, and looks "European," which means socialist.

The historical background of these issues has many roots: in World War I, the Depression, the New Deal, World War II, women in the workplace, housing built for defense workers, returning veterans, the baby boom, internal migration after the war, McCarthyism, tenant loyalty oaths, and the growing power of the real estate lobby. The progressivism embodied in low-cost public housing is ultimately deemed un-American so Los Angeles can build its own Levittowns.

In telling the stories of those towns — of Aliso Village, Rodger Young Village, Westchester, Chavez Ravine (where a Mexican "mountain village" was razed to make the city safe for the Brooklyn Dodgers), and Playa Vista — Cuff is able to deliver in great detail all the internal contradictions that give her argument such specificity and weight. Nothing in

her accounting is typical; there is no neat teleology; everything is really complicated. Rodger Young Village, for instance, was a development of Quonset huts for defense workers and never intended to be permanent. Moreover, it was entirely integrated, and the integration worked. When the city tried to tear the place down for a newer development, the citizens of Rodger Young organized and resisted. They weren't all crazy about the architecture, but they did realize their real social coherence, their community, was maybe unique and certainly invaluable. They lost, of course. In one of her chapter titles, "Rodger Young Village: 'Quonset Hut Community,'" Cuff registers an oxymoron too violent for history to bear.

The other story of hers I like pits an idealistic housing advocate named Frank Wilkinson against his archenemy, Fritz Burns, a real estate developer who in another kind of book would have been called a visionary. Burns was a Catholic and a big donor to the Los Angeles diocese. Both he and Wilkinson were also friends of Monsignor Thomas J. O'Dwyer. Wilkinson and O'Dwyer were in contact with each other every day for ten years until Wilkinson was investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee and sent to jail. O'Dwyer received a mysterious sabbatical and never spoke to Wilkinson again. This episode does not explain everything in Cuff's long, rich, complex book, but it does tell us why, when money is talking, the poor are unheard.

In the end, Cuff says she believes that large, disruptive building projects need not be all bad, but the record of failure she presents is pretty conclusive. Marshall's scheme seems a bit too simple at this point, and Cuff's history too complex, to be easily translated into any plan of action. Their books confirm each other's points, it seems, and cancel each other's hopes. The good things that happen in these books are never the result of urban planning, but accidents as different as Jackson Heights, Rodger Young Village, and Marshall's own home neighborhood; and in these places alone do we sense anything at all like community, the ideal that developers trumpet and slum clearance denies.

After I decided not to go to Carnegie Hall, the cabbie got to talking, and you know what he told me the secret to community is? "People, people, people." ■



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