

REVIEWS

## Urbanism Without Effort: Reconnecting with First Principles of the City

By Charles R. Wolfe

Island Press, 85 pp., 2013, \$3.99 e-book

REVIEW BY PHILIP LANGDON

In this short e-book, Charles R. Wolfe, a Seattle environmental and land-use lawyer, urges people to make “spontaneous, organic neighborhood life” the starting point in any plan for new buildings, public spaces, or transportation facilities. To that end, he fills his electronic book with examples, quotations, and observations spanning hundreds of years of world history.

In Wolfe’s view, architecture and planning today usually focus too heavily on plans, model codes, transportation models, building appearance, and other such factors. What tends

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## Without effort

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to be overlooked by building and design professionals, he says, is “indigenous urban spirit”—the ability of people to breathe life into public spaces pretty much on their own.

*Urbanism Without Effort* reminds me of Bernard Rudofsky’s 1964 classic, *Architecture Without Architects*. Rudofsky, a

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IMAGE CREDIT: CHARLES R. WOLFE, URBANISM WITHOUT EFFORT

The Ramblas in Barcelona, Spain

Moravian-born writer-designer-teacher who settled in New York, used that book to promote “nonpedigreed architecture”—vernacular, often anonymous creations that satisfied human needs beautifully. Wolfe is Rudofsky’s spiritual descendant, enamored of the graceful ways in which past cultures, usually with limited resources, fashioned congenial settings for daily life.

Wolfe encourages the reader to use camera, pencil and paper, or other devices to assemble an “urban diary”—a collection of views of, and thoughts about, places that foster human activity. Such places, he suggests, are more abundant than we suspect. In an alley near his home, Wolfe notes that some of his neighbors show movies on certain nights—relaxed get-togethers that strengthen community connections, at little expense. Says Wolfe: “I believe the best urbanism is often the urbanism we already have.”

Studding his pages are quotes from Ada Louise Huxtable, Grady Clay, Christopher Alexander, Rob Goodspeed, Richard Sennett, J.B Jackson, Rem Koolhaas, Alexander Cockburn, Joseph Rykwert, and Roberta Brandes Gratz, to name just a few. There are photos from Venice, Barcelona, London, Lisbon, Las Vegas, Melbourne, and many less well-known cities and towns. Many of the images are captivating; they show people using public spaces in unprompted, informal ways.

I wish Wolfe had refrained from taking so many gratuitous swipes at Jan Gehl (the Danish urban designer’s

prescriptions tend to be “overly generic, conclusory, or paternalistic,” Wolfe says), “tactical urbanism,” Celebration, Florida, and other individuals, places, and movements that have, in my estimation, brought significant improvements to community life during the past 30 years. Wolfe issues criticisms in a glancing, not particularly convincing manner. He complains, for instance, that tactical urbanism and “pop-up” places don’t always have “a meaningful and lasting effect.” But how could they, when they were typically conceived as *short-term* interventions?

Despite praising holistic, naturally occurring urbanism, Wolfe doesn’t provide much detail on how people might actually infuse this kind of thinking into the places we build today. If you’re looking for careful instruction, this isn’t the best source. *Urbanism Without Effort* is mostly a book of inspiration and aspiration. It makes the reader yearn for places with soul. For how-to guidance, you’ll have to go elsewhere—such as the growing shelf of new urbanist literature. ♦

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