Boomtown 2050: Scenarios for a Rapidly Growing City (review)

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Landscape Journal: design, planning, and management of the land,
Volume 30, Number 1, 2011, pp. 158-160 (Review)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

For a book written by an architect and urban designer, there is a lack of credit for the planners and other parties responsible for the projects. For example, the Houston Metrorail Project (30), which is credited to HOK as the architect, while this project was planned by Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut, and Kuhn (EEK) and involved over a dozen other consultants not listed (Full disclosure, the review's author used to work for EEK). The index only provides a listing of firms and individuals, and does not provide access to the projects by locations or project types. Scale is barely mentioned, a few projects have area, length, or height mentioned in the text, but there is not a discussion about how systems and places vary in function (and complexity) by scale. A more useful (but less provocative) organization for such a book as *The Landscape of Contemporary Infrastructure*, would have been by typology and scale, not the themes selected. There have been several fascinating studies of scale published on the web over the last decade—seeing the contrast in size and density of subway systems from cities around the world, or the scale of a city's ring highway, or of a park area, illuminates geographic distinctions and serve as vital references. That comprehensive book has not been published about infrastructure. Brian Hayes' *Infrastructure—a Field Guide to the Industrial Landscape* (2005), also suffers from the lack of diagrams and scale comparisons (and does not take a critical stance either).

> With the advent of urbanism, land ceases to be mere place. It becomes territory—with order, accessibility, and layered narratives. Infrastructure, by its very nature, is a colonization of land and there is a plethora of examples monumentalizing man's [*sic*] ability to tame and conquer nature through technology and innovation, engineering and infrastructural feats (106).

This quote is a good summary of what the book explores and accomplishes. What is needed is a book that questions the role of infrastructure in our society, which casts a critical eye on the impacts of the "colonization of land," and which chooses examples that are not necessarily beautiful but transcend engineering to perform in a truly sustainable fashion.

In contrast to being a book that "address[es] itself to urban designers, architects, landscape architects, civil engineers, traffic planners, and policy makers," (11) the audiences who will best appreciate and use the wisdom of this book are students the architecture and landscape who do not need quantitative metrics, nor deeply critical analysis of the successes and failures of each project, nor a description of the process or team organization. The design community is still waiting for such a book about infrastructure that provides all those missing pieces, in addition to the provocative critical essays provided by Shannon and Smets.

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Boomtown 2050: Scenarios for a Rapidly Growing City

by Richard Weller. 2009. Perth, Australia: University of Western Australia Press. 453 pages, numerous color photographs, diagrams, and drawings.
$99.95 hardcover.
ISBN13 978-1-921-40121-3

Reviewed by Michael Martin

Perth: the final frontier. To a native of North American suburbs, the story is oddly familiar. A 19th century pioneer outpost becomes established in a regional landscape with few natural boundaries but with abundant marketable natural resources. The outpost becomes a town; the town grows organically and haphazardly, sustains itself through territorial expansion and appropriation/economic exploitation of those natural resources (in this case, primarily minerals and natural gas), experiences tremendous growth during the late 20th century, and by the onset of the 21st century everyone is beginning to reconsider the social/functional/aesthetic tradeoffs as well as the ecological consequences of "spacious" suburbanism sprawling miles and miles willy-nilly from the urban core.

Weller and his team of researchers (based at the University of Western Australia's program of Landscape Architecture) have waded deeply into this reconsideration by engaging the suburbanized Swan Coastal Plain landscape at a regional scale, situating that landscape within a wide-angle global economic/ecological context, and then zooming in to tightly frame their speculative proposals at site scale—or, at least, they begin to accomplish the latter (resolution at site scale is actually more in a category of "future directions" for this work). What we hold in both hands is a weighty, durably bound dead tree tome, beautifully wrought on thick heavy-duty paper, gorgeously and imaginatively illustrated, succinctly presented

in terms of textual elements and data representation. This is quite a good thing, because while the volume builds its case and presents information in a familiar "case study" linear flow, it also invites "dipping in" (the author's term) for sampling of its constituent elements. Readers will appreciate this characteristic.

An introductory section situates Perth in a historic/geographical context. Cheap, plentiful land afforded low-density settlement in the days before any sort of planning controls limited development patterns. Water was not plentiful but was available underground. Residential lots were created so they were large enough to include septic tanks and to provide extensive back-yard landscapes of service and utility; eventually front-side (street-side) landscapes reflected "the importance of façade" and a cultural landscape identification with the English garden traditions from the mother country. By 1928, Perth had also inherited town-planning legislation from the old world, and the standardization of suburban design (lot sizes, configurations, street design standards, land-use relationships, etc.) began to be codified in a legal framework that eventually became writ large across the Swan Coastal Plain.

The "Database" section follows, comprehensively documenting the growth of Perth and its suburbs and tallying figures for the present day: growth rate, demographics, water use, energy consumption, waste accumulation, automobile miles driven, etc., right up to the year 2010, at which point Perth and its suburbs are home to a population of 1.5 million. The "Database" is followed by an intriguing, fun to read section called "Local Culture," which consists of compendiums of snippet quotations from Perth's major newspapers situated around topical issues (the coming growth boom, transportation, suburbia, climate change, etc.). This affords at least a superficial (and considering the source publications, tendentious) glimpse at the warming political climate, as Perth contemplates adding 700,000 new homes over the next 40 years, to double its 2010 population by the year 2050. Boomtown 2050, indeed.

Next comes "Mapping." Suburban Perth is revealed as a linear coast-hugging pattern, a morphology that figures heavily in the development scenarios of the book's latter half. In the "Method" section we get a serving of the inevitable McHargian "tyranny of positivism" tempered by the spirit of "optimism" inspired by the Dutch design firm MVRDV, whose proposals "hybridize natural and cultural systems into ingenious new growth trajectories," whetting our appetite for the Weller team's scenarios (which we've already sneaked a peek at of course by cheating a furtive look at the end of the book). However, before going there for keeps we are treated to a middle section of the book that works wonders in bringing the place alive in a subjective visual sense, following the relentless wonkish numbness of objective charts and satellite-view mappery. This section is called "BAU" (Business As Usual) and its primary feature is a dramatic, other-worldy, Corneresque low-flying oblique-aerial photography tour of suburban development hard up against the unsuspecting brushy rural edges, appropriately titled "The Cutting Edge" (also some ground level shots here, but the aerials are the gobsmackers). "BAU" also contains, in a section titled "BAU+," one of two examples in this book of innovative design independent of this study: the Wungong Urban Water project, a new urbanist community designed "as if landscape mattered." This project, along with an urban Perth waterfront redevelopment project that appears further in, provides "for instance" examples of innovation that has made it over political hurdles and perhaps a bit beyond concept-scheme drawing boards and fabulously seductive image edits.

And then, at last, the innovations. Weller and team split these into "horizontal" and "vertical" strategies. The horizontal schemes seem to acknowledge local culture more successfully, by re-jiggering human-landscape relationships on the ground, usually without yanking the new folks high into the air, Corbu-style, where those facing west-ish are provided with fine sweeping ocean views but everyone up there is detached from any sense of rootedness in any particular home landscape. It's an intriguing collection, these scenarios: the "POD"s (Performance Oriented Developments) re-imagine Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities from 110 years ago, greened-up as eco-burbs. "Food City" re-imagines Frank Lloyd Wright's egalitarian Broadacre City concept (from the 1930s) in terms of intensively interwoven agricultural sustainability, with the implicit presumption that a great many Perthians will live happy, economically productive lives as hi-tech farm workers. "Car Free City" represents a hardy perennial of utopian schemes, exploring what you might do with all that land dedicated to roads and parking (and every inch of the reclaimed landscape re-woven with people-mover devices) *if we can just make everybody give up all those damnable cars.* In "Seachange City" the natural linearity of the regional landscape becomes an armature for an extensive linear mass-transit system that obviates existing motorways, and "Treechange City" imagines

a series of high-density inland villages situated within pockets of umbrageous reforestation.

The vertical scenarios in that one sense seem more detached, merely by being vertical (as noted). On the other hand they do represent strategies for infill as opposed to the total makeover (or greenfielding) that most of the horizontal schemes imply. In this the verticals track better with, for example, the Congress for the New Urbanism's pledge several years ago to favor, in a philosophical sense, infill over greenfield development. "Sky City" is just what it sounds like: soccer fields, rose gardens, and tree houses in the sky; towers distributed throughout existing low-density neighborhoods and urban areas. All this without the modernist site-insensitive blunders of 1960s high-rise urban renewal efforts, of course (the Perth waterfront project mentioned earlier appears here as a workable, real-world high-rise proposal that has passed muster as a politically plausible development). "River City" imagines great contiguous bands of architectural medium-rise densification slung along/across rivers, as well as along major roadways, leaving the spaces between as they exist. "Surf City" acknowledges the linear coast and beach as the organizing armature for Perth, akin to the horizontal Seachange City. And then finally, "Divercity" cobbles all the scenarios up together, treating each as its own discrete but well-connected experimental proving ground—a remarkable vision of landscape as laboratory.

Weller and team are clear all along about the nature of these various scenarios: they are not meant to be particularly site-specific or to be taken too literally with respect to their generalized indications of architecture and development pattern. They are "data-scapes"—big-idea, big-scale speculative work based on a wealth of empirical data. Even so, they remain largely enigmatic and unknowable as places. Wungong and the Waterfront project put a bit of flesh on the bones, and then at the very end of the book we are treated to some architectural proposals for new types of buildings. We are invited to imagine these buildings as components of the regional scenarios, but it's difficult to make that leap. Instead, the architecture intrigues on its own merits, for those who subscribe to *Dwell* magazine, anyway: mass-produced housing akin to contemporary modular commercial/industrial steel-buildings, houses utilizing recycled brick from outmoded tear-downs, modular houses that can be deconstructed and reassembled as resident space needs change, mixed-use developments allowing for flexibility of vertical subdivision. The lot of it extraordinarily fresh, cool, edgy, and landscape-context-free, of course.

That aforementioned "leap" is a big one: not just to imagine these buildings in those landscapes, but these landscapes in Perth. As noted, the authors acknowledge the schemes as conceptual, leaving it to later efforts to adapt them to site and situation. There is more that could be ventured, however, even within the scope of this admirably wide-ranging project. Maybe it is the memory of modernism's clean sweeping solutions, rejecting and even at times annihilating the existing order, that leave some of these scenarios too much in cloud-cuckoo land. Could we investigate/interrogate both the vernacular "sprawl" landscape and the people who inhabit it? What do Perthians have and value now in their city and suburbs that can be a part of the new order? If not low densities, then what—in terms of architecture (will unadorned metal cubes sell to romantic nesting newlyweds who are not architects, one wonders), in terms of gardens, in terms of autonomous mobility, in terms of streets or alleys, in terms of Lynchian "waste space", in terms of the layers of landscape that afford social lubrication among neighbors, between neighbors and non-neighbors. In terms of nostalgia, if your Dad bought that house in 1974 that's featured on the inside cover of this book, and you are the little guy in diapers who wants "in" to the beach-ball game being played on the graciously-scaled front lawn by your older siblings, (two-tone station wagon with chrome luggage rack duly noted) what might that say about what you, the second or third-generation Perthian, might value in 2010? It is a bit of a disappointment to find the comically unsustainable, doomed Tara-inspired "Prix d'Amour" mansion held up for broad-brush ridicule at the end of the book, as if this ostentatious disco-era paradigm of piss-elegance actually can personify (in Peirce Lewis terms) Perth's "landscape as problem." Not very subtle, or persuasive. A dose of deferential, open-hearted J. B. Jackson-style humanism could go a long way in this respect.

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