**BOOK REVIEW**

# City Building: Nine Planning Principles for the 21st Century
**By John Lund Kriken**
**Princeton Architectural Press, 2010**

Reviewed by Nicola Szibbo

A series of global case studies forms the backbone of this book, largely drawing on author John Kriken's work as a principal urban designer at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) LLP. While visually stunning and thought-provoking, the book avoids grappling with the toughest questions confronting today's cities. The first of three parts introduces the reader to a short history of urban design and planning, situating the author as a newcomer to the field at a time when rational planning had reached its apex. Part II outlines nine principles for 21st century city building. Part III examines future solutions and models for city building.

What appears at first to be a rich, practical guide to urban design turns out to be a fairly cursory examination of large-scale physical planning interventions. The reader can flip through *City Building* with celerity, since the book is lacking substantively both in content and in graphic form and attribution. All of the case studies are from one firm (SOM), which skews the portrayal of the design process through its deliberate, selective refusal to acknowledge other competing designs and outcomes. In addition, the author does not delve into great detail, failing to provide either comparative charts or scale comparisons. These elements are sorely missed, and could have easily been included in order to demonstrate relational scale and context. Furthermore, Kriken does not provide any useful metrics or indicators for city building, as opposed to books like Douglas Farr's *Sustainable Urbanism* or Randall Thomas' *Sustainable Urban Design*. The lack of quantitative analysis is striking, and the text is decidedly descriptive and caption-like.

The highlight of the book is Kriken's hand-drawn diagrams, in which urban designers will revel and from which they will derive much visual satisfaction. They illustrate the ability of the urban designer to encapsulate meaning and concept by means of a few punchy, powerful strokes. These simple sketches are most effective at getting Kriken's 'city building' principles across to the reader, alluding to the human side of design. By comparison, the numerous aerial renderings and master plan maps seem impersonal and less significant. They detract from the book in

the sense that they give it the removed, empty feel of a glossy architect's portfolio or an inviting coffee table book, rather than providing a critical case study. A suspension of disbelief is also required to attribute all visual material to Kriken, raising questions about the role of the silent designers and draftspersons who are relegated to the far recesses of the project credits in the appendix.

While Kriken does not break any substantial new ground with his nine principles (sustainability, accessibility, diversity, open space, compatibility, incentives, adaptability, and density), one must admire the tenacious loyalty he demonstrates towards Kevin Lynch's theory of good city form. The principles may be useful, perhaps, for the beginning or intermediate student or scholar, but advanced designers will be left wanting more than a re-capitulation of the importance of normative design standards. Although it is clear that Kriken has a firm grasp of urban design theory (he alludes to Lynch, McHarg, and Olmstead as particularly inspirational), his book falls short when it comes to addressing critical contemporary planning theory and policy issues. For example, one must question where participatory planning falls in the practice of large corporate design firms such as SOM. If cities are really about people, after all, where do people come into the SOM decision-making process? Furthermore, how effective are urban designers at unpacking complex cultural meanings and integrating them into design, which assumes universals? To build the city, we simultaneously have to deconstruct the cultural meaning within it. It is within this vacuum that new urban design theory and practice must engage. In a world where North American designers are increasingly being hired to work in China and the Middle East, how can planning and design be equitable when projects are governmentally dictated from the top down?  Today, these are the questions that are not only the most topical, but also the most difficult to answer.