
Angela D. Dillard

As a historian, Thomas fails to offer much that is new to our knowledge of what went wrong in postwar Detroit. Outside of the compelling chapters dealing with the last two decades, the book covers what will surely be familiar terrain for urban historians. As an urban planner, however, she offers much to be admired. First and foremost, the work’s focus on planners as a distinctive class hardly recommends it. Through ample use of interviews Thomas documents the rise of large-scale urban planning and its fall from grace after the rebellion, as planners themselves were scapegoated by both residents and politicians. “Their [planners’] experience offers a case study,” Thomas writes, “in how a bureaucratic agency can lose power in a political environment and confirm the now accepted notion that planners must be able to function effectively in a political environment in order to survive.”

The book’s other major strength is its call for urban planners to learn from the mistakes of the past, and to re-orient the field towards a philosophy of social justice and racial equality. As Detroit embarks upon another phase in the history of redevelopment through federally-sponsored “empowerment zones,” Thomas’s call for a vision of the future which focuses on present strengths and assets, on participatory planning, and on social justice for all residents, particularly the most disadvantaged and disaffected, is a welcome one.

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The first black commercial insurance companies emerged in the late nineteenth century in part because white firms, convinced by pervasive racist sentiment, that blacks were unfit for insurance, either refused coverage or charged exorbitant rates. In this book Robert Weems examines the origins, historical development, significance, and problems of the Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company, in the context of Chicago’s black community.

Originally founded in 1925 as the Metropolitan Funeral System Association, the company was the outgrowth of the “Great Migration” to Chicago and the dreadfully high mortality in its black community. It primarily served the black working class by providing low cost burial insurance. In contrast to the staid image of insurance magnates, Weems reveals that in its early years, two of the company’s founders, Daniel Jackson and Robert Cole, obtained venture capital and expansion funds from participation in various community-based gambling enterprises.

While the early founders were men without formal training in business or experience in insurance, they were men of unusual