

REVIEW ESSAY

PITTSBURGH AND THE “BUILT”
ENVIRONMENT

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Crowley, Gregory J. *The Politics of Place: Contentious Urban Redevelopment in Pittsburgh*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 2005. x + 207 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.)

Bauman, John F, and Edward K Muller. *Before Renaissance: Planning in Pittsburgh, 1889–1943*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. xii + 331 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$27.95 paper.)

Aurand, Martin. *The Spectator and the Topographical City*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. \$39.95 cloth.)

The three books considered in this essay are very different books, from different disciplines, and cover a broad time period, yet they treat the same theme—the “built” environment in Pittsburgh. Crowley’s book concentrates on the use of political power in urban redevelopment projects, Aurand’s book focuses on the role of topography and the visual impact of buildings, while Bauman

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and Muller trace the history of planning in the context of Pittsburgh. The books also focus on different periods in the city's history; Bauman and Muller deal with the period prior to World War II, Crowley analyzes mostly postwar projects, while Aurand's book extends over the entire period.

They are also very different types of books. Bauman and Muller have an eye for detail that helps the authors contextualize events, and they support their work with copious notes from a multitude of sources. They also attempt to be comprehensive in their coverage of the period. Crowley's book is much shorter and makes no attempt to be all-inclusive, instead it focuses on a limited sample of redevelopment projects. Crowley is interested in showing how different sources of political power manifested themselves in specific redevelopment projects, rather than attempting to illustrate how these projects affected the evolution of Pittsburgh. Aurand concentrates on three distinct geographic areas: downtown, Oakland, and the Turtle Creek Valley (also known as Electric Valley because Westinghouse dominated the area). Although he records the history of the development of these areas, he examines these developments through the eyes of an architect, and is concerned with how buildings are designed to interact with their environment. As the title indicates, Aurand also gives primacy to the distinctive topography of the region which primarily is created by the rivers that have etched valleys into the Allegheny Plateau, and has forced development to occur in certain areas and discouraged it in others. Authors who write about Pittsburgh often mention this concept, but Aurand actually shows this interaction very clearly.

Bauman and Muller cover their period the most thoroughly. Their book is an important contribution to both the history of Pittsburgh and the history of planning. The authors' primary argument is that the famous government private partnership that used planning to direct Pittsburgh's rebirth in the 1940s, known as the Pittsburgh Renaissance, did not begin in the 1940s when it became known nationally, but much, much earlier. They argue that since the turn of the century in Pittsburgh, private citizens and government agencies have struggled with the notion of planning, and their struggles made the later planning triumphs possible.

The second theme of the book is that the planning developments in Pittsburgh were significant nationally. Although most urban scholars are familiar with the importance of the Pittsburgh Renaissance to national efforts to revitalize declining cities, Bauman and Muller show that planning efforts in Pittsburgh led the way much prior to that. Although the Pittsburgh Renaissance has been the subject of many scholars, the period prior to the

Renaissance has been relatively neglected.¹ There are numerous contemporary reports from the period, but scholarly treatment of topic has been missing. Bauman and Muller's book fills this void in the historical record.

Although many scholars of the Renaissance in Pittsburgh trace its roots to the plans and projects discussed in the 1920s and 1930s, Bauman and Muller argue that the roots go even deeper. They argue that the roots of the Renaissance were "in the early decades of the twentieth century, when a partnership of public and private leaders formed to promote modern city planning—that is, comprehensive planning viewed as a process, and built upon an organic concept of urban space to be managed scientifically by educated professionals" (2).

Bauman and Muller trace the early efforts at city planning to a progressive reaction to ring-led development. Supporting their notion that the city represented archetypical urban development, Pittsburgh, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, built the first round of urban infrastructure—streets, sewers, water lines, lights, and streetcar lines—under the impetus of the urban machine led by Christopher Magee and William Flinn. The authors argue that the reaction of progressive leaders to the corrupt, irrational building process used by machine politicians initiated the first efforts to coordinate construction projects in a more rational, efficient way, which then could evolve into more comprehensive, city-wide planning.

Wealthy private citizens, who worked through private interest groups (such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Citizens Committee on the City Plan, or CCCP) to bring in outside planners to coordinate and control infrastructure development in Pittsburgh, led planning at these early stages. This process was very contentious, especially since the modern tools in planning—eminent domain and zoning—had not yet been developed.

One of the book's strengths is the attention to detail, which is required when dealing with an historical period as complex as this one. The authors document some of the most interesting issues in Pittsburgh history that others merely mention. The "hump cut," in which part of Grant's Hill was removed in order to lessen the grade on the streets in this very important part of the golden triangle, is one such topic. The city's failure to build a subway, after passing a bond issue for that purpose, is another. They also explain the politics of the time, and how that affected infrastructure development. For example, when William Magee, nephew of the notorious machine politician Christopher Magee, replaced George Guthrie as mayor in 1909, a casual observer might conclude that the machine was coming back in power. The

authors show, however, that in spite of his family connections, William Magee did not return Pittsburgh to machine control.

One concept that the authors introduce to the history of planning is the changing role of the planner. Initially, during the 1910s and 1920s, planners primarily tried to limit the construction of things that were not part of an overall plan. Planners were the “thin line” (p. 200) that separated an intelligently designed city from chaos.

A preeminent planner in Pittsburgh, Frederick Bigger, exemplified this concept as he worked, in an effort to reduce congestion, to discourage downtown development during the 1920s. Reducing congestion was anathema to the downtown property owners who wanted planners to help downtown develop even more, since that increased the value of their properties. During the Great Depression, as new construction fell off precipitously, planners had to change their role. Instead of trying to control overzealous developers, planners needed to use public money to inspire private sector development that might not take place without their efforts. The authors argue that this was one of the motivating factors in the creation of the Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association, which evolved out of the Municipal Planning Association. During this period, the larger role played by the federal government, which was primarily financial, enhanced the planning profession by requiring that projects receiving federal funds be incorporated into community master plans.

This is an important book for the history of both Pittsburgh and city planning. At the beginning of the period covered by the book, people had just begun to consider using planning to help control the rapidly expanding metropolis. By the end of the period, planning was an integral part of urban development. Bauman and Muller do an admirable job of finding in Pittsburgh precedents for later developments, both locally and nationally.

Although Aurand covers some of the same topics as Muller and Bauman, he takes a very different approach. The book is very visually oriented, with a picture or map on almost every page. Aurand uses the images to make the reader the spectator. While Muller and Bauman focus primarily on transportation infrastructure, Aurand focuses more on buildings. His work builds on two earlier architectural histories of Pittsburgh by Franklin Toker and James van Trump.² Though earlier authors treat each building as a unique structure, Aurand places the buildings in the historical process of city building and in the visual environment. For example, Aurand documents how early in its history, downtown Pittsburgh was dominated first by churches, then by civic buildings (such as H. H. Richardson’s magnificent Allegheny County Courthouse),

which reflected the rising importance of government. He then shows how early wealthy industrialists, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Frick, Henry Phipps and Henry Oliver, competed with each other in their construction of buildings downtown. According to Aurand, "This competition-by architect yielded a landscape of personal giantism" (41). Aurand shows how Andrew Carnegie, in 1895, used steel frame construction to promote the product of his mills as he constructed the first skyscraper (14 stories) downtown. And after Carnegie and Frick had a falling out, Aurand explains that Frick's first building downtown (21 stories in 1901) "literally overshadowed that of his former partner, now his foe" (38). This demonstrates Aurand's ability to contextualize the built environment and use architecture to symbolize historical periods.

Aurand's documentation of the commercialization of downtown during the first quarter of the century supplements Muller and Bauman's explication of this period, when the commercial interests began to push industry and manufacturing out of downtown. Aurand could have taken the concept of symbolism of downtown development as a reflection of larger trends in the post-war period. Whereas most buildings prior to World War II were constructed by individuals (many of whom owned large industrial firms that they had founded), the postwar building boom was primarily driven by corporations. Instead of Carnegie and Frick, large corporations such as US Steel and Mellon bank constructed the major buildings of the 1950s and 1960s. Taking this concept even further, during Renaissance II in the 1980s, many of the buildings were constructed by real estate developers, reflecting the economic shift to services and away from manufacturing.

Aurand does a good job in showing how the topography and local conditions affected Pittsburgh's development. Although Pittsburgh is no longer a large city, physically its downtown is much more like Manhattan than other smaller cities because the rivers and Grant's Hill confine the downtown area, and force growth to occur vertically. Aurand notes the importance of the views of Pittsburgh from various places, such as Mt. Washington and Grant's Hill, and how architects considered these perspectives when designing their buildings. For example, he points out that constructing some of the tallest towers at slightly higher elevations, such as the US Steel building, dominate the city by breaking the visual barrier created by the height of the escarpments across the river. Especially when approaching downtown from the south, the visual impact of seeing the tops of only a few skyscrapers miles prior to entering the city through the front door created by the Fort Pitt Bridge and tunnel is profound.

Supporting the importance of planning in the city's development discussed by Muller and Bauman, Aurand shows how the city's building code limited buildings to 265 feet at the first set back, but allowed unlimited height if the buildings were set back from the street. Buildings constructed prior to the code tended to be massive boxes, whereas after the implementation of the code, classic Art Deco skyscrapers flourished with artistic crests and multiple set-backs. Under the influence of viewing cities from the air, he argues architects such as Le Corbusier created "skyscrapers in the park." Aurand, again supporting Bauman and Muller's thesis that Pittsburgh was at the forefront of many planning developments, contends that the chromium-steel towers of Gateway Center was the "skyscraper in the park" envisioned by Le Corbusier in his *Radiant City*. Additionally, he asserts that "Mellon Square was a precursor to the skyscraper plaza required by many urban zoning codes in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Such plazas sought to add open space to the city while providing economic and aesthetic benefits for their corporate parents"(71).

Although the Turtle Creek Valley is not within the city of Pittsburgh, it is an urban environment in the Greater Pittsburgh area and suits Aurand's purposes because it is visually very distinct. It is a compact valley that is completely filled by industrial buildings, unlike the industrialized areas on the Monongahela, the Allegheny, or Ohio rivers, where the rivers themselves visually divide the broader valleys. Additionally, once the Westinghouse Bridge was completed in 1932, the valley was made even more visually impressive, and the bridge itself allowed many people to look down on the valley from above, providing yet another perspective. Aurand posits that the valley manifests the concept of the "technological sublime." This concept was "the suggestion of infinity due to sheer size and the repetition of elements. For the spectator on the valley floor, the [Westinghouse] works was a continuous brick façade, displaying window after window after window. For the spectator on the surrounding hills, the works was a vast expanse of roofs, nearly filling the valley from side to side" (118). Aurand argues that the visual impact of Pittsburgh was impressive, from the manmade landscape of huge industrial plants, often lit by magnificent fires or partially obscured by smoke to the railroads, highways, bridges crossing rivers or ravines and often plunging right into tunnels to the natural landscape of the hills and the rivers themselves. Electric Valley was the apotheosis of this concept.

Whereas the golden triangle became the commercial center of Pittsburgh, and Electric Valley was an example of the region's industrial foundation, Oakland was consciously developed as a civic center. Aurand does not dwell

much on Carnegie's Beaux Arts museum and library, which Franklin Toker credits with initiating the development of a civic center in Oakland.³ Instead, he focuses on the activities of architect Henry Hornbostel, whose winning design for Carnegie Tech solidified Oakland's role as a center for education and the arts. Aurand argues that the "American campus became a key locus for the implementation of City Beautiful ideals because of its charge to civilize and elevate its students, its search for spatial order, its ongoing role as an urban experiment, and its centralizing planning authority" (139–40).

Hornbostel also won the design competition to build the campus of Western University of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pittsburgh) in 1908. Hornbostel envisioned treating the hills of Oakland much as the Italians treated the hills of Rome; the campuses of Carnegie Tech and Western University were designed to be viewed from afar and to allow their students to view the distant landscape. Like the Roman *villa suburbana*, the campus was to allow the enjoyment of the rural life in an urban setting, and while being physically separate, was still linked to the public domain.

Unfortunately for Hornbostel's vision, Western University ran into financial difficulties, which interrupted progress on the transformation of Oakland. When Pitts' finances could not support the plan, Hornbostel was relieved of his commission. The new chancellor, John Bowman, dramatically changed direction. New buildings for the campus were placed at the foot of the hill instead of on it, and the focus of the campus was on a Gothic, academic skyscraper, the 52 story (eventually reduced to 42 stories) Cathedral of Learning. Given the abundance of land in Oakland, it was not necessary to build up, but Bowman wanted to make a grand statement. Along with the Heinz Chapel and Stephen Foster Memorial, also built in the Gothic style, the Cathedral of Learning interrupted the development of Oakland along a unified architectural theme. Aurand argues that the variety of architectural visions on display in Oakland allows spectators to view Oakland as they desire.

Bauman and Muller focused on government officials, planners and the urban elites that drove development prior to World War II; Aurand examined the impact of architects, and in the final book covered by this essay, Gregory Crowley adds the general public to the development process. Crowley has chosen five redevelopment projects in Pittsburgh to examine the interaction between the different interest groups—business leaders, city officials, developers, local residents, as well as other institutional actors—to understand why some redevelopment projects were enacted while political opposition

stopped others. Crowley attempts to use the projects in Pittsburgh as case studies that demonstrate local manifestations of political power.

The five redevelopment projects Crowley examines are: the Civic Light Opera amphitheater in Highland Park, the Gateway Center at the Point, public housing projects in St. Clair and Spring Hill-City View, the demolition of St. Peter's Church in the Lower Hill, and the Fifth and Forbes downtown retail project. Four of the five projects were constructed in the 1950s; the Fifth and Forbes project was initiated in the late 1990s. Citizen opposition led to the derailment of the Civic Light Opera amphitheater in Highland Park (although it was redesigned and constructed as the Civic Arena in the Lower Hill District), as well as the Fifth and Forbes project downtown. Citizen opposition was overcome in the other projects and they were constructed as originally planned.

Crowley argues that a few factors determined the different outcomes in these contested urban redevelopment projects. First, institutional structures for community opposition were not well developed in the 1940s and 1950s, so early projects (four of the five) faced much less organized opposition than did the later one. In addition, the proponents of the early projects—the mayor, city council, and the business community—were more unified during the early period. Crowley attributes this to the ability of Pittsburgh's mayor, David Lawrence, to use his hold on the traditional Democratic Party apparatus to keep the council in step with the mayor. The structure of the city council was also important; as part of the political reform process Pittsburgh changed from a dual council elected by district to a single, smaller body elected at-large in 1911. Crowley argues that at-large elections meant city council members were concerned more about the city as a whole than any particular section, and were thus more supportive of redevelopment projects that were purported to have a broader impact than council members elected by district would have been. Pittsburgh went back to election by district in 1989.

Another factor that helped ensure the success of most of the early projects was the business community's relatively high level of concern for the welfare of the region; urban redevelopment was seen as crucial to the rejuvenation of an area in which the business community had so much invested. Somewhat less important factors that still had an influence were different levels of federal and state support, as well as changes in the regional economy. By the 1990s, the Pittsburgh regional economy was much less concentrated in the primary manufacturing sector as technology and the service industries grew dramatically. Crowley argues that in the 1990s business leaders had a much

wider variety of interests and were therefore much less unified than they had been immediately after World War II. Additionally, they had less time to devote to urban redevelopment projects, so the city government was forced to play a much greater role in the later period.

Crowley documents that activists who were unsuccessful in stopping the early projects had attempted to use the courts to prevent the acquisition of property by eminent domain, but that the courts in the 1950s rejected their lawsuits. The court's decision to dismiss the lawsuits effectively ended the opposition, and did so very quickly. Because the legal case for using eminent domain to take functional, profit generating property from one private owner to give it to another seemed so tenuous and had not yet been litigated, it would have been better if Crowley had analyzed why the courts ruled as they did, especially in light of the fact that Crowley argued that a fear of losing in the courts was one of the primary motivations for the withdrawal of the CLO project. Additionally, although Mayor Murphy's acquiescence to political pressure to revamp the Fifth and Forbes project during the 1990s was largely a political decision as Crowley claims, it is also important to remember that some of the reasons behind Murphy's decision was probably due to the change in the legal atmosphere surrounding the government's use of eminent domain. While in the 1950s the courts gave the government the benefit of the doubt, by the 1990s, the property rights movement, as well as the mounting physical evidence of some of the drawbacks to using eminent domain to remake large sections of major cities, clearly had had an impact on public opinion and the courts. In his focus on structural issues in decision-making, Crowley does not give sufficient weight to either the legal system or the broader historical forces that affect the decision-makers.

Crowley documents that urban redevelopment evolved from a "top-down" program to one in which the community increasingly had a role. Although his primary concern is how community opposition used existing political structures to attempt to alter the projects of "the regime," he has failed to place the changes in the redevelopment process in the broader context of an evolution of programs from the New Deal type approach that typified early programs (experts deciding how to use federal funds for large projects) to an approach initiated by President Lyndon Johnson's efforts to include neighborhood residents in the decision-making process, in which local actors had more of a voice. Although the earliest redevelopment projects in Pittsburgh (the Gateway Center) used little federal money because it was not yet available, most redevelopment projects used large federal grants to make their projects

feasible. By the 1990s, however, the federal government was not providing that type of funding and Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy and other proponents of using eminent domain to rebuild urban areas had to put together much more complicated deals, with much less federal funding, to make those deals work. Crowley correctly documents the more sophisticated and organized nature of the opposition. Still, he does not give enough weight to the importance of the historical context in which that organization took place and to the evolving nature of federal support.

Pittsburgh provides an ideal location to track this evolution of the process of urban redevelopment for, as Crowley points out, in the 1960s Pittsburgh was the first city to use urban redevelopment money to try to maintain housing for low- and moderate-income families instead of bulldozing it. But Crowley does not even mention Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS), which used a combination of code enforcement and rehabilitation grants and loans to property owners to improve existing housing in the early 1960s, which was a pioneering effort that became a national model. Nor does he mention the Community Action Agencies and the idea of “maximum feasible participation” by the community that became the mantra for activists who sought to influence federally funded programs such as urban redevelopment. A book that examines contentious urban redevelopment in Pittsburgh would be better served by examining the process in more detail during the 1960s, when many of the important trends changed.

Crowley has used newspaper articles, reports, and the work of other historians to flesh out a more detailed picture of some of the early redevelopment projects in Pittsburgh. His analysis of the Fifth and Forbes retail project breaks new ground, and his use of interviews of many of the important actors allows him to get past the headlines to tell a more complete story. But while his treatment of individual projects is good, a lack of contextualization limits the book to being a series of case studies instead of serving a larger purpose.

People interested in Pittsburgh will find all three books useful. Bauman and Muller’s book is the most detailed, and for that reason, probably the most difficult to digest. But it treats a subject—early planning efforts—that has been neglected in both Pittsburgh and nationwide. Crowley’s book is the easiest to read, and makes a contribution to understanding how people react to redevelopment projects on a local basis, but its utility is limited. Aurand’s approach is imaginative, and while not comprehensive, provides an insightful way of understanding the built environment that deserves to be replicated in other cities.

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NOTES

1. The best of these are: Roy Lubove. *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969) and *20th Century Pittsburgh: Volume Two, the Post Steel Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); Jon C. Teaford. *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990; Robert C. Alberts. *The Shaping of the Point: Pittsburgh's Renaissance Park* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980); and Sherie Mershon. "Corporate Social Responsibility and Urban Revitalization: The Allegheny Conference on Community Development, 1943–1968" (Ph.D. diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2000).
2. Franklin Toker, *Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1986, and James D. Van Trump. *Life and Architecture in Pittsburgh*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, 1983.
3. Franklin Toker, *Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1986, p. 81.