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Book Review of Growth and Transformation of the Modern City

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Book Review

John R. Mullin

The book consists of a group of papers developed for one of a series of symposia to celebrate the centennial birthday of the University of Stockholm. It was organized by the University's Departments of History, History of Art and Human Geography. Invitees included scholars from Sweden, Britain, Finland, Denmark and the United States.

Editors Hammarström and Hall have divided the papers into six sections, representing a rough time line beginning with the seventeenth century and ending with modern town planning, a perspective for the future and commentary on the use and purposes of urban history. In the first section Dr. Marianne Råberg of the City Museum of Stockholm explains the radical planning of Stockholm that occurred in the early seventeenth century as a result of Sweden's ascendancy as a European power. The role of fortification, the influence of the king and the desire to create a capital befitting a powerful nation are emphasized. Dr. Råberg then focuses on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and highlights the growth-decline-rebirth-stagnation cycle that occurred in Stockholm as a result of the decline of Swedish power, disease and conflagrations. She concludes with an analysis of the influence of early industrialization upon the development of Stockholm and reviews the various plans that were created to handle the problems of growth, disease, transportation and commerce.

The second section, entitled 'Nordic Capitals: Growth and Change in the Nineteenth Century', includes papers by the historians Ingrid Hammarström (Sweden), Ole Hyldtoft (Denmark) and Sven-Erick Åström (Finland). Professor Hammarström's paper is an analysis of the relationship between the building construction cycle and the more general business cycle. The results provide a perspective of how the growth of cities is significantly impacted by the interplay of these two cycles. Professor Hyldtoft's paper analyses the role of industrial factory location in the expansion of Copenhagen. He argues logically that industrial factories were capital webs around which significant residential, commercial and further industrial growth occurred. The third paper, by Professor Åström, attempts to explain the development of Helsinki in the light of the various and often competing value systems held by its citizens. Drawing on the works of Burgess and Firey, he explains the influence of class structure and stratification on the building of this city.

Section three focuses on European City Development in the Nineteenth Century. Town planning historian Dr. Anthony Sutcliffe's two papers focus on the experiences of London, Berlin and Paris. In the first, he convincingly shows that a uniquely complex set of political, economic and social conditions controlled the ability of these capital cities to react to growth and change. His second paper examines the factors that governed Haussmann's plans for Paris and, as well, Haussmann's impact upon Parisian architecture. The third paper in this section, by architectural historian Barbara Miller Lane, is an examination of the influence of urban form upon architectural style between 1900 and 1914. Professor Lane points out that, until 1900, there were widespread efforts to reduce the apparent size and mass of buildings 'fit' into the existing fabric. After 1900, she notes that the opposite occurred. Buildings became more unique and their mass became larger than their surroundings. Historian Richard Roger concludes section three with an examination of the role of the building cycle in the transformation of

Scottish towns between 1860 and 1914. He found that the failure of private house builders to develop housing for the lower income market was an important factor in the creation of public housing authorities. The efforts of these authorities were monotonous, homogeneous and dramatically changed the character of the Scottish city.

The fourth section, entitled 'The Modern Metropolis', begins with the geographer Thomas Lundén's paper on suburban growth in Stockholm and is followed by planning historian David Goldfield's comparison of suburban development in Stockholm and the U.S. Professor Peter Hall's perspective of the European city in the year 2000 follows. He begins with a 30-year retrospective view of the forces that have shaped our cities and then offers a speculative commentary on their future. The section concludes with two articles by urban historian Sam Bass Warner. In the first, Professor Warner presents a research strategy for urban history in which he makes a strong case for the metropolitan scale as being optimal for our research efforts. His second paper is a polemic which argues that the net effect of government intervention, often in concert with large corporations, has led to the loss of our former freedoms of property and personal liberty. He sees the movement toward a 'Corporate Metropolis' leading to standardization of design, the creation of uniform community values and increased elitism in terms of community power.

Section five is a discussion of 'The Centre and the City in Modern Town Planning'. Art historian Thomas Hall begins this section with a survey of Central Business District (CBD) Planning in Stockholm between 1928 and 1979. His survey analyses the influences that stimulated wholesale change (and then those that stopped it) and the role of citizens' groups in shaping policy. An essay on the purposes of the City Centre by the Danish architects John Alpass and Erick Agergaard follows. The authors argue against massive change and for planning that reflects the needs of the citizens. Using concepts generated for Copenhagen, they present schemes of various ways to make the CBD more functional. Thirdly, Alison Ravetz presents an analysis of the relationship between the suburbs and the CBD offering both an overview of the failures in CBD planning over the past 50 years and a prospective on the future.

The book concludes with papers by Professor Peter Hall and Dr. Björn Linn. Professor Hall examines the reasons for the failure of several large-scale planning projects. He reviews these failings in the context of uncertainty in the environment, in decision-making and in values. From his examination emerge some tentative recommendations to help improve city planning results. Finally Dr. Björn Linn presents his ideas on the uses of building and planning history. He argues that we view our buildings as 'culturally neutral products'. Because of this, and because of our lack of knowledge of the historic experience of city builders at other times, he believes that we are in danger of leaving our communities in worse shape than we find them.

The papers themselves are, for the most part, quite strong. Particularly high marks must be given to the first Sutcliffe and the Åström papers. What is bothersome is that one really must search for the comparative aspects between Stockholm and the other cities analyzed in the book. In fact only Professor Goldfield overtly and successfully ties in the Swedish experience with another nation. Others such as Åström include American research but do not relate it directly to experiences in other places.

There are also some minor problems with the order. Parts one and two fit nicely. And yet there are certain commonalities between the Hammarström (part one) and Roger

(part three) articles. Both examine the influence of building cycles on development. Unfortunately they are separated by 80 pages. It seems, as well, that both of the Sam Bass Warner essays would have been more appropriate in the concluding section. While both deal with the metropolis, the primary purpose of the articles is to raise concern about future historiographic approaches and the emerging corporate metropolis. His concern with specific metropolises is secondary.

The book's strongest asset is that it brings vignettes of the Swedish experience to English reading audiences. In so doing, it helps to open up further opportunities for comparative urbanism and, as well, provides an interesting overview of the development of cities in a part of the world about which most English readers know very little. For these reasons alone, the book is worth reading and having in one's library collection.