

## BOOK REVIEW

# Good Urbanism: Six Steps to Creating Prosperous Places

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*Good Urbanism: Six Steps to Creating Prosperous Places*

Nan Ellin

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The book *Good Urbanism* challenges ideas long established in the field of urban planning and proposes an alternative perspective, when utopian visions of the city seem to have come to an end<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, this is a book to be commended and one that will certainly prove helpful to students and researchers, in the broad field of (e-) planning studies, and to planners as well. The book has 9 chapters, including an Introduction and Conclusion, and endnotes with useful details. While chapters 2, 3 and 4, deal with ‘process’, chapter 5 addresses ‘content’ (the design of places), with the remaining chapters focused on some of the issues examined in the previous chapters. From chapter 3 to chapter 6, the book includes numerous vignettes, each with detailed descriptions of case studies, and each serving as a prime example of a specific

dimension of ‘Good Urbanism’. By learning with these exemplary cases, Nan Ellin developed a new approach to urban planning, organized into six steps – prospect, polish, propose, prototype, and promote. Like other approaches developed and experimented in the long history of urban planning, also this one is a combination of previous proposals, blending new concepts with principles and practices associated with ‘Collaborative Planning’<sup>2</sup> and ‘New Urbanism’<sup>3</sup>.

In the first group of chapters, focused on process, Nan Ellin describes the method. In chapter 2 (*Urban Desiderata: A Path Toward Prosperity*), describes the six steps toward prosperity, which is followed, in chapter 3 (*The Tao of Urbanism: Rendering the Latent Manifest and the Possible Inevitable*), by an explanation of how this path toward better places (or prosperous places), described in the previous chapter, make the latent manifest, by building on the strengths of places, on one side, and the possible inevitable, on the other, by raising support and resources to realize the vision. The idea of co-creation, or collaborative production of better places, in all stages of the

methodology proposed, is explored and examined in more detail in chapter 4 (*Co-creation: from Egosystem to Ecosystem*). As Nan Ellin suggests, co-creation tend to be easier through the use of information and communication technologies, social media, social networks, increasing the opportunities for social interaction and collaborative work, an idea supported by the evidence available, which suggests that citizens connected through the Internet tend to increase opportunities for collaboration in the construction of better places. In other words, 'Good Urbanism', like restorative justice, works with others (citizens), to uncover valuable assets, turning them into resources ('jewels') that will enrich place and community. And as implicit in the evidence provided in the book, e-Planning enhance and foster restorative urbanism in large communities by making it easier to work with others.

A second section in the book, focused on how to design the urban form, is constituted by chapter 5 (*Going with the Flow: the New Design with Nature*). Nan Ellin describes how to design the urban form based on principles different from those of modern urbanism (e.g. separation v. mixture of functions, etc.) as well as from those advocated by post-modern urbanism (e.g. on how to define what constitutes optimal living conditions).

The last section develops some of the issues addressed in the first part of the book. In Chapter 6 (*The Art of Urbanism: A Practice Primer*) Nan Ellin offers a guide on how to implement the six steps and makes recommendations on how to communicate effectively. This is followed in chapter 7 (*From Good to Great Urbanism: beyond Sustainability to Prosperity*) by the description of the main characteristics of this planning paradigm. By moving beyond sustainability toward prosperity, a state or condition with a smaller ecological footprint, Good Urbanism shift emphasis from problems and deficits, as in the sustainability paradigm, to assets, in the prosperity paradigm. While the sustainability paradigm starts with the recognition of a need or problem, and then proposes a solution, the prosperity paradigm starts with

the recognition of assets, connecting them in order to effect the intended changes. In other words, Good Urbanism shifts the emphasis from needs to opportunities. In Chapter 8 (*Sideways Urbanism: Rotating the Pyramid*) Nan Ellin describes how this new planning paradigm operates, neither top-down nor bottom-up but sideways, being therefore different from modern urbanism (mainly top-down) and post-modern urbanism (mainly bottom-up).

The book concludes (Chapter 9 - *Conclusion*) by summing up the main ideas and characteristics that make up 'Good Urbanism' and a good planner. Among other characteristics, Nan Ellin emphasizes the judicious use of information and communication technologies to foster citizen participation in the co-creation of prosperous places/cities.

In conclusion, the 'Good Urbanism' paradigm, proposed by Nan Ellin, represents a rupture with the CIAM discourse on Urbanism<sup>4</sup>, and with Modernism more generally, as other post-rational planning approaches did in the past decades, incorporating principles and approaches of neo-modern and post-modern urbanism<sup>5</sup>, with its refusal of the idea of planning as a technical, objective, and politically neutral activity. However, it differs from Collaborative Planning (or Communicative Planning<sup>6</sup>), as the latter places its emphasis on process more than on plan content and 'urban form'. If 'co-creation' and 'restorative planning' ('working with') are key features of Good Urbanism, linking it to Collaborative Planning and to Post-modern Urbanism, the importance given to plan content ('urban form') distinguishes it from these two planning paradigms. By taking for granted that it is possible, through co-creation, to reach "the plan", a 'synthesis' of the fragmented visions and interests present in the community, Good Urbanism, like Collaborative Planning, differs from post-modern perspectives of urban planning (e.g. the "plan" seen as one of many possible "narratives"). In other words, the 'Good Urbanism' proposed by Nan Ellin is, to a certain point, a roadmap to build radically different visions of the city through co-creation by planners, citizens and

other stakeholders. However, contrary to the urban utopias of modernism, focused on a stable and ideal urban form, taken as the target to be achieved once defined, and contrary to the post-modern visions of what might be an utopian urbanism, Nan Ellin' idea of Good Urbanism seems to combine both dimensions, plan content (the good city form) and process (co-creation as the new utopia), in which e-Planning, in particular the extensive use of Internet, social media, collaborative computer-based technologies, and 3D visualization technologies in urban planning, have an important role to play in the construction of better places by enhancing citizen engagement in the co-creation process as proposed by Nan Ellin.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pinder, David (2002). In Defence of Utopian Urbanism: Imagining Cities after the 'End of Utopia'. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, Vol. 84 (3/4): 229-241 (Special Issue: The Dialectics of Utopia and Dystopia).
- <sup>2</sup> Healey, Patsy (1997) *Collaborative Planning: Shaping Places in Fragmented Societies*. London: Macmillan Press. Healey, Patsy (1997). *Planning Through Debate: The Communicative Turn in Planning Theory*. In Campbell, S. & Fainstein, S.S. *Readings in Planning Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 234-257.
- <sup>3</sup> Healey, Patsy (2003). *Collaborative Planning in Perspective*. In *Planning Theory*, Vol. 2 (2): 101-123.
- <sup>4</sup> Grant, Jill (2006). *Planning the Good Community*. *New Urbanism in Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>5</sup> Talen, Emily (2005). *New Urbanism and American Planning: the conflict of cultures*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>6</sup> Mumford, Eric (2000). *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
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