

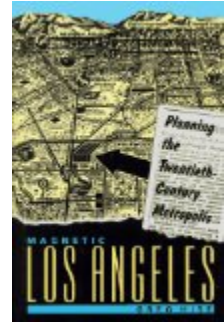
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William Fulton. *The Reluctant Metropolis: The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Angeles.* Point Arena, Cal.: Solano Press Books, 1997. 395 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-923956-22-6.

Greg Hise. *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth Century Metropolis.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. xiii + 294 pp. \$35.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5543-6.

Reviewed by Don Parson (Independent Scholar)
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Los Angeles: The Reluctant Magnet?

Scholarly perspectives on suburbanization have viewed the development of urban form as a consequence of transportation technology; as an isolated middle-class retreat; or as the product of an urban big bang which has created an ever expanding “edge city” at the periphery of metropolitan universe. Greg Hise finds that, in contrast to the stereotyped suburban sprawl, Los Angeles’ urban form is the result of a planned dispersal of housing, services, and jobs. Suburbanization, in other words, should be seen as urbanization. Such developments utilized the progressive land-use planning principles embodied in “modern community planning”; as well as a rationalized housing production as large-scale community builders sought to lower the cost of the finished product and expand the homebuyer market to include increasingly lower income wage-earners. Homeownership within a self-contained community was, from early-on, seen as a positive and magnetic force that would stimulate the development of Los Angeles—as something for which to be planned.

The principles of modern community planning had developed from within the real estate profession itself—marketing practices, the standardization and rationalization of the home building industry, regulation of subdivisions, etc.—as well as from the (not incongruent) progressive urban theory of Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City and the Regional Planning Association of America. As differ-

ent theoretical schools struggled to realize an alternative urban form, the planned neighborhood unit emerged as a common cause from which the orderly decentralization of the city was promoted.

Efforts to refine the architecture of housing into an affordable and marketable form involved the elimination of wasted space. “Scientific” house plans utilized time and space studies that delineated flexible and multi-purpose activity areas within a house. Single-purpose rooms, such as the dining room, or unnecessary zones, like the basement and attic, were eliminated. Such trends culminated with the FHA’s 1940 floor plan for a 624-square-foot 4-room minimal house. Concurrently, the home construction industry was seeking modernization of its production through standardization of components, rationalization of assembly, and purchasing basic material through the economies of scale. The minimum house—in fulfilling these production requirements—was viewed favorably and marketed aggressively.

Both housing production and community design were informed and advanced with experiments by the Farm Security Administration in California through the construction of new communities for migrant farmworkers. In housing production, the FSA pioneered methods of innovative construction practices—standardized and rationalized building operations such as pre- assembly,

site fabrication, and modular planning—which were monitored by other government agencies and a very-attentive private industry. As to community design, the FSA camp program experimented with and substantially realized the progressive principles of community planning. These communities served as actual templates for the construction of low-cost communities in the postwar suburbanization of Los Angeles.

During World War II, immigration, location of defense industries, and community planning principles would come together to produce the incipient urban form of postwar Los Angeles. A sizable proportion of defense workers were employed by aircraft and their allied industries. These firms were not centrally placed but instead surrounded the central city in what Fred Viehe calls “suburban industrial clusters.” Federal agencies encouraged, and homebuilders responded, establishing new housing developments near suburban employment. Aircraft manufacturing had pioneered the economic foundation on which postwar community builders—promoting the ownership of low-cost, mass-produced homes in communities that reflected the principles of modern community planning—could flourish. With an intimate connection between the location of jobs and housing, Los Angeles was poised for its postwar expansion.

Immediately after the war, industrialist Henry Kaiser and homebuilder Fritz Burns formed Kaiser Community Homes (KCH) in order to produce new communities that would realize, on a mass scale, the antecedent experiences in housing. The KCH housing factory and “Homes for Wholesale #2” utilized the Fordist assembly line to fabricate standardized bathroom, kitchen, cabinet, storage, and plumbing assemblies which, in turn, were used to construct interior, exterior, and floor and ceiling panels. Finished panels were then trucked throughout Los Angeles for the final on-site assembly. Yet by 1948 the housing factories were being phased out. The highly centralized production regimen was incompatible with the entrepreneurial nature—particularly that of land acquisition—of community building. Factory panels were, in terms of cost and efficiency, interchangeable with on-site fabrication techniques.

Though KCH’s housing factory may not have been a success, Panorama City—a KCH community building project located in the San Fernando Valley—was. Containing “22 miles of homes” located on curvilinear streets, integrated with schools, parks, health care facilities, shopping, churches, and deliberately situated in proximity to major employers, Panorama City was a self-

contained urban node. The minimum house, standardized and mass-produced with on-site fabrication, allowed a wide range of wage-earners to become homeowners. Panorama City was not an atypical or isolated experience, but “epitomized the convergence of a planning ideal, the decentralized regional city, with the production emphasis and the community-building expertise of a corporation such as Kaiser Homes” (p. 212). As such, the suburban expansion of postwar Los Angeles was a product of Progressive housing theory mixed with rationalized housing production driven by the profit motive.

William Fulton deals with the contemporary culmination of the processes that Hise describes—the magnetic agglomeration of communities throughout metropolitan Los Angeles. This landscape is the product of, using Harvey Molotch’s terminology, a growth machine whose proponents—“place entrepreneurs”—realize profits by promoting cycles of economic development. From a small but influential cadre of the economic elite at the end of the 19th century, the growth machine expanded to encompass the middle and working classes who were actively engaged in the design, planning, construction, and servicing of the regions communities. Metropolitan Angelenos are entrenched in the planned communities that Hise describes and circumscribed by a decentralized political structure—“political cocoons” Fulton calls them. But the magnitude of urban growth has made it increasingly difficult to deny the reality of an imposing metropolis—so massive that “the growth machine began to collapse under its own weight” (p. 16). Fulton chronicles this collapse.

Political resistance to the growth machine in Los Angeles began with affluent suburban homeowners associations, but it was not until the Renters’ Rights coalition won political power in Santa Monica in 1981 that slow-growth politics gained a beachhead. A city of 80 percent renters threatened with displacement by offices and luxury apartments, Renters Rights demanded social developments (e.g., low-income housing, parks) as the price of further development. Later in the decade, attempts to downzone the Los Angeles master plan and slow-growth initiatives in Orange and Riverside Counties had failed. Aspirations to unite suburbs and cities, middle and working classes around common environmental issues faltered as the working class saw their job security tied to the growth machine’s unchecked voracity. But these efforts did not go unnoticed—they signaled the unraveling of the pro-growth consensus.

The management of the infrastructure upon which

the growth machine relied, water and transportation, is in disarray. With the 1982 defeat of the peripheral canal, the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) allied themselves with environmentalists to force Central Valley agribusiness to transfer their water rights to the MWD. In so doing, the constituent water districts that formed the MWD broke from the fold to do their own transactions. Centrally-located business interests, invoking the mystique of the red cars, sought to invert the purchasing-power of the growth machine and promote a light-rail system focused on downtown. Both the freeways, long the means of metropolitan expansion, and the bus lines, the refuge of the car-less proletarians, suffered. Drastically scaling-back its light rail plans, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has no clear consensus on which way to proceed. Efforts to impose some sort of coordinated regional development through the Southern California Association of Governments has fallen apart as the localities pursue their own (pro-growth) agendas.

Land development on the periphery of the metropolis has met with a growing opposition that is circumscribed by the rules of the growth machine, whose ultimate authority is often vested in the higher echelons of government. The upset victory of Maria VanderKolk as Ventura County Supervisor in 1990, on the single-issue of stopping the development of Jordon Ranch as a golf course surrounded by upper-income homes, did not solidify political power with anti-development forces. Instead, VanderKolk was forced to play, with political pressure from Sacramento, a game of trade-offs and compromises. Jordan Ranch was saved, but by transferring the development to the near-by Ahmanson Ranch. VanderKolk accomplished her goal, but, in so doing, found herself estranged from her anti-growth constituents. In Orange County, environmentalists tried to utilize the Endangered Species Act to stop the San Joaquin Toll Road from destroying the habitat of the California Gnatcatcher. The reluctance and then refusal of the Interior Dept. to declare the bird endangered seems to be connected to Clinton's 1996 reelection strategy of not alienating pro-growth Orange County voters.

The passage of California's 1978 proposition 13 signaled the refusal of small property owners to foot the bill for continued growth, and set into motion a scramble for alternative sources of funding. Disputes about income generation over profitable land use between Los Angeles County and the Music Center has led to an impasse in the construction of the Disney Concert Hall, leaving a gigantic hole in the urban fabric of the Bunker Hill redevelopment project. Proposition 13 left sales tax as the primary source for municipal income, leading to an

aggressive promotion of large-scale consumerism among the municipalities of the metropolis. An example is the "Sales-Tax Canyon" of department stores, retail outlets, car dealerships, and "category killers" along the Ventura Freeway on the Oxnard Plain. Traditional planning principles of the communities who front a ten-mile stretch of the freeway have been shattered as the post-Proposition 13 municipality appears as little more than a cash register.

Fulton concludes by examining the consequences of the growth machine's future. Like Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" which posited that the closing of the frontier would require a reorientation of American perspectives of the world, the metropolitan frontier likewise is closing. The time-honored response to a place that has been over-developed is simply to pull up stakes, move on, and create a new place. As can be seen in the history of Los Angeles, this is not a sustainable future. Retreating into their suburban cocoons and disassociating themselves from the metropolis, the residents of Los Angeles are reluctant to engage in the pursuit of a common urban life and envision a positive future.

Hise's work promotes a theory of urban development in Los Angeles, backed by an impressive array of historical data, which explains much more about the city than the "sprawl" theorists. My criticisms of the book are minor, and my brief comments here should be placed in the "topics for further research" category: 1) The role of race should be discussed more. The new communities accommodated a wide range of incomes, yet my impression is that ethnic minorities may have been confined to older, inner-city areas; 2) What is the connection between the urban form promoted by the altruistic Progressive reformers and those elements adopted by profit-driven community builders? I suspect that there may have been a governing dictate of "you get what you pay for."

Fulton's book, due to its contemporary nature, is more journalistic than scholastic. It is well-referenced: academic works are used to provide historical foundation; while newspaper articles, personal interviews, planning agency reports, etc., account for the bulk of the current material. Being a reader of the fragmented *Los Angeles Times* (as appraised in the final chapter), the breadth of his analysis has furnished me with a much more comprehensive perspective of the metropolis in which I live.

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