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Published on H-Environment (April, 2023)

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In *Boomtown Columbus*, Kevin R. Cox examines the complex and often contradictory nature of urban expansion in Columbus, Ohio, after World War II. Cox argues that Columbus is an “anomaly” among other rustbelt cities in the Midwest and Northeast (p. 245). Though it has experienced some of the negative impacts of deindustrialization and suburbanization, it has avoided losing its tax base to independent suburbs and continued to grow in a pattern more characteristic of sunbelt cities in the South and West. At the same time, Cox aims to demonstrate how Columbus reflects broader trends in American urban development in this period. As is the case in most American cities, real estate developers have had an outsized influence over the course of urban development in Columbus. Compared to their counterparts in western Europe, Cox contends, American cities have been more susceptible to the whims of developers because the state structure is so decentralized. Since municipal governments rely on local taxes for revenue, they are forced to compete with each other to attract investment and are apt to support development schemes that may lead to increased property taxes. Despite its relative economic stability, Columbus is also typical of many middling American cities in that it has struggled to compete with larger cities for investment. In short, Columbus “remains ... both out of place and out of step: in short, both blessed and cursed” (p. 246).

The first four chapters provide key historical context on Columbus’s development after World War II and examine how its history and geography have made it unique. Coming of age in what Cox terms the “second generation of urbanization,” an era marked by electricity and the automobile, Columbus shares many characteristics of sunbelt cities in the West and South (p. xii). For one thing, unlike many other rustbelt cities, it has avoided losing tax revenue to independent suburbs through an aggressive policy of annexation. This was accomplished in part by leveraging its control of public utilities. Starting in 1954, Columbus refused to supply water or sewer services to suburbs outside city limits. Columbus is also unique in that
it has always been less industrial than neighboring cities in its region, giving it an advantage in transitioning to a postindustrial economy. Nevertheless, Columbus has experienced challenges in the postindustrial economy typical of middling cities. Its proximity to larger and long-established cities like Cleveland and Cincinnati has made it difficult for Columbus to attract investments like airline hubs and major sports franchises. As a result, the postindustrial economy has had an uneven impact in Columbus. Efforts to redevelop the city center to attract investment by constructing convention centers and converting aging housing into luxury real estate have also displaced low-income residents and led to an increased homeless population. While areas along the Outerbelt in the North have thrived in a postindustrial economy, parts of the city more dependent on manufacturing have become mini rustbelts.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the outsized influence of real estate developers over urban development in Columbus since World War II. Cox explains that the growing power of the development industry in American cities can be traced to shifts within the real estate industry postwar. In the nineteenth century, real estate tended to be purchased by industries as needed, but by the 1930s, developers began buying large plots of land in anticipation of renting out properties. Not only did this encourage more development on the outskirts of cities where land was plentiful, but it also made real estate a speculative enterprise. Cox argues that developers have ensured profits in a competitive climate in part by shirking responsibility for the public costs of expansion. They have resisted paying impact fees to cover the costs of necessary public services, even while they seek (and often receive) tax abatements from local governments. Meanwhile, developers engage in a form of creative destruction that unintentionally ensures continued profit. The industry depends on constant innovation to sell properties, which means it tends to produce more than the market demands. As buyers are attracted to new developments, older housing and shopping centers rapidly become obsolete and are subsequently redlined or abandoned. This, too, presents new opportunities for profit as some of these abandoned areas are targeted for redevelopment and gentrification.

In the final three chapters, Cox explores the larger geopolitical reasons developers are able to “get their way” and the industry remains insufficiently regulated (p. 165). Again, a critical reason is the decentralized nature of the American state. Like most American cities, Columbus is made up of a complicated array of local governments, municipalities, and school districts. All of these local entities are competing for tax revenue, which developers can use to play them against each other. Developers also have access to a good deal of money, of course, which allows them to influence elections or outmaneuver neighborhood groups opposing their projects. Moreover, developers and their supporters have crafted a language for painting development as a common good, which Cox refers to as “development speak.” Developers claim (falsely) that impact fees would mean increased costs for consumers or would force developers to leave Columbus. They also paint oppositional forces as outsiders and prey on concerns about competition from other cities or local governments. In doing so, developers benefit from the class and racial inequalities common to American cities like Columbus. Developers can bolster support for their efforts by exploiting existing perceptions of “good” and “bad” neighborhoods or fear of racial change. Thus, while there are many stakeholders in Columbus that shape development, ultimately monied interests (including developers) are able to protect their interests at the expense of the poor.

Cox makes a compelling case for studying middling cities like Columbus, arguing that larger cities like New York and Los Angeles have been “overstudied and do not reflect the entirety of urban America” (p. xi). Indeed, urban history is often defined by major industrial rustbelt cities like
New York and Chicago, on the one hand, and emergent sunbelt cities like Los Angeles, on the other. The story of Columbus's development after World War II challenges simple categorizations of “rustbelt” and “sunbelt” cities that have defined post-World War II urban history and adds nuance to the story of deindustrialization. The heart of the book, however, is Cox's analysis of the development industry in Columbus and its complex relationship with local governments. Cox's analysis of the structural incentives supporting developer behavior down to the very language used to frame their work as a positive good is particularly enlightening and demonstrates how deeply entrenched these interests are in urban politics.

While *Boomtown Columbus* is an important contribution to our understanding of urban development after World War II, it is perhaps overly ambitious in scope. In setting out to analyze the entirety of Columbus's development after World War II, Cox tackles a number of themes that could rightly be monographs on their own. One could imagine a monograph devoted to Columbus's annexation policy, for instance, or the politics of real estate development. A narrower focus would have allowed Cox to make similar arguments while providing space for deeper exploration of case studies examined in the book. As Cox himself notes, much of *Boomtown Columbus* is based on newspaper articles, especially articles from the *Columbus Dispatch*, which he acknowledges has historically been unabashedly pro-development. These records are critical for deconstructing elements of “development speak,” but municipal records along with the records of development firms or neighborhood associations would add additional nuance and texture to the stories Cox tells.

Overall, however, *Boomtown Columbus* has opened up a number of avenues for continued exploration of Columbus's unique history and geography that promise to make important contributions to urban history.
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