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Urbanity and density in 20th century design

Susan Parham

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BOOK REVIEW

Urbanity and density in 20th century design, by Wolfgang Sonne, Berlin, DOM Publishers, 2017, 359 pp., €98.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-3-86922-491-6

What an extraordinarily good book this is. Wolfgang Sonne's magnificent exploration of *Urbanity and Density in 20th Century Design* is really a towering achievement in urbanism and urban design history research. The book's sheer heft as a physical object reflects a huge amount of scholarship that deeply enriches our understanding of this key urbanism area while offering an iconoclastic approach to some accepted urbanism certainties. Taken as a whole it presents a blistering attack on the destruction and dissolution of cities willfully wrought across the twentieth century but concludes on a positive note with some hopeful signs of repair in Europe and North America.

Professor Sonne explains the proposition of the work very clearly in his Preface; making the point at the outset that "examples and concepts of dense urban design recur throughout the entire course of the twentieth century in Europe and North America" (2017, 7). As he argues here, this

flatly contradicts two historio-graphic commonplaces: firstly, that modern urban design tended to dissolve the city, and secondly, that the history of urban design in the 20th century is demarcated by two shifts—from the "traditional" to the "modern" and then to the "post-modern" city. (2017, 7)

He then situates his conceptual fields of urbanity and density in his introduction – which acts as a beautifully argued and composed monograph in its own right – how these have played out historically across the century.

In the main part of the book Prof Sonne works through a series of highly detailed, superbly illustrated sections that trace from 1890 onwards the spatial evolution of block forms, streets, and squares, high rises as generators of public urban space, conventional, and traditionalist reconstruction and city repair. Thus, for Urban Residential Reform Blocks – 1890–1940, Prof Sonne positions this form between tighter urban forms and the row blocks, a move toward which modernist architects presented as a logical step in the necessary dissolution of the city. Exploring examples of the reform block through text and wonderful illustrations, from places including Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Paris, Milan, London, and New York (in each case in their national contexts) he argues the block "was used much more frequently than its avant-garde sister, the row construction, which turned a cold shoulder to the street." (p.53). Prof Sonne notes that despite wide variations in typology, material and style the reform block "was therefore a highly creative venture, a *recherche patiente* requiring more patience and resourcefulness than the stringing together of rows based on ostensibly scientific guidelines" (117).

In the following section on Squares and Streets as a Public Stage 1890–1940 the early mention of Camillo Sitte's arguments is a welcome aspect of the framing of spatial enclosure as a "history transcending principle of urban design" (120). As Sonne points out there followed a highly unfortunately distancing of architecture from the square as human scaled and based on physiological needs of the pedestrian (120). How this failure has influenced places including Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, *Piazze d'Italia*, through the Civic Art and Street Architecture of Great Britain and the Civic Center and City Beautiful in the USA. These are again explored with great skill and through fabulous illustrative material. Among other delights, it is great to see Paul Zucker's work on squares given in-depth treatment here.

The section on High-Rise as Generators of Public Urban Space 1910–1950 is particularly fascinating for its interplay between the building and its context in the USA and Europe. Prof Sonne argues here that in oscillating between two poles (to paraphrase 186): maximum exploitation of real estate for private use on the one hand and “socialist land management of amorphous public ownership” (186) on the other, high-rise “like parasites ... have a tendency to destroy what they engender, namely the urban” (186). He suggests that there have been examples, though, where “efforts to find urban-civilized solutions for the high-rise continued even when the tower in the green seemed to be the all-purpose solution” (186) and this section offers an intriguing survey of some of these notable attempts through forms including set back skyscrapers with plazas in the USA, urbanized skyscrapers and high-rises buildings with streets and squares (both in Europe).

The subsequent section turns its attention to Conventional and Traditional Reconstruction 1940–1960; distinguishing in Germany between theoretical approaches in books and actual projects in cities, and then exploring Southern and Eastern Europe before moving on to France and Great Britain’s rather different experience. Among many riches here, the New Towns movement is neatly summarized, with its connections to ideologies of modernity nicely teased out, and concepts like townscape dealt with in a reconstruction context.

The final section Repairing the City 1960–2010 brings us nearly up-to-date with its focus on what constitutes a damning critique of functionalism in city design. As Wolfgang Sonne explains: “One of the tragic paradoxes of urban design history is the fact that criticism of functionalist urban planning had already presented all of the most cogent arguments before functionalism went on to wreck extensive damage in the cities” (270). Prof Sonne points to a fixation on innovation over proven urban design concepts and forms and he considers here some of “the perpetrators of dissolution and destruction” (270). He posits that what the repairers (also surveyed in this section) share is the desire to correct the mistakes of modernization (paraphrase 270).

Finally, something should also be said about the excellent presentation of the book. It is a massive tome in keeping with the magisterial scale of the work undertaken. Its large format should not mislead the reader into thinking this is a “coffee table” book. It is just that its extensive, academically grounded text needed this scale of production to encompass the work done and the writing is supported by a large number of illustrations: photographs, plans, maps and drawings on beautifully laid out pages that as are pleasure to view simply as a visual object and that help bring to life the points made in the text.

This translation of the original *Urbanität und Dichte im Städtebau des 20. Jahrhunderts* (2017) brings this magisterial work to an English-speaking audience barely a year after its first appearance in German. I would urge any student of urbanism to acquire this superb book as soon as they can.

Susan Parham
University of Hertfordshire, UK
 s.parham@herts.ac.uk

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