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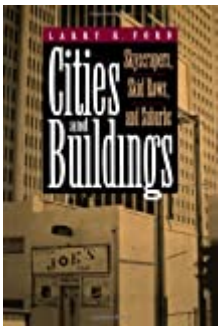

Larry Ford. *Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows, and Suburbs (Creating the North American Landscape).* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. xiii + 304 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4646-5; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-4647-2.

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In *Cities and Buildings*, Larry Ford offers an original approach to North American urban geography. The book will be praised by some as filling a long-standing vacuum and it will be castigated by others who demand a more theoretical treatment. I've enjoyed reading the book, it is a useful addition to my urban bookshelf, and a wonderful source of information to add colourful anecdotes to my undergraduate urban geography course. It's a must acquisition for any university library that supports urban geography, urban history, architecture, or planning. The chief shortcoming is that the theoretical development is very weak: there is almost no social to this history and little human to this geography. This book is about cities and buildings and says comparatively little about economic, cultural, ethnic or transportation issues that are the foci of most introductory treatments of urban geography. In my view, this omission is justified to redress the near absence of architectural issues and observations in many of the mainstream geography text books.

The book is organized by building type and land use. There are separate chapters on the downtown core and skyscrapers, the "frame" or zone of assimilation immediately outside the Central Business District, commercial structures, single family dwellings, multi-family dwellings, and the suburban commercial strip. A final chapter discusses recent architectural innovations and speculates on future architectural trends. The emphasis is on vernacular architecture and not on the spectacular exceptions to the rule represented in coffee table books. Each chapter describes the historical development of a building type, and discusses how it helped shape many contemporary cities in North America and a limited number from overseas. For example, the chapter on commercial buildings, titled "Places to Shop", begins with medieval market squares. It moves on to eighteenth century European arcades; the emergence of department stores; shopping centres, malls and the decentralization of retailing; "industrial chic retailing" and the adaptive reuse of places and structures such as Boston's Quincy Market-Faneuil Hall; and coming full circle, San Diego's Horton Plaza exemplifying the latest downtown retailing trends in festival centres.

This is an original approach in urban geography because the field has for many years been dominated by a positivist orientation and an emphasis on social and economic issues, despite the appearance of Marxist, humanist, feminist, and post modernist alternatives. Until very recently, the nitty gritty of how the city looks, the urban designs that give a unique character to urban places, and the succession of building styles that differentiates neighbourhoods were not a concern for most urban geographers. (Two notable exceptions are the funky *Close-Up:*

How to Read the American City by Grady Clay (University of Chicago Press, 1973) and Ted Relph's more theoretical *The Modern Urban Landscape* (John's Hopkins University Press, 1987).) As one who cut his teeth on the various editions of Maurice Yeates' *The North American City* (Harper and Row, 1990), I always thought that my students and I were missing something of the reality of urban places that we stroll in, drive past, and hurry through when we are afraid.

By describing some of the historical trends in the development of arcades and department stores; row houses and bungalows; skyscrapers and skid rows; Ford provides a well organized compendium of the architecture and architectural history of North American cities. Thus the book is an ideal companion volume to any of the more traditional texts emphasizing urban-economic and urban-social geography. And because of its logical organization, it is easy to find things. But it is not as useful as it could be due to the paucity of systematic citations and absence of documented empirical support. For example, Ford offers an interesting argument about house size trends in the United States (pp. 169-171). Single family house size peaked with the rambling Victorian eclectics of the 1880s, declined to a trough marked by the tiny post-war bungalows built in both Canada and the U.S. c. 1950, grew to a peak with the "monster houses" of the 1980s, and may now have begun to decline once again.

The houses of the late 1940s and early 1950s were about 12 percent smaller than those built ten years earlier. In addition, many of the frills –porches, garages, formal dining rooms, and fireplaces –were eliminated in order to cut costs. The typical house had just under 1,000 square feet, and many "economy houses" had as little as 650 square feet. (p. 163).

This is the sort of fascinating detail that makes Ford's book so useful and readable. But if he inspires me to follow up on this and investigate house size trends in Canada, say, I am left high and dry. I can't easily verify his assertions and I am offered few clues about the where previous research on this subject has been done or about how one might replicate the results. So we have to accept Ford's arguments at face value. This is justified by a desire to maintain a conversational rather than a scholarly tone (p. xiii). It may make the book more readable but does a disservice to the many researchers who will be inspired yet frustrated by Ford's accomplishments.

Paradoxically the book is both too theoretical and not theoretical enough. A positivist might argue that it is "too theoretical" in the sense that Ford offers many little explanatory generalizations but without the necessary rigorous empirical testing. This is not always a bad thing as these poorly supported but intriguing generalizations open the door for further empirical research leading to more formal theoretical progress. I can thank Ford for inspiring me to ask a number of interesting questions that could lead to future research.

But many others will argue that the book is theoretically empty. They will complain that it is too descriptive and the generalizations are shallow. It does not develop any of the 'isms in vogue and remarkably little is said about institutions such as the Federal Housing Authority, that have had such a powerful influence on cities and their buildings. There is no overarching theoretical argument that runs throughout the book, indeed there is no conclusion! It ends with a whimper, kind of like a Warren Miller ski film, lots of spectacular footage but there is no denouement, the plot is never laid bare, the scales don't fall from our eyes, and there is no "Eureka" experience in the final scene. But this too may not be a bad thing as post modernists have become increasingly sceptical of heroic efforts to construct sweeping "meta-narratives".

I don't think that this critique will concern Ford very much. His goal is to examine the evolution of vernacular architecture in an urban American spatial context. He wants to "thicken our two-dimensional spatial models" and by "fleshing out city structure with real landscapes" (p. 9) he makes a tangible contribution to the manifest links between geography, architecture, and social history. He has achieved his goal. But without theory or conclusion, he leaves the task of forging those links to future students of cities and buildings.