



Robert Fishman, ed.. *The American Planning Tradition: Culture and Policy*.
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Is There an American Planning Tradition?

The American Planning Tradition: Culture and Policy, edited by historian Robert Fishman and published under the auspices of The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, presents eleven major essays on American planning and its history by an array of distinguished senior scholars. All of the essays are of high quality, and several offer exceptional insights into particular topics. Depending on one's interests, a reader may value this work either for the cumulative perspectives it develops into American planning or simply for its rich array of distinctive essays. This review will focus on the general thrust of the book, reflecting my own special interest in the history of "city planning," meaning by that term the Progressive Era-born conception of urban planning as a comprehensive undertaking, best implemented by a general or master plan framed by experts in order to shape the development of a city and, often, its region.

When read for its perspectives on American planning history, this book is both significant and problematic. Significant, because it offers fresh

analysis of many aspects of planning. Problematic, because it begs a major question: whether there is, in fact, an American planning tradition and, if so, how do we characterize it? While many authors have discussed planning as an activity in American history, among them John Reys, Mel Scott, Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver, and Don Krueckeberg, to name a few, this work suggests that planning be chiefly understood as a definable body of ideas--what the book subtitle calls "culture and policy"--available to successive generations as an intellectual resource.[1]

According to Michael J. Lacey, who directs the American Program at the Wilson Center and who has written the foreword, this publication began as a "debate between former Center Fellows John L. Thomas and Robert Fishman over what to make of the deep-seated bias in the history of America's regional cultures against the rise of the modern metropolis that grew up to dominate each of them" (p. ix). As their discourse brought various themes and topics into view, other scholars were asked to contribute. The heroic task of defining the common ground made apparent by

all these exchanges fell to Fishman, who has edited the work, written the introductory overview (chap. 1), and furnished one of the ten substantive chapters.

Fishman opens his introductory essay by claiming that "the American planning tradition" gave rise to the "older forms of cities," most especially the center-dominated metropolis built up during the "urban century" of 1830-1930 and best exemplified by early twentieth-century New York and Chicago (pp. 1, 6). This phrasing suggests a unitary interpretation of American planning, geared to the nation's historical experience with the rise of great urban centers during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. But reflecting his debate with Thomas, Fishman organizes the first sub-section of the book to highlight "two traditions": that of regional planning, or regionalism, as interpreted by Thomas (chap. 2) versus "the metropolitan tradition" as explained by Fishman (chap. 3). Because Thomas makes the world view of Lewis Mumford with its deep hostility to the "imperial city" or "*tyrannopolis*" his basic starting point while Fishman begins, in effect, with the pro-metropolitan, Progressive Era planning ideas as expressed most prominently by Daniel H. Burnham through the 1909 Plan of Chicago and subsequently by Thomas Adams through the 1929/1931 Regional Plan of New York, one wonders at points if we are only reading a sophisticated update of the famous exchange between Mumford and Adams that was occasioned by the latter plan.

For example, Fishman upholds the centralized metropolis as both a historic and conceptual urban form that confers "a rich legacy of possibilities for the economic and cultural revitalization of the inner city, for a balanced transportation system, the limitation of sprawl and other policies" (p. 23). Thomas, by contrast, draws on Mumford, Benton McKaye, Ian McHarg, Anne Whiston Spirn (represented in this book by an inspirational essay on opportunities for planning with nature in present-day Boston, chap. 11), and still others to

argue for "the re-emerging philosophy of the commons--land set aside for all the people" (p. 62). In effect, Fishman makes the vitality of the early twentieth-century city his starting point, while Thomas begins with nature or, more accurately, a "middle ground" in which man and nature co-exist in a balanced setting, best exemplified, in Mumford's view, by a region-wide mix of town, country, and wilderness found during the canal era of the 1820-1850 decades. To Mumford, at least, this was a "golden age." It was certainly pre-metropolitan.

Without doubt, these two streams of thought about cities and their settings can be identified and explicated but by doing so, the book implicitly defines a "planning tradition" less in terms of plan-making activity, which has been the norm in most analysis of planning history, than in terms of prescriptive ideals about the form that human settlement should take.

Much has changed since 1929 when Adams and Mumford squared off, however. Neither Mumford's regionalism, which was never implemented, nor the center-dominated metropolis has fared well, especially since World War II. The present-day American cityscape, as Fishman observes, now reflects the triumph of "the standardized corporate model" of anti-city, sprawling development (p. 83). Today's urbanism is more multinodal than centered. It is also radically transformative of old urban cores and radically destructive of "nature" or "middle ground" or what was once called countryside (nature domesticated by family-scale farming). Confronting this reality, both Fishman and Thomas concede, as anyone must, that neither tradition has exerted more than fragmentary influence on present-day urban form, although Fishman upholds present-day Portland, Oregon, as a promising exception (discussed in an excellent chapter by Carl J. Abbott, chap. 9).

The further one proceeds into this bipolar discussion, especially into the contributing essays

meant to broaden it, the more one encounters another, deeper reality about American planning. Put simply, neither one nor two but multiple "traditions"--or, if "tradition" is too weighty a word, then many historically distinguishable forms of planning--have addressed the nation's urban and environmental past. The contributing essays offer numerous examples, though that is not their intended purpose. Specifically, Michael Lacey (chap. 4) focuses on "national planning," beginning with the Gallatin Plan of 1808 for canals and roads and then concluding with the nationwide conservation initiatives of Theodore Roosevelt. In effect, he spotlights two "traditions" or bodies of thought, notably the internal improvements program as advocated in the early nineteenth century, especially by Whig politicians, and scientific conservation identified with Gifford Pinchot.

Another contributor, James L. Westcoat, Jr. (chap. 5), sketches what can be seen as two more traditions--first, "watershed" planning, which involves small-scale, upstream land- and water-management programs historically geared to soil conservation, pollution control, and riparian habitat protection, often as overseen by the Soil Conservation Service; and second, "river basin" planning, referring to a long history of large-scale, downstream water development for purposes of navigation, flood control, dam construction, and the like, commonly done by the Army Corps of Engineers or the Bureau of Reclamation. Westcoat contributes a remarkably informative essay. But while entitled "'Watersheds' in Regional Planning," it catalogues and dissects developments that seem only tangentially related to the socially and ecologically balanced regionalism so eloquently traced by Thomas.

Political historian Alan Brinkley (chap. 6), in turn, analyzes the National Resources Planning Board of the New Deal years, which briefly brought together city and regional planning thought, which emphasized the physical city (Fishman's metropolitan tradition) with national

"social and economic" planning, and which had Hamiltonian roots and stressed national economic policy and management. This coupling of two very different modes of thought, or "traditions," never worked out, growing more strained over time. By 1943, economic planning prevailed within the Board, achieving real if watered-down expression in the Employment Act of 1946, which set up the Council of Economic Advisors.

Yet another form of planning is emphasized by Margaret Weir (chap. 7) who analyzes the Congressional struggle in 1970-1975 over the National Land-Use Planning Act. If enacted, the federal government would have funded land-use studies in all states willing to establish state-wide land-use planning procedures. This never happened. Significantly, defeat came at the hands of many groups, each holding what can be seen as alternative visions of both environmental intervention and "planning." The opponents included environmentalists who favored federal regulatory action over state-level planning, mayors jealous of their municipal prerogatives over land use, minority-group advocates of community-based planning and control, and corporate and other business interests whose power to plan their own land-sites was threatened.

Although the essays by Lacey, Westcoat, Brinkley, and Weir all involve what Fishman calls "the quest for national planning" (his sub-section title for these essays), they describe neither a single subject nor outlook. Nor do they represent explorations of the two "traditions" identified by the Fishman-Thomas debate. What they document vividly and with considerable insight, however, is the weakness of the federal government as a force in shaping local life, including cities, and the far-reaching consequences of the federalist structure of American governance, especially its deliberate fragmentation of political authority and public initiatives, including planning practice itself. In this respect, the Lacey essay is especially insightful in elucidating how democratic politics and

American federalism have thwarted centralized visions of the public good that the planning impulse, when given national expression, usually upholds. Those who have blamed the weaknesses of American planning chiefly on private enterprise should take note.

In principle, a more centralized national government in which the states would have functioned as administrative units, not as political centers with powers of their own, might well have enabled national planning visions to triumph or exert greater influence. That this was not the case suggests that the deepest structures of American society, those set forth as a consequence of the American Revolution, provide a major key as to why planning in the United States is in essence a fragmented art. The consequence at the national level seems clear: whether we look at the Gallatin Plan, at Theodore Roosevelt's programs, or at the national land-use legislation of the early 1970s, little came of these initiatives, and American federalism has much to do with this fact.

At the state and city levels of public authority, the record also appears weak. For example, the New York Regional Plan of 1929/1931, which Fishman describes as the "zenith" of the metropolitan tradition, upheld a vision of a center-dominated metropolis on an unprecedented geographic scale but failed as a plan. And the regionalist vision, with the possible exception of the Tennessee Valley Authority during the 1930s, met a similar fate. This book tempts one to conclude that American planning history is much more a story of aspirations than fulfillment.

However, such judgments depend on where and how one looks at the record. American history is complex and multifaceted, and so is its planning heritage. If the fate of the Gallatin plan suggests an incapacity for national initiatives, what are we to make of the mid-to-late twentieth century interstate highway system? Whether we like this system or not, it stands out as a nationally planned and fully articulated network built to a

very high engineering standard and notably successful on its own terms. And at the state level, going back to the Gallatin era, we can point to DeWitt Clinton's Erie Canal and its imitators elsewhere as instances of consequential state-level transportation initiative and planning. In truth, many aspects of the built environment involve planning, whether we are focusing on buildings, parks, waterworks, university sites, waste removal systems, shopping centers, airports, subdivisions, and so forth. Many scholars have devoted careers to analyzing these real, if lesser and more specialized and often successful, forms of plan-making, among them Paul Turner on campus design, Joel Tarr on wastewater technology, and Richard Longstreth on shopping centers.[2]

The deepest puzzle posed by this book, when read for insight into the nature of American planning history, is how to comprehend this subject in a fruitful and historically realistic way. Certainly, if we accept the assumptions of this study, it is not by focusing on the multiple forms of specialized plan-making just noted or to claim, as I would, that American planning is a fragmented art. More sweeping perspectives are favored.

In this respect, Fishman's thinking lies at the heart of this work and thus deserves special attention. And no claim he makes is more fundamental than his initial assertion that the metropolis of 1830-1930 should be understood as the "creation" of a "planning tradition." This claim, I submit, while productive of a very imaginative discussion, ultimately mystifies and confuses what is ordinarily meant by planning.

Contrary to Fishman, this reviewer sees the centralized metropolis as an unplanned configuration brought about by the complex interaction of private, market-based decisions and incremental government actions. The metropolis as it grew begot a planning tradition but is not itself an expression of one. Fishman is on solid ground whenever he highlights specific choices and actions that helped to shape the metropolis, such as the

building of a railroad network throughout the nation's interior during the mid-nineteenth century or decisions by various civic elites to promote particular rail lines. But the form taken by the city as a whole lay beyond anyone's control. A host of private and public agents, operating within various geographical, technological, social, and market constraints, yielded the outcome. Parts were planned but not the whole. Only the rare individual, such as Frederick Law Olmsted, possessed the genius to grasp the entire developmental pattern and to respond to it in influential ways. But even his role was reactive. At best, his schemes only adjusted the result. For example, Boston would have become a metropolis with or without its Emerald Necklace.

One drawback to assuming that the metropolis itself is planned is that a planner must be identified. To his credit, Fishman tackles this problem. The essays in this book, as Fishman readily concedes, make clear that the nation has lacked ongoing institutional structures at any level that make formal planning effective. "American society," he asserts, "inherently lacks the stability for long-term planning or the social solidarity for collective action" (p. 4). His solution, drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville, who marveled that America produced satisfactory communities without designing them, is to posit the concept of an "urban conversation" taking place among all the involved interests as "the ultimate source of authority that generated the outpouring of investment in roads, bridges, waterworks, schools, libraries, and other public facilities that so astonished Tocqueville" (p. 5). Through give and take, conflict and resolution, steps and missteps, a common pattern was evolved.

Whatever one thinks of this solution, it is an elusive, if not mystical, construct. Even if we acknowledge that a consensus of sorts often emerged on actions to take, the inchoate processes and conflicts that produced it are not what most people mean by planning, especially when

the "conversation" typically occurred outside of existing institutional structures. This solution, apart from whether it represents an adequate definition of planning authority, has another potentially far-reaching, potentially fruitful consequence: it upends a generation of urban historical analysis that has emphasized transportation and communications as key determinants of urban form, implicit in such terms as "walking city," rail-based urbanism, or the "automotive city."

Finally, the most serious drawback to defining the source of a planning tradition so loosely is to muddle our sense of what constitutes planning. For example, at one point, when discussing the suburban development that accompanied metropolitan growth, Fishman acknowledges the upper-middle-class bedroom suburbs of the 1900-1930 era as "enduring ideals for suburban living" and then observes that "the more modest middle-class and working-class neighborhoods that took shape on the periphery" at about the same time represented "an even more impressive achievement" (p. 12). But these lower-status neighborhoods, as Fishman frankly admits, citing Sam Bass Warner, Jr.'s *Streetcar Suburbs*, represented speculative developments, which is to say the virtual opposite of what is usually considered planning.

Given all the values, calculations, and constraints that enter into speculative growth, a case might be made that growth of this sort served as the vehicle for an "urban conversation," thereby yielding the outcome so admired by Fishman. But why call this process "planning," no matter how satisfactory the outcome? Why not simply recognize that markets can yield positive, if unplanned results? In short, a loose, permissive definition of planning by comprehending so much obfuscates what we commonly mean by the term. Rigor is lost. Activities that most people associate with the word are marginalized; others that are more market-based gain undue emphasis.

Throughout, Fishman makes clear that the metropolitan tradition also involves the more for-

mal and familiar planning ideas of Frederick Law Olmsted (Sr.), Daniel H. Burnham, and Thomas Adams. But these luminaries of American planning history, I would argue, should not be understood as creators of the metropolis but as its reformers. Historically, they stepped onto the urban stage only after the centralized metropolis had begun to emerge. Responding to its growth, they devised ways to modify it, by introducing and protecting open space (Olmsted in many cities), by refining and integrating transportation arrangements (Burnham in Chicago), and by repositioning economic, residential, and open space functions (Adams in the New York region). None of them envisioned an alternative urbanism, that is, a new overall pattern for human settlement. That kind of thinking, far more radical and utopian, became the domain of the regionalists who repudiated the prevailing metropolitan pattern and opposed its extension.

The American Planning Tradition, while replete with challenging and provocative interpretation, is much more than a disengaged scholarly study. Its major premise is the failure of the present-day urban pattern in the United States, especially the post-metropolitan sprawl that has both reconfigured urbanism itself and fundamentally jeopardized the middle ground prized by regionalists. In effect, Fishman and Thomas partially resolve the Mumford-Adams debate by identifying present-day urbanism as the common enemy. Fishman, who has done as much any urban historian to explicate this new order, suggests that it is now bankrupt and near exhaustion. Thomas, more realistically, notes and celebrates a gathering, almost Hegelian reaction to it.

Fresh thinking is needed, they both agree. Indeed, Fishman believes that a new conversation has already begun, some of it finding expression through the new urbanists, notably Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Peter Calthorpe (none of whom are directly represented in this volume). Thomas simply points to the "hundreds

of nature conservancies, land trusts, shoreline commissions, park planners, housing agencies, and land owner compacts across the nation," through whose ad hoc efforts some of the vision of the original regionalists is brought forward but with more ecological as well as more opportunistic twists (p. 62). In fact, both new urbanist and new environmentalist sensibilities inform many of the essays.

This work, while sounding an alarm, is more an academic effort than a call to arms. It is best seen as a scholarly resource to those who enter the fray or who want to understand it. The high levels of historical generalization and the sophistication of argument will cut against popular appeal. Some chapters, while interesting in their own right, do not cohere well with the whole. Arnold R. Hirsch (chap. 8), for example, offers a probing essay explaining the failure of New Orleans to embrace urban renewal during its heyday elsewhere in America. And Judith A. Martin and Sam Bass Warner, Jr. (chap. 10), analyze Oak Park in Chicago to illustrate both how local initiative can yield a pattern of local exceptionalism, in this case with respect to racial integration, which has been achieved in Oak Park though ignored elsewhere in America, and how on another front, that of locally vexed storm-water flooding and sewage pollution, a locality can succumb to inherited citywide infrastructure decisions and policy inertia, impeding newer, more environmentally sensitive alternatives. Both chapters, however, reinforce the most powerful sub-theme of the book: the diversity of American planning engendered by federalist governance.

Even if the discussions triggered by the Fishman-Thomas debate spiral off in unexpected directions, those who want to explore metropolitanism and regionalism as historically based prescriptive traditions and resources for current discussion will do well to consult this work. Thomas's essay, in particular, is an historian's tour de force, illuminating both the original regionalist

impulse and its links with present-day thinking. Fishman's contributions, especially if read simply as commentary on metropolitan urbanism, vividly demonstrate that this heritage remains a basis for addressing the urban predicament as now experienced, particularly its patterns of sprawl and environmental devastation. In short, this work belongs on the shelf of any American planning historian or activist curious about the historical firmament in which their ideas and aspirations are rooted.

Notes

[1]. John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Mel Scott, *American City Planning since 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver, eds., *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Donald A. Krueckeberg, ed., *Introduction to Planning History in the United States* (New Brunswick, N.J.: The Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1983).

[2]. Paul Venable Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (New York: The Architectural History Foundation, and Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 1984); Joel A. Tarr, "Sewerage and the Development of the Networked City in the United States, 1850-1930," in Joel A. Tarr and Gabriel Dupuy, eds., *Technology and the Rise of the Networked City in Europe and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 159-185; Richard Longstreth, "The Diffusion of the Community Shopping Center Concept during the Interwar Decades," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56 (September, 1997), 268-293; and Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 1997).

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