

Books That Have Shaped Our Thinking

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A city, he said, is only a crowd of citizens. If each of them has renounced his private virtue, how can they build a public good?

Mary Renault (1966 [2015]) *The Mask of Apollo*

Often when asked by students and other researchers about the most influential books that have really shaped the debate on cities, the built environment and planning, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly which one should be recommended. The editors of *Built Environment* decided that this challenge should be directed at the editorial board, and so we have asked eight members to select a 'favourite' book that has been influential in their careers, to comment on why, and to review it in the light of subsequent events.

This collection of papers is the outcome of that process. It is intended to act both as a record of the great and important contributions of individual authors, and examples have been taken from the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and one from 2000. It is not a definitive list, but a much more personal selection, and readers might comment on the absence of Jane Jacobs, Richard Sennett, Peter Hall, Alice Coleman, John Reps and many others, and the absence of many of the historical giants of city planning. Lewis Mumford is here, but not Patrick Abercrombie, Ebenezer Howard, Clarence Perry, Clarence Stein, Raymond Unwin, Le Corbusier and others. But many of these greats are mentioned in the individual papers.

Although it is always [fun looking back, whether simply in terms of what was said then, or, with the benefit of hindsight, to have the opportunity to comment on an author's prescience, we are all influenced by what we read](#). The difficulty faced by each of us has been to choose just one book, and it should be noted that none of us (i.e. the eight contributors) has selected the same book. The books chosen may also relate to the stage in the lifecycle where each contributor is currently positioned. This hypothesis has not been tested, but contributors seem to have selected a book that was first published in their 'formative' period. This observation in turn reflects the different periods of thinking, from the Cold War period (1960s) through growth and optimism in the early 1970s, to the transformation of cities and their renaissance over the more recent past.

The overly historical perspective taken by Lewis Mumford in his monumental tome on *The City in History* has been selected by Lawrence Vale. This historical survey of cities contrasts the organic city growth perspective with the more modern desire to control its development through regulation and the tendency towards 'city centre urbanism and the vapidness of suburbia'. His essentially moral message is seen as being one of hope, as the book was written at the time of the Cold War and under the threat of mutual destruction. The examples given are mainly taken from Europe and the United States, meaning that the book's relevance to today may be limited in terms of where city growth is now taking place most rapidly. Yet when it was published, the reception was lukewarm, and it is only now that, on reflection, its scope, scale, commitment, and passion have been realized and appreciated.

The next four papers critically examine the concept of modernism that has led to alienation and segregation within cities, and the need to move beyond that to foster a sense of community and culture. Yet even this postmodern perspective in itself is not a complete answer, as it might lead to gentrification and other forms of social exclusion.

Claire Colomb examines the important contribution made by David Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity*, where the political economy of culture is seen as being instrumental in the move beyond mass production (Fordism) to flexible accumulation (Post Fordism). These

changes are not only apparent in cities, as they reflect the broader issues of globalization and new forms of production, but in her paper they are interpreted within an urban context. Harvey demonstrates the complexity of cities through the wider process of 'cultural production and ideological transformation'. As with many of the other eight books, it is in the richness of the thinking and the literature embraced that makes each a landmark publication, as the authors all demonstrate both the breadth and depth of their thinking and knowledge. The books are truly interdisciplinary.

Allen Scott's *The Cultural Economy of Cities*, written some 11 years after Harvey's book, has been selected by Robert Kloosterman. The deindustrialization process has been completed in many Western cities, but the urban economy is now growing again through producer services and the expansion of the knowledge economy. It is here that the cultural industries have come to the fore, and there are clear agglomeration economies that allow a new creativity to take place. The book opens new avenues for thinking, as new spatial patterns of activity take place and, as the division of labour becomes a core element resulting from the growth in city specialization. This in turn has led to a transformation of urban economies and the ways in which cities should be investigated and understood.

In a rather different way, this thinking is reflected in Martin Crookston's selection of Charlie Gillett's *The Sound of the City*. Rather than looking at how cities have changed, this paper focuses on music and place, together with sound and the city. Although based mainly on the US experience of music, the criticality of place is central, as the role of music is used to describe how the city can be identified by its musical traditions. The enthusiasm of the narrative in terms of its vibrancy and commitment is apparent, but the importance of culture and identity are also working to emphasize the differences and similarities between cities. For planners, this type of argument is novel as it places **emphasis** more on the people and traditions rather than on the physical environment – there is more to cities than just planning.

The last paper in this group comes down to the local level and links urban spaces with the use of that space. Yasser Elsheshtawy has selected William (Holly) Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* to illustrate the role of the *flâneur* as both observer and recorder (through film) of how people relate to open space, and the importance of the quality of that space. There are strong links here between Whyte and others concerned with the urban environment at the neighbourhood level (e.g. Jacobs, Sennett and Gehl), where there is a rejection of the massive and impersonal, and a desire for the human and small scale. There was also a rejection of urban renewal that was fashionable in the 1970s and 1980s, as it was seen as destroying community, but ironically it is now accepted that gentrification could lead to the same outcome.

The last three papers are more sector based, examining the important issues of housing and transport in cities. The narrative from Michael Cohen is interesting, as it strongly promotes the concept of appropriate housing in developing cities and the encouragement of self-help as a new urban housing policy. His inspiration is John Turner and Robert Fichter's *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process*, where the dweller has control over the housing rather than a top down set of procedures that ignore local needs. The importance of this new thinking is that it became central to World Bank strategies for urban assistance to improve the quality of shelter and infrastructure throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. It is argued that market approaches do not provide suitable solutions to housing the urban poor, and that the provision of shelter should be seen as a process that meets needs and not as a capital investment. Even now, there are many houses without people and many people without houses, and this is true in all cities, whether in rich or poor countries.

Stephen Hamnett has taken Hugh Stretton's *Ideas for Australian Cities* as his exemplar, as it provides a defence for the development of the suburban house and garden. Within the Australian context, Stretton argues for smaller and better planned cities, such as Canberra.

But the true significance of the book is in Stretton's arguments that neo-liberalism, when applied to city planning and housing, is not an effective strategy to deliver the fairer city. He was also concerned about opening minds through debate and argumentation so that new ideas can be promoted and eventually assist in the shaping of societal change. From this intellectual position he was able to move thinking away from accepting the *status quo* towards new perspectives that opened debates on the nature of the desirable city, suburb and region.

Transport in global cities has always provided a rich source of debate, as it is a necessary part of the city but at the same time acts as a constraint on the efficiency of the city, and on the wider concerns over equity and environmental degradation. David Banister examines the contribution that Michael Thomson's *Great Cities and Their Traffic* has had on thinking, as it was one of the first books to argue for the use of demand management to allocate scarce road space. It examined a range of global cities and attempted to classify their urban structure in terms of the different approaches to transport planning. It is concluded that although the problems may be similar, the scope and scale of the problems that need to be addressed has increased and that little progress has been made towards a low carbon transport system. The endemic levels of traffic congestion act as a constraint on the development of cities, as well as increasing inequality within cities and lowering the quality of the environment.

For the individual paper authors it has been a revelation rereading these books. For the editors of *Built Environment* it has also been inspiring in terms of what has been written in these eight papers. Although there are differences in approach between the papers and the influence that each of the 'greats' has had on the authors' thinking, there is a rich source of material here that may make you want to go back to the original texts, or to investigate for the first time some of the books covered here. We hope you enjoy the read.