

Lemon, James T. *Liberal Dreams and Nature's Limits: Great Cities of North America since 1600*. Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Pp. x , 341. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography and index

Larry McCann

Volume 27, numéro 1, october 1998

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016622ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016622ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

McCann, L. (1998). Compte rendu de [Lemon, James T. *Liberal Dreams and Nature's Limits: Great Cities of North America since 1600*. Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Pp. x , 341. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography and index]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 27(1), 68–69. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016622ar>

place, often a metropolis. In one particularly interesting and well-crafted study, Eric Sandweiss documents how purportedly benign planning decisions shaped the infrastructure of St. Louis in the early part of the century, favoring particular residential enclaves. Patricia Burgess renders a fine analysis of the actual (as opposed to the intended) effects of zoning on the health, safety and welfare of citizens of post-World War II Columbus, Ohio, and two other essays examine how this war contributed to the explosive growth and reshaping of the urban west, in California. The south is represented as well, with Charles E. Connerly's account of the emergence of citizen participation as a democratizing planning influence in Birmingham and Robert Hodder's especially interesting revelations on the role of the preservation movement in "constructing" Savannah's historic landscape. At another scale of place, Michael H. Lang's well-illustrated case study of the World War I-era "Shipping Board Scheme" of Yorkship Village represents the only account of a singular planned community.

Other chapters describe planning processes, trends, and social movements by casting a bigger net to include several place examples. Susan Marie Wirka contributes an important chapter on the powerful and underappreciated influence of progressive women reformers in the early part of the century. Only two authors explore a planning topic through analysis of the work of individuals, including Jon A. Peterson's chapter one account of the planning careers of both Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and Jr., in which he describes the groundbreaking work each did as (respectively) visionary and practitioner.

The concluding chapter, like the introduction, is authored by the editors. Titled "Planning History and the New American Metropolis", Sies and Silver document the "fundamental shift" in urban form, from the traditional epicentral to the clusters of only partially interdependent edge cities. The editors make note of this trend in order to call for a more interdisciplinary (and not simply multidisciplinary) approach to the study of this phenomenon. Historical scholarship, in its most useful and perhaps most interesting forms, is scholarship that seeks outright to inform contemporary thinking and practice, and to help guide or frame further study. In every respect the editors and their several contributors have accomplished this in *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City*, a work that will be of great interest and usefulness for students, scholars and practitioners.

Michael Martin  
Department of Landscape Architecture  
Iowa State University

---

Lemon, James T. *Liberal Dreams and Nature's Limits: Great Cities of North America since 1600*. Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Pp. x, 341. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography and index.

This is an informed, provocative, and challenging book. It is obviously the product of years of careful thinking about the history of great North American cities, of the forces that distinguish these

metropolises from lesser places, and of the ideological context that has guided their past development but now threatens their very future. We would not expect anything less from Jim Lemon. More than most historically minded scholars, he has always been willing to put forth an argument and challenge us to consider its worth. For Lemon, cities in a liberal democracy are places where individuals should have the unquestionable right to the ownership of private property, and where society is obligated to protect this situation. Cities are also places subject to the constraints of changing technologies — nature's limits — particularly those that restrict the movement of people or goods in space, or retard economic development. Over the course of several centuries, from the seventeenth to the eve of the twenty-first and from one historical epoch to another, cities have responded positively, creating new and positive opportunities for most people. Now, according to Lemon, the obverse is beginning to take hold.

But is Lemon successful in demonstrating how liberal democracy and nature's limits have shaped North America's great cities? Is he successful in teaching our students how these two processes have interacted to create the present, more negative situation? My initial response straddled the fence: in some ways, yes; in other ways, no. This conclusion really depends upon two things: first, whether one accepts the "individual-city-as-representative-of-an-historical-epoch-a pproach;" and second, whether the reader is a student who is just coming to the field of urban historical enquiry, or is somebody who has already given ample consideration to the issues that James Lemon raises.

The book is written as a text, and is thus intended mainly, I suppose, for senior undergraduate students. For the uninformed novice, the task would be daunting, but not completely unrewarding. Even for students with considerable reading about the history of cities to their credit, the challenge is strong. Rather than focus on the great city as a general type, Lemon focuses on particular places at particular points in time. Thus, during the mercantile and commercial era, we first visit Franklin's Philadelphia in 1760 and then move forward a century to view the ascendancy of New York in 1860. Early in the twentieth century, well into the modern era, Chicago is examined as the shock city of industrial capitalism. Later, in 1950 and 1975, we gain insights about Los Angeles and Toronto, respectively. I cannot think of any other source that offers a better synopsis of the character of Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles or Toronto at these chosen points in time. These syntheses of a diverse and expansive literature are well worth the price of the book. The literature consulted is thoroughly multi-disciplinary in perspective. Sources and interpretations are drawn from history, geography, economics, political science, architecture, *et al.* fields of enquiry. They are then melded in a satisfying, interdisciplinary manner. Each chapter is therefore a wonderful distillation of the relevant literature on places that have come to be widely accepted as truly representative of both an historical era and a particular type of city.

But this attractive approach is both a strength and weakness of the book. Lemon might argue that the initial two chapters provide ample context on cities in general, covering as they do the social, economic, and political background that is essential for examining the individual cities at particular points in time. He might also claim that the structural outline followed in each chapter (e.g., social relations, politics and government, land development and planning, and internal spatial structure) also allows for making comparisons among cities and for considering patterns of change over time.

True enough, but as the argument moves from place to place and from one development phase to another, or put another way, as the discussion shifts from one particular great city to another at a different point in capitalist development, students are left very much to their own wits when attempting to tie together the threads of Lemon's general argument. Quite simply, students might understand well enough how liberal democracy works in mid-nineteenth-century New York, but New York in 1910, in 1950, or in 1975 is not Chicago in 1910, Los Angeles in 1950, or Toronto in 1975. Does this deny that the case of either liberal democracy or nature's limits is irrelevant to each place across all phases of time? Of course, not. But because the book is intended as a text, more guidance, i.e., more teaching, is required to show students how the central thesis — the fall of liberal democracy and the failure to overcome nature's limits — does indeed apply to all great North American cities at all points in capitalist time.

For students who encounter this text, keeping track of how this central thesis is integrated across all chapters, i.e., just how it is applied to different cities over time, will prove a real challenge. This was the experience that my students encountered when I used the book as a text in a third-year course in urban historical geography. When considering the thesis on liberal democracy, it was genuinely difficult for these students to take the particular experience of one great city and reformulate it into general terms and then apply it, effectively and accurately, to the experience of another city, either earlier or later in that other city's development. Most students wished for additional discussion of this transcending experience, suggesting that they had lost sight of the book's main thesis during the course of interpreting its unifying argument,

Despite this situation, these same students nevertheless quite easily followed, and readily accepted, most of Lemon's arguments of the ways in which different structural elements of the representative cities formed a recognizable pattern through time. For example, when asked, after reading the book, to devise a model of the changing internal structure of cities over time, they took material from the discussion of different cities at different points in time and quite effectively produced a stage model of changing spatial structure. They were less effective in doing this for social and economic change. Did this occur because the line of reasoning about changing spaces offered a more familiar, i.e., geographic, approach to interpreting the city? As a teacher, had I failed to demonstrate the value and intricacy

of Lemon's overarching, inter-disciplinary arguments? Had I failed to fully demonstrate the structure of his approach? On reflection, I think that I did let my students down, even though Lemon's inter-disciplinary approach is what attracted me to the book in the first place. I had certainly wanted to excite students about the possibilities of the inter-disciplinary approach to urban historical research.

Yes, Jim Lemon's *Liberal Dreams and Nature's Limits* is informed, provocative, and challenging. Its synthetic qualities are informed by an outstanding and wide canvass of the literature; its thesis offers the opportunity for provocative classroom discussion; and its inter-disciplinary approach challenges teachers to teach better. Quite obviously, on further consideration, I should no longer straddle the fence, offering, instead, my own version of "two thumbs up."

Larry McCann  
Department of Geography  
University of Victoria

---

Snowdon, Frank M. *Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884–1911*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xvi, 478. Bibliography, index.

Historians have seen the Giolittian period as representing a decisive change in the economic life of Italy. A. Gershenkon (1962) called the years 1896–1908 Italy's "big push" towards industrialization and Paul Kennedy (1988) noted that during those years Italian industrial growth rose faster than anywhere else in Europe. But it was as uneven as it was rapid. Although the *risorgimento* had much southern support, the Piedmont benefitted most from it. Southern Italy, especially the Neapolitan south and Naples itself, were marginalized, left almost entirely in their agricultural backwater of small holdings, poor soil, niggardly investment, sharecropping and inadequate transport. No wonder the south became increasingly an irritant and a challenge in Italian politics, ultimately bringing into question no less the liberal, even moral, basis of the revolution. Crude and savage, southern politics had always been barely manageable and, notwithstanding the liberal revolution, they remained so.

In the generation or so before the Great War, two cholera epidemics (1884–5, and 1910–11) highlighted both the deadly complexity of southern politics and the chasm between North and South. The first epidemic challenged the political authority of the *risorgimento* when it became a metaphor for all the discontents of southerners under a political order dominated by the Piedmont. The second illustrated how precarious was the authority of the state itself.

Frank Snowden's *Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884–1911*, is a particularly useful insight into the late 19th- and early 20th-century Italian politics, political culture and public policy issues. It is also a useful introduction to an interesting historiographical discussion. It's not just that few cholera studies had been made