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URBANISM

Without Effort

an ISLANDPRESS *e-ssential*

URBANISM WITHOUT EFFORT

Reconnecting with First Principles of the City

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES R. WOLFE



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To my father, Professor M. R. Wolfe, 1918–1989,
who taught me how to notice whole places as artifacts,
and to photograph them with care.

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Introduction

“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun.”

—Ecclesiastes 1:9

CITIES, TODAY, PRESENT A SENSE OF EXCITEMENT AND RENEWAL, and an undeniable focus on more sustainable ways of life. A new generation of urban stakeholders boldly experiments with [walkable, compact, and mixed-use neighborhood settings](#), including both public space and transit nearby. In the most dedicated urbanist circles, bicycle use supplants automobile reliance, “pop-up” places and uses expand, and other creative efforts such as [“parking day”](#) challenge conventional thinking about urban land use and transportation.



Figure I-1: Melbourne: old and new



Figure I-2: Madrid: Plaza Mayor: a classical gathering place

These urban stakeholders—residents, pundits, developers, associated professionals, and politicians—care deeply about cities, and frequently discuss the virtues of urbanism in many ways, including casual conversation, social media, or more applied advocacy. While I find these discussions illuminating and commendable, I often note that even the most ambitious references to [transit-oriented development](#), [complete streets](#), walkability, or [carbon neutrality](#) gloss over the basic underpinnings of urbanism. They underemphasize important cues from the rich backstory of urban history, including naturally occurring aspects of city life and foundational examples of non-American venues.

What would we gain from a more deliberate inquiry into the fundamental principles of urban history? Understanding what lies beneath an enticing, well-scaled urban setting a comfortable sidewalk café, children playing safely in an alleyway can inform policy and planning efforts that more fully resonate with the particular culture and context of a place. Without such a preface of integrity, we are left with merely catchy ideas, plucked from a catalog of trendy, oversubscribed options.

Perhaps ironically, traditional and active close-knit spaces and spontaneous human interactions of the historic city are reemerging as key components of a more lively urban future. [Contemporary discussions in America](#) inadvertently embrace approaches that have worked for centuries elsewhere in the world. In the spirit of both déjà vu and amnesia (concepts [combined by](#) American actor/writer Stephen Wright), past precedents implicitly live on with once-considered—but often forgotten—core principles ripe for rediscovery.

Why not make today's urbanist efforts even bolder by better explaining their basis and context? I believe we will achieve the most effective evolution of our urban landscapes only if we first challenge ourselves to fully understand the historical underpinnings of the world's most successful cities, towns, and neighborhoods. These places are not always the most well-known, but they lie in wait for the interested, discerning observer.



Figure 3: Madrid: safe passage

There should be no surprise in this reemergence of familiar elements from historic urban places. Successful community is among the first principles of the human condition, and, at core, city dwellers invariably celebrate environments where they can coexist safely, in a mutually supportive way. I believe such celebration is most notable when it occurs spontaneously—seemingly without effort. This effortless experience is the subject of this book. It is what architectural theorist [Christopher Alexander](#) called the “natural” versus “artificial” city in his landmark article, “The City is Not a Tree”^[1], and it occurs more often in organic old world environments than in the new. It is premised on the successes of the unpredictable, disjointed and overlapping, rather than the prescriptive or planned.

As we rethink approaches to urban planning and redevelopment, such organically evolved places—both past and present—offer striking examples of how to reshape the urban environment [authentically](#). Yet, contemporary discussions tend to underemphasize the fundamental [tension](#) that occurs when the imprecise wonders of a naturally changing city are exchanged for programmed approaches

to place, such as formulaic development proposals, fashionable land use initiatives, or targeted, theme-based populist campaigns (e.g. [Streets for All Seattle](#)). In fact, whether unintentionally or outright, today’s “[placemaking](#)” professionals often—with regard to the smallest [parklet](#) or the largest plaza—ponder how the prescriptive, planned, and programmed can achieve what used to occur naturally and without intervention.

I’m reminded of an essay by Rob Goodspeed that makes a related point. While explaining sociologist Richard Sennett’s *The Uses of Disorder*, Goodspeed explains how visions of city development that indiscriminately mandate technology (light rail) or sustainability-oriented policies (smart growth near transit or work) often miss the real story behind a desired, urbanist “look and feel”—that, in fact, such forms of development were the historical result of authentically evolved complexity, randomness, and conflict over long periods of time.

Almost 100 years ago, similar discussions surrounded a [then-nascent attempt](#) to model “ideal urban neighborhood life.” In the 1920s, community planning movement colleagues of Clarence Perry critiqued preliminary formulations of his “[neighborhood unit](#)” [approach](#), which was authored as part of the Regional Plan Association’s landmark effort to address the repercussions of automobile proliferation, *The Regional Plan of New York and its Environs*. In 1928, Perry’s colleague, the eminent Scottish town planner Thomas Adams, implied the importance of the organic city when he wrote:

[D]iscussions . . . seem to suggest that neighborhood life is something that can be created. All city life is neighborhood life in some form. We should not discuss it as something that is non-existent and can be brought into being, but as something that exists in forms that need to be changed, improved and better organized. (Memorandum, Adams to Perry, January 23, 1928, *Papers*, Regional Plan Association, Cornell University).

As the discussions continue today, the question of authentic versus prescribed urbanism should remain at the center of urban stakeholder dialogue. For example, Trent Noll recently wrote [in Planetizen](#) that the naturally occurring basics of place-

making (i.e., comfort, variety, entertainment, and walkability) have existed from time immemorial in successful cities, and today's design challenge is a more purposeful implementation of these basics with a value-engineered mindset, to spur investment incentives for savvy developers. I do not argue with Noll's premise, but, from my perspective, the dialogue should be more visual, more interpretive, and more focused on the multidisciplinary underpinnings of urban life.

Understanding the history of a place is a gateway to authenticity for today's proffered solutions, and it enhances the quality of urbanist advocacy. A healthy dose of urban history is as essential and exciting as it is nostalgic. As I stress throughout this book, it is essential that we spend the time necessary to rediscover, reinterpret, and wisely reapply the long-term calligraphy of interaction between humans and the urban environment. This especially rings true when community—as the essence of this interaction—can be conveyed or supplemented through media that [inspire the senses](#), much like the original experience of “being there.”

To those ends, the chapters that follow comprise a visually-centered effort examining how we might distinguish underlying, organic relationships between people and cities from indiscriminate prescription imposed upon place. I purposefully balance idealism and realism in assessing 21st century urban environments. And I repeatedly underscore the value of individual observation to discern and implement the “urbanism without effort,” which I believe is the key to creating lasting and sustainable places.