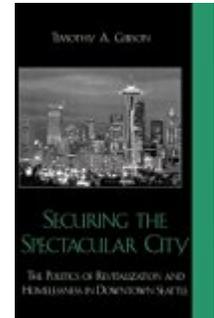




Timothy A. Gibson. *Securing the Spectacular City: The Politics of Revitalization and Homelessness in Downtown Seattle.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. 312 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-0569-6.



Reviewed by Lynne Dearborn

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Urban environments in the United States have suffered as a result of competition in an increasingly global marketplace. In this context, U.S. cities begin at a disadvantage as a result of federal policies that have, over time, increasingly supported suburbanization at the expense of central cities and have whittled away aid to cities. Because of wage and benefits expectations, unionization, and existing regulations, U.S. cities have not fared well in the contest for multinational corporate investment and jobs. In the face of fierce competition for private investment and thus an increase in the urban tax base, leaders in some cities have engaged in what Timothy Gibson terms a "spectacularizing" of the urban fabric. By this he means promoting development of large, glittering office towers, yielding to the demands of developers who may skirt zoning regulations to increase profits, providing subsidies for large-scale development, and investing public funds in upscale shopping districts and buildings that provide high-culture experiences. All of these efforts and resources are expended to provide cultural amenities that might lure global corporations and their white-collar employees to a particular city,

and draw wealthy tourists and convention-goers. According to Gibson, the growth of the "spectacular city" has been accomplished at the expense of development that benefits a wider public. Likewise, the urban fabric created does not provide true public urban space, but rather space that is privately controlled by those corporations who own it. The result, as the author demonstrates in his case study of creating "spectacular" Seattle, is that people of modest incomes and few resources are driven away as moderately priced housing is torn down to make way for world-class development projects. The marginalized in society--fixed-income pensioners, immigrants, low-income families, and the homeless--are associated with urban decay while new fashionable development is associated with the rejuvenation of the city.

The author focuses on the fall and rise of the city of Seattle from the mid-1970s through the end of the 1990s. Gibson prefaces his urban case study with a description of Fordist and post-Fordist economic agendas in the United States and the impact of these on U.S. corporations and U.S. workers. He then describes in minute detail two differ-

ent stories about development in Seattle. The first concerns the development of large-scale office towers in downtown Seattle in the 1980s including, for example, Prescott's Pacific First Center and Unico's Two Union Square. Rapid development of a skyline full of "trophy" skyscrapers led to a glut of office space in the city just as the recession of 1990 took hold. Developers were subsequently cautious and demanded concessions from the city, while the city government became exceedingly pro-business throughout the 1990s. The second story concerns the battles among Seattle's business interests, advocates for the homeless and for preservation of public open space, and the mayor and the city council in the 1990s. The business interests in this story included the Nordstrom family, developer Jeff Rhodes (who is seen by some as the savior of the retail core of the city), as well as several other small-business property owners who expected to benefit from public investment in the cultural district, which contains the new Benaroya Symphony Hall and the Seattle Art Museum. Advocates for the common good included several shrewd individuals who came together to support providing low-cost housing and services for the homeless, as well as a group who sought to protect the one true public space in the retail core area, West Lake Park. The mayor and the city council vacillated over the course of the 1990s, supporting first the business interests, then the advocates for broad access to the central city, and then the business interests again.

As a result of strong-arm tactics by both the pro-business group and their opponents, a compromise ultimately gave something to both sides. When the owner of the Mann Building, David Gelatly, discovered that a business deal for his building might fall through because of the homeless service center proposed for the basement of the Glen Hotel next door, he went public in a front page story in the *Puget Sound Business Journal*, where he exaggerated the size, scope, and hours of operation of the homeless service center. He also exaggerated the patron-to-staff ratio at the

center, which incited fears of drug deals in the center and incivilities on the sidewalk outside. He followed this with a lawsuit to stop construction of the center. In response, LIHI, the group developing the homeless service center, demanded a million dollars to stop their project. When that demand was not met, LIHI proposed an impossible task: find an alternative site in the central part of Seattle. This battle continued until LIHI agreed to develop the center in another building on the fringe of the city core, aided by one million dollars from the City. In exchange, they were able to save another forty-seven units of affordable housing. However, as Gibson points out, this compromise was really a loss of true urban experience, by which I mean street-level mixing of diverse people who live and work in Seattle's downtown blocks. Fashionable shops and high-culture establishments for high-end consumers, which Gibson terms salvation by retail, replaced this experience of diversity. Urban public space was replaced with privately owned commercial space.

This book provides several well-documented and captivating stories that draw the reader into specific events in the timeline that transformed Seattle from a sleepy port city to the desirable location it is today. In telling these stories, Timothy Gibson relies extensively on the Seattle city archives, news accounts from the mainstream and alternative press, as well as semistructured interviews and census data. He also aptly situates the case of Seattle in the discussion of postmodern and tourist-oriented urban development, the strategy supported by many city governments in the United States.

If the author's purpose in this book is to convince readers that pro-business urban redevelopment strategies do not, in and of themselves, provide equitable distribution of public resources such as truly accessible urban public spaces--parks and restrooms, affordable housing, and retail establishments that provide for modest-income shoppers--his message is muddled by the

book's organization. The title of the book adds to this confusion because it focuses attention on spectacularizing the city. While the author briefly addresses some issues associated with creating a spectacular city, such as the desire to remove the homeless from sight, he does not analyze more complex questions. When human interactions are increasingly commercialized, what are the trade-offs? What are the urban spatial consequences of skyscrapers taking the place of human-scaled buildings?

Introducing the material about pro-business urban redevelopment strategies early in the book, in place of the detailed discussion of economic theory, would have carried the reader into the subsequent chapters with Gibson's main theme firmly in mind. Chapters 1 and 2, which discuss broad economic trends, are too long and lose the reader's attention. The theory might have been more useful integrated with the later case studies. This would have served to tie together the various events told in the book with the author's main thesis. Throughout most of the book, the author's treatment is too even-handed regarding the developers' stories. When Gibson finally assembles his argument in the final chapter of the book, he does so insightfully, making his sympathy for the advocates of public amenities clear. The idea of "the spectacular" holds promise and perhaps can be developed further in future scholarship. In doing so, it would be well to provide more comparisons to "spectacular" development in other cities, both inside the United States and in other countries. Despite the book's weaknesses, the stories told are very instructive. With the appropriate preface and linkages, the book can provide an educational case study for students of planning, advocacy, and large-scale real estate development.

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