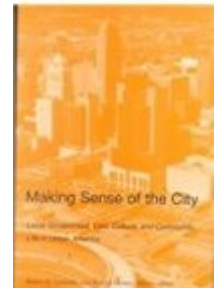


**Robert B. Fairbanks, Patricia Mooney-Melvin, eds..** *Making Sense of the City: Local Government, Civic Culture, and Community Life in Urban America*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001. xi + 192 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8142-0881-6.



**Reviewed by** John D. Buenker

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Although you probably wouldn't guess it from the title, *Making Sense of the City* is essentially a festschrift in honor of one of the most distinguished founders of the urban history discipline. The book's eight contributors all were initiated into their craft under the tutelage of Zane L. Miller; they all proudly affirm that "what distinguishes their work is a concern with definition and the impact that the process of redefinition has had on understanding what goes on inside the urban environment"--a perspective that "typifies Miller's approach to the study of the past and animates the issues he explores" (p. 2).

Like their mentor, they believe that the history of the city has been characterized more by change than by continuity, that a relationship has always existed among the definition of urban needs, the public response to those needs, and how urbanites "made sense of the city" over time, and that it is the pattern of interaction between definition and action that provides both the basis for an understanding of the community and a prescription for initiatives to improve its environment. Like him, also, they insist that the indepen-

dent variable in urban history is time, not place--while ideas, organizations, strategies, and programs may seem to transcend time, they actually possess different meanings in different historical contexts, regardless of location, meaning that it usually requires something on the order of a paradigm shift to generate significant change. For shorthand purposes, they dub Miller's approach and theirs as "symptomatic history"--exploring the specific in order to discern general patterns--and as "liberation history"--examining a wide range of possibilities in problem-solving, thus freeing urbanites to employ or reject past ideas--or to create new ones--in order to serve their own purposes.

Thus grounded, the authors each explore some aspect of the process of urban problem-solving in order to demonstrate that whenever city dwellers found that their beliefs failed to correspond to perceived realities, they attempted to resolve the disjunction by examining and revising their ideas. To understand the unfolding of that process, they focus on the words and actions of the various individuals, organizations, and insti-

tutions who participated in the public discourse about what the city was, and could be, and who consequently defined urban needs and acted upon them accordingly. The authors generally center their attention upon structure because "the way people organized reality usually manifests itself in a general disposition to change old institutions or create new ones" (p. 2). To illustrate that process, the authors announce their intention not only to examine such well-studied areas as politics and social reform in innovative and informative ways, but also to study aspects of the urban experience generally overlooked by other scholars. Thus, they explicitly challenge those urban historians who emphasize the impact of such vast impersonal forces as industrialization and immigration as the catalysts of change and reform and who focus upon fragmentation and conflict among competing groups. Instead, they emphasize the crucial agency of human choice and the consensus in basic cultural assumptions about the city and society that existed during different time periods, thus dividing the past into a "series of discrete and discontinuous chronological periods separated by shifts in the way people characterize reality" (p. 2).

In the first essay, Judith Spraul-Schmidt challenges the widely held view that the incorporation of Midwestern cities via legislative charter during the nineteenth century was primarily motivated by the desire of rural lawmakers to hamstring the power of urbanites to govern themselves. On the contrary, she argues, the reconstituting of cities as public corporations--carefully differentiated from private corporations--reflected a growing disposition toward redefining the municipality as a much more activist and service-providing entity. In the second, Alan I. Marcus attributes much of the failure of turn-of-the-century municipal reform efforts to the persistence of the "medieval image in the modern mind." In his view, a careful examination of the discourse on municipal governance reveals that nearly all of the participants were, to a greater or lesser de-

gree, severely constrained by the dead hand of outdated perceptions regarding urban government and the nature of democracy and citizenship. Focusing his attention on two "bibles" of the city planning movement--Wacker's *Manual of the Plan of Chicago* (1911) and *Our City: Dallas, A Community Civics* (1927)--co-editor Robert B. Fairbanks tackles the question of how the two books could be so different in diagnosis and prescription when both were sponsored by essentially similar urban planning associations. The answer, in Fairbanks's textual analysis, lies in the changing nature of perceptions about both the nature of the city and the planning process that occurred during that relatively brief time period.

Driving yet another nail into the coffin of the boss-reformer typology, Robert A. Burnham contends that the city "bosses" morphed into "managers" during the half-century between the end of Reconstruction and the onset of the Great Depression. Rejecting the possibility that this change in management styles was evolutionary, Burnham contends that it was rather the product of changing notions about the city and paralleled a similar transformation in private business administration. Focusing directly on the Queen City itself, co-editor Patricia Mooney Melvin examines the evolution of Cincinnati's neighborhood improvement associations between 1890 and 1940, and rejects the prevailing interpretation that neighborhoods and neighborhood organizing ceased to be significant loci of identification and action after World War I. Instead, she posits, the inter-war years were characterized by the rejection of the earlier organic model of the relationship between the city and its constituent parts and by the search for a metaphor with greater explanatory power for the "new city." Deliberately or inadvertently reinforcing Mooney Melvin's interpretation, Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh argues that the municipal recreation movement of the inter-war years not only promoted myriad leisure-time activities for urbanites, but also served as a type of community organizing focused on participatory democracy

designed to empower ordinary citizens. Scrutinizing the words and deeds of both local and national recreation leaders, Tuttle Kornbluh lavishes special attention on their efforts to organize women and African-Americans.

In "Making History: The Search for Civic and Cultural Identity in an American New Town, 1940-1980," Bradley D. Cross argues that suburban Mariemont, faced with the threat of annexation by Cincinnati, incorporated itself as a village and built a new civic identity based upon a deliberately constructed "past" as a British hamlet, complete with English-style architecture, a town crier, and a double-decker bus. According to Cross, Mariemont's reinvention reflected a new conception of culture as a set of lifestyle choices in which the physical environment served as a platform in an individual search for cultural identity. Asserting that one can learn at least as much from failure as success, Charles F. Casey-Leineger attempts to draw significant lessons from Cincinnati's frustrated fair housing movement between 1945 and 1970. Although he attributes the movement's ultimate failure to a multiplicity of causes, he assigns primacy to "changes in social thought in the mid-1950s that emphasized individual choice and the need for self-determinism among the many groups in American society" (p. 7). In the final essay, Roger W. Lotchin pays specific tribute to "the Queen City and Its Historian," and judiciously assesses his mentor's importance as an urban historian. Lotchin carefully locates Miller's scholarship within its proper historiographical context and even-handedly discusses his contribution to our understanding of various aspects of the urban world and of the city as a whole. He also avers that one of Miller's greatest achievements was to make the study of urban history "civically responsible"--to make historians aware of their duties as citizens as well as scholars.

It is unlikely that very many historians who emphasize adaptation to such vast impersonal forces as industrialization and immigration as the

key to understanding change and reform, or who stress social conflict rather than consensus, will be persuaded to adopt the authors' conceptual framework. A few may even conclude that some of the contributors have allowed that conceptual framework to predetermine their interpretation of the evidence. Nearly everyone, however, will almost certainly find these essays to be intellectually stimulating, well-crafted, and a worthy tribute to one of the seminal thinkers of the urban history discipline.

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