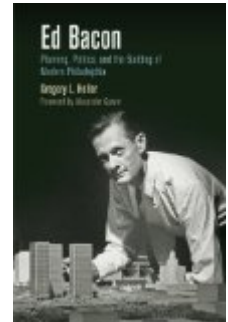


Gregory L. Heller. *Ed Bacon: Planning, Politics, and the Building of Modern Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 320 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4490-8.



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In the summer of 2002, Wesleyan University junior Gregory Heller sent Edmund Bacon—Philadelphia's foremost postwar planner—a letter. Soon, he was sharing lunch with the aging architect, considering an offer to become Bacon's personal archivist. Before the check arrived, Heller had decided to take a year off from college to help Bacon write his memoirs. Heller was twenty. Bacon was ninety-two.

Ed Bacon: Planning, Politics, and the Building of Modern Philadelphia is the product of that collaboration. Equal parts history, biography, and urban planning case study, the book's timing is ideal: It is among the first full-length treatments of Bacon, and one of only a handful of monographs on Philadelphia's postwar period. This is surprising, since the city was the locus of some of the era's most imaginative and complex urban design initiatives. As Heller writes, Philadelphia "secur[ed] the second-most federal urban renewal funds, after New York City. In the mid-1960s, no city ... eclipse[d] Philadelphia's national renown for its planning and redevelopment" (p. 2). In-

deed, in the following decades, Philadelphia transformed itself from a deindustrializing backwater into a vibrant magnet for creative-class types. While Bacon's analogues in New York (Robert Moses) and Boston (Edward Logue) have been the subject of academic and popular histories—most notably Robert Caro's magisterial *The Power Broker* (1974)—Bacon and his hometown remain understudied. Heller's book goes a long way towards remedying that problem.

Bacon's chief talent, Heller argues, was not his architectural genius, but his ability to shepherd plans through a maze of competing political and community interests. This skill proved essential, since Bacon never wielded absolute control as Philadelphia's redevelopment czar. But in his twenty-one years as executive director of the City Planning Commission, he learned to work the levers of soft power: frequent media appearances, celebratory public exhibitions, and back-channel wrangling proved just as effective as frontal assaults on mayors and their administrations. Ultimately, Heller holds up Bacon as a model for plan-

ners and stakeholders looking to "glean important insight on how to impact the implementation process" (p. xiv). Today's urban policymakers might want to take a page from Bacon, especially his balancing of community, business, and political interests. Bacon's life--and this book--are best understood, then, as a fruitful case study for an audience of planners. Other readers (particularly academic historians) should expect neither a richly textured story of one man's life nor a comprehensive and authoritative history of postwar Philadelphia. Nor will they find any traces of the *Sturm und Drang* of social history--or, for that matter, a particularly deep engagement with issues of race, class, and gender. Those concerns aside, *Ed Bacon* is a worthwhile addition to our understanding of city planning, institutional politics, and urban redevelopment.

Heller opens with a *bildungsroman* of Bacon's formative years: a middle-class childhood in West Philadelphia; an architecture degree at Cornell; a trip to Shanghai in 1933; the early mentorship of designers Oskar Stonorov, Eliel Saarinen, and Lewis Mumford. Bacon came of age at the height of the New Deal. Local and state governments were flush with federal funds, and the planning profession was beginning to assert itself as a force for social betterment. The transatlantic exchange of modernist ideals was in full swing; urban designers in Europe and North America were beginning to turn their attention towards public health, crime, inner-city poverty, and disorder. Bacon's first project, in Flint, Michigan, was a series of WPA-funded studies that explored strategies for downtown renewal. Drawing inspiration from the Garden Cities movement and its Radburn principles--which championed a utopian vision of planned communities equally suitable for pedestrians and cars--Bacon made the case for urban-style growth. Over the course of his career, he would struggle to juggle the same competing imperatives: automobiles against people, freeways versus sidewalks.

Bacon moved back east in the early 1940s. His timing was felicitous: Philadelphia, like many older cities, was transitioning away from a system of political patronage and cronyism towards more professionalized--even technocratic--forms of governance. The new urban liberalism required scores of planners and bureaucrats; Bacon and a cohort of New Deal veterans answered the call. As part of the newly created City Planning Commission, Bacon faced his first challenge: developing appealing housing for urbanites who would otherwise have forsaken the city for the suburbs. One early attempt, in Philadelphia's booming Far Northeast, was envisioned as a creative redesign of the subdivision. As Heller describes, Bacon "borrowed the best elements of the urban grid system--rowhouses, walkability, sense of community, predictable system of streets--and combined them with new planning principles that limited traffic flow in residential areas and preserved the environment" (p. 79). Bacon conserved natural streambeds and woodlands. He arrayed single-family homes tightly, preserving a human sense of scale. But private developers who worked with the city soon balked; they refused to tailor their new shopping centers to pedestrians. Momentum for a mass transit extension also flagged. The Northeast, like Philadelphia's suburbs, tied its fate ever more tightly to the automobile.

In the 1950s, Bacon tried other gambits to staunch the exodus of people and capital from Center City. Penn Center, modeled on Rockefeller Center in New York, was planned as a subterranean marketplace and transit hub connected to a stand of imposing glass office towers. Bacon conceived the project as a public-private partnership: Philadelphia Railroad, who owned the land, would provide financing; his office would promote and steer the development. Yet Bacon quickly realized that the city government was in "a weak position ... in dealing with private developers and the business community" (p. 114). As costs mounted, his dreams of building a soaring monument to civic life were dashed. Bacon was chas-

tened by the experience, concluding "in the end, the city lacked real tools for enacting the public good" (p. 114). Yet all was not lost: Even if Penn Center's viaducts remain riddled with vacancies, Bacon's scheme opened up Market Street for a skyscraper boom that arrived in the 1980s and 90s.

More successful than Penn Center was Bacon's redevelopment of the Society Hill neighborhood. In the postwar years, the historic environs near Independence Hall had fallen to shambles. Many knew it as the "Bloody Fifth Ward," infamous city-wide as "a violent slum" (p. 117). Yet Bacon grasped its unseen promise: he wanted to restore the colonial quarter, tempting middle-class residents back from the suburbs. His plan gave prospective homeowners financial incentives to fix up any home to its "authentic" historic appearance. Structures built later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries--regardless of their architectural value--were destroyed and replaced by modernist row homes, clad in glass and brick. The aging waterfront Dock Street Market was also leveled to build three sleek residential towers designed by I.M. Pei. By the 1970s, an influx of new, mostly white owners moved in. However, their arrival--and rapidly rising property values--pushed out the neighborhood's long-standing African American renting population. (Later in the decade, pathbreaking Marxist geographer Neil Smith examined the gentrification of Society Hill; Smith goes uncited in Heller's chapter.)

The mid-1950s redevelopment of the Eastwick area--a racially integrated, working-class neighborhood in the city's industrial Southwest--was meant to solve another problem: the outflow of African American residents displaced by slum clearance in North and West Philadelphia. Bacon and his collaborators called for a mix of row homes and single-occupancy houses interspersed with car-centric shopping centers. Eastwick was designed to demonstrate that urbanites could enjoy all the trappings of the suburban "good life"

without leaving the city. Others were less sanguine about the project. Local journalist Sidney Hopkins, reflecting on Eastwick in *Greater Philadelphia Magazine* in November 1964, jibed that it "would not only siphon off the black overflow but would be a low visibility cul-de-sac into which the burgeoning Negro population could be stuffed." [1] The area's current occupants were also less than enthused. From 1955 onwards, a multiracial coalition of neighbors fought the city's redevelopment plans, arguing that the area was already integrated and by no means a slum. Unfortunately, the nuances of this dialectic between city planners and residents get lost in Heller's telling. Relying on government documents, Bacon's letters, and a smattering of newspapers, the narrative does little to recover the voices of ordinary citizens [2] In all, Heller's account of the Eastwick episode gives us a captivating glimpse of midcentury urban institutional decision making. However, it falls short as a fleshed-out reckoning of Philadelphia's struggles over race and housing during the 1950s and 60s. For that, readers should refer to Matthew Countryman's *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (2006) and John F. Bauman's *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (1987).

In truth, Bacon never wholly embraced the sort of radical redevelopment later derided as "Negro removal." Instead he clung to idealistic notions of racial tolerance and diversity--even if it meant stopping short of full integration. Sadly, Heller fails to spend much time contemplating Bacon's prejudices and assumptions. This is disappointing, as other urbanists are now studying the intellectual milieus that shaped planners' attitudes. The work of those scholars has exposed how taken-for-granted categories--"modern," "slum," "criminal"--both produced and were in turn the product of broader cultural understandings. (Such considerations are especially crucial in the postwar period, when the meanings of "race" and "modernity" were endlessly contested.) Reading *Ed Bacon*, one cannot help but wish that

Heller had spent some time with a book like Samuel Zipp's *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (2012), which carefully locates city planners on an ideological landscape. A similar attempt to examine the social and scholarly currents that informed Bacon would have made for a stronger biography.

Heller takes us on a brisk journey through the rest of Bacon's career, a series of increasingly desperate attempts to recapture some of the shoppers and dollars that had fled to outlying suburbs. Bacon first proposed, then backed away from, plans to replace the moribund African American and Jewish shopping corridor along South Street with a multilane expressway. He did manage to secure federal funds to build a stretch of I-95 along Philadelphia's eastern edge in the late 1960s; over community protests, the city razed the homes of 3,000 longshoremen and laborers in the Queen Village neighborhood to make room. (Wealthier residents in gentrifying Society Hill won a concession to bury the highway, thereby preserving their property values and views of the Delaware River.) Finally, Bacon proposed an inner-city shopping district, Market East, to compete with the suburban malls. Built in fits and starts during the 1980s, it has had only limited success in attracting a regional following.

Bacon retired from the City Planning Commission in 1970, withdrawing from government but remaining engaged in the public debate over Philadelphia's future. He regularly volunteered his (sometimes cantankerous) opinions on urban issues on public radio and news broadcasts. And for decades, Bacon taught a popular planning seminar at the University of Pennsylvania. Heller lovingly recounts Bacon's final public imbroglio: a 2002 fight to allow skateboarders to continue to use LOVE Park. Skilled as ever at manipulating public opinion, Bacon decided—at ninety-two years old—to skate there himself. Bacon's skateboarding stunt put the issue back in the papers

and squarely on the mayor's agenda. Heller was present at the event, and this section benefits from his firsthand perspective; it is the most evocative and effective episode in the post-career chapters.

That said, this book's chief recommendation is the fact that this is the first Bacon biography published. Heller, for all his intimate access to Bacon and his papers, has produced a work that is oddly devoid of characters and the spark of human drama. While the Pulitzer-winning *Power Broker* has received its share of criticism, Caro's crackling portrayals of the personalities that shaped twentieth-century New York—Fiorella LaGuardia, Al Smith, and Moses himself—are all rendered with humor, sensitivity, and remarkable detail. Perhaps it's unfair to compare Heller's prose with Caro's, an acknowledged master. Nevertheless, *Ed Bacon* fails to get at the man's essential core—that elusive kernel where his psychology, political commitments, and emotional tics meet.

In *The Locked Room* (1986), Paul Auster wrote that "Every life is inexplicable.... To say that so and so was born here and went there, that he did this and did that ... that he lived, that he died, that he left behind these books or this battle or that bridge—none of that tells us very much." [3] In much the same way, Gregory Heller has given us a biographical chronicle: an accounting of roads paved, subdivisions planned, bridges built, campaigns won and lost. Bacon's story is all over these pages, yet the man remains inscrutable. Ultimately, *Ed Bacon* will prove useful to policymakers and students as a case study in urban planning. Yet it will disappoint those looking for a legible moral example—a narrative that weaves Edmund Bacon and his work into the fabric of a dynamic postwar metropolis.

Notes

- [1]. Sidney Hopkins, "Requiem for a Renaissance," *Greater Philadelphia Magazine* (November 1964), 34.

[2]. For a more even-handed appraisal of the struggle over Eastwick, see Guian A. McKee, "Liberal Ends Through Illiberal Means: Race, Urban Renewal, and Community in the Eastwick Section of Philadelphia, 1949-1990," *Journal of Urban History* 27 (2001): 547-583.

[3]. Paul Aster, *The Locked Room* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 247.

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