

THE VOLUNTARY CITY. CHOICE, COMMUNITY, AND CIVIL SOCIETY. BY DAVID T. BEITO, PETER GORDON, AND ALEXANDER TABARROK, EDs. ANN ARBOR: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS AND OAKLAND, CALIF.: INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE, 2002.

Modern-day urban planning emerged at the turn of the twentieth century when various individuals involved in architecture, engineering, public health and social reforms found a common ground for their respective agendas. To summarize, some architects were interested in design problems on a scale larger than single buildings, while engineers involved in the design of infrastructure elements and public utilities were attempting to coordinate their projects with large-scale land use and housing initiatives. Meanwhile, public health advocates thought it primordial to separate noxious industries and residential neighborhoods. Finally, self-styled social progressives thought they could reform pathological behaviors by providing urban workers with better living conditions. In the eyes of these reformers, the time had come to substitute managerial expertise for both “machine politics” and the anarchic marketplace.

Urban planning as a profession was first recognized in the United Kingdom in 1914 with the founding of the British Royal Town Planning Institute. Similar recognition later followed in virtually every socialist and market economy.

The planners’ prescription for ailing cities, based on grand visions of high-rise public housing projects, open spaces, and a strict separation of commercial and residential functions, was supposed to bring cities back to life, to provide better housing for the poor, to cut crime rates and make the streets safe. The only problem was, the more cities were “renewed,” the worse they got. In the process, what turned out to be “planned chaos” destroyed much accumulated built and social capital.

Faced with a growing public outcry, the city planners’ outlook has changed drastically in the last two decades. In the process, they have rediscovered the supposed virtues of the traditional city’s high-density mix of housing, businesses, and industry. Indeed, the scourge to be defeated nowadays has turned out to be the traditional planner’s vision of car-oriented suburban areas filled with single-house dwellings that a vast majority of the public now seems to be enjoying.

Despite its seemingly endless string of shortcomings and failures, urban planning is just as pervasive today as it was a few decades ago. Of course, the main reason for this state of affairs is not so much the general benefits that it delivers, but rather the powerful constituencies it has built. For instance, zoning laws long ago became a

powerful rent-seeking tool for retailers trying to keep competition at bay and property owners anxious to maintain low-density housing without having to pay the real cost. In short, over the last century, decision making in most urban jurisdictions has become more intensely politicized, with the concomitant results of bureaucratic inflexibility, waste, nonaccountability, and corruption.

Another reason for the lack of challenges to current urban practices, however, is that, despite much recent talk on the virtues of “social capital” and “civil society,” most people have now forgotten that various spontaneously evolved tools and institutions actually proved more effective at improving city life than those that were later created through political actions.

It is in this context that historian David Beito and economists Peter Gordon and Alexander Tabarrok’s collection of essays, *The Voluntary City*, is so important. The editors have assembled a diverse array of contributions (which, although often previously published, greatly benefit from being gathered under one cover) which convincingly illustrate how various needs that are today thought of as being the government’s natural province, ranging from education to transportation to housing, crime control and park maintenance, were and could be better provided by voluntary exchange.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first, “Building the Voluntary City,” historian Stephen Davies shows that private-property rights and contracts made the urbanization of Victorian England an orderly process despite its fast growing population. Historian David Beito then tells the history of the private places (or self-governing enclaves) of St. Louis where streets, sewers, electricity, and even governing structures were all provided by the private sector in much less wasteful ways than these functions were later supplied by political monopolies. What the private sector did for residential areas, it also did for manufacturing districts, as historian Robert Arne reminds the reader in his chapter on Chicago’s “Central Manufacturing District.” Economist Daniel Klein also traces the efforts of private turnpike companies that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, replaced the earlier system of governmental highways that had fallen into decay.

The second section, “Law and Social Services in the Voluntary City,” similarly illustrates how the law and the provision of social services were often a fact of life without state intervention, although I suspect that it will be viewed as somewhat of a digression by people who will have been attracted to this book by its title. Be that as it may, the various chapters on the law merchant, the private provision of police in eighteenth and nineteenth century England, and the private provision of education in England and Mutual Aid Societies in England and America once again provide much needed counterpoints to the modern “market failure” perspectives on these topics.

Finally, the chapters in the last section, “The Voluntary City and Community,” get back to more conventional urban issues, although once again in a most unconventional way. Economist Fred Folvary thus presents the theory and history of proprietary communities, and explains how they can deliver public goods and services that are usually assumed the domain of governments. Economists Donald Boudreaux and Randall Holcombe similarly argue that in many respects the governance structures that arise in the market (such as condominium associations and corporations) typically outperform those of conventional cities and towns which never deviate from the one person—one vote rule. Finally economist Robert Nelson explains how older established neighborhoods can gain the advantages of proprietary communities while

social anthropologist Spencer Heath MacCallum makes the case for land lease versus subdivision.

Perhaps the best concise summary of this book is given by editor Alexander Tabarrok in his concluding chapter. As he points out, where most urbanists see market failures, the authors of *The Voluntary City* see market opportunities. Needless to say, such a perspective will come as a shock to theorists and practitioners whose *raison d'être* is built around notions such as public goods and externalities.

While *The Voluntary City* is mostly an attempt to provide a stepping stone to illustrate how services that are currently provided by politicized bureaucracies could be better delivered through market-based arrangements, the editors have had the good sense to frame their discussion not so much in terms of market versus public planning, but rather along the lines of civil society (which includes not only market processes, but also nonprofit firms and other not-for-profit organizations) versus bureaucratic-political procedures. (But while this may be a good rhetorical strategy, I suspect that in its present-day incarnation, the nonprofit sector has essentially become nothing more than a grab bag of cheap-labor extensions and lobby groups of government agencies and that casting too much hope in it might prove disappointing. Yet, reminding readers of what it once was and might again be is a useful task.)

What chances does *The Voluntary City* stand of becoming the road map of the current and the next generations of community activists and urban politicians? While, to some degree at least, it challenges the dominant urbanologist tradition almost as much as another urban tract for the ages, Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (first published in 1961), I suspect that it will not build the kind of outside constituency that will force academics and bureaucrats to address it in their work and teaching. Nonetheless, it lays seeds of unconventional thoughts that might, perhaps through reviews and excerpts on the internet, eventually find their way to a new generation of students who might find its tone and content refreshingly different from the current post-modern charabia that has become the mainstay of urban studies. Be that as it may, *The Voluntary City* was a necessary first step and the editors are to be commended for the quality of the final product they delivered.

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