

## Book review

### Urban Reports: Amsterdam, Bilbao, Copenhagen, Dublin, Zagreb, Zurich

Nicola Schüller, Petra Wollenberg and Kees Christiaanse (eds). gta Verlag, 2009, ISBN 978-3856-7622-85, £36, 340 pp.

This masterly study of the state of planning and development in six European mid-sized cities provides a fascinating glimpse into current thinking about strategic planning through the eyes of expert practitioners. The book came about as a result of an international symposium in Zurich at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH). Thanks to generous sponsorship, a beautiful book has emerged, containing 18 different contributions broken down into overviews of the competing global and local pressures on mid-sized cities followed by essays from different perspectives on the six cities: Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Bilbao, Dublin, Zagreb and Zurich. At the end is a 30-page section of charts comparing different aspects of city performance.

The book is all the more interesting because there are no British or American contributions, and even Dublin looks to San Francisco and Portland Oregon for models, not to London or Manchester. The book is motivated by the idea that:

In Europe there are approximately four hundred mid sized cities, with populations ranging from 150 000 to 1 million inhabitants. They form a web with an average mesh opening of approximately 100 km. Within this web, 300 million people live in a relatively high quality living environment. This is a uniquely European condition.

What has been called the 'hollow core', the area that lies between the agglomerations of the Randstad, the Flemish diamond and the Ruhr area contains much of Europe's wealth. The mid-sized European cities 'function as symbols of regional identity, centres of culture, knowledge and education, and as transport hubs for goods and people.'

At one level, the case study cities offer achievements that are inspiring others all over the world. But they also share common faults, including the unpredicted side effects of grand projects and global trends. Amsterdam has built an astonishingly complex public transport system, connecting up new communities such as Almere New Town, but it has also seen many of its residents move to family houses in the new suburbs. 40% of Amsterdam's residents are now immigrants and the average commuting time is 36 min (rather than 78 min as stated in the text).

Copenhagen's prospects have been transformed by the bridge that connects it to Malmö across the Oresund. However, as people move away from their workplaces, it becomes harder to keep all the new urban spaces animated, leading Copenhagen to implement an urban spaces action plan. The success of Temple Bar in Dublin in drawing visitors from all over the

world to sample its cultural pleasures has not stopped an unparalleled move to the suburbs, which now cover an area similar in size to Los Angeles. While visitors are impressed by the new tram running through the centre, the reality for most residents is traffic jams. Even Zurich – a model of orderliness – is losing its sense of hierarchy and becoming a 'diverse organism'.

Because its scope is so wide and many of the contributors are designers rather than planners or economists, *Urban Reports* provides a healthy contrast to the arid studies that are limited by what can be measured. Instead of seeing a city as a jigsaw (the analogy used in the comparable work on Phoenix Cities by a team from the London School of Economics), strategic planning is seen as a game of dominoes, which emphasises the multiple players and uncertainties involved. There is an emphasis on the processes as opposed to the products of development. The process is essentially one of trial and error, with lots of debate over many decades:

The secret behind the effectiveness of combining the masterplan, grand project, development agency and process instruments is that they provide coverage of various scales and levels, coupled with the appropriate gradient between control and laissez-faire.

All the cities recognise the importance of landownership or market forces, and the fallacy of relying on zoning plans alone to steer their futures and rebalance their populations. The new approach to planning includes connecting up public spaces and developing visible projects that create focal points. Bilbao captured world attention through the iconic Guggenheim Museum, but this was just one element in a strategic plan that was implemented through a public agency that took over redundant industrial land where the owners had failed to pay their taxes. The Director of the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam, who was born in Zagreb, comments that the 'key aspect of the success of the (Bilbao) model was the importation of managerial expertise from Britain and the establishment of a consensus in decision-making processes.' A focus on projects rather than plans could lead to much more productive use of resources – after all, Bilbao Rea 2000 only employs 25 people.

*Urban Reports* helps remedy the shortage of studies on how planning actually works, as well as providing fresh thinking on what a city is really for and a wealth of excellent maps and photographs. The book also provides some useful tools, such as the abstract grid of 45 min commuting time, which yields a pedestrian area of approximately 4 km<sup>2</sup>. This conflict between creating walkable cities and suburban lifestyles is at the heart of what urbanism is all about. In the words of Vedran Mimlica, 'the urgent question is how to reconcile the city of the spectacle with the real city'.

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