

H-Net Reviews

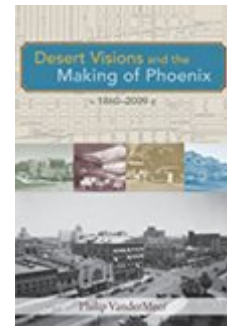
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip VanderMeer. *Desert Visions and the Making of Phoenix, 1860-2008*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010. 416 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-4891-3.

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Published on H-Urban (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Wendy Plotkin



A New Type of Urban Biography for a New City

Philip VanderMeer's excellent urban biography of Phoenix comes only twenty-two years after Bradford Luckingham penned his own urban biography (*Phoenix: The History of a Southwestern Metropolis* [1989]) of the same city. VanderMeer provides a more detailed examination of the recent history of Phoenix, devoting 273 pages to Phoenix since World War II while Luckingham took 132 pages to write about the same era. The author also seeks to offer a different perspective on the development of the city and its metropolitan region, through a lens "not simply dependent on forms and standards established many decades before" (p. 4). Indeed, VanderMeer wants readers to appreciate Phoenix for what it is rather than what it is not. He does this by focusing on five thematic areas: the natural environment, urban form, the economy, social and cultural values, and public leadership. As the title suggests, he also traces changing visions of the city which he identifies as a transplanted vision, an adapted vision, and a vision reflecting both time and place. The book is divided along these lines in three parts and a conclusion.

The initial vision of Phoenix during its early years emphasized the importance of making it a modern American city in the desert by borrowing from the town planting movement in the Midwest during the nineteenth century. The second vision, developed after World War II, focused on using the new high tech and service sector economies to make Phoenix the leading city in the Southwest. Unlike the first vision that was more imitative of earlier cities, this one reflected the new realities of the

post-industrial economy, the open spaces of the Valley of the Sun, and the transportation revolution. The outcome of this vision was an economic and spatial dynamic that seemed at odds with what was viewed as normal. The third vision mirrored more quality of life issues and sensitivity to life in a world of limited resources. Although in some ways symptomatic of the changing cultural priorities of America, this vision also represents a more nuanced understanding of Greater Phoenix's relation to the desert.

From the city's beginning, the desert offered special challenges but town promoters worked hard to overcome this hostile environment and make a modern city mirroring those in nineteenth-century urban America. Growth in the desert city was slow for a while because of the region's limited population and harsh climate. And with the coming of the railroad and the acquisition of an adequate water source, the small city in the early twentieth century took on the form familiar throughout America with a clearly defined downtown with residential neighborhoods clustered around it. By the 1920s, thanks to the streetcar and automobile, the city experienced outward growth and suburbanization that was typical of what was found in cities across the nation. In addition to the physical traits, Phoenix embraced social, cultural, and political characteristics associated with modern cities. Civic leaders seemed concerned that the city be perceived as a typical city.

World War II would not only change the economy

but also instill a new image of what civic leaders thought Phoenix could become. The result, according to the author, was a new high-tech suburban vision. VanderMeer's discussion of the impact of World War II on Phoenix reinforces Gerald Nash's thesis that World War II was transformational in the history of Western cities. VanderMeer does an excellent job of tracing the various ways World War II coupled with new leadership altered the city's economic and spatial development. Moreover, that vision encouraged a more coordinated, honest, and effective government after the war and promoted other strategies to make the city more attractive to new business. For instance, boosters adopted right-to-work laws, increased the role of Arizona State University, encouraged high culture, and undertook aggressive annexation campaigns to capture the outward movement of population. A deemphasis on downtown also accompanied this aggressive growth-oriented vision. The author does an effective job tracing the consequences of such a vision by exploring the spatial, social, and economic transformation brought on by growth and changing priorities in this desert metropolis.

By the late 1970s, new ideas about politics and the economy helped reshape the postwar vision. The very centralized leadership that had been encouraged under the old vision now became a problem for the new vision that emerged as the metropolitan area became increas-

ingly fragmented and demographically diversified. Government structure, transportation developments, and the rapid growth that had characterized Phoenix after the war now became viewed as liabilities. Other changes in priorities included new efforts to control the increasing sprawl of the metropolis into the desert and a new commitment to restore downtown as the center of the metropolitan region. Finally, an increasing interest in preserving older neighborhoods along with the promotion of smart growth policies sensitive to the region's environment reflected still another shift in vision about Phoenix and the Valley of the Sun.

Overall the use of vision as an analytical tool to explore significant changes in the city's history is effective. Some readers might want an expanded discussion of whether these were shared visions of the larger community or simply those of select leaders. One might also question whether such visions were more reflective of the city building process in the desert or if they represented broader cultural changes seen throughout the country. Overall, the book is successful and easily the most useful biography of Phoenix available. Well researched and effectively written, this book also demonstrates the benefits of urban biography in helping readers understand what is unique about the urban Southwest and what is shared by today's cities throughout the country.

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Citation: Robert B. Fairbanks. Review of VanderMeer, Philip, *Desert Visions and the Making of Phoenix, 1860-2008*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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