Pre-Industrial Cities and Technology

Colin Chant and David Goodman, eds.
European Cities and Technology: Industrial to Post-Industrial City
David Goodman and Colin Chant, eds .

American Cities and Technology: Wilderness to Wired City

Gerrylynn K. Roberts and Philip Steadman, eds.
(London: Routledge, 1999)

A Review by Jonathan Mason

Cities are diverse creations, but it is human technology that defines their creation. Cities cannot be properly understood without assessing the technological contexts that allow such settlements to exist and be sustained. Upon reflection, city planning is centrally about technology and its application within society. The essence of city planning involves both the effective implementation of evolving technological infrastructure *and* the management of the social and environmental disruption brought about by technological change. Technology, however, should not be seen as an external factor that impacts society. Rather, if we think of technology as being both a part and product of society, the notion of technology as the centerpiece of planning becomes more solid. Increasing contemporary concerns about sustainability emphasize the importance of understanding our technologies and our relation to them.

The growth of the Internet and the emerging 'informational economy' have especially stirred a renewed interest in technology's role in urban formation, and this timely series of books from the Open University sounds an arrival of such discourses to the mainstream academic curriculum. The series emphasizes the relationship between technology and cities, yet it moves beyond a narrow focus on engineering innovation and technological determinism, emphasizing the importance of cultural and political factors in guiding and producing technologies.

As advanced textbooks, the series should still have great appeal to the general reader. Indeed, the comprehensive style of a textbook is a suitable format to review a theme so pervasive as technology and cities. Each textbook is accompanied by a reader, bringing the series to a total of six

books. Supporting the textbooks' format, each reader is an informed anthology of key writings by prominent contributors to the field. The assemblage of such a broad range of scholarly contributions serves to assert the strength of the theme of technology and cities. While emphasizing overall the social history of technology and cities, each book has its own thematic thrust, with discussions of urban planning prominent in the latter two books on European and American cities. Through the survey format, history is put to its highest purpose: interpreting the past to inform the present and guide the future.

Pre-Industrial Cities and Technology is divided into three main sections: ancient cities, medieval and urban modern cities, and pre-industrial cities in China and Africa. The emphasis is on the pre-industrial infrastructure that assembled and sustained early cities. While the time period excludes the book from a discussion of modern urban planning, the insight provided into the basic mechanisms of cities would be of great benefit to any urban professional. While the city-civilizations covered seem the usual suspects, their treatment is thorough, and the elaborate illustrations can only reinforce the book's value.

European Cities and Technology: Industrial to Post-Industrial Cities is likewise divided into three sections: cities of the Industrial Revolution (to 1870), European cities since 1870, and urban technology transfer. The book maintains a heavy emphasis on Britain. Even though Britain was at the forefront of industrialization — a central theme of the book — the rest of Europe deserves stronger consideration. In the accompanying reader, coverage is limited largely to London, Glasgow, Manchester, Paris, and Berlin. While fault can always be found in the geographical coverage in all of these books, the narrow geographical breadth of *European Cities* surely could have been expanded.

The geographical scope of *American Cities and Technology: Wilderness to Wired City* is confined primarily to the United States, but the range of cities surveyed is more evenly spread. While the European books emphasized the transforming social conditions of industrialization, the American pair emphasize the role of transportation and telecommunications in urban formation. Notions of the 'networked' city and systems of cities receive strong exposition. Consequently, there is less attention to the social conditions of industrialization, although this reflects a more typically 'American' response to industrialization and technological change.

The series of books is a much welcome addition to the field, and it is fitting that the institution to bring them forth, the Open University, has

been a leader in innovative approaches to higher education through information technologies. Drawing a relatively small but burgeoning field together, they provide a survey of historical reflection and grounding for an exciting but sometimes over-exuberant realm of discourse. If planning is centrally about technological change in its myriad forms, as I assert, it is time we got about to understanding it.