Where (web site)

March 2009

In January, I asked *Where* readers and contributors what books they'd recommend to introduce the basic concepts of urbanism to curious, non-expert friends. I asked for a short list of accessible, concise books.

Since the initial query more than 30 titles have been suggested. Because I was already familiar with only a handful of the books, I headed to the library to get better acquainted with at least some of the other suggestions.

Based on that library visit, on posted comments from readers, on behind-the-scenes advice from *Where* contributors and my interpretation—from my own very amateurish (and American) perspective—of what counts as "accessible" and "concise," here are five books about the basics of urbanism that I'd now recommend to relatively clueless, but curious friends.

Almost all of the links in this post connect to Google Book Search.

The Top 5

1. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs (1961). At about 450 pages, "concise" is probably not the most apt description of this book. But, as this is the single best written, most accessible, most compelling book I've ever read about cities, I'm willing to forsake the concision criterion even in my first recommendation. If you want to know what can make cities pleasant, safe and interesting places to live, read this book. If you want to read one of the best non-fiction prose stylists of our time, read this book. It's a classic, and deservedly so. As one *Where* reader put it: "It's a great book for explaining why we care about all of this."

2. *The Option of Urbanism* by Christopher Leinberger (2007). While not as fun to read as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* or *The Geography of Nowhere* (see below), this slender volume briskly highlights difference between drivable sub-urban development and walkable urban development, and does a good job of explaining the benefits of walkable city neighborhoods. It's good primer on the basics of density, zoning and the hidden subsidies fueling drivable sub-urban development.

3. *The Geography of Nowhere* by James Howard Kunstler (1993). This book is an exploration—and excoriation—of the rise of suburbia and sprawl. It also explains how the more traditional patterns and places of city life and country life are superior to the "geography of nowhere." Accessible and ferocious.

4. *Cities Back from the Edge* by Roberta Gratz, with Norman Mintz (1998). According to a *Where* reader, this book is "in the spirit of Jacobs" and discusses "how existing cities can be improved with citizen participation in contrast to destructive master plans." The book is filled with lots of specific ideas about how to improve downtown areas, all of them lavishly illustrated with real life examples from successful efforts in dozens of cities.

5. *How Cities Work* by Alex Marshall (2000). Squarely aimed at the lay person, this book seeks to discover what forces shape places and cities—and finds that one of the most powerful forces is political choices, particularly those having to do with transportation policy. A *Where* reader gave this recommendation: "It's not comprehensive, of course, but it's a good snack, possibly the kind that could interest a person in a larger meal."