

H-Net Reviews

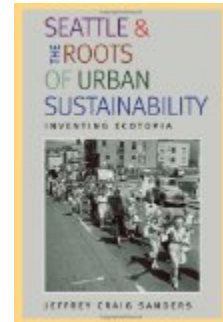
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey C. Sanders. *Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. xiii + 288 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4395-2.

Reviewed by Hannah Bennett (Princeton University)

Published on H-Urban (November, 2011)

Commissioned by Robert C. Chidester



It Ain't Easy Being Green: The Origins of Environmental Activism in Seattle

The modern study of urban sustainability and the development of ideas about an ecologically responsible city was given significant form in the 1930s by figures such as Lewis Mumford, with important precedents reaching to Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902) and proposals put forth by leaders of the City Beautiful movement. In the last few decades, academic output in these areas has only accelerated. More than 1,200 titles were published in 2010 alone, exploring issues of urban ecology, urban agriculture, sustainable design and development, self-reliant living, and many species of ecologically aware landscape design.[1] Some of the more significant titles in the last few years include Eugenie Birch and Susan Wachtner's *Growing Greener Cities: Urban Sustainability in the Twenty-First Century* (2008), a study of green cities supported and developed by state and federal agencies, local civic organizations, foundations, neighborhood groups, and individual initiatives; Joan Fitzgerald's *Emerald Cities: Urban Sustainability and Economic Development* (2010), which examines emergent efforts linking sustainability policy with urban economic development; and finally, *Sustainability in America's Cities: Creating the Green Metropolis* (2011), editor Matthew Slavin's city-specific look at programs addressing local sustainability. Historians are also examining these issues, focusing on how they have impacted the evolution of the city itself, such as William Scott Swearingen's *Environmental City: People, Places, Politics, and the Meaning of Modern Austin* (2010).

Jeffery Craig Sanders's *Seattle and the Roots of Urban*

Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia is the latest addition to this growing and important literature. It is the story of how environmental activism first took shape in 1960s Seattle, how it affected the thinking of a broader urban population that resulted in a number of initiatives and, at the broadest level, provided a model and inspiration for urban environmental activism in other cities throughout the nation. In a series of chronological case studies, beginning with the 1960s Pike Place Market redevelopment controversy, followed by Seattle's Model Cities program, the city-wide fight over open space at Fort Lawton, the evolution of the Tilth Society and community gardening movement, and concluding with the Seattle Commons Plan of the early 1990s, Sanders traces how a notably countercultural environmental activism evolved and guided the direction of urban sustainability in Seattle.

Sanders's history recovers key characters and movements whose efforts for social equality and a healthy urban environment were within close proximity of one another, oftentimes sharing political momentum or civic attention. In many instances, countercultural groups with seemingly incongruent agendas worked together and supported each other's causes. Notable examples from Sanders's book include the 1970 United Indians for All Tribes (UIAT) peaceful "invasion" of the defunct Fort Lawton Army base. Black Panthers, the Seattle Liberation Front, and many immigrant communities came forward in support of the protest, necessitating a large-scale city concession: land reserved for the public's "Discovery

Park” and land given to the UIAT for both a community center and an environmental refuge. Another lead character in Sanders’s narrative is the Tilth Society. In its early days, this group brought considerable city attention to urban agriculture and green consumerism, all of which became important components of Seattle’s urban sustainability aims. Moreover, the Tilth Society would go on to become a nationally recognized organization for its promotion of organic gardening and the cultivation of a healthy urban community.

The heart of Sanders’s history is the 1960s and 1970s Model Cities program. The federally funded initiative, within President Johnson’s larger War on Poverty program, targeted the urban poor in select cities across the country, with Seattle’s Central District being the first neighborhood in the nation selected to participate. Rather than revitalizing blighted communities with new housing, the underlying strategies of the program addressed social and economic problems within those communities; coordinated federal, state, local, and private resources to leverage against the poverty problem; and lastly, and perhaps most importantly to Sanders’s work, enabled widespread citizen participation in the bettering of their communities.[2] Sanders illustrates how local involvement was of paramount importance to the success of the program in Seattle, resulting in pivotal community-based programs such as the Central Area Motivation Program and Environmental Health Project. Without a doubt, Seattle was a special test case for the Model Cities initiative. As Sanders notes, many of the city’s community activists were already accomplished organizers, having emerged from the civil rights movement, and were in a position to develop highly organized and compelling social cases for Model Cities funding. At the same time, Seattle was one of the only Model Cities to apply its federal funding to environmental concerns, with city residents playing a central role. Seattle was undoubtedly the “model” for Model Cities, as governed by an administration not only sensitive to the needs of its distressed Central District neighborhood but welcoming of the programs and initiatives proposed by local organizations with a variety of agendas. However, Sanders does not address how unique this success was, since the Model Cities program largely failed in other cities due in part to corruption, disorganization, and mismanagement at local levels.

Throughout his history, Sanders emphasizes how local activism, and most often countercultural activism, was instrumental in pushing sustainability issues into the foreground and in creating awareness of environmental

effects, what we might even call environmental justice. The role of the government is downplayed to the extent that activists seem as if they brought all this into being on their own. Yet without politicians and government officials open to progressive notions, all that activism could have been seriously curtailed or even shut down. To be sure, government may not have led on the issue and may have proven inhospitable to other areas of reform. However, its role here is not usefully portrayed as being, at best, a reluctant participant in, and at worst, an obstacle to the forward motion of social progress. That is to say, emphasis on the role of countercultural activists comes at the cost of more nuanced and more complex political interactions. The “us vs. them” mindset that colored the countercultural period of the 1960s, in other words, tints sections of Sanders’s book as well. In fact, the more successful stories he tells are those descended from the Model Cities program where government and local agents worked together, at least to some extent. For this important moment in Seattle’s history, Sanders could have struck a better balance to illustrate how activists worked with the government.

Nevertheless, the strength of this book is Sanders’s smart, scholarly treatment of the environmental movement, focusing on those whom he continually refers to throughout the book as “environmental heretics,” such as the Tilth movement, the People’s Revolutionary Action Group, the Puget Consumers Cooperative, or the Fremont Public Association. Sanders delights in how these groups mobilized communities and affected real environmental reform in the city. And Sanders enlivens his discussion by integrating his history with the fringy, New Left, countercultural publications that formed around these groups, namely *The Fremont Forum*, *Asian Family Affair*, *Seattle Sun*, *The Tilth Newsletter* and *Seriatim: Journal of Ecotopia*.

In some sense, this book is not actually about sustainability or urbanism in Seattle. It is rather an account of activism around issues of environmentalism and how those efforts led to lasting changes in the city, such as Cascade Community Development or the many community gardens (“P-Patches”) that were established throughout Seattle. Sanders convincingly documents how the activism of the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for this larger sensibility in Seattle, giving significant form, in particular, to the urban agricultural movement. Thus there is little about the physical changes to the city during this period, and minimal description of how specific physical traits of Seattle, from its uncommon hillside downtown to its climate, impacted the overall sociologi-

cal and built environment.

Sanders offers a vivid and compelling history of environmental activism in Seattle. His work is resourceful and the research well synthesized. It is an exciting story, told without being overly nostalgic, leaving the reader with a deeper appreciation of the ambition, dedication, and energy found in the likes of Victor Steinbrueck, Walter Hundley, Diana Bowers, Bernie Whitebear, Mark Musick, and the many other lead characters in Sanders's history. Sanders brings an important and uniquely "Seattle" history to the surface, and one likely to inspire many to support and lobby for healthy and humane neighbor-

hoods in their own communities.

Notes

[1]. Figures generated from 2011 OCLC WorldCat statistics and Library of Congress Subject Heading Authority Files.

[2]. Ricardo A. Millett, *Examination of "Widespread Citizen Participation" in the Model Cities Program and the Demands of Ethnic Minorities for a Greater Decision Making Role in American Cities* (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1977).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Hannah Bennett. Review of Sanders, Jeffrey C., *Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33875>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.