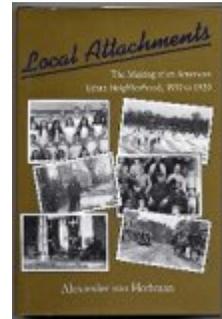


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexander von Hoffman. *Local Attachments: The Making of an American Urban Neighborhood*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 311 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5393-7; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4710-3.

Reviewed by James Beauchesne (Northeastern University)  
Published on H-Urban (March, 1997)



In an in-depth community study of Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood of Boston, Alexander von Hoffman argues against prevailing assumptions concerning the effects of urban growth, and offers a novel interpretation of the roots of a number of present-day urban problems. Focusing on public life, he employs a wide variety of sources to paint a detailed picture of an outer-city neighborhood in the throes of rapid urbanization. In the process of change, a vital community was created where none had existed before. The last chapter advances the second major argument, that progressive municipal reformers, in seeking to rationalize city government, tore down political structures which fostered accommodation and coalition-building, inadvertently introducing their worst fear, public life based on class and ethnic resentments.

Von Hoffman lays out his thesis in his introduction. The fundamental premise he seeks to rebut is that the rapid growth of American cities in the nineteenth century began to undermine an earlier sense of community. In the terminology of German sociology, *Gemeinschaft*, or community, receded in importance as *Gesellschaft*, or society, took precedence. While noting that some revisionist sociologists find community and society coexisting, von Hoffman states that historians of large cities have upheld the interpretation of urbanization as the deterioration of community. The historian's "neighborhood" has been a "receptacle for a single social or economic group," not a healthy, heterogeneous community (p. xviii).

One basis for this view rests on geography, which in turn rests on transportation technology. This is the "streetcar suburb" model. Geographic expansion made possible by improvements in transportation brought res-

idential segregation by class, facilitated by developers along the new transit lines. The metropolitan area becomes a succession of rings, rising in class as one moves further from the urban core. Von Hoffman's depiction of Jamaica Plain's growth and settlement pattern differs in every respect from this model.

Before examining Jamaica Plain's growth and development, von Hoffman sets the stage in his first chapter, "On the Urban Fringe," which describes Jamaica Plain in 1850. The population consisted largely of farmers, and of the wealthy residents of country estates located around Jamaica Pond. But even then there was a working-class and immigrant presence, including the laborers and domestics of the large estates, and some farm laborers. And there was some industry in the valley of the Stony Brook, including typical "fringe industries," unwelcome in densely populated areas, such as tanneries. A working class residential district grew around them. Thus Jamaica Plain, although best known for its elite estates, was already becoming heterogeneous.

But the elite dominated local politics, and led a slow-growth, anti-tax movement for secession from the urbanizing town of Roxbury. Thus was born the town of West Roxbury, from which Jamaica Plain would later be set off. Although secession succeeded, von Hoffman cites local histories (or rather the lack of them) to argue that residents did not yet have a sense of community.

Von Hoffman's second chapter, "The Making of an Urban Place," employs demographic and other data to demonstrate social change in Jamaica Plain over the next half-century plus. As population grew rapidly, Jamaica Plain became less agricultural, both more middle class and more working-class, more immigrant, and more in-

dustrial. Jamaica Plain “matured from a fringe district to a heterogeneous city neighborhood, a type of urban area that heretofore has not been generally recognized” (p. 24).

This heterogeneity was matched by spatial variety, as the area became a mosaic of residential, commercial, and industrial sub-districts. Elite areas were not all contiguous, nor were they all furthest from the inner city. Maps of the various sub-districts illustrate the mixed pattern of development.

Here von Hoffman also develops his subsidiary argument about the role of transportation improvements in urban growth. New transportation routes were not driving development and settlement patterns, but rather, new settlers fought for, and won, new transportation services. Middle-class residents preceded service improvements, then demanded commutation train fares and other improvements. Moreover, commuting was not a simple matter of middle class travel to downtown jobs. Jamaica Plain was a destination for some, including some skilled industrial workers.

In the next chapter von Hoffman introduces the issue of parks. This does not serve to further elucidate the creation of community in Jamaica Plain, but rather shadows his second major argument concerning reform based on universal principles and how such reform may unintentionally conflict with the needs of community. Four of Boston’s major parks, important elements of Olmsted’s “Emerald Necklace,” sit within or adjacent to Jamaica Plain. Elite reformers entertaining visions of the moral uplift afforded by nature lobbied for the creation of these parks, and to a large extent set the rules for their use. Jamaica Plain residents, more interested in the recreational enjoyment of nature than in meditative contemplation, contested these rules, with some success. Von Hoffman’s main point is that the elite reformers’ universal principles ignored local realities, as they would again in the era of municipal reform.

The next three chapters, constituting the main body of the book, document the development of the neighborhood community in three realms, business, voluntary organizations, and politics. The chapter on neighborhood business ties makes use of a novel form of evidence, chattel property mortgage records. Von Hoffman employs these records to demonstrate the level of locally-based economic activity. Noting that most industrial jobs of the era were still in small shops, the records indicate that many small Jamaica Plain businesses were started with local capital, often borrowed from outside the en-

trepreneur’s own class or ethnic group. Thus formed local ties which lasted for years. The burgeoning Jamaica Plain business community eventually became vigorous pro-growth advocates, and formed an association with a strong neighborhood identity, involved in booster activities as well as supporting neighborhood-based public celebrations.

In his chapter on neighborhood society, von Hoffman documents the vibrant organizational life of Jamaica Plain in this era of lodges, churches, and social clubs. The neighborhood had local chapters of all of the important national organizations, as well as some unique local groups. Although divided to some extent by class, ethnic and religious lines, the groups did provide a network of neighborhood associations within these boundaries, as well as reaching beyond such lines somewhat. For example, von Hoffman notes that the local charitable association did put its mostly upper-class Protestant women members in contact with the largely Irish Catholic working class. Although their approach was moralistic, they did describe their clientele as “our poor people,” suggesting a sense of responsibility for one’s neighbors that is less evident in today’s public discourse (p. 160).

Moving to local politics, von Hoffman describes a lively local political scene with a strong pro-growth orientation. By the 1870s the slow-growth, anti-tax elites were a minority opposed by a middle-class and working-class coalition which advocated successfully for annexation to Boston. The objectives were improvements in infrastructure and services, and, for the working class, city jobs. After annexation the coalition continued to press city government, through its local representatives, for services and improvements for the neighborhood. This advocacy was bi-partisan, and united classes and ethnic groups.

The conduit for neighborhood claims on city government was its contingent of representatives on the bicameral city council and on the school committee. This locally-based, decentralized governmental structure became the target of a national movement of municipal reformers, largely of the upper and upper-middle class. The success of this movement in Boston, and its harmful effects on community in Jamaica Plain and elsewhere, constitute von Hoffman’s last full chapter and his second major argument. Like the earlier park advocates, the municipal reformers applied universal approaches to local conditions. Stronger mayors and at-large councils, inter alia, were supposed to reduce the influence of partisan politics. Instead, the weakening of local political organi-

zations and their inherent coalition-building resulted in a politics of open class resentment and ethnic-baiting. Von Hoffman examines Boston's mayoral election of 1910, the first under the reformed charter, to demonstrate the corrosive effects of the reforms.

In a brief concluding chapter, von Hoffman briefly describes what has happened in Jamaica Plain and in urban neighborhoods throughout America in the decades since the era of municipal reform. While acknowledging other causes of urban decline, and the efforts of urban neighborhood activists, he suggests that the structural governmental changes of the reform era are fundamental to current problems, and to their solution.

Von Hoffman convincingly supports his first main argument regarding the creation of a vital, heterogeneous community in the course of Jamaica Plain's becoming an urban neighborhood. But although he acknowledges class and ethnic differences, he does tend to soft-pedal them, as when he notes the appellation of an immigrant working-class district as "the Jungle," without comment (p. 58), and when describing street gangs as a territorial phenomenon, another "local attachment," without political or class content (p. 147). That class remained a serious divide is evident from the fact that some of the proponents of municipal reform in Boston were Jamaica Plain residents, who were obviously less than satisfied with what their neighborhood was becoming. One is left to wonder if the organized nativist and immigration restriction movements, active in Boston in the 1890s, were manifest in Jamaica Plain. Despite these quibbles, the postulate of a lively Jamaica Plain public life and neighborhood identity, of a heterogeneous community, is forcefully made.

A legitimate question about von Hoffman's thesis is whether Jamaica Plain is representative of urbanizing neighborhoods, as he suggests. Its status as a mixed fringe community prior to urbanization may have conditioned its heterogeneous development, rendering this example a model for only a subset of urban areas. But this question constitutes a call for other studies of the interplay of community and urbanization.

The book's second major argument, regarding the effects of municipal reform, is more obviously related to present-day policy questions, and is somewhat less well documented. Von Hoffman's interpretation of the accommodations and coalitions concomitant to locally-based politics is compelling, but the evidence for the deleterious effects of reform rest largely on one election, that of 1910. Other causes of the decline of the urban public sphere, such as home entertainment and automobile culture, are cited, but von Hoffman argues for the fundamental significance of structural governmental reform. Perhaps here again, the prescription is for further study of the issue.

Altogether von Hoffman makes a strong case for his interpretation of the rise and fall of urban community. His work is of obvious importance to urban social historians, and particularly to anyone interested in the dynamics of nineteenth century neighborhood life, in the relationship of transportation to urban development, in the urban park movement, and in municipal political reform.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact [h-net@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-net@h-net.msu.edu).

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

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

**Citation:** James Beauchesne. Review of von Hoffman, Alexander, *Local Attachments: The Making of an American Urban Neighborhood*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=905>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).