REDISCOVERING THE ACTIVE CITY

ERIC H. MONKKONEN, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns, 1780-1980.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Pp. xvi, 318, index, $30.00.

Whether they have represented "old" or "new" historical tendencies, have found the city to be an "unheavenly" mess or an "unheralded triumph," historians have written overviews of American urban development that have, on the whole, maintained a view of "the city" as a dependent, not independent, variable. If the old urban history failed to challenge this view because it saw the city as just a "place" where things happened, the new continued it by seeing the city as the structural outcome of the agency of others—as they chose where to live, where to work, where to invest capital, and so on—not as a separate organizational agent itself. The continuity of this view is easily seen on a quick tour through the tables of contents of interpretive overviews of American urban history beginning with Arthur M. Schlesinger's 1933 book, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898.* This examination reveals chapters with titles such as "Society's Wards," "The Engine of Private Enterprise," "The Factory and the City," "Newcomers and the Urban Core," and "The Automobile and the City," all of which pursue the question of how a series of social, economic, and technological changes affected the city.

Eric Monkkonen's *America Becomes Urban* is without a doubt the boldest, most sustained, and most provocative attempt yet to reverse this implicit causal model of American urban history. Employing a new focus and metaphor for urban history and a redefinition of the urbanization process itself, Monkkonen highlights the agency of the city as an organizational form and concentrates on the ways the city has "shaped itself" through American history. This view combines the findings of the new social history, the more recent work of urbanists—including Monkkonen himself—on municipal government and bureaucracies, and a resurgent interest in political history into a striking reinterpretation of American urban history that will surely influence the next stage of its historiography. The book is clearly written;

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makes excellent use of quantitative, literary, and graphic evidence; and is informed by an interesting comparative perspective. If, as Monkkonen has written elsewhere, synthesis can be "dangerous," then this is a very dangerous book indeed because it is a powerful new synthesis.[1]

For Monkkonen the appropriate metaphor for the city is not the skyline, superhighway, or opportunity structure, but the corporation. The powerful insight that propels his analysis is that the key to the history of American urbanization, the characteristic that is shared by every village and metropolis, is corporate status. Like American corporations, American cities are "physically elusive," yet possessed of a precise legal identity that confers powers on them that are quite broad. Because of their corporate forms, cities as organizational entities can "borrow and lend, build and destroy, expand and contract, appear and disappear." Therefore, the history of American urbanization is the history of how cities "came to their corporate status, what they have done with this status, and how they have shaped themselves."

This view of American urbanization has both spatial and temporal dimensions that significantly revise current conceptions of urban history. Across space Monkkonen conceives of the urbanization process itself as being as much political as demographic; as important as increasing population concentration and the number of points of such concentration is the political organizational experience of city life, and these processes may not follow the same pattern. For example, there are now five times more city governments per capita than in 1790, so that at the political and organizational level more and more Americans have the experience of participating in urban government at the same time as the share of the American population living in large cities has been dropping since the thirties. Over time the key change in his view is in the "shape" of the city as an organizational – not spatial – entity. The great shift is from the "regulatory" to the "active" city, from a relatively simple organizational form with a limited scope of essentially reactive tasks to an organizationally complicated, proactive city providing a wide range of services. The motor of this transformation was not social "needs" or technological progress but the political choice of cities to change from regulators of the local economy to its promoters.

"Self-promotion, boosterism, and a constant attention to the economic main chance" came to characterize the nation's cities early on, Monkkonen argues; and by the end of the Civil War the foundation for a more complex, economically aggressive, and highly bureaucratized city had been laid as cities began to try to attract capital and people by providing safe business and social environments. Both directly, through debt-financed land grants and capital investment, and indirectly, through the creation and implementation of a wide array of services, cities strove to amplify their existing

locational or economic advantages and thereby underwrote the expansion of the capitalist economy. By 1920, with the help of progressive reformers, the full-scale active city had emerged and begun to be routinized. It was through this process of becoming economically active that cities "designed themselves as service oriented, debt financed, growth (and therefore capital) promoting, economic (not social) centers."

In one of his most important arguments Monkkonen contends that this shift from regulatory to active city was rationalized in part by an ideology of "boosterism" that was rooted in the remarkably high level of homeownership characteristic of American cities. By 1890 almost 37 percent of nonfarm households were owner occupied, and in many cities large proportions of workers and immigrants were homeowners. (By comparison, prior to World War I only 10 percent of such homes were occupied by owners in Britain.) This homeownership tied a broad cross-section of the American urban population to "booster politics," which mobilized support for the investments and services of the "promotional" city by arguing that all would profit in the long run from economic development that increased population growth and thus property values. In fact, according to Monkkonen, this vision of economic progress was incentive enough for the urban electorate to approve bond issues and new services even if on other issues connected to class or ethnicity it was bitterly divided. In this way, this ideology "united a fragmented but expanding society."

Because of this new framework, Monkkonen both devotes attention to topics that rarely find a place in syntheses of urban history and offers provocative reinterpretations of those that do. Among the former are a chapter-length consideration—"Financing the Service City"—of the badly neglected issue of municipal revenue, taxation, and debt; a reinterpretation of the history of urban politics that tries to reject the "boss-reformer" dichotomy and substitute a framework related to the emergence of the "service" city; and thoughtful explorations of how urban service bureaucracies mediated the relationship between mobility and stability in urban America. Among the latter are interesting rereadings of the history of police, transportation, progressive reform, and even the story of the Jurgis Rudkus family in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle.*

For Monkkonen, the police are less an agency of "social control" and more just another aspect of the developing active city. The creation of public order was a high priority for city promoters and, therefore, "the deeper, underlying pressures" for the creation of the police had "little to do with" crime or conflict. Instead the police were simply an early step in the creation of the new, service-providing city government, and in the early years at least, this

is exactly how the police were viewed, because they devoted much of their time to locating lost children, housing the homeless, and feeding the hungry.

In his view, too, transportation innovation is less the "shaper" of the city than shaped by the policy interventions of the city. On the basis of a careful analysis of the relationship between the building of hard-surface roads and the introduction of automobiles across several cities, Monkkonen argues that transportation innovation did not drive the shape of the city so much as city government facilitated it. The expansion of these roads designed without automobiles in mind was what made automobiles a practical means of transportation. Both in origins and in later development the "automobile revolution" should better be seen as part of the "service revolution," the efforts of government—local, state, and national—to make a transportation innovation work.

Our failure to see the role of government in the automobile revolution is an example of the "invisibility" of the active city in twentieth-century America that troubles Monkkonen. As the multiple activities and bureaucracies in American cities became routine and rationalized, they became invisible. The uniformed policeman, bond issue, or urban bureau that might have caused a political or social stir in 1850 had become such a familiar fixture one hundred years later that the idea of an active city was taken for granted, the years of organization building that had gone into creating it seemed to have been forgotten, and the successes cities had experienced in solving some of their most pressing problems were ignored.

In addition to becoming "invisible," the city attracted twentieth-century commentators like Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs who wrote withering critiques of urban life based primarily on aesthetic considerations. Employing what Monkkonen calls the "architectural fallacy," authors like these attempted to read the economy, politics, and society of urban America through its built form and to evaluate that form by means of an ahistorical, primarily aesthetic set of criteria. The "death" of the American city that these authors declared was premature at best; what they were really describing was simply the inevitably changing physical face of the active city. By ignoring other aspects of urban history, Americans in general and these analysts in particular failed to appreciate the progress that has been made in the provision of housing, transportation, and other services in the less than 150 years since the emergence of the active city.

It helps to put Monkkonen's synthetic break in perspective by comparing it with Sam Bass Warner's synthesis of almost 20 years ago, *The Urban Wilderness,* a book with similar synthetic breadth, topical organization, personal tone, and contemporary purpose. For Warner the city was a wilder-

ness, an environment shaped by economic and technological forces without regard for planning and within the narrow boundaries of a commitment to the protection of private property. Understanding the "system" that reproduced this environment was the key to changing it, and that system was overwhelmingly socioeconomic: "It is from a particular technological climate and a particular configuration of transportation that the form of our cities and our business institutions inevitably takes shape." According to Warner, the hope for such change lay in the neighborhoods where, against the odds, a "cultural consensus" around such ideas as equal opportunity and equal access to education and health care existed. If Americans would mobilize the neighborhood consensus against the urban system, they could "choose" a new city.[2]

However, Warner's narrative of urban history was powered almost exclusively by socioeconomic forces. Change from one form of city to another was driven out, not by individual action, but by economic and technological change. What action there was in the city seemed to be taken only by the upper-income groups who profited from the system; the neighborhood bearers of the "consensus" were the victims of the system. By both emphasizing structure and failing to consider political—or other—examples of change, Warner defeated his own purpose. He set out to write a book about "choice," but the story he told allowed "structure" to overwhelm it.

Although he confronts Warner's account directly only in his discussion of the politics of the transportation "revolution," in some ways Monkkonen's book is the antithesis of Warner's. Among the "lessons" that Monkkonen takes from urban history is that the "essence" of cities is "human action, human institutions, human organizations," and therefore, cities are not merely the "inevitable physical manifestation of vague economic and social and geographical forces." The most important structure for Monkkonen is the urban organizational structure, and his urban history is about choice and change and the power of political organization over technology and history. Because it is, the city we have inherited has not been somehow foisted off on the urban population but chosen by it. And if cities have chosen to pursue the "main chance" through boosterism, to emphasize property values over community, private homes over public housing, cars over buses, police-maintained order over chaos, that is a problem only for those who disagree with those choices. Monkkonen conceives his task as proving that these were, in fact, choices and that, given those choices, in some of these areas the accomplishments have been substantial.

But choices by whom and under what circumstances? "Cities" do not choose; individuals do. And their choices are influenced by their class, ethnic,

or political identities and interests; facilitated or constrained by their access to political or economic resources; and structured by modes of political organization and participation as well as available visions of the outcome of those choices. Monkkonen's detachment of urban history from the chains of socioeconomic structural determination is a real accomplishment. But to demonstrate that the city is not wholly determined by structure is not to prove that there are no structured relationships—and thus conflicting interests—within the cities.

Monkkonen's account leaves us wanting to know more about "who" chose the corporate form, the booster strategy, or the active city; how that choice was affected by relationships of economic and political power; and who gained and lost because of those choices. The neat fit he proposes among these things and the interests of boosters, bureaucrats, and taxpayers may downplay conflicting interests among these groups and minimize the difficult process by which these choices were made at the same time that it exaggerates the progress entailed in the shift from one form of city to another.

For example, throughout its long history the corporate identity of the American city has been by no means a stable or uncontested concept. Among others, legal historians Gerald Frug and Hendrik Hartog have described an almost continuous, high-stakes struggle over the meaning of the city's corporate identity in both legal treatises and case law. Involved in this were conflicts over authority between city and state, over jurisdiction between the legislative and judicial branches of government, and over boundaries between private and public that had important implications for economic activities. Although cities were some kind of corporation, the grant of that status by no means established once and for all exactly what kind they were.[3]

This struggle over corporate status often was about use of public power for private purposes, precisely the connection between corporate status and boosterism that Monkkonen makes. Here local boosters and bureaucrats were often in mortal combat. As others have pointed out, much of the impetus for "home rule" and the elimination of "special" legislation came from elected officials tired of footing the bill for legislation advocated by boosters. While Monkkonen assumes a similarity of interests between boosters and service providers, the opposite was often the case; the impulse of urban bureaucrats to rationalize their tasks and render the budget process in particular more predictable warred against the entrepreneurial instincts of the boosters.[4]

Their relationship becomes even more complicated when taxpayers come into the picture. When Monkkonen argues that local property owners were persuaded of the wisdom of debt and services because of their long-term benefits, he forgets his own important point that for most urban residents

most of the time there was no "long run"; extraordinarily high rates of geographical mobility made it – strictly speaking – economically irrational for property owners to support anything that created a short-run tax increase. Indeed such short-run thinking was endemic in the developing city – as it is today. Boosters bounced from project to project and city to city extolling the long run but hoping to profit sooner than that. Elected officials measured the "long" run precisely by the length of their terms; taxpayers from one property tax bill to another.

Given all these tensions and conflicts among the actors at the heart of Monkkonen's analysis – to say nothing of those over class, ethnicity, and race to which he gives rather short shrift – it may be that our urban history is less about progress toward solutions to problems than about changing terrains of conflict over the solutions to problems. At any given time the "shape" of the city may result from the unstable balance of contending forces in the battle over how to shape the city and the reigning "vision" of the city – for example, "regulatory," "booster," and so on – may be the ideology that the "winners" in these contests use to mobilize their coalition and its supporters. The succession of city "types" may follow the rise and fall of these unstable political coalitions more than some linear progress toward the solution of urban problems.

Today, for example, a coalition of ideological "free marketeers" and victims of the city's failures in education, policing, and so on are working together to end the era of Monkkonen's active city by shifting its functions to the private sector. That coalition's claims of "progress," "inevitability," "efficiency," and "long-run" benefit after short-run pain sound very familiar and somewhat dubious to the urban historian; there may be more of politics than progress here, just as there was among the proponents of the active city. Monkkonen's book might have done more to help us understand why.

But by restoring a sense of human agency to American urban history, Monkkonen has gone a long way toward putting the politics back into that history. At the same time his book carries an important message for the present: We cannot stop urban history but we can make – and unmake – it. Both of these accomplishments make this book an important one to read, assign, argue with, and learn from.

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NOTES

1. Eric H. Monkkonen, "The Dangers of Synthesis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 1146-1157.

2. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (New York, 1972), 60.

3. Gerald Frug, "The City as a Legal Concept," *Harvard Law Review* 93 (1980); Hendrik Hartog, *Public Property and Private Power: The Corporation of the City of New York in American Law, 1730-1870* (Ithaca, 1983).

4. For examples of conflict between boosters and bureaucrats, see Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore, 1984).