

Book reviews

Marco Amati, *The City and the Super-Organism: A History of Naturalism in Urban Planning*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2021; 200 pp.: ISBN: 978-981-16-3977-7, €93.08 (eBook)

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Marco Amati's aim in *The City and the Super-Organism, A History of Naturalism in Urban Planning* stems from a very pragmatic question: as people find refuge in cities because of climate change, which kind of alliance between city planning and the sciences do we need for habitability?

The author collects a vast array of examples, ranging from the 16th century to the 21st, where city planners made use of naturalism – broadly conceived as a philosophical position that assumes that social sciences have their objects of enquiry rooted in a single natural order (p. 6) – to make arguments about urban planning and transform them into action.

Illustrating the complex mirror game between city planning and the biological, medical and environmental sciences, Amati informs the starting point's question with a historical genealogy of the dialogue between the applied urban social sciences and the 'hard' sciences.

Amati aims to prompt a historically informed discussion on the lessons learnt from an often reductionist and ideological application of sciences to city planning and

to reflect on the kind of science needed in the Anthropocene. The empirical content is distributed in eight chapters, each followed by a brief conclusion, which summarises the theoretical differences between each 'naturalistic approach' and reflects on the historical development of the discipline of urban planning.

The first chapter introduces a trope that will be found in several other naturalistic understandings of the city: the metaphoric usage of the human body. The French and Italian context of the mid-17th century produced several theories of the city as a body. This promoted reflections on the city as divided into functional components such as the organs and the corruptedness of the city, which had to be corrected and brought back to a state of perfection, similar to that of the human body.

At the same time, Amati argues that the analogies to the body played an essential role in seeing the city as an organic whole (p. 33).

The second chapter looks at the medical sciences and city planning. In the Parisian context of the 19th century, attention is brought to the relationship between the exterior conditions of the city to the human body. The focus is on how the climate influences the health of citizens, in agreement with the miasmatic theory. This resulted in the development of medical topographies, which included information on climatic, meteorological and environmental information as well as customs and food habits. These concerns brought to the surface a new concern with light and air into the city, as

Urban Studies

2023, Vol. 60(6) 1177–1188

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DOI: 10.1177/00420980231158030

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well as remedial actions such as tree planting, making it an urban ecological understanding of the city *avant la lettre*. The author notes that, after the discovery of media between humans and the environment, such as bacteria, efforts at sanitation focused on eliminating bacterial load in the city, but this also meant that the medical profession abandoned the ecological view of the city (p. 48).

Chapter three focuses on Marcel Pöete's use of a Bergsonian-inspired vitalism to describe the historical evolution of the city of Paris. Cities are driven by a vital impulse, and the urban possesses a 'sarcode'. It follows that the urban planner's role is preserving the city's sarcode and facilitating citizens' engagement to commune with the city's soul (p. 67).

Chapter four presents two examples of an evolutionary science-inspired urban theory, contrasting with the positivist and modernist trend. He analyses Kon Wajiro's take on the evolutionist reading of the city, focusing on the new ways humans adapted and found new niches in the rapidly industrialising and changing cities at the beginning of 20th-century Japan. His view was inspired by Geddes, who used the Spencerian idea that humanity would progress from competition to cooperation and that cities had a catalysing role in societal evolution. The author underlines that this synthetic philosophy made an important contribution to helping architects who dominated urban planning to see the city as more than 'reductively architecture writ large' (p. 74). As Amati notes, these approaches embraced indeterminacy and complexity infused with synthetic science to make situated claims, as opposed to city planning inspired by positivism and in this case a biological metaphor was used to highlight the rampant social injustice.

In chapter five, Amati follows the naturalistic narrative of the pathologisation of the urban population of 19th-century France,

which, again, using the structuring analogy of the organism, argued for a holistic rebalancing of the social body. The social urban body was seen as being in a state of disease. Therefore, Arthur Bodier proposed decentralising the population to render the nation healthy and not paralysed. Amati analyses the eugenic character of this theory, which indeed proposed a control on the population's development and justified elite urban segregation in Europe and the USA. As Amati notes, ecology is resorted to stabilising the status quo; it enables an explanation of social inequality, gentrification and segregation without recourse to politics or history. The naturalistic development of urban sociology under the Chicago school followed a similar strategy, although it was based more on the desire to gain attention to the discipline of urban planning, borrowing the insights and legitimacy of established science.

The sixth chapter focuses on Le Corbusier and his relationship with science. Amati shows how Le Corbusier advocated for a science of cities that could improve the human race. In this case, recourse to science, such as seeing urban cells as modular units, was used to sustain a positivist approach to architectural standardisation. Le Corbusier's specific approach to science consisted of a reductive and selective choice that allowed him to consider life as a machine and ignored urban realities.

Amati shows the connection between the aim of perfecting the human body and, as a reflection, the city. This brought Le Corbusier to reflect on the necessity of air and light for the body and architecture.

In chapter seven, Amati draws attention to Sir Patrick Abercrombie's naturalistic logic to counteract urban sprawl. The assumption of the naturalness of interactions between communities and open space shows an example of designing an infrastructure city system as a biological metabolism.

The last chapter brings forward the examples of two planners, Victor Grued and Eliel Saarinen, who used anthropomorphisation of the city in the early-20th century USA and then referred to medicine and surgery of the city. The assumption is that the city is a living organism with a certain state of harmony, which, if disturbed, must be brought back to a harmonious state. Amati notes that this approach espoused an ideal vision of a scientifically rational planner and justified even considering slums as a cancer cell that had to be amputated.

In the conclusive chapter, the author draws attention to the possibilities of naturalistic metaphors, which in history have prompted movements to urban challenges and envisioned future urbanisation (p. 165) and rapidly reviews some current use of naturalistic approaches to urban planning, focusing on the risks of the naïve and ideological use made of them in the past. Nevertheless, the author encourages the readers to think about a science ‘of, for and about’ the city in times of climatic emergency.

The author successfully elicits several cases in which a unified theory of the natural and the social informs urban planning and shows how similar scientific theories inspired completely different narrativisation of the social and the urban. Amati can clearly show how each approach has prompted a change in the discipline of urban planning and helped progressively see the urban as an object of study amid elitist and racial pitfalls.


The empirical data are gathered according to historical cases and a chronological approach, but a cross-chapter analysis is sometimes lacking, given the thematic commonality.

The richness of empirical material can be the basis for more theoretical works informed by philosophy of science and race and class studies. Although mentioned

briefly, the connection between the Material Turn in the social sciences, and its influences on the future of urban studies, could be a fruitful case to continue thinking of Naturalism and applied urban planning.

The book is overall a great tool to think about the complex narrative relationship between city planning and the sciences, its risks and potentials, which can inform today’s understanding of trends such as ‘urban acupuncture’ (Lerner, 2014).

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Reference

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Chiara Tornaghi and Chiara Certomà (eds), *Urban Gardening as Politics*, Oxon: Routledge, 2019; 236 pp.: ISBN: 978-0-41579-380-3, £96.00 (hbk)

Jeroen van der Heijden, Harriet Bulkeley and Chiara Certomà (eds), *Urban Climate Politics: Agency and Empowerment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019; 256 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-10849 297-3, \$105.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Tariro Kamuti , University of the Free State, South Africa

More than half of the world’s people are urbanised and the proportion of people living in urban areas is expected to increase to about six billion by the middle of the 21st century. A high percentage of this urbanisation is projected to come from Asia and Africa. Cities already contribute almost three-quarters of the gross domestic product, resource consumption and greenhouse