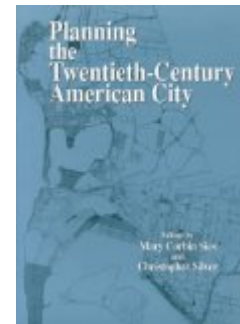


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Corbin Sies, Christopher Silver, eds. *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xiv + 594 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5164-3; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5163-6.

Reviewed by Roger Biles (East Carolina State University)
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City Planning—American Style

Mary Corbin Sies, who teaches in the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland, and Christopher Silver, a professor of urban studies and planning at Virginia Commonwealth University, have assembled an interdisciplinary cast of urban historians, architectural historians, architects, urban geographers, and urban planners to discuss various aspects of twentieth-century planning in U.S. cities. Following the editors' introductory chapter on the historiography of planning history and preceding their conclusion, "Planning History and the New American Metropolis," eighteen contributors offer their analyses of a host of planning-related topics. The result is an eclectic collection of essays that considers parks, housing, transportation, zoning, government policy, public works, historic preservation, and the social and economic consequences of planning initiatives.

In any anthology, the quality of the chapters is likely to vary. In *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City*, however, the editors have set high standards in their selection of authors and, as a consequence, the contributions are uniformly well researched and gracefully written. A few chapters stand out: In "The City Social Movement: Progressive Women Reformers and Early Social Planning," Susan Marie Wirks identifies a shortcoming in traditional planning histories that trace the evolution of the early-twentieth-century "City Beautiful Movement" to the "City Practical Movement." The usual typology, Wirks posits, ignores another reform strain, the "City Social Movement," in which such settlement

house workers and consumer advocates as Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch and Florence Kelley pioneered in injecting a concern for social reform into urban planning. In "Five Strategies for Downtown: Policy Discourse and Planning Since 1943," Carl Abbott underscores the changing perceptions of central business districts in the post-World War Two era and notes how these perceptions have altered policies implemented by various levels of government. In "Seeking a Finer Detroit: The Design and Planning Agenda of the 1960s," June Manning Thomas tells the sadly ironic story of how an enormously talented and well-intentioned city planner failed to halt—and even contributed to—the deterioration of a rustbelt city. John Hancock's "'Smokestacks and Geraniums': Planning and Politics in San Diego" is a case study that illuminates the broader question of how planners struggle to reconcile the desire for utility and aesthetics in urban design.

Planning the Twentieth-Century American City is not a textbook, and some readers unfamiliar with the rudiments of planning history may wish that the editors had provided more background. Fortunately, the clarity of the prose and welcomed absence of jargon ensure the book's accessibility to a wide audience. Endnotes to each chapter and a substantial bibliography provide relevant sources for further reading. The book is adorned with a number of handsome illustrations and architectural drawings; its fascinating subject and readability should appeal to expert and novice alike.

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