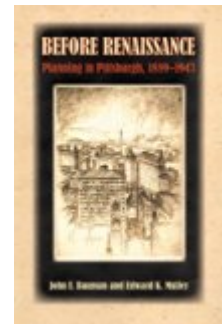


# H-Net Reviews

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John F. Bauman, Edward K. Muller. *Before Renaissance: Planning in Pittsburgh, 1889-1943*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. xiv + 331 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5930-4.

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## A Pittsburgh Story

In November 1949, an article in *Architectural Forum* depicted Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as the site of a local metamorphosis that had national and international significance. Entitled "Pittsburgh Renascent," the article described how a city popularly associated with heavy industry, smoke, and squalor was becoming a cutting-edge symbol of modernity. It outlined numerous bold initiatives that were either complete or close to fruition, including air-pollution controls, flood controls, innovative skyscrapers, and the replacement of a scruffy downtown commercial area with a public park. It attributed the surge of coordinated civic improvements to a far-sighted coalition of business executives, design professionals, and political leaders. The language of rebirth and transformation that dominated this account typified the perceptions of many observers who saw Pittsburgh as a model for rejuvenating aging industrial centers. By the mid-1950s, the phrase "Pittsburgh Renaissance" had entered common use and had become a touchstone for planners and politicians in other cities.[1]

Yet urban redevelopment in the immediate post-World War II years did not break quite as sharply with the past as journalists and publicists at the time claimed, or as some later accounts have suggested. In *Before Renaissance: Planning in Pittsburgh, 1889-1943*, the historians John F. Bauman and Edward K. Muller ably trace continuities between the mid-twentieth-century reconstruction of American cities and previous episodes of urban environmental reform. The wellsprings of the Pittsburgh Renaissance and its imitators, they argue, lay in

the invention of comprehensive city planning half a century earlier. This new discipline regarded urban physical space as a coherent, dynamic whole that could be understood, and at least partly controlled, by experts wielding the tools of scientific inquiry and scientific management. Between the 1890s and the 1930s, institutions such as municipal planning commissions, zoning laws, and private consulting firms emerged to implement comprehensive planning. Pittsburgh both exemplified and contributed to the main trends in American planning thought and practice during that crucial foundational period.

This book is primarily a work of political and institutional history, with attention to the intellectual origins of comprehensive city planning. Readers interested in the social impacts of planning or the vernacular development of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods will have to look elsewhere, although Bauman and Muller are clearly well aware of the class, ethnic, and geographical divisions that pervaded the city. The focus here is on the individuals and groups who exerted the greatest power over urban land use: business elites, middle-class professionals, large real-estate developers, and political officeholders. Drawing on previously unpublished archival research, the authors chart the course of an "urban conversation" among these key participants—a conversation in which the principles of comprehensive planning gradually acquired authority and made a tangible, if limited, impact on the built environment.

*Before Renaissance* is organized around a chronolog-

ical narrative that has three broad divisions. The first, spanning the period from the late 1880s to 1918, locates the inception of planning within the progressive movement in American politics. Bauman and Muller demonstrate that the idea of comprehensive city planning took root in Pittsburgh as part of a larger progressive campaign to reshape both urban space and urban governance. Initially, advocates of planning were reacting against the prevailing form of centralized power in American industrial cities: political machines that distributed utility franchises, public-works contracts, and patronage jobs in exchange for financial and electoral support. Although Pittsburgh's machine-dominated city-building process could deliver quality physical infrastructure, it was haphazard, biased toward wealthy neighborhoods, and corrupt. The resulting scandals and inadequate public services fueled the progressives' critique of immorality and disorder in urban society. Inspired by scientific methodology and Protestant Christian religious sensibilities, businesspeople and middle-class civic groups staked an alternative claim to power. They envisioned the correction of urban problems through rational analysis and nonpartisan cooperation.

Building on the work of historians such as Paul Boyer, David Schuyler, and Jon Peterson, Bauman and Muller stress the roles that theories of environmental determinism and the influence of the nationwide City Beautiful movement played in knitting disparate proposals for reform into a systematic approach to guiding urban development. Their Pittsburgh evidence accords with Peterson's thesis that, around the turn of the twentieth century, there was a shift from "special-purpose planning" for particular elements of the city (mainly parks and water and sewer networks) toward comprehensive planning that integrated multiple urban systems.[2] A milestone in this transition was the Pittsburgh Civic Commission, created in 1909 to devise an overall local planning agenda. In 1911, the municipal government acknowledged the findings of the commission and the growth of public support for planning by establishing the Pittsburgh City Planning Commission (PCPC) as a permanent agency.

The most original contribution in this section is an analysis of *Pittsburgh: Main Thoroughfares and the Down Town District*, a 1911 report that Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. prepared for the Pittsburgh Civic Commission. Olmsted was eminent among the first generation of American city planners. Bauman and Muller have previously studied the work of his firm in the Pittsburgh region, and they use their expertise to good effect.[3] Combining local sources with material from the Olmsted Associates

Papers, their examination of the 1911 plan will benefit anyone interested in the Olmsted firm or in the emergence of a professional culture of city planning.

After the First World War, planning activity in Pittsburgh expanded in scope and changed in character, losing much of its earlier moralism and concern about social inequality. The middle division of *Before Renaissance*, covering the years from 1918 to 1929, offers an innovative assessment of this period. Bauman and Muller challenge the view that comprehensive city planning during the 1920s was, in the words of the influential Pittsburgh historian Roy Lubove, an ineffective exercise in "form without substance." [4] They recognize that planners faced severe constraints ranging from the explosive growth of automobile traffic to political rivalries within and among local governments. From their analysis of PCPC records, however, they conclude that this decade marked a crucial turning point in the process of institutionalizing comprehensive planning as a regular municipal function. Pittsburgh adopted a citywide zoning ordinance in 1923, and successfully enforced subdivision regulations against politically powerful landowners. Bolstered by increased budgets, the PCPC launched a topographic survey and other initiatives that laid the groundwork for future development projects.

The 1920s also witnessed intense interest in the concept of the master plan. Between 1919 and 1923, a private organization, the Citizens Committee on the City Plan, laid out six components of a master plan for Pittsburgh: parks, playgrounds, major streets, mass transit, railroads and waterways. In 1925, engineers with the Allegheny County Department of Public Works devised a long-range plan for a highway network encompassing the city and its suburbs. These documents had only modest effects on actual choices about the placement of urban physical infrastructure. But they revealed that local business and political elites were ambitious to impose rational order on a metropolis that was changing rapidly due to economic growth and mass automobile use.

Bauman and Muller appropriately highlight the career of Frederick Bigger, an important but relatively neglected figure, who did much to advance comprehensive city planning in Pittsburgh and connect local events to the national scene.[5] During the 1920s, Bigger served as the executive director of the Citizens Committee on City Plan and then as the director of the PCPC, where he oversaw the development of ideas—such as a proposal for peripheral boulevards to direct traffic away from the city's congested downtown—that became part of the later Pitts-

burgh Renaissance. He was a founding member of the Regional Planning Association of America, in which he collaborated with Lewis Mumford and other luminaries of American urban studies. Subsequently, he joined the federal administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the New Deal political reforms of the 1930s.

With the economic hardships caused by the Great Depression, and the advent of the New Deal in response to them, the “urban conversation” in Pittsburgh shifted again. The final division of *Before Renaissance*, covering the period from 1930 to 1943, documents the temporarily devastating impact of the economic collapse on both the PCPC and private-sector advocates of comprehensive planning. To keep urban planning and development initiatives alive, the federal government stepped in, offering loans and grants to Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. Federal officials, with their power to approve or reject requests for funding and impose conditions on recipients of federal aid, thus gained leverage over local policymaking.

The consequences of the New Deal for the politics of city planning are illuminated in Bauman and Muller’s account of a debate over the future of downtown Pittsburgh during the late 1930s. The prospect of obtaining federal grants for highway construction created a strong incentive for local stakeholders to define common goals. But it also exposed conflicts among the city, the county, and private interest groups. In response, some of Pittsburgh’s wealthiest business leaders formed the Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association—a descendant of the former Citizens Committee on the City Plan—and set out to forge a unified local agenda for presentation to federal and state officials. They enlisted the help of Robert Moses, New York City’s famed creator of highways and parks, to prepare a master plan entitled Arterial Plan for Pittsburgh.[6] This 1939 document was an act of practical politics. It broke no new intellectual ground; rather, it organized existing ideas in a way that helped local planners reach accord on key issues. Out of these negotiations, the specific configuration of individuals, organizations, and goals that would constitute the post-World War II Pittsburgh Renaissance began to take shape.

Several recurring themes weave through the book’s central narrative. One is the rise of a professional identity among city planners as they sought to distinguish themselves from the older disciplines of civil engineering, architecture, and landscape architecture. Prickly relations between engineers and planners were a case in point. According to Bauman and Muller, planners claimed to possess a uniquely holistic understanding of urban de-

velopment, in contrast to the engineers’ allegedly more limited focus on carrying out individual projects. How engineers viewed planners is not as clear, but other evidence suggests that many engineers would have disputed the planners’ narrow characterization. Civil engineers prided themselves on having pioneered the “systems idea” of large-scale interconnections among different aspects of the modern city.[7] There is surely more to be explored in this intersection between planning history and the literature on professionalization and the growth of specialized knowledge.

*Before Renaissance* is also strong in its treatment of the institutional framework that embodied comprehensive-planning ideas. The first and most enduring concern of city planners was coordinating the location and design of publicly owned facilities. This task relied on traditional municipal powers to open, relocate, or vacate streets; establish parks; and construct public buildings. It tied planning closely to the activities of the city and county public-works departments. Over time, the scope of comprehensive planning grew to include regulatory controls on private property, especially rules governing subdivision layouts and the height and bulk of buildings. The extension of municipal authority over private development marked a major, and controversial, change in the structure of property rights. It illustrated the growing presence of the administrative state in American life.

Moreover, Bauman and Muller demonstrate that public-private partnerships were instrumental in the rise of comprehensive city planning. Private, voluntary associations, sponsored mainly by the Pittsburgh business community, usually took the lead in overseeing the preparation of master plans or overarching agendas for reshaping the urban built environment. These organizations then collaborated with government officials in attempts—which did not always succeed—to ensure that the municipality exercised its public powers in accordance with the goals the plans had established. Evident at each major juncture in the city’s planning history, this division of labor reflected not only the sociopolitical influence of business groups but also the need for a form of governance that respected American commitments to market forces and limited state power. The alliance of business, professional, and political leaders that impressed observers of the Pittsburgh Renaissance in the 1940s was not new; it built upon shared values and institutional arrangements that had been evolving for decades.

Overall, this book effectively uses the case-study methodology to summarize recent work on the history of American city planning and to explore the interplay of local and national issues. Bauman and Muller generally avoid the trap of becoming mired in local detail. Although specialists in the history of Pittsburgh and the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States will appreciate the particulars, there is much to interest scholars of urban planning, policy, and politics in general. (A minor but annoying flaw is the lack of a bibliography to help the reader navigate the copious references that support the text.)

The one aspect of *Before Renaissance* that calls for further elaboration involves allusions to the place of planning history within larger trends in American political economy. For example, the authors mention that several key contributors to Pittsburgh's "urban conversation" were followers of Henry George, whose theory of basing public finance solely on the taxation of land values informed many progressive proposals for economic and social reform. Yet they do not clearly explain what, if any, influence Georgism had on the substantive development of comprehensive city planning. Likewise, they make some perceptive observations about the role of economic turmoil during the 1920s and 1930s in fostering a desire for stability that gave city planning a fundamentally conservative tone. More could be said about this. The Pittsburgh story that Bauman and Muller tell thus points toward other stories, not yet fully told, about cities and the political shaping of modern industrial-capitalist societies.

#### Notes

[1]. "Pittsburgh Renascent," *Architectural Forum* 91(November 1949), 59-73, 110, 112; Paul F. Grendler, *The European Renaissance in American Life* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), 129-47; and Sherie R. Mershon, "Urban Revitalization and Corporate Social Responsibility: The Allegheny Conference on Community Development, 1943-1968" (Ph.D. diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2000).

[2]. Jon Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in*

*the United States, 1840-1917* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003). Other pertinent studies include Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); and Maurine W. Greenwald and Margo Anderson, eds., *Pittsburgh Surveyed: Social Science and Social Reform in the Early Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

[3]. Edward K. Muller and John F. Bauman, "The Olmsteds in Pittsburgh (Part 1): Landscaping the Private City," *Pittsburgh History* 76 (Fall 1993), 122-141; and Bauman and Muller, "The Olmsteds in Pittsburgh (Part 2): Shaping the Progressive City," *Pittsburgh History* 76 (Winter 1993-1994), 191-205. The Olmsted Associates Papers are located at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[4]. Roy Lubove, *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business, and Environmental Change* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 87 ff. Lubove's exceptionally concise, stimulating work on Pittsburgh and the progressive movement remains an essential point of reference for historians of modern American urban policy.

[5]. John F. Bauman and Edward K. Muller, "The Planning Technician as Urban Visionary: Frederick Bigger and American Planning, 1915-1954," *Journal of Planning History* 1 (2002), 124-153.

[6]. On Moses, see Keith D. Revell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 257-64; and Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

[7]. Revell; Tim Palucka and Sherie R. Mershon, *The Engineers' Society of Western Pennsylvania: Celebrating 125 Years of Engineering* (Tarentum, Pa.: Word Association Publishers, 2006).

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