

reviews

**Liberal Dreams
and Nature's
Limits
Great Cities Of
North America
Since 1600**

James T. Lemon

**Toronto: Oxford
University Press,
1996, 341 pages**

**Reviewed by
Len Gertler**

This is a good book. It is a good book because it strives to understand the urban present by exploring the urban past, because it discovers in that past a guiding theme, and because it has an intelligible structure and sustains a critical stance throughout. Synoptically, these features add up to a sound perspective: city and society are interwoven, and the planning of cities must be informed by that ineluctable insight.

The author, James Lemon, a geographer at the University of Toronto and award-winning urban historian, writes with a passion about the rise to glory, stagnation, and ... "what next?" of the great cities of North America.

The chosen cities are Philadelphia in 1760, New York in 1860, Chicago in 1910, Los Angeles in 1950, and Toronto in 1975. Each one is presented as an epitome of its time, and the five together convey the central narrative: the driving force behind the rise of these cities has been the liberal dream—the untrammelled pursuit of fame and fortune through the market. But that expansionist dream has, in our time, been the source of some formidable limits to growth. These are the limits of Nature—cities press upon vital life supports, both regional and cosmic—and of Society—can civility and the good life be sustained in what appears to be "an economically stagnant world"?

There is not the opportunity in this format to follow the complexities of Lemon's discourse, but fortunately I can do this symptomatically by reference to his interpretation of the work of Jane Jacobs. At a time when Jane Jacobs is on her way to becoming an icon, beyond any criticism or reproach, Lemon has the courage to question her influence. He observes that Jacobs' preferred image of the city—lively, diverse neighbourhoods, shaped by small scale development and enterprise—has not prevailed "in large measure because of the power of property with which her own views actually coincide." While her ideals are laudable, her position, according to Lemon, is "seriously flawed" by an apparent inability to appreciate that her cherished business creativity is founded on a liberalism that

equates freedom with "control over property," and that the historic tendency of a society so based has been toward an aggrandizement of scale, market monopoly, corporate power, and cities polarized into rich and poor.

This philosophical bent, it is argued, has led her to several follies: to pick planners as targets rather than "big developers and bankers" and "politicians desperate to overcome decay;" to attack state monopolies like Ontario Hydro for their current misdemeanors rather than insisting upon adherence to original public purposes; and to deny and minimize the role of government or "collective management" in addressing the inequities and social stress generated by the economic process, and in restoring balance between private and public interests in city and society.

In this respect, Jacobs reflects the predominant American liberal ethos, which Lemon contrasts with the Canadian variety (which presumably owes more to the developmental, people-oriented liberalism of John Stuart Mill than to the property-oriented kind of James Mill). He writes:

*I will pair the following tendencies:
excess/restraint, exclusion/inclusion,
polarization/compromise,
antigovernment/progovernment, populist/elitist,
corporatelsmall scale, consumer/citizen. The
U.S. tends more to the former, while Canada
tends more to the latter and is thus more like
northwestern Europe.*

While this is a heavy burden to place upon Jane Jacobs (even if only inferentially), it is a challenge worthy of her legendary dialectical skills so vividly demonstrated in her *Systems of Survival*. A rebuttal, if forthcoming, should be illuminating.

Notwithstanding this somewhat stark contrast, Lemon acknowledges the common ideological roots of the two countries and of their cities, and laments in the modern history of Toronto the retrogressive change from the eminently "livable city" of the seventies to the pur-

poseless urban expansion following on the excesses of the eighties.

In addressing the inescapable question 'Where do we go from here?', it is to the author's credit that he does not indulge in futuristic fantasies. He is highly skeptical of the claims for the "cybercity." He returns to the basics. Cities will be as good or as bad as the society in which they are spawned, as reflected in income distribution, employment, the uses or abuses of technology and natural resources, and our propensity for "living together."

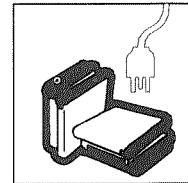
The energy that flows through this book makes it compelling, in spite of some surprising stylistic gaucheries. George Bernard Shaw once observed that good style is the by-product of having something to say. In this respect, James Lemon qualifies in full measure. **PC**

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