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Book Review

Resilient Cities: Responding to Peak Oil and Climate Change
by Peter Newman, Timothy Beatley, and Heather Boyer, Island Press, 2009, $35.95

Cities as Sustainable Ecosystems: Principles and Practices
by Peter Newman and Isabella Jennings, Island Press, 2008, $41.95

by Don Alexander, MCIP, Vancouver Island University

Yogi Berra once said that “the future ain’t what it used to be,” and that’s certainly true for planners. In the past, planners’ activities were aimed at facilitating economic growth, disciplining and directing development, creating transportation infrastructure, and building needed community facilities. Although we have begun to pay lip service to the ‘new issues’ looming on the horizon, in large measure we have been acting as if the future will be a linear projection of present trends.

However, as these books show, the future will throw everything that has become familiar—all of business as usual—out the window. In particular, peak oil and climate change—or so the authors argue—will mean that we will have to abandon urban sprawl, transportation systems organized around personal motor vehicles, overweening dependence on global trade (especially food), and will no longer be able to rely on dependable weather and stable ecosystems.

There is considerable overlap between the two books. Cities as Sustainable Ecosystems is organized around the excellent Melbourne Principles that were conceived at a charrette in Australia in 2002 and endorsed by local governments that same year at The Earth Summit + 10 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The ten principles (and chapters) deal with vision; economy and society; biodiversity; ecological footprints; modeling cities on ecosystems; building on sense of place; empowerment; partnerships; sustainable production and consumption, and governance and hope.

Resilient Cities is more focused on what cities can do to pre-
Book Review (cont’d)

pare themselves to survive and thrive in a post-oil era of modified climate. It begins by sketching out four possible future scenarios: collapse of urban systems, re-ruralization of urban areas, divided cities, and the resilient city.

The ‘collapse’ scenario has much in common with the historical episodes discussed by Jared Diamond in his book of the same name where societies exceed the limits of their resource base, suffer a decline in organized systems of production and governance, and then a correspondingly massive shrinkage in population.

Re-ruralization envisions that city dwellers will be required to become more self-provisioning as supply regions contract. The proponents of this vision advocate that vast open swathes of suburbia will need to be converted to food production. The problem with this scenario, as the authors point out, is that it ignores the millions of inner city dwellers who will have to be deconcentrated somewhere (thereby contributing to sprawl), who currently have little access to food-growing land and who will have few means of making a living.

The divided cities (and, by extension, divided countries) scenario is one where the rich and powerful look after themselves and kick the less fortunate out of the life raft, sealing themselves into fortress communities with whatever resources they can sequester.

Finally, the resilient city is one in which urban communities become more adaptable to change and more in balance with their respective bioregions and with the biosphere as a whole. The authors draw their definition of resilience from ecology where the term refers to “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure.” The degree of resilience “may be measured by the magnitude of the disturbance the system can tolerate and still persist” (p. 6). To reinforce the point, they give the example of Atlanta and Barcelona. Atlantans consume 782 gallons of gasoline per year, the residents of Barcelona 64. Which city will best be able to cope with inevitable oil shortages?

After articulating the threats associated with what they call the “double whammy” of peak oil and climate change, and the benefits of cities becoming resilient, they describe a vision for revitalized cities built around: renewable energy, carbon neutrality, distributed infrastructure, harnessed photosynthesis for food and fibre, closed-loop systems for raw materials and wastes, an emphasizing and reinforcing of sense of place, and sustainable transport systems. This latter point is also addressed in a separate chapter. The book ends with what the authors describe as “ten strategic steps towards a resilient city.”

The authors of these books definitely have their fingers on the pulse of something. In recent years, the notion of the resilient city has moved closer to the mainstream. Not only is it manifesting itself in the transitional towns movement, Metro Vancouver made it part of the structure of its winning entry into the 2001 international competition for a 100-year sustainability plan, where considerable attention was given to how the region could prepare itself to withstand a variety of shocks.

And, more recently, it was the theme of a major conference in Vancouver attended by over 600 delegates from a broad cross-section of industry, government, and civil society who came together to discuss ideas and applications for healing our beleaguered cities—focusing not only on threats, but the enormous opportunities that await those with vision.

The strength of both books is that the authors provide an abundance of case studies and examples of their proposed principles and strategies. Weaknesses include being heavy on the rhetoric, not always dotting ‘i’s and crossing ‘t’s in terms of explaining concepts or implementation problems, and allowing some ideas to sound more straightforward than they are. For instance, they make frequent reference to organizing within bioregions—a worthy concept—but, as I have shown elsewhere, bioregions can always dotting ‘i’s and crossing ‘t’s in terms of explaining concepts or implementation problems, and allowing some ideas to sound more straightforward than they are. For instance, they make frequent reference to organizing within bioregions—a worthy concept—but, as I have shown elsewhere, bioregions can be challenging to define.

While short and sweet, these books are not elegantly written. They feel like first drafts and could have been more tightly edited; they also need more comprehensive indices. Nonetheless, they are wonderful resource books on urban sustainability, especially because they synthesize a wide range of theory and practice and provide a strong overview of the directions we need to go if cities worthy of the name are to persist. In addition to being useful for practicing planners, Resilient Cities and Cities as Sustainable Ecosystems would make good textbooks for university-level courses in planning.