#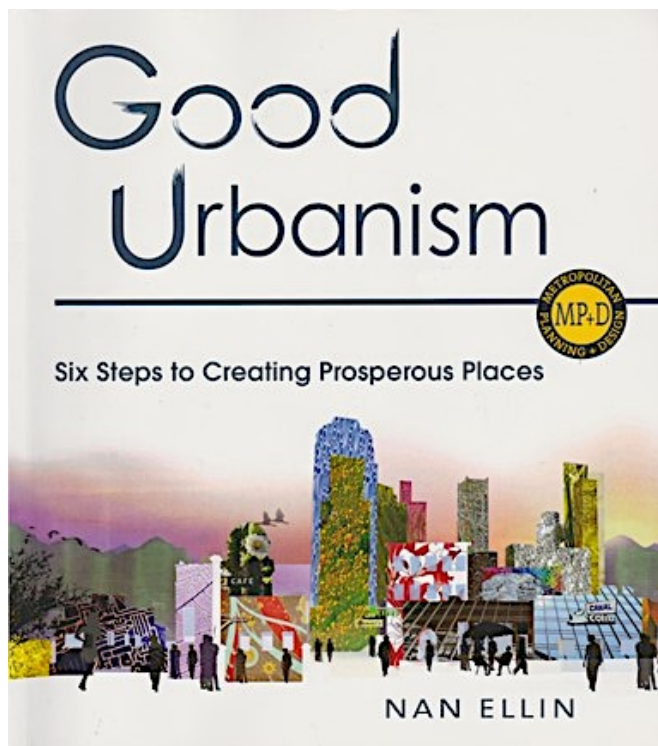 RETHINKING THE QUALITY OF URBAN ENVIRONMENTS: BOOK REVIEW OF 'GOOD URBANISM: SIX STEPS TO CREATING PROSPEROUS PLACES' BY NAN ELLIN (AUTHOR). ISLAND PRESS, WASHINGTON DC, 2013, 164 PAGES, ISBN 978-1-61091-364-5

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Professional and academic advancement regarding the special link we have with our spaces and its effects on our wellbeing has been a journey of advocacy and knowledge over past decades. Some notable publications in this field include Jacobs (1961); Habraken (1998); Alexander (2002); Thwaites, Porta, Romice & Greaves (2007); Salama & Wiedmann, (2013); and Porta & Romice, (2014). This book not only sits in this cadre, but is set to expand its debate by addressing head-on, the issue of people-place-prosperity.

The author's objectives with this book are primarily two. First, to highlight how urban designers[1] have to some extent, supressed their urban 'instinctual' capacities towards enabling places that allow us to fully prosper. This according to Ellin has to do with continuing divisions in the built environment industry that can make adequate problem identification and appropriate intervention difficult. Other related challenges are also discussed in the book (these include inclinations to focus on problems rather than positive and forward looking solutions in urban research; and those design practices that are product, rather than people-centred). As such, despite recent approaches in urbanism towards supportive and sustainable places, including availability of intellectual, political, and practical resources and tools, making real life impact has been difficult.

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[1] The author poses the question 'we know where we want to go, but cannot reliably get there. Why not?' (P. 2). She makes a note of the pronoun 'we' as specifically referring to urban designers; including the reference material (notably Scheer, (2010) where the question was initially posed.

The book's greatest contribution to urbanism is in meeting the second objective; a proposed flexible six-step 'path' towards creating prosperous places, as a guiding framework for all professionals in urbanism. This target is met through a functional approach (covering the philosophy, practice, and implications of this proposed path) that combines principles from several disciplines including ecology, sociology, and economics. The author's discourses can be related to ideologies discussed in for example, 'The Nature of Order' (Alexander, 2002); 'The Structure of The Ordinary' (Habraken, 1998); 'The Three Ecological Principles of Economic Sustainability' (Ikerd, 2013); Gunderson, (2011); and 'Social Cohesion and Economic Prosperity' (Dayton-Johnson, 2001).

Overall, the book is structured in 9 chapters including the introduction and conclusion; there are 2 appendices that summarise functions and features of good urbanism and a good urbanist character checklist respectively. Case studies (primarily from the United States of America) are presented in chapters 3 through to 6, to highlight real life implications of aspects of the author's proposed path to prosperity.

The path is outlined in the chapter 2 'Urban Desiderata: A Path towards Prosperity' and comprises six steps. (1) Prospecting, to identify personal, collective, and place potentials; (2) Polishing these potentials; (3) Proposing plans for designs and policies in order to amass added value economically, socially, and environmentally; (4) Prototyping is then employed to obtain feedback and enhance proposal's capacities; and (5) Presenting to stakeholders in place management, to realize it and take it forward. Chapter 3, 'The Tao of urbanism' is a reiterative passage highlighting the relevance of prospecting in urbanism; founded on the Taoist tradition of appreciating ourselves and resources at our disposal in order to be our best. Evaluated simply, prospecting involves making latent assets evident; capturing the past to better the future; voicing the bad to transform for better; protecting valued aspects and enhancing its deficiencies with what needs to be added. These, the author stresses are important aspects of good urbanism labelled PEA; 'Protect-Enhance-Add'. There are two case studies in this section; the New York city High Line, and the Canalscape in Phoenix.

The fourth chapter 'Co-Creation: From Ego-System to Eco-System' further explores collective and place prospecting. The author's emphases here are on trans-social recognition, partnerships, participations, and stakeholder collaboration in urbanism practice. The urban professional should ideally be an entrepreneur for proactive and dynamic processes that integrate government, business, and civil society. What is more, we are continuously reminded about culture; a shared and vibrant life characteristic that includes our use of space and forms of communication. The New Orleans civic center case study in this section shows how Candy Chang uses communication tools to encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing in urban design.

The next chapter (5) 'Going with the flow: The new design with nature' contains reminders that nothing in this world exists in isolation; we are, in our diversities, inherently related to each other and the environment. Here, Ellin discusses relevant functions for polishing place and collective potentials and making proposals for achieving integrated urban fabrics. These include hybridity; connectivity; porosity; authenticity; and vulnerability. Chapter 6 headlined 'The Art of Urbanism' then guides the reader from the theory that defines the 'path to prosperity' to an action process. It considers not only physical and social space, but incremental. The VIDA approach; Visioning-Inspiring-Demonstrating-Advocating, incorporates the six steps to prosperity into an activity palette that engages stakeholders in a continuous process toward change.

Moving on to chapter 7, the author analyses subtle shifts 'From Good to Great Urbanism' occurring in various disciplines; including notable protagonists, urbanist movements, and powerfully allied community organizations. The next steps suggested are to accelerate these strides in moving from sustainability to prosperity. In this context, a sort of reverse but complimentary pyramid process to the *Maslow scale of needs* (Maslow, 1943) is presented.

Instead of the pyramid declaring '*I need/want*' it alternatively presents '*I have/can use*'. Chapter 8 'Sideways Urbanism: Rotating the Pyramid', features a quasi 'scale of needs' process, but rotated at a ninety-degree angle to show dynamism, and representing a collaborative process that is neither top-down or bottom-up.

This book, by my assessment is a recommended read for all those interested in the livelihood and prosperity of our environments. As a philosophical endeavour, prosperity is multifaceted and broad; plus, its perceptions could be relative and subjective (Shah, 2012; see UN-Habitat, 2013), but all indicative of vibrancy in life. The book works about this basic principle, advocating for change in practice clearly and simply regardless of one's academic level. However, this type of advocacy is paramount in now Developing Cities[2] where sustainable interventions are an imperative in the face of challenges posed by rapid urbanization; and most relevant in slums. I would have liked to see the book extend its scope to these more vulnerable urban contexts, further than the brief mention in chapter 6; and it could be an extra dimension that follows from it. For these cities to prosper there have to be appropriate urban planning and design initiatives that bring together social diversities and physical integration at the human scale (UN-Habitat, 2013); and these initiatives need to be consistent to local realities (see Elshater (2014)) if they are to make positive and valuable impact. The reader more inclined towards advocacy in this area is presented with a robust array of tools to use, but not the necessary contextual guide. Nonetheless, the book provides the reader necessary and multidisciplinary background, principles, theories, strategies, examples, and engaging discussions to nourish creative and adaptive capacities towards prosperity practice. It does not propose an ultimate, rather a recommendation for lively places. Ellin presents additional justification to support this reviewer's view that issues on prosperity should generally be part of social [sciences] philosophy and practice; not only in principle, but likewise in content.

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[2] Also referred to as Global South cities. The term Global South was initially used to refer to countries south of the equator; it is now generally used as a term for the Developing (in terms of industrialization, political and economic stability, and health) Nations of Africa, Latin and Central America, and most of Asia.

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