

## Book Review

### *The Code of the City: Standards and the Hidden Language of Place Making*

Eran Ben-Joseph  
MIT Press, 2005

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Throughout history, people have asked questions like: How are cities formed? Why do cities exhibit different patterns? Eran Ben-Joseph's book *The Code of the City* provides an answer by examining the evolution of street and landscape design standards. Reviewing the historical path of regulating city buildings worldwide, this book unveils the birth and development of different landscape standards and their scope and influence, as well as the emergence of related professions and institutions. As philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli said, "whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past." This book helps us understand the past—how the urban planning practice comes to its current form. And yet Ben-Joseph does not stop here. Besides pinpointing the problems and defects hidden in current planning practice and design standards, he also tries to foresee the future, or at least, to make recommendations for future practice.

This book is organized into three parts, each consisting of three chapters. The first part describes the historical context and framework within which urban norms and standards are embedded. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the earliest urban form standards, which were created based on the power of a sovereign authority, as illustrated in some ancient civilizations such as the Indus Valley, China, Greece, Rome, and Byzantium. Ben-Joseph asserts that Islamic cities, on the other hand, were formed with a lot of adaptation based on "the principles of use rather than specific architectural regulations" (p. 16). Ben-Joseph uses historical evidence to show that order can emerge not only from centralized decision-making, but also from autonomous interactions of individuals in a community.

Chapter 2 looks into the impact of urban form-shaping professions on urban standards in the past few centuries. As human beings' knowledge about the nature and the environment they live in increased, new professions such as land surveyors and civil engineers were born. The author has found out that during the development of such professions, "we have shifted our planning apparatus from indicating and recommending values to specifying and requiring explicit standards." While the performance standards in design of places (such as the ITE standards) are assumed to be accurate, scientific, and based on empirical research, Ben-Joseph specifies that such standards neglect a social perspective, and that social problems in urban life at the turn of the 20th century remind us of re-thinking urban design in community terms.

Chapter 3 sketches some early regulations and standards in urban planning practices considering factors such as sanitary conditions, safety, and efficiency. The notion of "directing city

development through design codes and regulations” was increasingly advocated. Moreover, during this period public authorities began to intervene explicitly. In particular, the author argues that, in the United States, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) helped shape residential development most significantly. Rejecting the grid pattern for residential neighborhoods, the FHA advocated three forms of residential street layouts—curvilinear, cul-de-sacs, and courts—with specific standards on neighborhood boundaries, size, density, and setback of houses.

The second part of this book sheds light on how design and technological standards shaped urban forms and facilities. In Chapter 4, using the example of the development of urban sewage-system standards, Ben-Joseph argues that urban systems can easily become locked into technological dependency, and that current investment and funding on public facilities and infrastructure tend to focus more on improving traditional paradigms. He indicates that most local regulations and legislature processes *de facto* limit the introduction and application of alternative plans. One prominent reason lies in the reluctance of local officials to back the use of new technologies without the endorsement of higher authorities. Yet he further argues that notwithstanding the tardiness in government initiatives, industry forces such as developers, mortgage companies can be agents of change.

Chapter 5 identifies problems in current standards and regulations. First is a mismatch between traditional engineering specification methods and new demands for better livability in the framework of physical and social systems. Second, delays that prolong administrative and approval processes in subdivision regulations. Third, land developers have lost favor with excessive streets and right-of-way widths and rigid earthwork specifications in subdivision development. As a researcher and a planning practitioner, Ben-Joseph contends that planners, architects, and engineers can provide better placed-based criteria for local scenarios.

Chapter 6 discusses the impact of standards on landscape and the natural systems. Traditional engineering practice in clearing land often neglects land features and site-specific solutions. The author therefore suggests that multidisciplinary efforts are required to identify a site’s resources and incorporate them into project designs.

Having revealed the inadequacy of current design standards, Ben-Joseph discusses a possible paradigm shift in Part III. In Chapter 7, he argues that private developments provide better solutions to urban design problems, using the emerging concept of common-interest communities (CICs) as an example. The deregulation of subdivision standards and zoning for CICs gave developers great flexibility in design solutions, which proved to be more agreeable to consumers and developers. Privatized subdivisions like CICs have acted as a catalyst for innovations in architecture and site-features, density, and street patterns. While acknowledging some issues related to CICs such as spatial segregation, Ben-Joseph advocates that “many of the ecological concepts of these private communities can be applied to the broader housing market.”

By highlighting a variety of visualization tools, Chapter 8 describes the advancement of urban planning processes in response to the increased availability of powerful computer techniques. Computerized three-dimensional visualization can not only assist in the process of urban planning and design but also promote communication between professionals and the public. The last chapter concludes with a call to match design standards with local contexts in all aspects. Ben-Joseph also recommends initiatives in professions and in local governments in Chapter 9. For urban design practitioners, playing a greater role in policy decision-making and cooperating with professionals outside their disciplines are important. For local governments,

it is worthwhile to leave more room for place-based approaches. I agree with Ben-Joseph that it is time to re-examine urban design process using a holistic, case-specific, and accumulative approach.

This book is an intriguing read. Undoubtedly, a paradigm shift in design standards and the planning process cannot happen overnight. Although I am not sure how this transformation will happen and at what costs, this book provides much food for thought. As the author indicates, “the intent is not to champion the abolition of regulations or advocate elimination of all controls or government interventions, but rather to illustrate their evolution and ongoing contemporary effects, and to encourage change where and when needed.” In fact, I think Ben-Joseph can make an even more ambitious call for change. After all, in the words of Aristotle, “a change in all things is sweet”—especially when urban planning is hampered by the increasingly outdated design standards and approval process.