

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Fairbanks, Robert, and Patricia Mooney-Melvin (eds.) *Making Sense of the City. Local Government, Civic Culture, and Community Life in Urban America*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2001. Pp. 192.

Guy Chiasson

Volume 34, numéro 1, fall 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016059ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016059ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Chiasson, G. (2005). Compte rendu de [Fairbanks, Robert, and Patricia Mooney-Melvin (eds.) *Making Sense of the City. Local Government, Civic Culture, and Community Life in Urban America*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2001. Pp. 192.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 34(1), 123–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016059ar>

of the collection. Walker and Lewis' "Beyond the Crabgrass Frontier" more-or-less functions as a second introduction to the volume. This overview concerns the historiography of suburban industrialization and adds a reasonably broad perspective of trends in urban geography and history. Muller and Groves in "The Emergence of Industrial Districts in Mid-Nineteenth Century Baltimore" argue that in Baltimore during the middle decades of the 19th Century, highly specialized industrial districts emerged within and outside the city itself, subject to both "centrifugal and localizing tendencies among large firms" (p. 51) that produced a highly fragmented and nucleated structural form. They note this "transitional city" yielded residential patterns corresponding to forces of fragmentation, segmentation, and specialization which had profound implications for ethnic and racial settlement. Originally produced in 1979, this analysis seems to operate as an assumption held within several other chapters in this collection.

Lewis contributes a chapter on manufacturing districts in Montreal. Extending from his book *Manufacturing Montreal* (2000) Lewis concludes that Montreal's suburban industrial development came from "a series of industrial complexes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (p. 91) that took different forms at different times. These districts shifted as successive waves of capital formation produced new social and political contexts. Richard Walker's study of San Francisco Bay Area, 1850–1940, notices the growth of the Bay Area was driven by a varied and speculative cluster of industrial and commercial forces, that took hold of successive suburban locations to draw the city beyond its original geography. Ultimately the numerous Bay Area districts played home to suburban industry. Edward Muller's chapter on the geography of metropolitan Pittsburgh, 1870–1920, argues that corporate capitalism provided the engine for a complex division of labour and a widely scattered industrial landscape. He looks beyond the usual metropolitan scale of development to address the regional perspective of industrial suburbanization. The remaining reprinted content of the book concludes as Greg Hise examines "Nature's Workshop" of Southern California in the first half of the twentieth century to challenge conventional industrial and suburban narratives. He found in Los Angeles spatial and social orders that were in fact "not successive but concomitant" (p. 180). In other words, the creation of the industrial suburban landscapes did not depend on a series of stages for their development, but happened simultaneously in the early twentieth century.

Ultimately *Manufacturing Suburbs* provides a service to the fields of historical geography and suburban industrialization but it also leaves the reader hoping for more. The contradictions and overlapping conclusions of the essays remain undressed. Reconciling a series of independently produced essays (that were not necessarily intended for collaborative publication) is hard work by any editor's reckoning, yet this is both the strength and weakness of such a volume. *Manufacturing Suburbs* represents a cross-section of methodologies and a

wide geographical distribution of case studies, but one still hopes for a more integrated volume on the topic.

Bradley Cross
St. Thomas University

Fairbanks, Robert, and Patricia Mooney-Melvin (eds.)
***Making Sense of the City. Local Government, Civic Culture, and Community Life in Urban America.* Columbus: Ohio State University, 2001. Pp. 192.**

This book is a collection of urban historical essays in honor of Zane Miller, professor at the University of Cincinnati. As is explained in the preface of the book, Miller brought to urban history a perspective centred on conceptions of the city as main drivers of how city life and governance evolve over time. "Zane's exploration of the political response to Cincinnatians to the impact of rapid urbanization at the end of the nineteenth century moved beyond the battle between the forces of 'good' and 'evil' for control of the city. He found that the way contemporaries perceived the spatial arrangements of the city and then used it in their attempts to solve governance problems helped explain the political world of turn-of-the century Cincinnati" (p. x). The papers that are anthologized in the book are all very faithful to this particular approach to urban history. All of them tend to break away from more common historical perspectives (or materialist leaning perspectives) based on "class, ethnicity or race" (p. x). They prefer to embrace a point of view that consider that city actors' efforts at "making sense of the city" is fundamental in shaping the city and its politics. One can assume that this theoretical coherence not only suggests good editorial work but also the continuing relevance of the approach developed by Miller's work.

I am not a historian which means that I am unable to judge this book's contribution from the point of view of historical debates. However, from the untrained eye of a political scientist primarily concerned with local and city issues, this book appears to be a solid piece of historical work. Most, if not all of the chapters, present an in depth look at different aspects of city life (housing policies, city charters, municipal governing machinery reform, planning etc.) and provide very interesting and detailed insight on these topics. Usually, the chapters are concerned with quite short periods of time (at least from the point of view of other social sciences) and very specific locations which allow for very careful analysis. I suspect that these methodological choices are consistent with the particular approach developed by Miller. In order to get a good sense of how people understand the city it is probably very helpful for a study to be grounded in a particular locale and a specific and limited time-frame. Interestingly enough, Miller himself has worked on Cincinnati his entire academic career (p. 178).

If this book sparked my historical curiosity it also proved to be useful in another way. Studies from urban sociologist as well as scholars of urban politics often identify sweeping changes that

transform city governance. Trends such as the rise and fall of fordism, turn of the century modernization of city government and post war suburbanization and racial segregation are all well known and often used as heuristic categories by urban scholars. The studies presented in this book rarely contest these broad categories. However, the careful analysis of intersecting and evolving conceptions of the city gives us more insight into how the sweeping societal changes were embodied, that is how they shaped and were in turn shaped by the day to day life of urban actors.

In some cases, the approach taken has allowed authors to review and revisit academic assumptions about the evolution of city life. For instance, Robert Burnham's piece on the turn of the century Reform movement enriches substantially our current comprehension of the Reform phenomenon in the United States. Much has been said on this period as the end of "party bossism" and the rise of a more professional urban management based on expertise as opposed to crass political patronage. Burnham's study shows how the story is somewhat more

complicated. The Reform period can actually be broken down into smaller periods with very different conceptions of the city and the ideal form of governance. While the 1880s and 1890s were dominated by the idea of the city as a coherent whole therefore requiring centralized government by a strong mayor or a "good boss," the first decades of the twentieth century brought a conception of the city as a "pluralistic entity" that led actors to prefer more depoliticized governance. Burnham's paper as well as those of others such as Charles Casey-Leininger on the Fair Housing Movement in Cincinnati not only give some depth and a real life feel to abstract and broad categories, they also remind us to be attentive to the complex realities hiding behind these abstract concepts.

For the reasons mentioned above, *Making Sense of the City* strikes me as a good example of a historical contribution that is of definite interest to scholars working in other disciplines.

Guy Chiasson
Université du Québec en Outaouais