

**Creating Built Environments
Bridging Knowledge and Practice Divides (Review)**

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BOOK REVIEW

Creating Built Environments: Bridging Knowledge and Practice Divides, by R. J. Lawrence, New York, London, Routledge, 2021, 266 pp., £34.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780815385394 in paperback, hardback and ebook

At first sight, the title of this book seems to make an impossible promise: to bridge the divide between knowledge and practice in creating built environments seems like an altogether unreachable promise, lacking in academic restraint, in view of the complexity and vastness of the task. But Lawrence's book is a major intellectual and organizational undertaking that delivers. The bridge of the title is carefully laid out for the reader, who quickly understands that the author is in fact claiming for a more democratic, inclusive, and collaborative planning and design practice that embraces diverse ways of knowing and breaks free from disciplinary boundaries to understand the built environment and its social and natural relationships in all their complexity.

To do that satisfactorily, built environment research and practice disciplines (architecture, spatial planning, urban design, landscape design, engineering and more) must seek not only to collaborate among themselves, but to reach to other disciplines (psychology, sociology, geography) and to other practices and ways of knowing. Lawrence summarizes this endeavour in his explanation about transdisciplinarity, in which "contributions extend beyond scientific knowledge by including non-academic researchers and institutions, such as representatives of the private sector, public administrations, community associations, and citizens. Transdisciplinary contributions enable the cross-fertilization of knowledge and the experiences of people educated in disciplines, trained in professions, and experienced in policymaking." (p.2).

Central to this movement are convergence, collaboration, and commitment of the members of those coalitions of stakeholders around the formation of visions and projects that address the multiple challenges faced by cities today. These are not new ideas, and Lawrence does not claim they are. What Lawrence does is to shine new light on ideas of co-design and participation for the formation of relevant knowledge that allows for action in urban development, rightfully decrying the ongoing fetishization of design and of designers. All this is anchored on notable attention to tacit or practical knowledge.

In short, Lawrence does not challenge expert knowledge. He simply tells us expert knowledge can be found in places where we are not used to look, and planners, designers and builders ought to reimagine their relationships with these other types of expert knowledge to be able to act as facilitators and articulators. In short, the bridge of the title does not refer to making academic knowledge accessible or usable by professionals. Roderick's bridge is much more radical and integrative, and speaks to a much more fundamental problem, which he calls our "urban condition," paraphrasing Hanna Arendt. Roderick reminds us that for Arendt human agency is in decline, thanks to the way modern scientific knowledge became "alienated from the world," despite the many opportunities offered by the technological revolution of the 20th century. For Arendt, we are increasingly unable to control the consequences of our own actions because we became divorced from the systems that control us. In Lawrence's words, Arendt thus proposes that "human actions be reconsidered in terms of human capabilities, because she felt they had been neglected, not just in terms of individual activity, but also collective actions and their consequences" (p. 4). Lawrence explores the consequences of this divorce between agency, action and consequences, and our alienation from the construction of the built environment. He does so by focusing on this bridge between true integrative

knowledge and a democratic practice that includes the contributions of a wide range of stakeholders. In this regard, Lawrence is speaking to the very foundational idea that people became alienated from the product of their own work, which Marx describes in his theory of alienation, as a consequence of increasing division of labour, and Max Weber explored with his theory of bureaucratic management. Alienation is furthered by humankind's increasing dependency on technologies that are only understood by a few experts, which is also reflected on how cities are planned, designed, and built. In this sense, we also became divorced from the practices that carry knowledge about how to make the build environment within them, the intrinsic knowledge that is embedded in *doing*.

To be sure, Lawrence himself does not quote Marx or Weber, but he recognizes that the last century brought about a "logic of segmented and uncoordinated human actions that often produced fractured districts and neighbourhoods" (p. 5), which he sees as increasingly driven by "the liberalization of land use-planning, the influence of foreign property investors and developers, and the transfer of the provision and maintenance of infrastructure and services for energy, transport, water supply, and waste disposal from the public to the private sector" (p. 5). In short, Lawrence is describing an intense ideological and political movement towards neo-liberalism (which he does not name) that has had dire consequences for our cities. In this conundrum, the issue of collective agency is central, and the bridge proposed by Roderick is a radical overhaul of city-making _ at least in the West_, based on collective knowledge production and collective action. In this sense, I feel Lawrence is a kindred spirit.

He does not emphasize, however, the antagonistic nature of city making, and fails to recognize that not all actors are interested in seeking solutions for the common urban challenges we face today. He states that "another concern expressed in this book is the incapacity of many contemporary societies to respond effectively to complex urban issues that often become persistent problems, for example chronic homelessness and substandard housing conditions in many cities; and increasing incidence of chronic, non-communicable diseases" (Preface). Lawrence does not discuss the causes of this growing incapacity to face structural problems, and opts for a more proactive instance, in which this incapacity is tackled via a renewed practice.

The point I wish to make here is that this position overlooks the fact that cities and communities often have the knowledge and the capacity to tackle problems, but they have a "political problem" connected to the antagonistic nature of city making I refer to, in which some groups are effectively oppressed or silenced. Decisionmakers and voters seem often unable to agree on which course of action to take or are dupped into believing the solution is to further reduce public administration and public capacity. In a scorching white paper published in 2021, Lindsey (Lindsey 2021) argues that American administrative capacity "is not what it once was" in view of the many failures to address systemic shocks in the last decades. For Lindsey

This deficit not only undermines effective public policy in a wide variety of important domains; with our republic now so deeply polarized, it threatens the legitimacy and continued vitality of liberal democracy as well. The decline in state capacity since the 1960s can be traced to two distinctive but mutually reinforcing intellectual movements. One occurred on the political right while the other is associated mainly with the left. Both represent dysfunctional responses to America's longstanding (and well-founded) fears of centralized power. On the right, healthy suspicion of rapid government expansion has given way to a toxic contempt for government and public service per se. On the left, efforts to expand "citizen voice" in government as a check on abusive power have produced a sclerotic "vetocracy" that makes effective governance all but impossible (Executive summary).

I am not a specialist in American public administration, but I tend to disagree that citizen empowerment leads to inaction. Despite rampant NIMBYism, true citizen empowerment has the potential to avoid the worse of socio-spatial injustice and may deliver more just outcomes. But voters and decision makers are being misled by widespread ideology that demonizes state action and romanticizes individual entrepreneurship, undermining true systemic collective action articulated via State administrations.

In the few cases in which some kind of consensus was reached, administrative capacity existed, and action was taken, results have been promising. Experiences like the “Housing First” policy in Finland, and “mobility corridors” in Curitiba and Medellín indicate that, where there is political will and focus, and where administrative capacity for public action exists, structural problems can be addressed successfully. The very question of housing in Europe after World War II is a prime example. But currently, we seem to be failing to address very concrete problems, such as climate change, growing socio-spatial inequality, housing shortages and more, thanks to the ailments described by Lindsey.

Lawrence seems to acknowledge all this but offers a more pragmatic and hopeful solution in the form of five strategic domains in city making that in themselves have the potential to promote convergence, collaboration, and commitment. He carefully illustrates these strategic domains with real-world examples, which Lawrence calls “beacons for change.” In “Constructing with nature in Mind,” commonly known as “nature-based solutions,” he cites the examples of the Cheonggyecheon Regeneration Project in Seoul, complete between 2003 and 2008, and the Jade Eco Park in Taichung, Taiwan (2012–2016), which according to Lawrence “illustrates how creative thinking can interpret climate as an opportunity for innovative architecture, engineering, landscape and urban planning, rather than a constraint” (p. 21). He also gives the example of the pioneering strategic vision for Singapore. In the three examples cited here, collective action to create public goods in the form of healthier greener urban environments, though state intervention played a major role. Without discounting the importance of good planning and design, it seems that collective vision-making articulated by efficient public administrations and strategic spatial interventions have played a major role. The remainder strategic domains outlined by Lawrence are equally integrative (2. Planning for Health and Well-being, 3. Food for Thought, 4. Housing matters for All and 5. Creating Adaptation and Co-producing Transformations) all point towards convergence and integration of different disciplines and domains of action, highlighting the high costs of inaction and poor-quality urban development and advocating for integrative planning and design, incorporating the most recent ideas about sustainability transitions, co-production of solutions, management and monitoring, which Lawrence highlights throughout the book.

Lawrence’s book is also a feat of organization and clarity. Ideas are systematically explained and illustrated with real-world examples that are compelling and convincing, making this ideal course material every student, teacher and practitioner in the built environment ought to read.

Reference

Lindsey, B. 2021. “State Capacity: What Is It, How We Lost It, and How to Get It Back, Niskanen Center.” <https://www.niskanencenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/brinkpaper.pdf>

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