

Book Review: The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st Century, by Rutherford H. Platt

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Abstract:

This article is a book review of “The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st Century City” edited by Rutherford H. Platt.

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extinctions)—must by nature choose some subjects at the expense of others. Writing a broad analysis of the South has always struck me as something akin to an academic Rorschach test; finding fault with topics included and/or omitted thus also probably says more about the reader than the author. As a product of the modern suburban South, I might have spent more time on the advent of air-conditioning, which has contributed mightily to the sweeping transformation of the South into today's modern Sunbelt monstrosity. Or perhaps recognize that Southerners invented and elaborated upon the cultural complex that inevitably has led to the single largest spectator sport in the United States: NASCAR. Neglected as well was the fact that Southern public and private universities have made possible the impressive growth of the high-tech centers of Oak Ridge, Huntsville, Atlanta, Houston, Cape Canaveral, the Research Triangle,

and the Northern Virginia-Charlottesville corridor. Also, when Kirby holds forth brick as an ideal building material that once was a symbol of planter wealth but which even poor folks eventually had access to, he misses the irony that in most suburban developments, houses are built of wood frame and vinyl siding, and once again only the wealthy can afford brick houses.

Much like good barbecue, *Mockingbird Song* offers a great deal to chew over and perhaps even argue about, which is doubtless why it received the 2007 Bancroft Prize from Columbia University. It serves well as a gateway to a broad sweep of historical, academic, and popular literature dealing with the environmental history of the American South. As such, it will make a welcome and refreshing companion to the standard fare for courses in Southern environmental history and geography.

The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st Century City.

Rutherford H. Platt (editor). University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA, 2006. 326 pp., photographs, DVD. \$80.00 cloth (ISBN 13-978-155849-553-1), \$27.95 paper (ISBN 13-155849-554-8)

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Contemporary ideas about urban design and planning are rooted in the prescient insights of a few key observers and commentators following World War II. With that in mind, Rutherford Platt has assembled a set of conference essays and case studies branching out from the writings of William H. (Holly) Whyte. The book's premise is that Whyte's vision of nature and public spaces in urban settings is now

coming to the forefront in such buzzwords as smart growth, new urbanism, sustainable design, and the increasing role of energy consumption and environmental attitudes towards living in urban places. Platt's fundamental goals for revisiting Whyte's work are positive and forward looking: to create more humane metropolitan environments that are literally more green, more healthy and safe, more

people friendly, and more equitable. He has succeeded in collecting a coherent set of papers that point out what can and is being done to reach these goals. The book could serve as a good source of readings in any graduate geography course related to environmental planning, and is an excellent supplement to Platt's (2004) upper level text *Land Use and Society: Geography, Law, and Public Policy*.

The book is arranged chronologically into five parts, beginning with five short biographical papers reviewing Whyte's most lasting contributions. The significant body of that work began in Chicago after World War II, with studies of the sociology of large organizations and emerging suburban landscapes, and then progressed to suburban land use and issues of sprawl more generally. In the 1960s, Whyte gained land conservationist credentials as a consultant to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, where he wrote professional reports recommending conservation easements and cluster development. In the latter part of his career he moved back into the city and focused on the function and design of public spaces in urban settings, particularly mid-town Manhattan.

Parts II and III of the book focus on the historical transition from setting up city parks to the creation of regional open space initiatives. A series of case studies review the development of urban green infrastructure from Portland, Oregon to New York City. Included is an interesting paper by Anne Lusk that points up design flaws of many urban walking, biking, and skating facilities that limit their benefits in terms of promoting human health and fitness. A common problem is that the provided facilities are difficult to integrate

into daily travel and work patterns. Following those topics are a set of papers relating the emerging field of ecological restoration to urban watersheds and brownfields. Geographers William Solecki and Cynthia Rosenzweig present an interesting review of the integration of the biosphere reserve concept into urban landscapes, and frame a proposal for such a reserve in metropolitan New York City.

Part IV focuses on environmental justice and inequities of designs, such as gated communities and homogenous neighborhoods favoring private management of common areas over public spaces accessible to all citizens. The social isolation and exclusivity of private developments bound by gates and fences are seen as a major impediment to a diverse community of people with an interest in the common good. Also in this section, Deborah and Frank Popper provide a thorough review of Whyte's "organization man" in the twenty-first century, pointing up the loss of individuality and personal initiative in neighborhoods governed by homeowners associations wielding foreclosure rights over private property owners.

The final and most forward looking section is devoted to contemporary issues and techniques for designing a more humane metropolis. Included are essays on zoning for public open spaces, case studies of green building, and examples of European cityscapes that are pedestrian friendly and promote non-fossil fuel energy sources. For example, photovoltaic energy cells are rising in efficiency and dropping in cost, leading to greater incorporation in urban buildings. And new ways of improving urban mobility are reducing reliance on private automobiles.

In the Epilogue, Rutherford Platt pro-

vides a concise and provocative statement of the current condition of American metropolitan areas in the context of environmental concerns. The next generation of urban planners and designers will need to move beyond issues of aesthetics and efficient land use, and address a variety of issues that bear on humane metropolitan areas: mobility and transportation, water

scarcity, air and water pollution, and environmental justice. Geographers will find motivation to contribute to solving these problems in this book.

LITERATURE CITED

Platt, R. 2004. *Land Use and Society: Geography, Law, and Public Policy*. Island Press: Washington, DC.

The Inner Islands: A Carolinian's Sound Country Chronicle.

Bland Simpson, photography by Ann Cary Simpson. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2006. 219 pp., maps, bibliographical references and index. \$34.95 hardcover (ISBN-13: 978-0-8078-3056-7)

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"Liminal" is a familiar adjective to many coastal geographers. The word suggests "an elusive, sensually-rich threshold between two different places or states, ambiguous and indeterminate." The "inner islands" Bland Simpson explores in this Down East travelogue could not be more liminal in space and time. Many sit mere inches above the surface of the water, their shapes shifting with incoming hurricanes and nor'easters, simultaneously threatened by rising sea levels and real estate development. Likewise, Simpson's writing transcends genres and periods, at once autobiography, regional oral history, poetry, and modern ecological investigation.

"These inner islands are not rocks, nor metals hammered hard at Vulcan's smithy and made final for all time—they are simply mud and sands, or shells, or swamps, massed for moments mere. We may stand and stride upon them and take their measure, feel the brevity of their moments (how like our own), and perhaps feel too some

sense of kinship between animate and inanimate, the kinship of all ephemera" (p. 188).

Simpson carries the reader through coastal North Carolina from Currituck County in the northeast, south through Pamlico Sound and inside Cape Lookout, and to the mouth of the Cape Fear River in Brunswick County. Each of his 15 chapters celebrates one small island and its inhabitants, some well known like Harkers Island, others, like Battery Island off Southport, accessible only to nesting ibises, herons and egrets. Four maps in the back of the book possess enough detail to clarify locations without distracting from the narrative. Simpson sources his stories and acknowledges the many voices that contributed to his work in an appendix—a treasure trove for additional reading and coastal stewardship contacts.

Coastal geographers will appreciate these essays because Simpson, a native of Pasquotank County, North Carolina, and creative writing professor at UNC Chapel