BOOK REVIEWS

Blais, Pamela.
Perverse Cities: Hidden Subsidies, Wonky Policy, and Urban Sprawl.
Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010.
278 pp.
ISBN 978-0-7748-1896-4.

In *Perverse Cities*, Pamela Blais, city planner and principal of Toronto-based Metropole Consultants, brilliantly discusses the reasons behind continuous sprawl in Canadian cities, despite a large consensus that has been achieved in the last decades regarding the unsustainability of sprawl and the urgent need for a more compact and mixed-use urban form. Blais' book tries to explain the apparent failure of city planners in curbing urban sprawl and creating sustainable communities through an analysis of the hidden financial instruments present in policies and regulations at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government. According to Blais, eliminating urban sprawl will remain wishful thinking unless the mis-pricing accountable for it is addressed and rectified.

The book is divided in four parts. Part One examines the price of sprawl, particularly in Canada's largest urban regions, where most of the growth in population and employment is occurring in the outer suburbs. After a brief explanation of what sprawl is, Blais gives an overview of the main arguments against or in support of sprawl by discussing the environmental, health, social and economic costs as well as the benefits of sprawl. According to the author, the benefits resulting from a sprawling urban form are based on what she defines as "false economy" that does not take into account the hidden subsidies allowing for sprawl. As a consequence, cities end up with a form of urban development whose benefits are private in nature whereas the costs fall squarely on the public and are shared by society as a whole. Part Two is a discussion of the role of planning in curbing urban sprawl. It assesses both the benefits and costs of planning and delves into the reasons behind the failure of planning to effectively arrest sprawl. Blais maintains that planning has been unsuccessful due to its tendency to ignore economic factors, in particular the deleterious

effect of mis-pricing of goods and services resulting from a variety of existing policies and regulations. Part Three provides several examples of mis-pricing in terms of subsidies, cross-subsidies and mis-incentives that result in the financing of urban sprawl. Finally, Part Four suggests market-oriented approaches as possible solutions to sprawl. In particular, Blais believes that, as of today, sprawl is underpriced since current prices do not reflect true costs, with subsidies and cross-subsidies artificially discounting prices for inefficient development forms.

The book is an extremely well conducted and persuasive study on the causes of urban sprawl in our city-regions. Its most apparent strength is Blais' ability to think 'outside the box' that has trapped most urban planners: if we want to arrest sprawling development, we need to move beyond 'just' planning and look at the role of economics and financial instruments that have and continue to subsidize sprawl. I enjoyed a number of aspects of this book, particularly the inclusion of rich data and examples presented in support of the argument. Whereas I would have liked a more extended discussion around the impact of curbing sprawl on certain sectors of the population, especially those who have thus far benefited from its underpriced costs, I find the overall argument in support of accurate price signals quite convincing. This is a readable text that can certainly benefit scholars in urban planning, geography and public policy as well as those readers among the general public who are interested in issues of urban sprawl.

Overall, *Perverse Cities* fulfills its goal of providing a sound explanation why decade-long planning efforts to curb urban sprawl have been unsuccessful. It also offers suggestions on how to address the problem and achieve more compact and sustainable urban forms. In so doing, the book reminds the reader that urban sprawl is not the inevitable result of market forces but is merely the outcome of public policy that can and should be changed.

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Calthorpe, Peter.
Urbanism in the Age of Climate Change.
Washington: Island Press, 2011.
126 pp.
ISBN 13:978-1-59726-720-5.

This 126 page, 9 chapter book offers an outward-looking perspective on the double challenge of peak oil and climate change, which is presented as the challenge of our time and evident in high carbon emissions and diminishing global resources. In this book, the author is unequivocal in outlining urbanism as the only solution to this problem, which he argues has been omitted from existing policy solutions. The book is intended primarily for a policy and practice audience. The US orientation of the book and the use of California as a demonstrator project (chps 7-8) means the book has clear messages for a North American rather than European audience.

From the outset the author presents the problem as he sees it and then tackles the various solutions in the remainder of the book. Namely, the disproportionately high level of carbon emissions in the US, and the disproportionate contribution of emissions from buildings and transport use (62% of carbon emissions compared to 37% globally). The solution presented is to reduce emissions to 12% with remainder of book dedicated to exploring options under three key areas: compact urbanism; building efficiency, and low-carbon autos/travel. In this respect there are 3 key shortcomings of this book. First, the need to realise 'compact' urbanism to achieve high density and optimise land use as a way of reducing carbon emissions and overcoming the energy challenge is fundamentally incompatible within the author's approach which views urbanism within a wider context of regionalism. While recognising the existing regional landscape is important, even by the author's own admission passive urbanism would be "environmentally benign" (p18) and therefore futile as a principal policy option. Given that regionalism especially in the American context can be taken to mean metropolitan regions and span large areas of land, pursuing urbanism within a regional context would only serve to legitimise further urban sprawl. Second, as the author notes, it is not possible to achieve a level of 12% carbon emissions without tackling the efficiency of buildings (p41) thereby diluting the key message of the book about urbanism. Here the author does make a useful contribution by revealing the impact that a simple change in lifestyle e.g. away from housing lots to green townhouses would have at a national level. Reducing demand at the end use for buildings and also transport does seem a viable way forward especially coupled with compact urbanism. Third, while the author states that changes in lifestyle around housing and transport are politically easy to achieve (p41) chapters 5 and 6 then examine the difficul-

ties of delivering changes in practice, which can be summarised as a need for a radical overhaul of the planning system and an expensive retrofit of new transit and arterial flows.

Overall, the book does not go far enough and the author seems to be undecided about which policy approach to adopt: either smart, compact urbanism, or more environmentally-sensitive regionalism. The arguments for creating compact urbanism are well placed and would achieve substantial results but would also require radical intervention to achieve walkable, transit-free areas, which also deliver on social qualitative aspects (here the author makes a good analogy with the work of Jane Jacobs four decades ago). The alternative is to pursue a more regional model, which challenges the planning system to achieve multi-purpose and mixed zone areas with corridors, preserves and transit-oriented new development. However pursuing an environmentally sensitive regionalism model without considering how end-user destinations such as work places could be brought closer to individuals (through decentralising economic activities) does not seem to offer a credible approach. In fact it offers a partial approach, which ultimately only tells half of the story for the practitioner audience. Above all, while the author raises important concerns about the current approach to land use and urbanism, which is laudable, the book would benefit from a clearer message and approach with regards to pursuing either compact urbanism or regionalism, and the practical measures and policy changes needed to realise this.

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Condon, Patrick M.
Seven Rules for Sustainable Communities: Design Strategies for the Post-Carbon World.
Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2010.
200 pp.
ISBN: 9781597266505.

As knowledge of climate change and other sustainability threats has grown in recent years, authors have proposed many different visions of sustainable communities. Some have focused on urban waste, energy, resource, and food systems, painting a picture of how these flows can be made more resilient and less wasteful (e.g. Lyle 1994; Girardet 2008; Downton 2008). Others have emphasized themes such as "biophilic cities" (Beatley 2011), "ecocities" (Regis-

ter 2006), "ecological democracy" (Hester 2006), or "restorative cities" (Louv 2011). Some have addressed regional scales of planning (Calthorpe 2011), the restoration of nature throughout urban areas (Hough 2004), or themes of social and environmental justice (Agyeman 2005).

In *Seven Rules for Sustainable Communities*, Patrick M. Condon, the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Livable Environments at the University of British Columbia, focuses on the large-scale spatial form of communities, weaving together land use concepts from the New Urbanism with urban greening ideas from landscape architecture. In direct, no-nonsense style he lays out principles that will be of use to any planner or developer considering future spatial growth patterns for cities and towns.

Condon begins with a diagnosis: cities are "sick" due to low-density, car-dependent development and separation of communities by class and income. This situation in his view leads to "infinitely increasing car dependence" and related problems such as climate change. He then introduces seven "steps to recovery." These are:

1. Restore the streetcar city.
2. Design an interconnected street system.
3. Locate commercial services, frequent transit, and schools within a five-minute walk.
4. Locate good jobs close to affordable homes.
5. Provide a diversity of housing types.
6. Create a linked system of natural areas and parks.
7. Invest in lighter, greener, cheaper, and smarter infrastructure.

Such rules are similar to principles that the Congress for the New Urbanism has advocated for years, and should come as no surprise to any progressive planner. Still, Condon's discussion of the logic behind each is clear and firmly grounded in practical experience. He frequently adds detail in the form of rules-within-rules. For example, his exploration of rule number five includes six additional principles conveying advice for professionals such as to consider redeveloping commercial strips, to understand that new jobs can in fact fit into traditional block patterns rather than sprawling office parks, and not to expect any economic development "home runs" but instead to focus on smaller-scale incremental job growth. Condon illustrates his concepts with examples from the Vancouver area as well as U.S. metropolitan regions such as Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis, and Boston.

Condon's prescription for sustainable cities is excellent as far as it goes and should be very useful background for students and those new to the urban planning field. However, it leaves a great many other elements of sustainabil-

ity out—one wishes that the publisher had given it a more accurate title such as "Seven Rules for Neighborhood Design." The focus on spatial design avoids extensive discussion of energy systems, building design, environmental restoration, food systems, social services, greenhouse gas mitigation planning, or public participation in governance. Even spatially oriented concepts such as urban density aren't directly addressed. The chapter on "lighter, greener, cheaper, smarter infrastructure" provides an excellent consideration of stormwater systems and on-site rainwater infiltration, but omits every other form of infrastructure, including sewage systems, electrical systems, telecommunications, and transportation systems.

So overall this volume, while eloquent on the subject of neighborhood design, fails to achieve the title's promise of exploring "sustainable communities" and "the post-carbon world." Even within its own sphere of interest one wishes that the book provided more justification for the new orthodoxies it is promoting, and more extensive grounding in the academic literature. How far can the streetcar suburb model go, for example, in reducing motor vehicle use, especially since North American streetcar suburbs have historically emphasized the single-family housing type? How might we actually mix small stores, schools, and other services into neighborhood centers in this era of large-scale commerce and institutions? In his intense focus on physical form Condon does not go far enough towards exploring the other elements that would be needed to make his model work, and the evidence related to them. Still, *Seven Rules for Sustainable Communities* is very good at outlining basic principles of neighborhood design, and in this regard will be a valuable resource for students and professionals.

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Gehl, Jan.
Cities for People.
Washington: Island Press, 2010.
269 pp.
ISBN 978-1-58726-573-7.

Jan Gehl's *Cities for People* is an accessible and engaging update to his well-known work *Life Between Buildings* (1987) that provides a timely introduction to Gehl's people-centered urban planning and architecture practices. Since the translation of his work from Danish in the 1980s, Gehl has become one of the most visible heirs to urban thinkers like William Whyte, Jane Jacobs, and Christopher Alexander, serving to spearhead visible changes in the apportionment of urban space in places like London, New York City, and throughout Australia. *Cities for People* is a well-illustrated overview of Gehl's urban theory and practice, offering short chapters on the importance of human scaled architecture, the importance of paying attention to the body, the role of street life, and walkable urbanism in cities in the Global South.

The book is organized in a way that allows different levels of engagement to take place simultaneously with its concepts. Fully half of the book in composed of large full-color illustrations taken from cities around the globe, and each paragraph is neatly summarized by short aphoristic phrases inserted to the left of the text, making the book suitable for quick skimming. Gehl's writing is creative and enthusiastic, composed of everyday language and peppered with pithy phrases such as "talkscape" and "social sustainability."

Unlike Gehl's earlier work, *Cities for People* attempts to include a wide variety of perspectives, and some the illustrations and examples are drawn from

countries around the globe such as China, Vietnam, Guatemala. However, the majority of the book's examples come from North American, Australia and Europe; for example, Gehl relies heavily on current projects such as new urban developments in Copenhagen or along the Vancouver waterfront. These kinds of illustrations are one of the primary strengths of the book, as they demonstrate that Gehl's ideas are not simply nostalgic wishful thinking, but are being produced in the present day.

Gehl's theory of architectural planning draws on the prior work of people like Kevin Lynch, Christopher Alexander, and the school of new urbanists, and his book is largely an attempt to relate these kinds of theories to modern urban debates over the built environment. One of Gehl's more innovative ideas is the emphasis on "universal principles" drawn from the limits and capacities of the human body as a guide to architecture and planning practice. Lines of sight, "soft edges" for seating, and the limits of sensory perception form the basis for Gehl's both concept of "the human scale" and his subsequent planning prescriptions. Gehl attacks modernist icons like Brazilia for assuming "bird's eye views" of the city, and for being too dedicated to formalism, and attempts to critique auto-oriented planning for being overly-dedicated to inhuman abstraction.

While *Cities for People* makes a good introduction to critical human-centered planning, the book lacks a great deal of theoretical depth. The chapters are often repetitive, and the book as a whole lacks a logical narrative. For example, Gehl discusses the importance of bicycling at many different places throughout the book. Readers interested in a thoroughly worked out theory of space may be more interested in Gehl's earlier work. In addition, the text's unbridled enthusiasm can sometimes make it seem like an advertisement for Gehl's planning firm, promoting the kinds of "public space public life" studies that his firm regularly conducts. Yet *Cities for People* remains a readable, updated, and engaging text that can serve as a practical introduction to Gehl's now-popular urban theories. It is recommended for anyone working in the planning, architecture, or urban studies fields.

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Sarkissian, Wendy and Dianna Hurford with Christine Wenman.
Creative Community Planning: Transformative Engagement Methods for Working at the Edge.
Earthscan: London and Washington, 2010.
Also available at PDFDocSpace.com.
230 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-84407-703-8.

Over recent years new tools have emerged to support planners in thinking and acting with diverse communities as they attempt to address a myriad of pressing concerns. The process, however, has been uneven: while post-rationalist theory validates the embrace of knowledge forms outside the realm of positivist social science, in certain areas of practice planners may feel constrained to revert to conventional modes of argumentation.

Creative Community Planning seeks to enliven planners' practice through a "focus on creativity, beauty, relationships and skilled facilitation" (p. xxi) in public engagement, in a welcome addition to a repertoire dominated by "hard-surfaced themes such as objectivity, efficiency, risk avoidance, reducing bias and formalizing engagement processes" (p. xxii).

John Forester's preface gives a complimentary appreciation of the contribution and Sarkissian's preface eases us into the conversational, even folksy tone of the book. The text is presented in five Parts, each ushered in by one of Hurford's poems. An introduction acquaints readers with the community of scholars and practitioners who share outlooks with the authors, and invites participation on the "edge," that is, where it is argued that transformative change may take place. The second Part shows the nature of the practice, describing experiences and defining essential terminology—heartstorming adds to brainstorming, for example—drawing largely on Sarkissian's work. The third Part describes experiences of others in innovative practices of engagement including community service learning, film and websites and Part four focuses on engagement with children. Part five has two chapters, one showing how language can be thought of as "an essential vehicle of creativity that we use every day to construct new thoughts and ideas and to infuse a kind of love into planning and community engagement" (p.191) and the other imagining a path to a utopian future. The book ends off with a section entitled "Gilt-edged Resources," comprising guides to five engagement practices.

The volume is an accessible and convincing statement that new forms of engagement are within practitioners' grasp, but just where these practices lead is shown less clearly. The authors argue that influential social structures "are

not in charge" (p.107), citing Paulo Freire, but a limitation of the contribution is that the descriptions of the many examples of practice focus on the immediate processes and don't enable readers to evaluate how outcomes connect with social transformation.

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