

BOOK REVIEW: THE ART OF CLASSIC PLANNING: BUILDING BEAUTIFUL AND ENDURING COMMUNITIES, BY Nir Haim Buras

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Abstract. A comprehensive treatment of urban planning according to classical principles, from ancient times to the present. The author, an experienced architect and planner, critiques Modernist planning and offers a powerful tonic to its alienating and failed strategies for making cities. The classic approach is characterized by symmetry, grids, and traditional street patterns.

Keywords: *Urban planning, classical architecture, neuroscience, traditional urbanism, New Urbanism, classic planning.*

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There is an adage among historians that where a significant knowledge gap exists, a flawed book is better than no book at all. Many neglected subjects emerge with sparse or poor scholarship, only to be supplanted by better efforts later on, after academic fashions change to open up the field to research. Dr. Nir Haim Buras, a skilled architect and planner from Washington, D.C., and neophyte author, has written such a book. There are nevertheless many good things in it that need to be part of public discourse today and are not found in establishment texts on urban planning.

The premise behind *The Art of Classic Planning* is that several thousand years of human civilization, and a few centuries of classical modern design, have produced durable and often unsurpassed models for how to build buildings, landscapes and cities. The reason that no books currently in print focus on explaining this undeniable fact is that several centuries of Cartesian dualism, positivistic faith in “progress,” and scientific rationalism have convinced humans to reject excellent existing models for making their environments.

The first section of Dr. Buras’s book uses spurious and historically flawed arguments to press this point when a short introduction would have sufficed. His message is simply that there is nothing “original” and “innovative” when it comes to building great places, and that past examples contain all that is needed to design them. The author might well have dispensed with his polemical, skewed history of urbanism and architecture. It wasn’t a necessary part of this book, as other authors have provided better critiques of recent developments in building and planning. For instance, Léon Krier (Buras’s hero) has written several books on Modernist architecture’s conspicuous failures, illustrated with his inimitable drawings.

In the second main section, “Where Do We Go From Here?” the author also ventures into territory that he doesn’t fully understand, insisting that cities emerged out of nowhere in the Fertile Triangle with grid plans, and ignoring well established archaeology and urban

history that tell a different story. He finds all kinds of non-gridded city plans inferior to his favorite “classic” towns, with no evidence to support these claims. Florence does not have a grid plan—neither does Casablanca, London, or Jerusalem—all great cities. To fit the history of civilization into his schema he runs roughshod over scholarship on cities and settlements that show the gradual and natural process of developing all sorts of city form. The “shapes” that the great Spiro Kostof analyzed in two books cited by Buras are misinterpreted and cherry picked to present a false narrative. So, when the reader gets to the well-researched and compelling middle of the book, on the development of Washington, D.C. (familiar to Buras from years of residence there), she will need to accept a history that exists only in the pages of *Classic Planning*, and nowhere else. It is also rather absurd to argue that “classic planning” grids anticipated auto circulation, parking, and subways before such things existed.

The bulk of this book contains information that will be useful to architects and planners, presented in clear illustrations, diagrams, photographs, and maps. A large budget (underwritten by the Driehaus Foundation) allowed Dr. Buras to print color illustrations throughout, and create helpful spreads that make a compelling visual argument. He also had the means to travel widely and photograph places often undocumented in previous studies. The footnotes are extensive and generally useful, but there is no bibliography, in which the reader may access them readily.

Strangely, he is critical of another urban theorist with anti-establishment views, Christopher Alexander whose *Pattern Language* employed short, focused texts and excellent diagrams to make complex points. That book would have been an excellent model for Buras, had he learned lessons from it. Alexander’s book has been a best seller for decades, despite consistent criticism from nearly all establishment architects. *Classic Planning* could find a similar place in the literature if it is revised and shortened. It would then be less bulky and expensive, and thus affordable to students.

The latter half of the book offers tools that classically trained architects, and members of the *Congress for the New Urbanism*, have advanced for several decades, mostly to a resistant professional community. Little of this material is proprietary to Buras, who has been a contributor to the Traditional Architecture Group since the 1990s, and thus a student of the classical tradition. That is also an advantage, as he cannot be attacked for putting time-tested formulas into the book. Traditional building and place making are part of a shared culture that has only to be noticed and promoted, as this book does effectively. When the author writes in expository style, as an experienced designer, he is convincing. When he attacks modernists and misguided policymakers, he is not.

When it comes to the mechanics of design, Buras has a talent for simplification that makes the second half of the book a treasure trove of information. He manages to introduce both Western and Non-western models into the text with ease, giving the reader a primer on the Orders and Classical grammar in diagrams and a few pages of succinct text. No architect would find this sufficient, but for an urban designer nothing more is necessary. Examples from his own extensive portfolio give him the authority that only experience can offer, though fewer would be better.

No other text presents Fung Shui and brain science along with modern design standards for roads, transit design, and planning. This catholic approach proves most effective when treating familiar subjects like traffic circulation and street design (where other CNU thinkers have paved the way). Buras seems comfortable with selecting many effective

methodologies from current practice and mixing them with historically grounded ones. A wonderful example of this is his comparison of the horse with the car in a section on parking. One chart shows that both were major polluters, and that people made use of each in similar ways. Parking garages are very like stables, and even exist in similar places in a city like New York. A functionalist would never think to use such an analogy, but it works. A superb example of pictorial comparison is a pair of photos, one of suburban Arizona and the other of a Middle East refugee camp.

The most valuable part of *Classic Planning* comes after 300 pages of dense text, in Chapters 10 and 11: “Building a City,” and “A Plan is Legacy, Not a Solution.” Here Dr. Buras advances a cogent argument for bringing the best research (no matter when and how it was produced) to bear on pressing problems. In fact, he recapitulates material that was dismissed earlier, like the contributions of early twentieth century “modern” planners (Hegemann, Peets, Sitte, Parker, Unwin, and Cerda) in a positive light. As he writes, “Using conventional language and qualitative parameters, the humanistic territorial interventions of the classical method displace the written planning brief with practical forms” [364]. Many of these forms are outlined in the last chapters of his book.

As in the earlier chapters, the author uses examples from his own planning work to flesh out ideas, but more effectively in that the character of different communities, places, and cultures stands out. *Classic planning* becomes no longer a dry formula or didactic pursuit—people benefit from careful analysis, best practices, and appropriate scientific knowledge. Good teams of experts, craftsmen, and community leaders can make a difference when all contributions are valued. In some respects the title, and term “classic,” are not helpful in explaining this. Is there another term that would be better? He cites the *Gaia hypothesis* of James Lovelock to discuss a kind of building/environment balance that Aldo Leopold called a “right relationship” between humans and nature. Alexander used “timeless” in his books, and Geoffrey Scott used “humanism” as a rubric.

Indeed, one of the biggest hurdles this book will face in gaining wide acceptance is its relentless didactic drumbeat for *Classical* design in all its forms. Good architects have been working in traditional idioms since a revival in the 1980s, and there is considerable discussion of architecture in the final three chapters, in concert with landscape design and artisanal decorative arts practices. The contributions of traditional crafts masters are particularly important in any stable urban society—Japan and China continue to value their heritage in this way. Neuroscience and biology have proven that brain-body-environment awareness is acute in such artisans, and that all of us benefit from being in their presence.

The conclusions in this long and incessantly polemical book are sound. Many of its themes and paradigms will be part of the discourse on how to reform the design and planning professions during the coming decades. Despite a lavish production budget and handsome design it was not properly edited or screened before publication. Hence, those who hope for significant reform of the design professions won’t be able to commend the book to students—at least in its present form. Dr. Buras runs a graduate course through his own Classic Design Institute that hopes to teach practical planning and only time will tell if he will be successful in doing so. With a few judicious revisions to his book, he will undoubtedly be more effective, leaving a legacy, but not necessarily a final solution, as he set out to do.

References

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