

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Hirshorn, Paul, and Izenour, Steven. *White Towers*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979. Pp. viii, 190. \$9-95 (U.S.)

Harvey Levenstein

Volume 10, Number 3, February 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019088ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019088ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Levenstein, H. (1982). Review of [Hirshorn, Paul, and Izenour, Steven. *White Towers*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979. Pp. viii, 190. \$9-95 (U.S.)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 10(3), 73–74. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019088ar>

is that, contrary to the views of F.J. Turner, cities preceded rather than followed the settler into the West. Moreover, these western cities did not grow haphazardly from chance beginnings but rather developed according to premeditated designs, often as a consequence of surveys and plats prepared by ambitious entrepreneurs. They were, in short, the result of conscious "urban planning." In a series of chapters whose very organization is a valuable contribution to urban study, Reps distinguishes among the styles and eras of city development, including the eighteenth-century French, English and Spanish colonial heritage and the nineteenth-century western American variations. In the latter, he describes Mormon cities, central plains and pacific northwest cities, mine towns, railway centres, and the instant towns of Oklahoma. In these chapters, the founding of literally dozens of cities is examined, each in turn, within the larger economic and political context.

Organization and scope are strengths of the book, but so too are the illustrations. Indeed, the more than 500 surveys, sketches, pictures, plats and promotional plans, including thirty-two beautiful colour plates (half of the latter are bird's eye views) make the volume a collector's item.

Reps has firm views on what constitutes sensible urban planning and is generally dismayed by the absence of "proper" values in the creation of western towns. Though he does not outline his criteria in systematic fashion, they can be discerned from his use of adjectives and his distribution of praise and criticism. The chapter on Nebraska towns illustrates his perspective. The "unimaginative" plats of the Missouri River towns which were created in the 1850s were based upon monotonous rectangular grids and did not provide for parks, vistas, or other urban amenities: "None exhibited much skill in town design.... Speed and speculative advantage were the two principal criteria in the design of towns in this region and period – not beauty or monumentality." By contrast, the plat of the state capital, Lincoln, was an "interesting design, by all odds the most successful adopted for a Nebraska community...."

In its generous provision of public sites and open spaces; its recognition that major public buildings could be so located as to provide vistas down major streets; its differentiation of lot sizes between those intended for business and those to be used for residential purposes; and its variation of street widths depending on proposed functions, this plan ranks high among those of western America. Moreover, and more important, the three-dimensional city that developed on this two-dimension plan became one of the most impressive and pleasant communities of the country.

Reps believes that urban planning necessarily has social consequences. And he seems to have concluded that, despite the infinite opportunities of the frontier where thou-

sands of communities were waiting to be called into existence and to have their character defined, the story of western planning is one of challenges failed. Only the Mormons and Spaniards receive high marks for interest in planned congenial communities. The establishment of most towns was marked by speculation, haste, and monotony.

The text is dotted with such contemporary observations as the 1869 story of a rail construction camp. These supply centres, including buildings and people, often moved with the track-laying crews. When one such centre arrived in Cheyenne, Wyoming from Julesburg, Colorado, it filled an entire freight train – frame houses, furniture, tents and "all the rubbish which makes up one of the mushroom 'cities.'"

The guard jumped off his van, and seeing some friends on the platform, called out with a flourish, 'Gentlemen, here's Julesburg.' The next train probably brought some other 'city' to lose forever its identity in the great Cheyenne.

Reps' volume is difficult to fit into a category: it is at once a picture book, a survey of urban planning, an encyclopedia of town plats and a narrative on western urban history. It is not notably theoretical; its conclusions can be summarized in a few brief sentences; its contribution to the science of urban planning is apparently confined to a list of past mistakes. But to stop here is to miss the virtues of a lifetime devoted to methodical research on a single important subject. The strength of Reps' work lies precisely in its scope. He has collected between two covers all the attempts to plan "new" towns between the Mississippi and the Pacific. He has described the process of site selection, the basis of physical design and the evolution of streetscapes in the early years of several hundred urban centres. For an introduction to any given western town, the student need go no further. And, for a perspective upon the urban development of a quarter of a continent, every scholar will start first with this volume.

Gerald Friesen
Department of History
University of Manitoba

Hirshorn, Paul, and Izenour, Steven. *White Towers*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979. Pp.viii, 190. \$9.95 (U.S.)

Few of the Canadians who made pilgrimages to the glittering cities of the Northeast and Midwest of the United States in the 1940s and 1950s could fail to notice the White Tower chain of fast-food restaurants. They seemed to embody so much of what made American cities a magnet in those days: their bright white facades and plate glass windows bespoke shiny modernity; their fast service typified the frantic pace of life that made slow Canadian

pulses quicken as soon as they set foot in Buffalo or Detroit; their practice of staying open twenty-four hours a day symbolized non-stop excitement; and their prices typified the bargains which drew so many Canadians across the border. At five cents (later ten cents) a hamburger, you couldn't go wrong, even if it was a rather small one. Yet this photographic history of the White Tower chain does much more than appeal to nostalgia. The introductory essay is an excellent architectural history of the chain. The captions that accompany the razor-sharp photographs that comprise the bulk of the book are informative, interesting, and often amusing, derived as they are from the comments of the men who designed and planned the buildings depicted.

The growth of the White Tower chain is significant for urban historians because its rise was associated with the changing work and residential patterns of the 1920s and 1930s. It was conceived of as a city-centre workingman's chain which would provide an inexpensive, clean, reliable eating place for the new breed of urban workers who lived far from their jobs and commuted to work on street cars and subways. The white tile exteriors, bathed in white light at night, the glistening interiors, the counter men preparing the food in front of the customers: all were designed to reassure customers that the hamburger meat was indeed of bovine origin and that the food was handled and prepared in a sanitary fashion. The pseudo-mediaeval towers were thought to provide a touch of elegance to the image. Since White Towers generally sat very few customers, patrons were encouraged to "Take Home a Bagful" of the hamburgers.

In fact, though, the restaurants aimed very much at workers taking the hamburgers back to their factories. Many White Towers were located close to large factories, especially in Detroit, where the new auto industry factories spawned White Towers on their fringes. They stayed open twenty-four hours a day, not to attract teenagers out on dates, but to accommodate shift workers in factories that never closed. White Tower planners also developed a working class clientele by locating restaurants at mass transit stops, especially at subway entrances and exits.

White Tower's basic designs and strategies were developed in the 1920s. In the 1930s the market for low-priced restaurant food rewarded an aggressive expansion campaign while higher-priced restaurants were closing or retrenching. The postwar shift of population to the suburbs and the displacement of mass transit by the automobile among its working class clientele forced wholesale changes in the corporation's design, location, and marketing strategies, resulting in a predictable attempt to carve a niche for itself among the Macdonald's and Burger Kings of the suburbs. Perhaps the recent moves of the latter chains back into the centre city holds out the hope that the White Tower corporation will preserve its surviving downtown restaurants, many of which retain the Art Deco

features of the 1930s. Not only do they continue to send a *frisson* up the spine of those of us who still remember the Good Old Days of urban America, but a few more books such as the one under review might make them "trendy." Who knows? White Tower may well become the fast food chain of the middle classes now migrating back into newly-renovated cores of American cities.

Harvey Levenstein
Department of History
McMaster University

Silverman, Robert A. *Law And Urban Growth: Civil Litigation In The Boston Trial Courts, 1880-1900*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp.xxiv, 217. Tables, maps. \$16.50 (U.S.)

The field of legal history presents tremendous opportunities to today's urban historian; not only in the availability of research materials and of historical issues with which to grapple, but also in its potential for significant contribution to our understanding of the past. Although the body of researchers and literature in Canadian legal history is growing, we still lag considerably behind the U.S. In this regard, however, the American literature can serve as an example to the Canadian urban historian of the potential of legal history. This is certainly true of Robert Silverman's book.

The book is a study of the Boston civil trial courts during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As the first such study, Silverman's conclusions regarding the development of the role of the courts in the midst of rapid social and economic change in the urban environment are particularly relevant. These conclusions are based on a random sample of 1,445 actions brought in the Suffolk County Superior Court in 1880 and 1900, and in the Boston Municipal Court in 1880 and 1902. His analysis regarding the litigation pattern during the time period is based on comparisons of these samples.

In doing so, Silverman has successfully shown the value of local court records as source material for the urban historian. In reading his analysis of these records, however, the reader is left curiously unsatisfied. Stimulating issues in the development of the relationship between the courts and their urban environment are touched on without adequate discussion. In defence of the author, perhaps, one should note that this book is a drastic condensation of a doctoral dissertation completed at Harvard in 1977. Those of us who find the editing of his analysis severe should be directed to the thesis.

With the exception of this criticism, the book is a useful contribution to our understanding of the role of law in