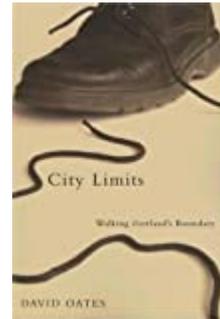




David Oates. *City Limits: Walking Portland's Boundary.* Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2006. 125 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87071-095-7.



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Portland's Bounded Experiment

Metropolitan areas are defined by boundaries. Urban historians are familiar with many of these forms of demarcation, from city and county lines to zoning, special use districts, and the informal mental geographies of class and race. Since 1970 Oregon has constructed another kind of boundary—the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). Designed to manage urban development and protect farmland, Oregon's UGB laws have been considered a model of environmentally friendly “smart growth” policies, with Portland presenting the most celebrated example.

To better understand Portland's UGB and its effect on urban life, author and teacher David Oates set out in 2002 to walk and kayak the 260-mile long boundary. His impressions are recorded in *City Limits: Walking Portland's Urban Boundary*, an engaging book that successfully challenges the notion that the UGB acts as a kind of fence or wall separating the urban and the rural. Instead, Oates argues, the UGB is “Portland's experiment in living with each other,” an attempt to “see ourselves as a community, and to decide, collaboratively, what that meant” (pp. 2-3). Oates suggests that the act of mak-

ing and maintaining the UGB is an exercise in community self-definition, an act that raises questions of what values the community should hold, how those ought to be expressed on the landscape, and who should have the power to promote and defend those values. Ultimately, he suggests, Portlanders have not done an adequate job of addressing those deeper issues, jeopardizing the UGB experiment itself.

City Limits is presented as a conversation rather than a unified narrative. Several of the chapters present Oates's internal dialogue as he walks the hillsides, streets, and riverbanks that make up the UGB. His writing is more descriptive than analytical, focusing on what he observes and encounters along the boundary as he begins to see the UGB as a process of community identification rather than just a line on a map. Oates situates his observations in the broader national and international context, of September 11, 2001, the “war on terror,” the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In doing so he shows how the daily process of negotiating urban boundaries and actions is hidden or masked in the early twenty-first century by the larger and often totalizing matters

of warfare and terrorism. Oates also tries to situate Portland and its UGB in historical context, through the use of imagined dialogues with John Muir and Italo Calvino. Though not always successful—his attempt to recreate Muir’s speaking style seems forced—these dialogues help reveal Oates’s own beliefs that Portland’s experiment is not new to history, but is instead another attempt to define human relationships, to each other and with the land.

In addition to Oates’s narrative, he has included short essays from other Pacific Northwesterners on Portland’s boundary. These essays create a sense of the range of experiences and interpretations of those who have encountered the boundary, and many suggest that the UGB is not just about what gets built where, but about the way urban life in Portland is defined and lived. David Bragdon, president of Metro—the tri-county regional government for the Portland metropolitan area—offers a short essay that suggests that the UGB is “probably better appreciated as a symbol than for its functional values,” that the UGB’s primary role is to “make the city a better place” (p. 41), preferring these standards to the overly precise measures of forecasting that Metro must legally use. Ana Maria Spagna’s essay compares Portland to her small community in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, observing that both locales, though seemingly very different, involve the same issues of human interaction with the natural landscape, interactions that she believes can never be shaped by hard and fast rules but instead by compromises between humans and with nature. Oates’s dialogue with planning student Kelly Rodgers examines the ways that urban planners and anxious homeowners interact, observing that as planners become more defensive, a “public buy-in” becomes increasingly important in making planning work.

Another contribution examines the way the UGB provided for the existence and growth of new kinds of industries that depend on both urban and rural landscapes. Eric Lemelson, of Lemelson Vineyards in Yamhill County, Oregon, contributes an essay explaining the role of the UGB to the survival and growth of local wineries. The UGB, Lemelson argues, protected valuable farmland in close proximity to the Portland urban core, which allowed smaller grape growers to survive by cultivating enough customers to keep their businesses afloat during the crucial early years. By the 1990s Willamette Valley wineries had been around long enough to refine growing techniques and select the best varieties for the soil and climate, and by the twenty-first century these wines had begun to attract global attention. Like many of the contributors, Lemelson prefers a long view of the UGB’s

role, writing that it helps create a “bountiful future for our grandchildren and those that follow” (p. 95).

Although not a work of urban history, urban historians will still find value in this book. Along with Lemelson’s essay the book suggests other aspects of urban development that have been significantly reshaped by the UGB over its thirty-five-year history, from higher densities to mass transit. *City Limits* asks urban historians to consider how urbanites conceived of community relationships, the built environment, and urban-rural interfaces during the 1960s and 1970s when Portland and other cities began creating urban growth boundaries and other anti-sprawl measures, and what has changed between then and now in the public’s interaction with those measures.

City Limits also offers valuable insights on political battles over land use that have recently returned to the political agenda in many states. In November 2004, just as Oates finished his manuscript, Oregon voters passed Measure 37, a “takings” initiative promoted by property-rights groups. Although Measure 37 did not overturn Portland’s UGB, it did mandate that local governments had to either pay a property owner for the loss of land value that theoretically occurred as a result of regulatory action, or rescind the regulation itself. *City Limits* went to press soon after the Oregon Supreme Court upheld Measure 37 in early 2006, leaving in doubt the future operation and existence of the UGB system. Flush with success in Oregon, and riding public backlash to the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2005 decision in *Kelo v. New London*, property-rights groups have put similar measures before voters in other states. Initiative 933, a nearly identical version of Measure 37, is on the Washington State ballot this fall (2006), and a related initiative designed to limit government land use planning power is on the California ballot as Proposition 90.

Oates suggests that defenders of smart growth and UGBs have done a poor job of engaging the public in the land use planning process, making themselves vulnerable to the challenge from property-rights groups. Oates cites Metro’s decision to expand the UGB in 2002 toward the sparsely populated regions of Damascus and Boring, instead of resolving long-standing debates in Washington County, as an example of Metro’s failure to effectively incorporate public discussion into their decision-making. This effort to expand is also seen by Oates as an avoidance of fundamental issues regarding urban planning, leaving him to conclude that Metro was “heavy-handed and aloof” (p. 102) in making seemingly arbitrary decisions

and therefore susceptible to a property-rights movement that couched its aims in populist terms.

With *City Limits* Oates has attempted to reveal and publicize the kind of public dialogue about urban boundaries, and ultimately, about urban life that the land use planning process in Portland has failed to promote. A wide-ranging and inclusive conversation, Oates believes, is already out there, in trailer parks and coffeehouses and on buses, and should be encouraged and made a more direct part of urban planning. This would be crucial in

blunting what he calls the “privatizing mentality” (p. 41) behind the property-rights movement, which Oates believes wrongly denies the connectedness of urban life.

Whether or not this book can further that discussion is up to Portlanders. What Oates has accomplished is a wonderful account of where that conversation stands today. *City Limits* is a snapshot of Portland in the early twenty-first century, a metropolis struggling to determine what its core values are, and what kind of metropolis it wishes to become.

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