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The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl

Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton

(Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001)

A Review by Stephen M. Wheeler

The resurgence of metropolitan regionalism that began in the early 1990s has been fueled by a number of important works in the past year. *Reflections on Regionalism*, edited by the Brookings Institution's Bruce Katz, provides an excellent overview of growth management and equity issues affecting metropolitan areas. *Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together*, by Manuel Pastor Jr., Peter Dreier, J. Eugene Grigsby III, and Marta Lopez-Garza, explores strategies to reduce metropolitan inequities. Economic and equity themes are also tackled by contributors to *Urban-Suburban Interdependencies*, edited by Rosalind Greenstein and Wim Wiewel.

Other authors are developing physical planning and urban design strategies for the metropolitan region. Foremost among these are Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton, whose book *The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl* seeks to define regional design as a legitimate field of inquiry.

Calthorpe is of course well known to those who have followed the New Urbanism movement. Best known for neo-traditional neighborhood design, Calthorpe and others within the Congress for the New Urbanism are actually after something much bigger—the reassertion of urban design and physical planning strategies as an alternative to twentieth-century sprawl. In this broader view neighborhood design is seen as one building block of regional design.

The most regionally oriented of the New Urbanism leaders, Calthorpe initially laid out a regional synthesis of urban design principles in his 1993 book *The Next American Metropolis*. Essentially, that work proposed a typology of pedestrian- and transit-oriented design at different scales within the region.

In his current volume with William Fulton, a highly respected analyst of planning in California and author of a recent book on Los Angeles' development, Calthorpe aims at an even broader synthesis of regional planning theory. Similar to early twentieth century regionalists, these two authors attempt to integrate concepts of the economic region, the

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ecological region, and the social region. In their view, economic regions are defined by business and financial relationships, ecological regions include “entire watersheds, agricultural territory, and ecosystems,” and social regions are characterized by social interrelationships, a sense of regional identity, and a tacit “social compact” between residents. In terms of the built landscape, Calthorpe and Fulton argue that a “new metropolitan form” is now emerging, which they call the “Regional City.” This construct is the result of three trends: the emergence of a new, networked, polycentric regional structure, the maturation of the suburbs, and the revitalization of older urban neighborhoods.

Calthorpe and Fulton outline how public policy and federal investments have shaped the regional city, often in counterproductive ways, and how physical design strategies might undo some of the resulting damage. For example, they argue for new investment in transit systems, transit-oriented development, multifamily housing, urban revitalization, and open space. Although neighborhood design is their starting point, they argue that regional design must rely at a larger scale on four basic physical elements: centers, districts, preserves, and corridors. Descriptions of recent regional planning in Portland, Seattle, and Salt Lake City help illustrate how these building blocks can be combined to form regional physical planning strategies. Handsome graphics from the consulting work of Calthorpe Associates illustrate these examples. The authors also provide briefer discussions of regional physical planning visions in New York, Chicago, and the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as state-led physical regionalism in Florida, Maryland, and Minnesota.

The evidence and theory presented in *The Regional City* are somewhat more fully developed than in *The Next American Metropolis*, in part because the national experience of metropolitan physical planning has expanded in the intervening eight years. The Seattle and Salt Lake City examples help supplement that of Portland. The authors also include more extensive discussion of equity issues and the interaction between physical form and social capital. In terms of equity, they argue for regional fair-share housing, regional tax-base sharing, and urban educational reform as steps to address the current widening resource gaps between communities within metropolitan regions.

The vision that Calthorpe and Fulton present is a deeply encouraging one—that a new model of metropolitan development may take the place of the automobile-oriented sprawl that has covered our landscapes since World War II. But the framework that they lay out is still in its

early stages. The list of regional design values they propose (human scale, diversity, conservation) is partial and needs more development, for example, by more explicit mention of other principles such as community, connection, equity, and ecological integration. The set of regional design tools could be further explored by more specific discussion of densities, current urban form archetypes, and the pros and cons of different regional spatial patterns. The authors tend at times to engage in optimistic New Urbanist rhetoric rather than explore the complexities of the social, political, and economic obstacles hindering their vision. Frank discussion of the challenges involved in implementing planning reforms would have helped in such instances. Also, the book's graphics feel borrowed a bit too directly from Calthorpe's consulting work. Illustrations developed more specifically for this volume might add punch, as did many of the graphics in Calthorpe's previous book.

However, in the breadth and comprehensiveness of its vision *The Regional City* goes considerably beyond any other similar work to date, including the recent book *Suburban Nation* by the other main New Urbanism figures, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. Although making many of the same points as Duany and Plater-Zyberk, Calthorpe and Fulton start with a fundamentally regional perspective, rather than an extended neighborhood-scale critique of sprawl. With this larger context as its foundation, *The Regional City* is a major contribution to the current literature on metropolitan regionalism.