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Peer reviewed

Review: Planetizen Contemporary Debates in Urban Planning
Abhijeet Chavan, Christian Peralta and Christopher Steins (Eds.)

Reviewed by Elery Hamilton-Smith
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Chavan, Abhijeet, Peralta, Christian and Steins, Christopher (Eds.). *Planetizen Contemporary Debates in Urban Planning*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2007. xvii,183pp. ISBN 9781597261333. US\$21.96, paper.

Having just read Haugen's paper on the evolution of and trends in Environmental Adult Education (Haugen, Caitlin Seceast. 2009. *Adult Learners and the Environment in the Last Century: An Historical Analysis of Environmental Adult Education Literature*. *Electronic Green Journal* 1(29)) this is certainly in keeping with her discussion. The editors established the Planetizen website (<http://www.planetizen.com>) in 2000 as a dynamic forum for discussion of issues in urban planning and development. Now we have this book as one outcome of that discussion. It is a collation of brief opinion papers, each on a key issue together with selected comments and other feedback.

Few issues in urban development have been neglected in this remarkable maelstrom of ideas, values, beliefs, anecdotes, disagreements, definitions, concepts, technologies and everything else. The opinion papers each provide a stimulating framework, usually raising questions far more than providing answers.

As always, the inherent patriotism and self-satisfaction of the United States constantly stands above all the evidence which points to a sadly divided and very sick society. But at least in this book, contradiction and disagreement is not swept away, but lies very visibly on the basic floor of the volume. Most readers will be able to test their own perceptions and beliefs against the weight of ideas which emerge while reading.

Some who are used to standard textbooks may find it to be a very difficult book – there is no glossary and even any one sentence is likely to use words in a way which displays somewhat different meanings of those used by others. This is an accurate portrayal of utilitarian language, and inevitable in any complex and conflict-rich arena. Neil Postman, particularly in his 1995 book *The End of Education*, shows how the dumbing-down and over-simplification of much contemporary discourse fails to build competence in understanding complexity.

One of my most valuable mental tools came to me when I was very young indeed, and one of my most important mentors said "You should never stop asking questions – and you should never stop not fully believing any answers you are given!"

As I drive to and fro across my long-standing home city, I see new perspectives, all too often total stupidities, but sometimes mistakes or omissions with unforeseen benefits of great value to the city. So, perhaps I have a somewhat quirky approach to scholarship, but for me, this book does enhance my awareness and understandings of the modern city. So, I pick it up, open it almost at random and read what I find. Then I put it down and at intervals over the next few days, questions come back to either haunt me or delight me. It is just the kind of book that my students used to discover, read, encourage all their peers to read it, and then take off to a week-end retreat to discuss and argue – on reflection, a wonderful element of their learning!

So, readers are looking for answers will probably not enjoy or get great benefit from this book. Those who believe that true scholarship demands a personal search for meanings and values will probably find it a valuable resource.

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