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Rights and the City: Problems, Progress, and Practice edited by Sandeep Agrawal

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Book Review

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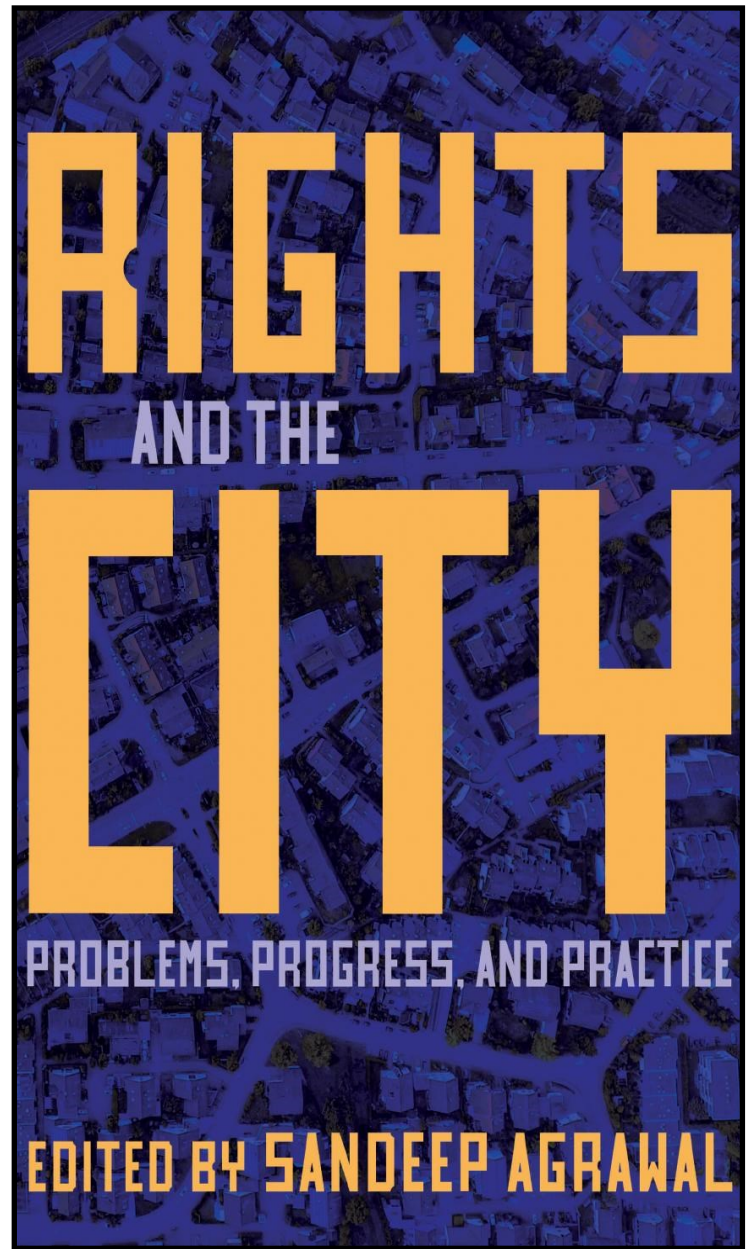
Sandeep Agrawal  (editor)

Rights and the City: problems, progress, and practice, University of Alberta Press, 2022; 281 pp. 4 b&w illustrations; 3 b&w tables; \$34.99 (paperback or e-book). ISBN 9781772126266 .

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As a scholar concerned with the legal dimensions of planning and the possibilities of legal pluralism in rethinking the discipline, I approached *Rights and the City: Problems, Progress, and Practice* with interest. According to the back cover description, the volume edited by Dr. Sandeep Agrawal (School of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Alberta) sought to explore “the tensions that exist between different concepts of rights” and “expose the paradoxes that planners and municipal governments face when attempting to combat discriminatory practices and advance a human rights agenda.” The introduction to the book places it within the framework of Henry Lefebvre’s *right to the city* (1968), highlighting the relevance of a rights-based approach to the understanding of urban planning, even if the implementation of such an idea is difficult to achieve from a policy lens and the concept remains most useful as a theoretical device. The editor also puts forward the notion of rights *in the city*, bringing attention to how human rights are actually implemented in practice (or not) in urban settings.

What I found as I read through the pages was a diverse collection of informative, mostly descriptive empirical chapters that examine, with varied levels of detail and theoretical depth, how certain existing legal rights manifest in practice in the Canadian context (except for chapter 7, which takes an international comparative perspective). Not surprisingly, much of the analysis revolves around the extent to which the



Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Constitution of 1982, and other federal, provincial, and municipal pieces of legislation meet human rights standards and/or help implement the protection of the rights under discussion, historically and today. To do this, the authors rely on a combination of case law, legislation, or examples from local initiatives to illustrate the state of human rights discussions in the country.

The book is organized into three sections: *The Right to the City*, *Rights in the City* (a title that could have more descriptively referred to human rights), and *Other Rights in the City*. In section one, Alexandra Flynn critically unpacks what the right to the city means in a settler colonial context like Canada, while Jennifer A. Orange examines how the concept has made its way into policy circles through advocacy and the work of cultural institutions like museums.

In the second section, the voice of book editor Sandeep Agrawal is very prevalent given his contributions to three different chapters. In chapter 3, Agrawal explores the historical evolution of human rights legislation between Confederation and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, while in chapter 4, together with co-author Eran S. Kaplinsky, they explore how group rights and collective rights have shaped urban policy decisions. In chapter 5, the editor examines municipal plans and bylaws in Alberta to assess their level of compliance with human rights legislation. In chapter 6, Renée Vaugeois reflects on the work of a human rights non-profit that aspires to turn Edmonton into a “human rights city.”

The third part of the book examines themes that did not seem to fit the other sections, and the title *Other Rights in the City* does not help readers to see what thread connects these final chapters. In chapter 7, Michelle L. Oren and Rachelle Alterman



Figure 1. Montreal. Photographer: Rachel Barber. Used with permission.



Figure 2. Istanbul. Photographer: Sheila Munro. Used with permission.

summarize the results of a content analysis of UN member state constitutions to assess how/if the right to adequate housing is legally protected. Chapter 8, by Eran S. Kaplinsky, examines property rights in the municipal context, with emphasis on the mechanics of land expropriation and compensation to landowners. Finally, Ola P. Malik and Sasha Best discuss the tensions and policy implications of protecting freedom of expression in public spaces while ensuring the protection of people’s dignity and group identity, advocating for the regulation of “othering” speech.

Throughout the nine chapters, the book offers clear, facts-rich examples of how some human rights



Figure 3. Ottawa. Photographer: Rachel Barber. Used with permission.

are actually codified, and whether they are being protected or violated in practice. While some of the chapters go beyond description and put forward more developed conceptual arguments, most of them remain largely descriptive or testimonial, rather than theoretical. The conceptual connections to Lefebvre’s right to the city in particular are not evenly clear and fleshed out across all chapters, making the book more a collection of examples about rights in the city. The volume would have benefitted from a closing chapter to bring all contributions back to this opening idea.

In my view, the main contribution of the volume – as Benjamin Davy states in the afterword – is to bring renewed attention to the relevance of legal rights in the realm of urban planning and politics, as well as to illustrate how they can serve to disadvantage or push for the protection of already marginalized groups in society in practical terms. To do this, the book offers well-researched examples, most of which show how these debates unfold at the municipal level. This approach will be especially useful for readers and practitioners whose work lies at the intersection of policy analysis, program design, and planning through a rights-based lens.

However, for a book that claimed to expose “the tensions that exist between different concepts of rights,” as I quoted at the beginning, I missed seeing more critical engagement with the ways in which legal rights – including human rights – emerge from particular cultural matrices that should not be taken for granted, since they materialize normative assumptions that are not universal. This is particularly true when talking about rights-based discourses in a settler colonial context, as the author of the first chapter begins to unpack.

Rights and the City is a relevant read for practitioners and scholars interested in the practical implementation of human right principles in Canada, particularly with regards to their codification into legislation and the tensions that emerge in their application. Educators, policy analysts, and students will benefit from this grounded approach. Given its applied focus on legal rights, however, the book might not fully satisfy readers who seek more critical analyses of rights-based approaches in planning. Nonetheless, it is a useful resource to expand knowledge about the state of human rights protection in the context of Canadian planning.

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