

THE WHISTLING LEAF-BLOWER

One Million Acres & No Zoning

(by Lars Lerup, Architectural Association Publications, 2011, 272 pages, \$39.95, hardback)

by Kayte Young

IN LARS LERUP'S *One Million Acres & No Zoning*, the leaf-blower takes its rightful place in the Houston landscape and in the psyche of its inhabitants:

“The hysterical rattle of a two-stroke engine and the reek of fuel disguise the emblematic significance of the leaf-blower—best seen in action blowing leaves and other vegetal matter onto the neighbour’s property. The utter futility of erasing any sign of decay, the obsession with ‘clean,’ the reckless expenditure of energy and absurd reliance on technology to accomplish the simplest of tasks; ultimately the suburban arsenal of behavioural attitudes comprises ‘passing of the buck.’ Together with its operator, the leaf-blower forms the most synthetic ‘weapon’ of suburban existence.” (144-5)

Lerup served as Dean of the Rice School of Architecture from 1993 to 2009. His new book builds on a career of unconventional and witty observations printed in numerous journals and books, including *After the City* (2000, MIT Press). His view of Houston, whether from a condominium tower or from behind a car window, has all the benefits of an academic’s clarity and all the drawbacks of academic distance.

The poetic portrait of the leaf-blower, along with an unremarkable photograph of a landscape worker with the machine strapped to his back, appears in the middle section of the book, which he calls *Abecedarium*. A catalog of elements, both natural and man-made, thoughtfully ordered by Lerup, the *Abecedarium* offers assistance in reading a city that resists comprehension: “...these elements... form clusters of human invention worthy of investigation.”

As Lerup undertakes the daunting task of articulating a chaos that otherwise cannot be contained, he finds that ordinary language will not suffice. He creates his own set of terms for indexing this strange field, some familiar, others invented: speed zone, frontage roads, zoohemic

canopy, streamers, middle landscape, mega church, moist prairie, Kirby corridor, holey plane, mega shape, SUV, American distance, alphabet city, attractors, turbulence, cul-de-sac, gated community, white collar prison. The terms offer footholds in the swirling storm of the American suburban city. Lerup’s lexicon offers paths of discovery for a complex and ever-shifting urban reality, though he refrains from urging a clear path of action.

As he guides the reader on this tour of Houston, he keenly notes that from the car window, we take in the city filmically:

“Cars are the movie cameras through which one constantly scans the built environment. Whoever wields the automobile must have an audio-visual memory, perceive in a filmic manner, and possess the human analogues to slow motion, rewind, erasure, jump-cut, juxtaposition and fast-forward technology.” (83)

Lerup’s *One Million Acres & No Zoning* is best seen as a collection, a gathering of impressions, terms, tours through the city, analogies, suburban elements, relationships, drawings, proposals, diagrams, and stories. The book’s lack of cohesion

matches its subject. Stunning drawings run through the pages of the book, offering another tool for learning about Houston. I imagine him drawing from his condominium looking down at the city’s canopy, cut through by freeways and punctuated by clusters of high-rises. Part diagram, part architect’s sketch, part fine art print, a Lerup drawing serves to illustrate a point, to clarify a relationship, but primarily (I suspect) to dazzle the reader. The collection of drawings stands on its own, as a complete (and brilliant) body of work. This is a book not only for architects, but also for poets, planners, and concerned citizens.

Lerup examines the relationship between the artificial and the natural, between big oil/capitalist development schemes and state planning, and

finds himself caught in what blogger Andrew Sullivan calls *hathos*—a condition where you find something appalling and yet cannot look away. Lerup is both enamored of, and disgusted by, the shape Houston has taken as a result of corporate interests run amok. He then cedes the role of the theorist to developers, with the inclusion of biographies of Frank Liu and others.

What I find most surprising—and, I must say, refreshing—in the chapter “Obstacles and Opportunities,” is Lerup’s refusal to spew pat responses to the cry for sustainable development. “Utterly bewildering” are the words he chooses. He continues, “...plagued by ideology and self-righteousness... [i]ts fundamental vagueness shrouded in moral overtones, sustainability will always undermine our confidence: There is no way to know with certainty what is sustainable...” (242-3).

However, what he offers up instead of the call for sustainability is no less vague nor any more realistic or attainable. He’s fond of J.B. Jackson’s suggestion to build a manmade environment that is “as natural as possible,” and then goes on to describe a scenario in which government, private interests, and ordinary citizens work together for the betterment of Houston. He wonders if the bayous could be recognized for both their infrastructural value (channeling runoff) and their rich and complex ecological importance. He conjures up a sea change in public opinion, but there is nothing in sight to spark such a shift. Perhaps the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in the bayous by the Flood Control District over the last decade, often complemented by park enhancements funded by private donors, fulfills Lerup’s visions?

Lerup suggests that those seeking change not lose sight of the self-organizing principle under which Houston has always operated. He identifies the leftover spaces (*lacunae*) resulting from leapfrog development patterns—patches of raw moist prairie in an otherwise paved landscape—as breathing holes and wonders if they may hold the key to the future. Again, the specifics for how any of this can come to pass are missing. Lerup himself seems unconvinced: “In Houston, a city dominated by individual concerns and only incidentally by the public good, the change needed is truly radical...” (242). Indeed, to give just one example, according to the EPA’s latest Toxic Release Inventory, Harris County (where Houston is located) topped the list for air pollution.

Lars Lerup should leave the future alone and stick to what he does best: looking. His insight is deep; his wit is sharp. He is not an urban planner nor a social engineer, and he doesn’t need to prescribe. The book is no manual for activists. When observations are as astute and insightful as Lerup’s are, it is enough simply to point—and so reveal this sprawling metropolis in all its unruly absurdity and hidden beauty. *One Million Acres & No Zoning* invites us to take a closer look and offers a brilliant set of tools with which to do so. **c**

