

Book review

Planning for Place and Plexus: Metropolitan Land Use and Transport

David M. Levinson and Kevin J. Krizek

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The very first course I taught was on the connection between transportation and land use. This seemed like an easy assignment, given that I had just finished a PhD program in which I focused on this very topic. But while my students were reasonably happy with my attempt, I felt that I hadn't found an adequate way to structure the topic and tie together all its various components. In later attempts at teaching this topic, I felt no more satisfied and my syllabus never seemed quite right. The few available textbooks didn't help, in that they did not have an underlying logic that made sense to me; instead, they offered a series of useful but rather disconnected chapters. In *Planning for Place and Plexus*, David Levinson and Kevin Krizek have solved this problem by providing a comprehensive and compelling framework for understanding the relationships between transportation and land use within the metropolitan context.

Levinson and Krizek rightly put accessibility at the center of everything: "accessibility is a measure of the glue holding place and plexus together... it is what ties land use to transportation" (pg. 46). The problem in metropolitan regions is not congestion, they say, but accessibility, formally defined as "the ease of reaching land use (place) given the transportation system (plexus)" (pg. 44). The challenge for planning is not how to reduce congestion but rather "how to satisfy people's needs and desires for where and how to live" (pg. 14). The concept of accessibility also plays a prominent role in their explanation of how the metropolitan system works.

The book explains transportation and land use by focusing on the behaviors of multiple actors, the countless decisions by a multitude of households, firms, and governments. The book focuses first on households, with chapters on homebuying, job-seeking, traveling, and scheduling. To frame these behaviors, Levinson and Krizek schematically define what they call the "Diamond of Action." Part 2 looks at firms and their behavior with respect to siting and selling, which are governed by the "Diamond

of Exchange.” Finally, Part 3 considers the actions of the public sector, including designing, assembling, and operation, that make up the “Diamond of Evaluation.” The chapters provide a series of “interrelated models” that explain how behavior is shaped by the choices and constraints created by the cumulative behaviors of others. As the authors claim, this is a holistic approach, one that connects theories and concepts across disciplinary boundaries.

Understanding the process by which such decisions are made is important in understanding both why things are the way they are and what levers can be pulled to change them. Behavioral theory is thus a useful tool for policy makers as well as academics, and Levinson and Krizek do a notable job of including all relevant theories and explaining them in an accessible way, with useful examples. They go beyond the usual theories, for example, in using game theory to explain mode choice. They also sometimes offer multiple theories for a specific behavior, a helpful approach in that different theories can provide different insights. They are conscientious in tying theories back to the central concept of accessibility; for example, firms make their location decisions based on access to workers, infrastructure, desirable places to live, clean air and water.

The breadth and depth of this book are impressive. One might expect such thoroughness from a senior professor with a lifetime of work to draw on or perhaps a PhD student looking for an excuse to stay in school awhile longer. For relatively junior faculty to produce such a rich and insightful work is unusual and perhaps unprecedented. (I personally wonder how they found the time, given teaching and family responsibilities; I suspect that there is a gender effect here, but that is a hypothesis yet to be tested.) Perhaps their relative youth explains their ability to pour so much energy into the book.

Some of that energy has gone into efforts to lighten the book, with mixed success. Each chapter starts with an anecdote of some length intended to illustrate the concepts to be covered in the chapter. These are useful, though they sometimes feel a bit random, like the use of the assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981 to introduce the Diamond of Action. Their use of cultural references is as energetic as their coverage of theories and ranges from the radio show *Prairie Home Companion* (at least two mentions, befitting the authors’ Minneapolis location), the board game *Monopoly*, the movies *Thelma and Louise* and *An Affair to Remember* (showing good generational range), the satirical publication *The Onion*, and many more. Although entertaining, these references seemed to me a rather blatant attempt to counter-balance the nerdiness of the theoretical components of the book. Such references may help to engage the lay reader, but they also risk showing him up. I felt culturally with-it for having seen Sophia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation*, but parentally deficient that my daughters have not seen Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke*.

A bigger risk, I think, is that readers will see the book as overly clever. The problem

potentially starts with the title, *Planning for Place and Plexus*. I confess that I wasn't entirely sure what "plexus" meant. Although the alliteration in the title is catchy, I suspect that other readers will also be unsure of its meaning. (Fortunately for me, my sister-in-law, a classics professor, was visiting while I was reading the book. She described the use of "plexus" in the title as appropriate but "precious.") At one point, they talk of aiming for "a superior place and a sounder plexus". The alliteration continues from there, with the 3 Ps of place, problem, and perspective that they use to define the scope of their book, followed by the 5 Cs of chances, constraint, competitors, complementors (a word not recognized by my spell-checker), and choice that define the Diamond of Action. The 3 Es of sustainability have become the 4 Es of efficiency, equity, environment, and experience, mediated by a 5th E, the "politics of Expediency." The Diamonds themselves seem a little contrived, the shape having something to do with the Reagan story and the street layout of Washington DC. I sympathize with their attempt to find a label for those of us who study or work within this field, but I'm not confident that "transportationists" will catch on.

Having known both authors for some time (and having collaborated with Krizek), I enjoyed seeing much of themselves in this book. Some of this is subtle, but some is quite explicit. After reading the book, you'll know, for example, that Krizek grew up in Glenview, IL and owns seven bicycles. I like this personal touch (as should be obvious from the style of my own writings), and I think it will help to connect the reader to the heavier elements of the book. But it also gives the book an air of self-indulgence that could be off-putting to some.

Anyone involved in studying or shaping our metropolitan regions could benefit from reading this book, but I'm not sure that they will. I suspect that it will be a little too much for non-academics. While it could help policy makers better understand the land use-transportation system, they may not have the patience to make it through the density of material provided. Although theory is important for students in professional planning programs, the extent of theory in this book might also be a little much for them, and I can imagine resistance to spending as much time as this book does on theory rather than practice. On the other hand, PhD students could benefit from having a comprehensive framework that fits the different theoretical pieces in their proper places. This book could have saved me considerable time as a PhD student by serving as a guide to my preparatory reading. It also would have helped me in my teaching, whether or not I used it as a textbook.

This is an ambitious book. Levinson and Krizek claim at the outset that "We aim to learn the state of the world" (pg. 23) and to "explain how cities work", admitting that this is "a bold claim perhaps" (pg. 14). It is a bold claim for sure, and I might not go quite so far as to say that they've fully achieved this aim, but it is unquestionably a remarkable effort.