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Book Review: Politics of Urban Runoff: Nature, Technology, and the Sustainable City

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Andrew Karvonen. 2011. *Politics of Urban Runoff: Nature, Technology, and the Sustainable City*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA; London, England. 306 pages. ISBN: 978-0262516341

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Politics, according to Andrew Karvonen, describes “processes of relation building between different human actors to find common ground (in the best of circumstances) or to engage in power plays (in the worst cases) and to orient societies into particular configurations” (p. 160). Critical to the arguments made in this book is his addition to this formulation the importance of “nonhuman actors” such as flows of water, endangered species, the functions that various ecosystems provide to communities or societies, and even impervious surfaces and other engineered objects and systems implicated in the urban stormwater network. This expanded notion of politics—one primarily concerned with “relation building”—is at the core of the “civic politics” that Karvonen argues is necessary to break with the technomanagerial approach to urban nature that has dominated urban planning, urban infrastructure, and even much urban environmentalism over the past 150–200 years.

The book begins with an historical and theoretical explanation of how stormwater has been dealt with in the United States since the early 1800s. The first two chapters include description of the dominant narratives accompanying such practices and an introduction to alternative frameworks and practices beginning to emerge. Karvonen describes our approach to the “problem” of stormwater as one dominated by a Promethean logic that seeks to control and improve upon nature—the groundwork for the “command and control” practices of stormwater management that are so evident even today in most of our landscapes whether urban or rural. In place of this outdated and unsustainable worldview, the author advocates for a “relational” approach to nature, and, by extension, our management of stormwater runoff. Of particular importance to this relational understanding of the world is a shift from *topographic space* to *topological space*. The former understands space, and everything in it, as fixed and absolute, whereas the latter focuses on relational connections to which there is no outside to gain a privileged, synoptic vantage point, and thereby devise a monofunctional infrastructural strategy focused only on the command, control, or conveyance of a particular “actor.”

The middle section of the book is comprised of four chapters of case studies—two each on Austin, TX, and Seattle, WA. These chapters offer an essential complement to the more theoretical beginning and ending chapters, and they allow Karvonen to continuously demonstrate how the Promethean worldview infiltrates nearly all aspects of our relationship with urban nature. More practically, the case studies provide “urban practitioners”—a term Karvonen uses frequently to describe individuals working to put into practice a hybrid or relational

approach—with a wealth of concrete examples of what has worked and what has not in two cities known for their progressive stormwater policies and projects.

The book’s penultimate chapter is an in-depth discussion of contemporary urban politics, which Karvonen assigns to three categories: Rational, Populist, and Civic. Once again, the author uses this chapter as a way to interweave the practical with the theoretical to clearly demonstrate the outcomes of each political strategy. But it is the somewhat nascent category of civic politics that Karvonen believes is best equipped to “enact the relational perspective of urban nature” through a process of “local, deliberative, and action-oriented programs for reworking urban nature . . . while reinventing the roles of urban residents, governments, and technical experts through radically different forms of political life” (p. 160).

Karvonen closes the book with a chapter titled “Toward the Relational City” in which he outlines a strategy for achieving the relational city comprised of three main parts which include: (1) the development of “civic imaginaries” better able to understand and accept the messy hybridity of our contemporary urba(n)atural situation; (2) the development of a new form of “civic expertise” not so dependent upon the traditional expertise of the Promethean engineer; and, finally, (3) the need for continuous “civic experimentation” through which the ossified forms of technomanagerial, bureaucratic administration of urban stormwater can be slowly but surely replaced with new, more relational, and therefore more sustainable, forms of urban stormwater engagement.

In the spring of 2010, I became involved in a project aimed at raising awareness about sustainability as it relates to urban stormwater, facilitating change in City stormwater management practices, and actually implementing such practices in “pilot” form. The project arose in response to severe flooding problems in a local subwatershed, which is an area of the city where the aging stormwater infrastructure is no longer sufficient to deal with what are increasingly typical storm events. A solid partnership was formed between university faculty from departments such as landscape architecture, environmental engineering, and natural resources, members of the city’s public works, planning, and city council, and a group of concerned citizens that comprised the watershed steering committee. My involvement with the project stretched on for nearly two years (and will hopefully resume soon), and during this time, I witnessed many of the issues confronted in this book—the supposedly apolitical engineers wielding incredible power as a result of their infrastructural expertise; a group of citizens who were passionate in their convictions but not quite well-organized or politically savvy enough to effect enduring change; and a university system seemingly perfectly positioned to engage in such issues and contribute meaningfully to their community and their educational mission but which has yet to evolve an infrastructure capable of catalyzing and supporting the sort of sustained cross-disciplinary activities that such projects entail. The project was not without successes—we did manage to implement some small and scattered infrastructural

projects and there is no doubt that the overall awareness of alternatives to the Promethean approach was increased, but I am also convinced that the process would have been significantly more successful if we had been guided by Andrew Karvonen's *Politics*

of *Urban Runoff*. The book is neither abstract political theory nor a how-to manual of best management practices. Instead, it offers a productive synthesis of these two poles and thereby produces a useful "third way" resource for urban practitioners.

Robert L. France. 2011. *Veniceland Atlantis: The Bleak Future of the World's Favourite City*. Faringdon, England: Libri Publishing. ISBN 978-1-907471-13-1.

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Veniceland Atlantis: The Bleak Future of the World's Favourite City by Robert L. France integrates a variety of sources: novels, photo essays, monographs, environmental reports, and urban plans to document the effort to stave off the inevitable in a place "associated with impermanence and imminent death" (p. 2). Located at the meeting of tides and deltas on the edge of a lagoon, Venice was built to be defensible not sustainable. The city's slow descent into the Adriatic is irreversible and the solution, an integrated system of mobile floodgates known as MOSE (Experimental Electromechanical Module), is an expensive, engineered solution the author generally condemns. "MOSE is the compromise solution to the intractable problem of needing to both protect the historic city and lagoon at the time as not hindering the revenue-making activities of the port of Marghera" (p. 137). France believes the monies dedicated to MOSE would be better spent ecological restoration, workforce housing, and implementing a comprehensive watershed management system. Like New Orleans, flooding in Venice is exacerbated by the loss of wetlands in the surrounding region. In addition, half the salt marshes that once ringed the Venice Lagoon have been lost, which led to increased flows of agricultural and industrial runoff. This raised nutrient levels in waters already laden with human refuse and turned Venice into "the most beautiful toilet in the world" (p. 9).

The city's water quality has improved since the 1980s, when Gondoliers donned facemasks to protest the state of the toxic brew that filled Venice's canals. Bans on phosphates and the construction of thousands of septic tanks lowered eutrophication rates and algae blooms are less common. Restoration projects and the construction of artificial wetlands have reduced the flow of runoff from the mainland and, as a result, the Venice Lagoon is returning to a semblance of ecological health.

The chief problem, for France, is the plague of tourists that inundate the city with their waste and a "level of ignorance"

that "is staggering beyond belief" (p. 79). To verify this point, there are photos of barefoot tourists "'refreshing' their shopping-weary feet" in sewage laden floodwaters. Venetians seldom intervene, as they tend to "despise with vehemence all tourists" and "Good Samaritans are few and far between" (p. 32). France is not unsympathetic to such behavior as the city leaders have turned away from righteousness and sacrificed Venice "to the Baal of mass-market tourism" (p. 111).

An undisputed sense of loss permeates Venice. Since 1950, the city's population has dropped from 170,000 to 60,000 and the exodus has left an aging populace, the oldest in Europe. In this period, the city that exemplified the brilliance of the Renaissance and a soaring human spirit has morphed into "Veniceland," a tourist destination that attracts 12 million visitors a year. The government, bankrupt and corrupt, is hopelessly ineffectual. What hope there is for the future comes from private investors. Unfortunately, Las Vegas is their business model and they appear determined to entertain the world with a glossed over theme park rather than seduce visitors with an unmatched beauty.

Yet, there is hope. "Venice is just too hard-wired into the world's collective psyche to be ignored" (p. 118). France suggests a mix of "strategic urban planning and draconian tourist management" to place Venice on more sustainable lines. The key is to invest tourist dollars in projects to secure the built environment and restore the natural environment. While some have suggested turning the management of Venice over to the Disney Corporation, France thinks there are better models. He suggests setting off Venice's most treasured sections as a National Park of sorts, where admission is charged. The rest of the city could be regulated much like Banff or towns in the Lake District in England, where environmental and building restrictions are imposed to protect priceless public resources. In the end, Venice must cultivate a new "type of tourist," visitors less interested in "partying" and dedicated to unearthing the subtle mysteries of a bygone era (p. 119).

Venice is destined not to fade away. It embodies an inveterate sense of destiny that recalls the decadent and the divine. Whether we like it or not, Venice is a harbinger of the future and its fate is intrinsically linked with our own.