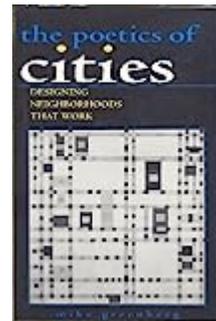


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Mike Greenberg. *The Poetics of Cities: Designing Neighborhoods That Work.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1995. xiv + 288 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8142-0657-7; \$62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0656-0.



Reviewed by Robert A. Jones (Portland State University)

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In *The Poetics of Cities* journalist Mike Greenberg expresses his dismay at the postwar development of his hometown, San Antonio, Texas. As a columnist for the *San Antonio Express News* and a keen observer of urban planning and design issues in his city, Greenberg has had ample opportunity to gain insight into the course of development San Antonio has taken. With *The Poetics of Cities* he has worked these journalistic insights into a book filled with suggestions for improving not only his own city, but any city that has experienced the automobile-dominated development of the past half century.

Greenberg's indictment of postwar American urban development in San Antonio and, by implication, elsewhere should sound familiar to anyone versed in the works of Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, or any of the New Urbanists (A. Duany, P. Calthorpe, D. Kelbaugh, etc.). As Greenberg puts it: "In our rush to build houses and roads and shopping malls and office parks and guardhouses—lots of guardhouses—we neglected the basic principles of sustainability, livability, and economic progress. We built things, but we forgot how to build communities" (p. xii). There is hardly anything new in this statement. It has been made countless numbers of times since Mumford's day.

Too often the automobile is viewed as the source

of urban sprawl and the loss of a sense of community. On the surface the solution to such problems seems rather simple: do away with auto-oriented development. Greenberg, however, poses a somewhat different solution. Asserting that there is a role played by the physical structure of the city in shaping social interactions, he also recognizes that most cities will continue to build commercial corridors dominated by wide streets and the private automobile, anathema to pedestrians and face-to-face interchange. How, then, to return the sense of community while still accommodating an auto-oriented society?

For Greenberg the answer to this question is to be found within the conception of the city as, most fundamentally, a marketplace. In the first section of *The Poetics of Cities*, entitled "A Theory of Cities," he argues that since its inception the goal of the city has been to foster exchange. It is through economic, social, and intellectual exchanges that value is created. Cities evolved, he argues, to optimize the efficiency with which such interactions could be transacted. Diversity and proximity are certainly features of the city that help to foster this wealth-creating exchange. So too are the physical structures of the marketplace and the various pathways and other connections that lead people there.

In the second section, "A Practice of Cities," Green-

berg delves into issues of the physical design and layout of the city. He explores how the arrangement of space and structure can encourage exchange, and how this, in turn, affects the wealth-creating ability of the city and its various neighborhoods. There may be something of an overtone of environmental determinism in this section, as the author explores how various features of the built environment can promote or inhibit the circulation of people, an essential component for the exchange of goods, ideas, and money. More interesting, however, and this is what distinguishes Greenberg from the New Urbanists, is his discussion of strategies “to accommodate the car and large, mass-market businesses while at the same time making the city more congenial to pedestrians, children, small businesses, and neighborhood life” (p. 55).

In the third section, “Policy and Politics,” Greenberg acknowledges that even marginal improvement to the wealth-creating exchange function of the city involves politics. “Every urban design policy and practice expresses a particular set of beliefs about how resources should best be allocated and how people are expected to relate to one another—how society is supposed to work. But people differ about what is important” (p. 243). The emphasis in this section is on the importance of participation in political processes, in the building of alliances, and in the search for design solutions that are capable of satisfying a wide range of divergent interests. To foster a better environment for exchange the city designer/builder cannot be viewed as working for a singular client. In his concluding remarks Greenberg puts it thus: “As individuals we are larger, more potent, more effectual, because in the well-made city our sphere of action and partici-

pation is enlarged. The boundary of the self expands to include the entire gift community. That, above all, is the promise of the city” (p. 271).

Anyone looking for great historical insight into questions of how and why our postwar cities have developed in the directions they have is likely to be disappointed in *The Poetics of Cities*. Greenberg offers little that is new or different in this regard. In looking at such issues the historically minded reader could delve into the sources that Greenberg uses but for the fact that few are cited, and the work lacks a bibliography. However, to the urban designer, planner, neighborhood activist, and anyone interested in the quality of urban life there is much of interest in the author’s assertion that the automobile will continue to dominate urban development for the foreseeable future and must, therefore, be accommodated. Also of interest is an understanding of how better urban design might be translated to greater economic and social return.

These points in combination with a practical, design-oriented course of action at the neighborhood scale form the core of Greenberg’s work. It is here that the *The Poetics of Cities* makes a valuable contribution to a literature seeking change in the methods with which we design and build cities. For this reason Greenberg’s voice deserves some attention as it calls us to realize more fully the potential of urban life.

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