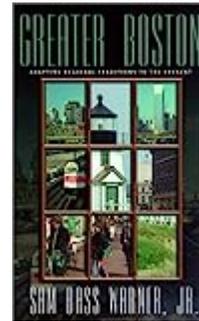




Sam Bass Warner, Jr. *Greater Boston: Adapting Regional Traditions to the Present.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. xvi + 244 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-1769-8.



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Warner's Boston

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Sam Bass Warner, Jr.'s most recent book *Greater Boston: Adapting Regional Traditions to the Present* is the inaugural volume in a series on metropolitan areas. Entitled "Metropolitan Portraits", this project of the University of Pennsylvania Press aims to explore "the contemporary metropolis in its diverse blend of past and present." Each book describes an urban region in North America "in terms of historic experience, spatial configuration, culture, and contemporary issues." In addition, each volume is "intended to promote discussion and understanding of metropolitan North America at the start of the twenty-first century."

Anyone interested in the state of urban history will be interested to see how Warner initiates the effort with his meditation on the meaning of tradition and place in the Boston region. A well-known contributor to urban history with a long-standing reputation, Warner deserves serious attention when he turns his mind and pen to a topic. Currently Visiting Professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he is the author of numerous land-

marks in urban history. His publications include: *Street-car Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston 1870-1900* (1962); *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (1968); *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (1972); *The Way We Really Live: Social Change in Metropolitan Boston Since 1920* (1977); and *Province of Reason* (1984). These last two books articulated Warner's views on the Boston metropolitan region but in the current work he offers a penetrating appraisal of a new urban form - metropolitan Boston. This he defines as an area encompassing some 4,200 square miles of eastern Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire with five million people and the nation's fourth most populous metropolis. He observes that "the domination of the old city of Boston and the largest mill towns is weakening, and clusters and subcenters of all kinds are springing up along the highway spider web" (p. 3).

This work is guided by questions about: the contemporary viability of the New England town and its open town meeting; the people who keep city and town traditions alike; the nature of the regional economy; popular culture; and Bostonians' dependence on their natu-

ral surroundings. Warner set out to capture the nature of this metropolitan Boston by reading newspapers and conducting interviews of his fellow-citizens. He then read “the histories and background material my informants’ concerns suggested to me” (p. xiv) and drew upon his own considerable body of impressions and ideas regarding Boston and the process of urbanization.

Noting that “city building is always a process of bit-by-bit additions so that the lineaments of the past continue to assert themselves directly and indirectly” (p. 19), Warner provides an overview of the geological history of the Boston region and demonstrates the enduring patterns established by rivers, railroads, and highways. He traces the economic development of a region that “possesses few resources save water and people” (p. 35).

A series of portraits of contemporary entrepreneurs establishes Warner’s point that “a culture of continuing innovation and tradition” (p. 45) has come to mark the region. A firm such as the shoe manufacturer Rockport is “a perfect metaphor for the entire economy of the region” because its only advantage is “access to an abundance of capital” and “the energy, experience, and imagination of its staff and executives” (p. 69).

Another series of contemporary portraits illuminates the new version of the “Yankee,” one that leaves behind the old restrictions against Catholics, Jews, African-Americans, and recent immigrants. Here Warner concentrates on the issues of education in a region sharply divided along a dozen fault lines. Inspiring stories of devoted teachers and parents do not obscure Warner’s admonition to Bostonians. He urges residents of greater Boston to “reclaim our historic leadership in public education by fostering curiosity and education within our own adult lives, and thereby joining with teachers and children to foster a climate of learning in our public schools” (p. 106).

Most readers will be surprised and perhaps persuaded by Warner’s account of music in Boston. He wryly notes that the region’s musical life resembles the circumstances of sexual activity years ago when everyone did it but few talked about it. Warner credits Boston music schools and institutions “with giving the area its unique qualities of a wide range of styles and a deep assembly of trained professionals and amateurs” (p. 111-112). The region’s history and traditions nurture certain qualities in music making. These he identifies as a focus on popular melodies and harmonies, an emphasis on lyrics that is connected to the region’s literary traditions, and a desire to reunite the music of churches, concert halls, theaters,

and nightclubs (p. 141-142).

Greater Boston concludes with an account of highways and parks and case studies that demonstrate both the problems and solutions of land use in an age of sprawl. Warner observes that in 1950 the term development was a term of hope (p. 202) but now can be used as a swear word. Similarly, in 1950 the automobile was regarded as “a hallmark of freedom”, but in a region where public transportation accounts for only ten percent of the region’s trips, the car has produced a “hornet’s nest of surprises” (p. 205). The cultural consensus of the 1950s, which dictated the continuous creation of suburban homes dependent upon cars and malls, created the greater Boston Warner has portrayed.

So what does Warner make of it all? What are the prospects? He envisions two alternative futures for the Boston region. If current trends are carried into the future, the regional dispersal would continue and more roads and highways would be constructed. The resulting “repetition of uniformities” in roads and housing would mean the loss of Boston’s particularity and value. Water shortages, traffic delays, strip malls and a shortage of affordable housing all will predominate unless corrective actions are chosen. And Boston will increasingly resemble every other area of the nation except that it has a seashore and lots of trees (p. 212).

The alternative future would be where the preservationists and the environmentalists team up with those concerned with affordable housing to bring “a positive new politics” to the fore (p. 211). Wealthy towns within the region have long known how to preserve and improve their special advantages. The challenge Warner raises is whether other cities and towns will choose family, community, and environmental goals that will allow them to create a better life.

Warner advances the field of urban studies yet again with this perceptive, entertaining, and beautifully written portrait of the greater Boston region. That Warner establishes a high standard for others in this series of metropolitan portraits is no surprise. The pen and ink illustrations that Warner added to the volume as a sort of “visual essay” may be a surprise and are certainly a pleasure. They help the reader to appreciate the variety and beauty of the region as well as Warner’s love for it.

That affection combined with wisdom is the strength of the book. Warner’s acute eyes and ears allow him to realize a lasting portrayal of greater Boston at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Contemporaries

are indebted to him for his snapshot interviews and the good advice he offers while future generations will profit from this portrayal of life in the late twentieth century. Those prospective readers will learn much of how the metropolitan region appeared to both the numerous citizens the book draws upon and to the esteemed master of his subject. They will be even more indebted to Warner if his advice is followed in the present and near future.

Several small editorial points may be apparent to a few readers interested in ecclesiastical matters and of interest to fewer. It was Augustinian Friars or Fathers - not Brothers (p. 182) - who staffed St. Lawrence O'Toole Parish and Merrimack College. The Framingham parish

cited on p. 188 is actually St. Tarcisius, not Tarcinius.

This book is attractive and useful for a wide audience. It should be required reading for an inquisitive citizenry, its representatives in government, and all those engaged in developing and implementing public policy in New England. It may be of benefit more widely in college and university courses dealing with urbanization and metropolitan life in the United States. Any other persons with the desire to acquire a long-term and wider view of an important region would do well to read this book because Warner's observations about the metropolitan future have national implications.

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