

Book reviews

EMPOWERING SQUATTER CITIZEN: LOCAL GOVERNMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY AND URBAN POVERTY REDUCTION

D. Mitlin and D. Satterthwaite. Earthscan, 2004. Hardback: ISBN 1 84407 100 6, £70; paperback: ISBN 1 84407 101 4, £19.99; 368 pp.

In mitigation of the delay on this review we can plead that the wording of the cover title gives no hint of the considerable relevance of its contents to ICE and *Municipal Engineer*. In eight case studies of programmes to improve the living environments of the urban poor in Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, South Africa, Pakistan, India, Thailand and the Philippines the authors put innovative municipal engineering right at the heart of the empowerment of squatter citizens. This in turn is the key to reducing poverty, which (Mitlin and Satterthwaite argue strongly) must be defined as a function not just of monetary income, but also of access to water and sanitation, protection from environmental hazard and disease, enjoyment of land tenure and cadastral status—and so creditworthiness—and access to the fundamental public protections afforded by the rule of law, especially security from violence and gangsterism.

Between a quarter and a half of the populations of the cities of the south lie outside that magic circle of municipal (properly accountable institutions) engineering (properly serviced living environments). Urban poverty remains highly resistant to conventional policy measures: national standard-setting, top-down improvement initiatives, externally sponsored demonstration projects, and sporadic clean-up actions. In the case of one (unnamed) multilateral urban poverty initiative the official evaluation concluded that ‘there is no evidence that this project has benefited anyone’. By contrast, Mitlin and Satterthwaite offer the programmes described in this book as a set of success stories.

Why? Because they all involve grassroots participation, bringing communities of the poor not just into the design and specification of urban infrastructure but also its financing, procurement, construction, ownership and long-term maintenance. Put simply, they show how the ingenuity and energies of those tens of millions of urban settlers who have been so adept at building their own precarious shelters on the unserved peripheries and marginal spaces of the cities of the south, can be harnessed to the tasks of collective provision.

Of the many themes that link the case studies, five may be of particular interest to present readers. First, localised participation is never enough. As the English working class discovered in the very earliest days of the co-op movement, success flows from federation. Squatter communities empower themselves through

cooperation over credit-pooling, political voice and knowledge-sharing. Whatever the language—Brazil’s *mutirão*, South African *uMfelanda Wonye*, Indian *Mahila Milan*, Thai *Krua Kai*—the keyword is networking. For example, the *Mahila Milan* network of women’s collectives of slum and pavement dwellers provides savings and credit systems and distributes training at grassroots level, while also giving members a collective voice in alliance with the National Slum Dwellers Federation.

Secondly, participatory action can produce excellent value for money, as the authors show by their analyses of project cost and outcomes in infrastructure schemes where resident groups have provided labour and/or materials, maintenance and—to an extraordinary extent—project funding through hard-earned local contributions. The whole collection can be read as a treatise on the classic virtue of thrift. For example, the construction of collector sewers and lane sewers in squatter areas of Faisalabad, Pakistan, for which the community declined NGO funding, preferring self-reliance.

Thirdly, this is a book about pragmatic utilitarianism. Every one of these cases has involved some process of technical compromise over the issue of non-compliance of homes and neighbourhoods of the urban poor with official engineering and planning standards. Part of the solution lies in regulatory flexibility and the use of participatory frameworks to negotiate solutions that are locally appropriate and technically acceptable. For example, the collaborations of engineers and communities to devise customised infrastructure solutions within the ‘micro-planning’ methodology of Nicaragua’s local development programme (PRODEL).

Fourthly, and relatedly, each case involves some shift in the role of engineers, city planners and other technicians. Instead of performing as the guardian of official standards, the expert becomes a facilitator, for example by maintaining the materials warehouse for the Nicaraguan self-builders and the South African women, laying the collector sewer for the lane-by-lane hook-ups in Pakistan, or providing the low-cost land for Philippino grassroots housers.

Finally, as squatter citizens become empowered and regularise their position vis-à-vis the state, they themselves require protection against squatters and free-riders. A subsidiary theme in the book is the community’s search for measures to defend the fruits of their thrift and collective effort, whether through partnership with local authorities or an institutional mutation in which the NGO itself takes on some of the attributes of a

municipality in miniature. For example, the emphasis that the South African Homeless People's Federation puts not just on building homes but on building institutional capacity and strong local organisations that have legitimacy and can resolve disputes.

The editors wrap the collection with a briskly stimulating introduction and two more extended final chapters on urban poverty and the role of local and extra-local organisations. There is some repetition in these concluding pages and rather too many bullet-points for comfort but the point is well taken: participation pays.

M. HEBBERT
Editorial Advisory Panel

SAFER PLACES—THE PLANNING SYSTEM AND CRIME PREVENTION

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister/Home Office. Thomas Telford Publishing, 2004. ISBN 0 7277 3261 7, £19.99, 104 pp.

Safer Places is a guide to planning and designing the built environment to reduce and eliminate crime. The book is essential reading for all designers and, despite the fact that it is intended for new developments, will be of considerable use to anyone engaged in improving existing places that need either minor works or target hardening.

It is intended as a guide for those involved in the planning and design of new development and summarises best practice in 'designing-out' crime in order to create safe and sustainable communities. A series of case studies are used to illustrate these principles from across the UK in housing, retail, leisure and commercial environments.

The editors repeatedly make the point that design excellence and community safety go hand-in-hand. Well-designed sites both attract people and deter crime.

A frequent criticism by some developers and funding bodies is that the designs featured in the case studies are expensive both in terms of the initial capital and the on-going maintenance costs, making an overall scheme unaffordable. In fact the reverse is more likely to be the case. The whole-life cost of a poorly designed and maintained development is much greater when vandalism, dereliction and early redundancy costs are taken into account.

Although the publication is specifically aimed at designers in the UK many of the principles can be easily adopted, sometimes with remarkably little alteration, for international use.

It is almost three years since *Safer Places* was published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM—now renamed the Department for Communities and Local Government, DCLG). However it is still as fresh and relevant as the day it was published. Nothing has time-expired in its advice. The only changes that could be incorporated would be more modern case studies to illustrate the approach.

Of particular merit are the sections on the principles of sustainable communities and crime prevention. Although this section occupies just a few pages at the beginning they, in effect, summarise the philosophy underpinning the remainder of the book. Those who have a responsibility for the creation and management of the built environment might do well to reproduce the table of 'the conjunction of criminal opportunity' and use it as a check list against which they could audit any part of their estate.

If any criticism is to be made of the book it is probably that its examples are drawn too heavily from the affluent rather than poorer communities; that it speaks too much to the mainstream and too little to the marginalised; and that it offers more to the middle-aged than it does to the teenager. However this book supplements a number of others within the 'Cleaner, Greener and Safer' family of publications and these do address these concerns.

I. JENKINSON
Editorial Advisory Panel

GRAPHICS FOR URBAN DESIGN

B. Meeda, N. Parkyn & D. S. Walton. Thomas Telford, 2007. ISBN 978 0 7277 3399 3, £35, 118 pp.

Human settlements are complicated environments which we use and navigate by instinct or through learning processes that are subtle and subconscious. This road is the shortest route. That pub has the best view of the river. Avoid those roundabouts, they will be congested. These bushes could hide a mugger. At this time and season the sun will be shining right there. The place is a dump.

Subconscious spatial perceptions are powerful behavioural triggers. They have a direct effect upon well being. In the aggregate they create social geography, distributing footfall and economic value across the map, making and breaking place reputations. So, those private mental maps are a matter of public interest and professional attention. That is the basis of the activity we call urban design.

It is no easy task to articulate peoples' perceptions of place and space. Urban designers do it partly in words but mostly in images. A variety of drawing, mapping and modelling techniques have been developed over the half century since the phrase 'urban design' was invented in 1956.¹ These tried and tested methods range from simple freehand sketches to elaborate computer visualisations. Some of the techniques are obvious, others are unexpected and counter-intuitive, such as the figure-ground map which only shows building footprints in black against a white background, yet gives an instantly recognisable portrait of complex urban spaces.

Good graphic communication is vital to communicate urban design issues and options to the general public. It also enables engineers, architects, landscapers and other practitioners to communicate with each other in an inherently cross-cutting field of work. It injects something tangible and place-specific to the bargaining of developers, local authorities and other public

agencies. Bad or absent graphic communication has the opposite effect.

We have been lacking an English-language introduction to this important topic. *Graphics for Urban Design* goes a long way to filling the niche. Starting from the various stages of the urban design process, it covers the variety of graphics products (reports, exhibitions, leaflets, presentation drawings, posters, newsletters, digital presentations, websites and 3D models) and the stages of the graphics production process, as well as the basics of photography and cartography. The authors have tried to address the needs of graphic designers entering the world of urbanism as well as urban designers exploring the resources of modern graphic communication. The book will help those who commission graphics for urban design and will certainly be used by those of us who teach the subject and our students.

At £35 for little more than a hundred pages, *Graphics for Urban Design* is not cheap but it is, and needs to be, lavishly illustrated. It carries the sponsorship of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and the Urban Design Group, as well as of a creative graphics collective and four leading urban design consultancies, who provide plentiful examples of work ranging from single images to extended case studies. There are useful commentaries on what images represent and why their graphics do, or do not, succeed. However, the book is noticeably

silent about the licensed digital processes through which most of these images are generated. No software is mentioned by name.

Prospective readers may well be disappointed to find that they are not getting any guidance on the scope, limitations and compatibilities of the packages at the heart of contemporary graphics for urban design. On the other hand, as recent developments with Google Earth and SketchUp have shown, the technology is moving very fast. The ins and outs of graphic and cartographic software have plentiful weekly coverage in the technical magazines. If this book did the same it would have a very short shelf-life. Instead it tries to fly above the turbulence of IT innovation. It gives a clear, pragmatic exposition of *why* the activity of urban design needs graphic excellence. It shows *how* to use graphic design skills. And it goes some way to answering *what* types of image can best convey that elusive thing, human experience in urban space.

M. HEBBERT

Editorial Advisory Panel

REFERENCE

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