H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brendan Gleeson, Nicholas Low. *Australian Urban Planning: New Challenges, New Agendas.* Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000. xvii + 273 pp. A$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-86508-238-7.

Reviewed by Mark Peel

Published on H-Urban (February, 2003)

It is perhaps a sad testimony to the current condition of urban planning in countries such as Australia that a book arguing for the importance of democractic, purposeful, and public governance in cities seems so refreshing. At one level, Brendan Gleeson and Nicholas Low's book is meant to be a kind of "tool kit" and textbook. It has boxed inserts explaining key terms and ideas, and provides an excellent historical analysis of both market-driven planning and radical cultural, economic, and environmental critiques. It is rigorous, and it is judicious: Gleeson and Low probe the fantasies of neo-liberal free marketeers, but they just as carefully unpack the difficult silences in much of the faith in "sustainability" or "cultural diversity" as paradigms for urban planning.

As such, they provide planning students with the intellectual equipment to imagine their practice as something more than small-scale adjustments for inevitable forces, or as an ultimately futile exercise in heroic assumptions. To recover some meaningful notion of planning--most simply put as "making a city, with all its freedoms and powers, work better and more fairly for its citizens" (p. 4)--they argue that we must first of all recover some meaningful version of social democracy. If planners are to be educated, rather than simply trained, this is the ideal book with which to begin.

Gleeson and Low provide an excellent overview of the history of urban planning in Australia, and of the modernising project of which it was a key component. They trace the crucial shifts towards economic strategy and "urban managerialism" in the 1970s, the attempts to marry market-friendly approaches with social democratic goals in the 1980s, and the unhappy outcomes of market failure, privatisation, and "urban entrepreneurialism" in the 1990s. As they show, the most puzzling result of three decades of making governments work more like corporations is that these failures, and the increasing inequalities between citizens they promoted, were blamed largely on the frailties of public rather than private enterprise. In other words, the solution to urban problems was to strip more regulatory and governing power from public authorities and place more faith in markets, when it was the market's

failures that created the problems in the first place. Indeed, not even the market's failures: "corporate liberalism has sought to subject all public services to market logic. But markets meet only the needs of those who can pay. This is no design fault or market failure; it is the essence of markets. If you can't pay, you don't get" (pp. 111-2). By devoting the first and largest part of their book to a history of urban planning ideas and practices, Gleeson and Low show the importance of urban history in the analysis of urban governance: in the absence of good, rigorous history, it is so much easier to forget that urban problems are very cheap to create and horrendously expensive to overcome.

In part 2, Gleeson and Low examine the range of critiques of planning since the 1970s. Urban political economy, radical cultural critiques, environmentalism, and neo-liberalism each merit a chapter, and each is examined in terms of diagnosis and "cure." They evaluate these critiques not simply in terms of their theoretical sophistication, but in terms of their potential contribution to the goal of better cities for all, to the public good and to a "real" democracy of participation, widespread political engagement, and debate. Rejecting single-minded approaches and simplistic solutions--whether from the right or the left--they are more interested in assessing how different critiques might contribute to a re-valuation of the goals and practices of urban planning for a new century.

Part 3, "New Agendas for Planning," emphasises the possibility of reinvigorated urban planning, and the kinds of changes in urban and social policy that might provide its fertile ground. Gleeson and Low insist on the importance of a "government of space" (p. 218), and make the commonsensical point that planning and regulation are "indispensable to the long-term functioning of market economies" (p. 219). They call for a unifying "spatial citizenship" (p. 220) in which poverty and inequality are not regarded as legitimate differences between citizens; a renewed structure of open planning based on research (rather than marketing) and accountable to the public and not private interests; and a commitment to environmental governance as an essential element in long-term strategies for growth. Drawing upon the critiques outlined in part 2, they ask "what should urban planning be and do?" and provide the outlines of an answer: aware of balance and self-containment, more interested in living places than showpieces, and committed to enhancing public goods and spaces rather than private fortunes. Most of all, this would be planning in the public interest, planning that takes seriously a commitment to inclusion, dialogue, and democracy.

If Gleeson and Low's achievement is in one way to synthesise and reformulate the intellectual supports for progressive planning in an accessible, convincing, and highly readable way, they also bring to their task an idealistic passion for demands--such as greater social justice and equity--that have too often slipped from the Australian intellectual as well as political agenda in recent years. In that sense, one of the most impressive aspects of this book is its belief that history opens up rather than closes off future possibilities. In urban planning, as in any other sphere, history's power lies not just in its questions about the past--about what was--but in the way those questions demand attention to the present and the future: what is, what might have been, and what might still be.

Accordingly, this book stands against one of the most deadening forces in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: a pessimistic "inevitablism," which is seen, for instance, in arguments about the unstoppable power of globalisation, or the impossibility of effecting real change in global structures of class or racial inequality. Little wonder, then, that planners or other professionals become convinced that their job is to make slight adjustments to structures that can't be changed, or protect a few "clients" from forces

that can't be stopped, or find loopholes in systems that don't work but can't be improved. Against that logic, Gleeson and Low's book is a very substantial breath of fresh air.

Australian Urban Planning is a powerful synthesis of the debates, arguments, and ideas that have animated urban planners and their historians in Australia and in other countries. It is always conscious of the international context and makes an important contribution to debates in every urban place: that alone is a good reason for people everywhere to read it. In addition, Gleeson and Low's arguments about planning's role in securing the unfulfilled promises of modernity (remembering that these are yet to be enjoyed by the vast majority of the world's population) are among the clearest and most convincing I have seen.

In a country ever conscious of larger, more powerful, and more important places on the other side of the globe, urban planning has always tended to promise either the replication or the avoidance of somebody else's urban future. With this book in hand, Australia's urban planners will know all about that context, and they will also be better placed to understand the distinctive past and the possible futures of their own cities.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Mark Peel. Review of Gleeson, Brendan; Low, Nicholas. *Australian Urban Planning: New Challenges, New Agendas.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7188

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