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## Berkeley Planning Journal

### Title

Two Takes on Sunbelt Urbanism: Bird on Fire by Andrew Ross, and Beyond Privatopia by Evan McKenzie

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5b33d9kt>

### Journal

Berkeley Planning Journal, 25(1)

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### Publication Date

2012

### DOI

10.5070/BP325111983

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**Two Takes on Sunbelt Urbanism:****Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World's Least Sustainable City****By Andrew Ross****Oxford University Press, 2011****Beyond Privatopia****By Evan McKenzie****Urban Institute, 2011**

Reviewed by Jake Wegmann

In the large and rapidly growing category of “books about cities,” much is written about such darlings of sustainability and enlightened urban citizenship as Portland, Malmo, Curitiba, and the like. Much less is written about the conurbations of the American Sunbelt and the radical transformations in governance that they have incubated and subsequently exported to the rest of the nation and world. Two recent books, *Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World's Least Sustainable City* by Andrew Ross and *Beyond Privatopia* by Evan McKenzie, while highly divergent in content, tone, and approach, should be of great interest to those interested in the urbanism of the Sunbelt.

While one could quibble with Andrew Ross's characterization of Phoenix as the “world's least sustainable city” in *Bird on Fire*, there is no question that the metropolis with the Western Hemisphere's highest summer temperatures, lying in a region labeled the “bull's eye” for climate change in the United States, is a strong contender for the title. Ross has made a career of extricating himself from his comfort zone of New York University and delving deeply into such unfamiliar environments as Celebration, the Disney corporation's New Urbanist showpiece community in Florida, in order to ask contrarian questions about them. Why did he select Phoenix this time? His answer: “If Phoenix could become sustainable, then it could be done anywhere.”

Ross takes his Sunbelt surroundings seriously, examining the so-called Valley of the Sun in its full complexity, both present-day and historical. The

lessons of the Hohokam people, who maintained a complex, irrigation-based civilization in the area, only to vanish from the archaeological record circa 1450 following a paroxysm of climate-triggered decline, are not lost on him. His method is to sequentially visit various subtopics of concern to the region, such as struggles for environmental justice in hardscrabble South Phoenix and Maryvale, the opportunities and contradictions raised by the fledgling solar industry, and the region's recent convulsions over nativist and racist crackdowns on undocumented immigrants and American-born Latinos. Ross uses these episodes to raise broader questions that resonate far beyond Arizona, while constantly jumping between spatial scales in order to situate Phoenix's local battles within nationwide and global debates about sustainability and social equity.

From Ross's deep engagement with his subject emerges a cogent and powerful argument. To him, "the key to sustainability lies in innovating healthy pathways out of poverty for populations at risk, rather than marketing green gizmos to those who already have many options to choose from." Ross is steadfast in his insistence that the region must address the needs of people in places like Maryvale and not just those in Scottsdale. In the process, he is unflinching in his skewering of Garrett Hardin and the notion of "lifeboat ethics," as well as all of Hardin's intellectual descendants who fuse an ostensible concern for ecology with unabashed nativism. Current luminaries that have tilled this ground, such as William Rees, the originator of the now-fashionable concept of the "ecological footprint," are not spared Ross's ire.

Seen from the standpoint of his central argument, Ross's provocative recasting of the Phoenix region's role in sparking a trans-Sunbelt anti-immigration conflagration as "the first skirmish in the climate wars of the future" is profoundly unsettling. But the pages of *Bird on Fire* also brim with richly detailed descriptions of local social movements that incorporate sustainability concerns into their very cores. Nowhere is this more true than in the vignette with which he closes the book, the triumph of the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) in a decades-long battle to reclaim flow from the Gila and Salt Rivers stolen by settlers in the 1880s. Ross observes that this belated righting of historical wrongs offers the hope of not simply passing on a better world to the children and grandchildren of the current generation, as the old environmentalist saw would have it, but to the economically and environmentally disadvantaged children who are alive right now.

Given Ross's contention that the key to ecological sustainability is less about technocratic fixes and more about political power sharing, it is somewhat curious that he omits discussion of perhaps the most important development in the last four decades in local governance. This is the rise of Common Interest Developments (CIDs), about which Evan McKenzie

wrote in his important 1994 book *Privatopia* and which he now revisits in *Beyond Privatopia*. CIDs, exemplified by the homeowner associations that manage many new subdivisions, are best viewed as privatized local governments that take on many of the functions traditionally performed by municipalities. They first arose in significant numbers in the 1960s in order to manage the shared amenities that developers, facing rapidly escalating suburban land costs, added to their projects in order to persuade buyers to accept higher densities. CIDs were invented to solve a specific problem. Their originators could scarcely have foreseen that they would come to radically reorganize the local state in the coming decades, particularly following the property tax revolts that began in the late 1970s.

While CIDs now exist from coast to coast and have rapidly spread internationally, they are nowhere more important, and thus vital to understand, than in such (until recently) high-growth Sunbelt locations as Phoenix. The explosive growth of the Sunbelt led the way in doubling the number of Americans residing in CIDs from 30 million at the time of writing of *Privatopia* to almost 60 million today.

McKenzie views the CID as a kaleidoscopic phenomenon, where one's view of it changes substantially depending on the vantage point from which it is perceived. Critical urban theorists, led by Mike Davis, have long viewed CIDs as abettors of societal fragmentation. Visionary urbanists, on the other hand, such as proponents of New Urbanism and cohousing, have seen CIDs as ideal governance arrangements for managing new (sub)urban forms and structures of social organization. Institutionalists, amongst whose number McKenzie counts himself, view CIDs as a novel governance structure that has raised unexpected issues, such as the requirement that all new residential developments include CIDs in municipalities such as Las Vegas and the Phoenix suburbs of Gilbert and Mesa.

While McKenzie sees partial merit in these differing perspectives, he spends a whole chapter debunking the assumptions underlying a new cadre of CID champions that has arisen since *Privatopia* was written: libertarian intellectuals. Far from being "an expression of voluntary choices made by individuals to create a club economy for the provision of local services," McKenzie sees owner associations as standardized governance arrangements over whose details homebuyers are powerless to negotiate. Under these conditions, homebuyers cannot be truthfully said to have voluntarily entered into private contracts that reflect their preferred combination of desired public services and willingness to pay dues, as the Tiebout-inspired neoclassical economic theory leaned on by the libertarians would maintain.

The consequences of this largely accidental revolution in local governance are profound, and could substantially constrain the policy choices available

in places such as Phoenix, particularly as the social and environmental stresses that Ross describes in *Bird On Fire* begin to accumulate. Will the foreclosure crisis crush numerous CIDs, heaping yet more unwanted responsibilities on fiscally overtaxed local governments? What if CID policies conflict with sustainability objectives, as in subdivisions in the Southwest that have forbidden their residents from replacing the green grass in their front yards with low-water “xeriscapes”? Neither Ross nor McKenzie claims to predict the future, but anyone concerned about the near-term fate of the Sunbelt would be well-advised to pay attention to what two of the few scholars who have closely examined this region’s urbanism and its underlying governance arrangements have to say.