Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Thomas, June Manning. *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit.* Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997. Pp. xx, 274, illustrations, maps, tables, graphs, index. US$39.95 (cloth)

Angela D. Dillard

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Dillard, A. D. (1997). Compte rendu de [Thomas, June Manning. *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit.* Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997. Pp. xx, 274, illustrations, maps, tables, graphs, index. US$39.95 (cloth)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *26*(1), 53–53. https://doi.org/10.7202/1016666ar

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Thomas, June Manning. *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit.* Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997. Pp. xx, 274, illustrations, maps, tables, graphs, index. US$39.95 (cloth).

In the past six decades the image of Detroit has been transformed along a tortuous course from the "Motor City" turning the wheels of capitalist development in the 1920s, to the "Arsenal of Democracy" during World War II, to the murder capital of America in the 1970s. The site of one of the worst urban uprisings in the late 1960s, the city appeared to be unable to recover its former glories. Presently, commentators have a host of negative representations to choose from. In the last few years Detroit has been likened to a Third World city, a Black urban core ringed by hostile and fearful white suburbs, and to Beirut, an analogy made by the Governor and subsequently withdrawn after protest from the region's Lebanese population. Most recently, Detroit has been characterized as the premier postmodern/postindustrial city in America, a symbol of urban decay and a warning of what all other American cities are in danger of becoming. Residents of Detroit, a city which has lost over a million residents and almost as many jobs since the 1950s, struggle to maintain an ironic sensibility. On a recent visit, for instance, I observed a vendor doing a brisk trade in T-shirts which read, "Detroit — Where the Weak are Killed and Eaten."

While city politicos continue to circle the wagons and issue proclamations heralding the rebirth of Detroit, scholars have turned to the past to uncover the roots of the city's present crisis. One of the newest additions to this field is June Thomas's *Detroit: Race and Redevelopment.* As Thomas argues, urban renewal, the de-centralization of the automotive industry, suburbanization and white flight couple with a shrinking tax base, ineffective government programs and their administration foiled the vision of urban planners at every turn. Of equal significance, the interplay of race, racism and class continuously haunted planner's efforts to transform Detroit into a finer city.

As Thomas carefully documents, the patterns of race and redevelopment were set during and immediately after World War II. In the early 1950s, for example, it became painfully evident to the Black community that the city's ill-conceived slum clearance initiatives equated urban renewal with "Negro removal" to disastrous results. The subsequent shift from physical to "social" renewal during the War on Poverty involved more direct input from residents; yet city programs such as TAP (Total Action Against Poverty) and the federal Model Cities program suffered from poor planning, racial divisiveness, and a consistent lack funding and resources. In the midst of these renewal schemes, the city's core population was becoming progressively poorer, unemployed and under-educated as even the Black middle class sought avenues of escape. Compounding these long-standing difficulties, in the wake of the 1967 civil disorder, the city administration capitulated to political pressure and essentially emasculated the local planning process.

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 confirms 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.

Angela D. Dillard
The Gallatin School of Individualized Study
New York University

Weems, Robert E. Jr. *Black Business in the Black Metropolis: The Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company, 1925–1985.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. Xvii,158. Illustrations, US$35.00.

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