



Jill Desimini. *Cyclical City: Five Stories of Urban Transformation*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021. 294 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-4632-0.



Reviewed by Steven High (Concordia University)

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Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Steven High on Jill Desimini, *Cyclical City: Five Stories of Urban Transformation*

Jill Desimini, a professor of landscape architecture, has authored a visually stunning and highly original book on the ecological underpinnings of urban transformation. The reader is drawn right into *Cyclical Cities* from the opening pages when Desimini takes us on a walk near the Bridesburg neighborhood in Philadelphia where she encounters old headstones from a displaced cemetery that have been used to buttress a bridge adjustment. The author is adept at moving between these physical vestiges and the long-term trajectories of urban growth and decline. The slow, incremental transformation of five cities is the focus here. In each case, an ecological story is told: hydrology in Philadelphia, urban wilding in Berlin, urban agriculture in Lisbon, playgrounds in Amsterdam, and so-called urban fallow in St. Louis. It is rightly noted that lowlands, prone to flooding, are the most likely to be abandoned.

The most impressive chapter, for me at least, is the first one, on hydrological innovation and

stormwater management in Philadelphia over 350 years. Water management is a unifying process as waterways are dammed, redirected, and sewered. But their continued presence manifests itself in various ways such as soggy and devalued lands. Indeed, the spatial pattern of the city's urban renewal projects, to some degree, follows one buried creek. Make no mistake, this is no small history but one of considerable ambition, as the book seeks to reveal the underlying ecological logic of the city's spatial development. For the most part, the past actions and policies that are driving these changes are those of urban planners and municipal governments or the environment itself.

The many accompanying maps, cross-sections, cyclical graphs (modeled on the rings of a tree stump), offer us considerable data in what could pass as beautiful works of art.

The author insists, near the outset, that "history matters," offering us a long-term historical perspective on urban change. However, the book

unconvincingly (and for historians, problematically) attempts to naturalize these changes in terms of cycles of change, or a recurring pattern of growth and decline, which ends up being profoundly ahistorical. For example, in the book's conclusion, the author writes: "My goal here is to explore the *hidden genetic codes* [my emphasis] of specific urban conditions in order to inspire robust projects elsewhere that can work both immediately and for generations to come" (p. 208). There is a tendency in urban morphology, as in this book, of treating the city as a living organism with its own agency.

By contrast, there is almost no attention here to the economic drivers of abandonment or the challenges in urban planning in a context of continuing economic and social disinvestment. At times, the book treads dangerously close to the ecological equivalent of ruin gazing, which has generated considerable political debate in deindustrialized cities like Detroit. Thus, in the chapter on Berlin we hear that economic recessions "are good times for urban wilds." This is no doubt true, but a romantic tone infuses the account of these "unkempt" wild areas that fail to "conform to typical urban mores" (p. 79). At times, I was reminded of geographer Tim Edensor's book *Industrial Ruins* (2005), which treats ruined industrial landscapes as liberatory spaces rather than sites of structural violence. While environmental and social trauma is acknowledged in *Cyclical Cities*, it is overshadowed by a much more positive reading of abandoned areas of various kinds.

This tendency is perhaps strongest in the final chapter on St. Louis, a deindustrialized city par excellence that is framed as "fallow land." The chapter speaks to the destruction of the urban fabric in the name of countering what planners labeled obsolete or blighted areas, leaving "fallow plots" of land. I am ambivalent to the politics of casting these ruined urban areas as fallow as it naturalizes destructive economic and political processes, placing them in a beneficial light. In-

deed, throughout the book, the author casts urban transformation in terms of the "cyclical evolution" of "human civilization." This insistence on the recurring cycles of abandonment lets economic and political actors off the hook for their disastrous decision-making. While the author is critical of top-down traditional planning, the alternative offered here of a naturalized "cyclical condition" risks depoliticizing urban change. However, I appreciated the author's ambition in this book.

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