BOOK REVIEW

Emergent Urbanism. Urban Planning & Design in Times of Structural and Systemic Change

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Emergent Urbanism. Urban Planning & Design in Times of Structural and Systemic Change
Tigran Haas and Krister Olsson (Eds.)
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The book edited by Tigran Haas and Krister Olsson provides a critical and well informed view of the diversity of current and emerging planning and design perspectives, which the editors name 'emergent urbanism', and has, besides the introduction, 17 chapters written by leading authors in the fields addressed. While diversity is a key feature of the emergent urbanism, the various approaches within it have in common some features, including the new media used, the new modes of urban governance and the relationships between citizens and urban governments. The central argument takes urban landscapes and urban structures as an outcome of both urban planning and urban design, on one side, and economic, social and spatial conditions, on the other, which together contribute

to shape urban landscapes. For that reason, as the editors argue, planners and designers need to be aware of the nature and characteristics of this emergent urbanism and how it can affect people's life in the city. Each of the chapters contributes to the discussion of specific aspects of contemporary theory and practice in the fields of urban planning and urban design, and, as a result, readers, in particular planning and urban design students, will find in each of these 17 chapters a broad overview of some of the different perspectives and issues that make up the current debate in the fields of urban planning and urban design, including the challenges cities face due to the widespread use of new information and communication technologies. The book is organized into three parts.

The first part – 'The New Urban Context' – comprises six chapters focused on contemporary and future urban spaces and urban forms. The themes addressed and discussed include, for example, dystopians and utopians future urban forms, the importance of nature inside the city, the role of time in planning and design, the

role and impact of innovative activities in the urban space and urban form, urban informality, and technology in the city. In the first chapter in this section – 'Alphaville and Masdar: The Future of Urban Space and Form?' – Alexander R. Cuthbert discusses the future of urban form, taking as a reference the movie Alphaville and the Masdar city in Abu Dhabi, arguing that there will be no standard tomorrows or universality in urban forms and urban spaces. More important seems to be the argument that the answer to the problem of sustainability is the transformation of capitalism and not so much a question of planning and design. This is followed in chapter 3, 'Imagining Biophilic Cities', by the discussion of urbanism that puts nature in the first place, what Timothy Beatley terms biophilic urbanism, its characteristics and advantages for the human life, although, as he argues, it is unlikely that a singular coherent vision of a biophilic city will emerge, and that such differences will be expressed by different combinations of the characteristics of a biophilic city. In the following chapter, 'A Long View at High Speed', Andrew Ballantyne discusses the consequences that would result if planning and design scaled time instead of space. Ali Madanipour, in 'Creativity, Diversity and Interaction: Urban Space and Place-Making', discusses the importance of culture and innovation in the knowledge economy and its urban impacts, which can have negative consequences in the form of specialized production spaces within urban areas and elite enclaves disconnected from the rest of society, or positive effects if culture is interpreted as a way of life, each perspective producing different urban forms and urban structures. Urban informality, a characteristic of large parts of the urban world, and one that cannot be simply erased, with few exceptions, is discussed by Kim Dovey in chapter 6 'Incremental Urbanism: The Emergence of Informal Settlements', arguing that in this emergent urbanism the form is provisional and contingent and for that reason the focus should not be in the fixed outcome but in the design of adaptive types and in the management of adaptive processes. William Uricchio in the last chapter

in this section – 'The City Seen: Strategies of Coherence, Evocation and Simulation in Urban Representation' – focuses issues related to the presence and role of technology in the city.

The second part – 'Processes of Planning and Urban Change' – comprises six chapters and discusses the role of social capital, the importance of culture in city branding, the cross disciplinary nature of urban design, the nature of place by contrast with that of space, good urbanism, and urban sustainability. In chapter 8, 'Social Capital in the Age of Megacities and the Knowledge Economy', Hans Westlund argues that the industries of the knowledge economy have a need to develop a more complex social capital compared with traditional industries and this seems easier to be fulfilled in megacities. Gregory Ashworth and Mihalis Kavaratzis in the following chapter, 'Cities of Culture and Culture of Cities: The Emerging Uses of Culture in City Branding', examine the limits and pitfalls that result from the use of culture within city branding, suggesting that there is no universally applicable model for the creation of the city of culture. In chapter 10 – 'The Field of Urban Composition' – Mark C. Childs discusses the formation of the discipline whose aim is to shape the collective form of our settlements arguing that despite its long elaboration over time the field is still emerging, what the author calls the field of 'urban composition'. Jonathan Metzger in chapter 11, 'The Subject of Place: Staying with the Trouble', discusses the meaning of place, seen essentially as a relation that enacts both subjects and objects. In the next chapter, 'What is Good Urbanism', Nan Ellin summarizes the characteristics of the emergent paradigm of 'good urbanism', which the author developed extensively in a previous book length publication. Andrea Colantonio in the last chapter in this section, 'The Challenge of Social Sustainability: Revisiting the Unfinished Job of Defining and Measuring Social Sustainability in an Urban Context', provides an overview of the challenges associated with the definition of social sustainability and the changing nature of sustainability indicators, illustrated with the analysis of the case of

Rotterdam's Social Index used to measure a neighborhood's sustainability.

The third part – 'The Urban Design Product' – discusses the impacts in the design and adaptation of urban spaces associated with the end of the fossil fuel age, urban capabilities, flexible planning codes, the role of bottom-up technology, the responsive city, landscape urbanism and new urbanism. Peter Newman in 'Emergent Urbanism as the Transformative Force in Saving the Planet' discusses the rising of a new kind of city where economic growth is dissociated from fossil fuel growth. Saskia Sassen, in 'Does the City have Speech?' discusses urban capabilities, seen as a mode of speech, the speech of the city, whose properties aim to secure cityness. In 'Planning the Emergent and Dealing with Uncertainty: Regulations and Urban Form', Emily Talen discusses how to implement visions of the desired future city, remaining at the same time flexible and open to refinement, and how to deal with the larger structural forces that transform cities. Sarah Williams, in 'The Responsive City: The City of the Future Re-Imagined from The Bottom Up', discusses the limits and pitfalls of technology and how it can transform cities, based on the example of the smart city idea. In the final chapter of this section, 'The Environmental Paradox of the City, Landscape Urbanism and New Urbanism', Douglas Kelbaugh discusses the environmental merits and demerits of urbanism in general and the similarities and differences of Landscape Urbanism and New Urbanism, two planning approaches developed in reaction to modern urbanism, arguing that the sooner these movements and other similar ones act together the better.

In sum, this collection of relatively short essays offers a well-informed and critical overview of some of the emergent trends in urban contexts, and on the new approaches being developed and proposed in the field of urban planning and in urban design. Several key ideas cross the book and come out as critical facets of the emergent urbanism. The idea of diversity in urban contexts, in planning and in design theories and approaches is one such common element. The other is flexibility and the need to combine it with the vision of the desired future city. The idea that there will be no standard tomorrows or universality in urban forms and in urban spaces in the emergent urbanism, as is argued in one the chapters, seems to be implicitly present throughout the book, similar to the vision that there will be no singular coherent vision in the future, as the argument put forward in the case of the biophilic city illustrates. For that reason, it is expected that each of these perspectives will produce different urban forms and urban structures. Also important to note is the idea that the form, whatever it is, is provisional and contingent. For that reason, the focus of urban planning and design should not be in a long range fixed outcome, as in the old days of modernism and its long term physical master plan, but in the design of adaptive types and in the management of adaptive processes. The presence and role of technology in the city crosses also most of these new approaches and this is particularly relevant for all those working or interested in urban e-planning. The uniqueness of the local and the need to take this into account in urban planning and in urban design is also a key idea that seems to be recognized and claimed by the emergent urbanism.

For the information it provides and for the critical insights it offers this book will be of interest for students, researchers and practitioners working in the field of urban planning, including urban e-planning, and in urban design, and for urban policy makers as well.