

BOOK REVIEW

The Agile City – Building Well-being and Wealth in an Era of Climate Change

James S. Russell

(Island Press, 312 pp., \$35.00 Hardcover)

By Thomas Herndon

Consider the following: The structures that Americans live and work in generate almost 40 percent of the US' total greenhouse gas emissions; (Russell 2011) furthermore, the automobiles that are driven each year are responsible for 28 percent of US greenhouse gas emissions. (Environmental Protection Agency 2011) Taken together, they constitute the majority of America's carbon output and pose significant burdens on both the present and future qualities of American life. As such, any solution to reduce America's carbon footprint must account for reductions in both of these greenhouse gas sources. In *The Agile City – Building Well-being and Wealth in an Era of Climate Change*, James S. Russell lays out a broad vision for America's metropolitan future that answers the question: "what do we do about it?"

James S. Russell holds many positions and titles that enable him to answer this question with authority. He is an editor for *Architectural Record*, Professor at the City College of New York, a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, and is the architectural columnist for *Bloomberg News*. *The Agile City* is Russell's first full-length book, though he has been writing about urban planning, architecture, and environmental design for more than 20 years. In it, Russell describes a vi-

sion of the future that addresses both the need for cities to adapt to climate change by reducing their carbon footprint and Americans' desire to maintain the comforts of the lifestyles that they enjoy today. While his proposals are at times overly optimistic, readers will find his knowledge and enthusiasm of the subject both highly engaging and thought provoking.

Russell builds his vision for the future on several basic premises. First, a vast majority of Americans now live in close proximity to major metropolitan areas. Second, the historic status quo for metropolitan planning and development has produced generally unsustainable long-term consequences. And third, adapting metropolitan areas to climate change in a future with increasingly limited access to natural resources will require creative thinking and the implementation of plans that tackle problems in holistic manners. It is this mindset that gives the book its title. Russell defines an agile city as one that fosters "an urban culture of change" enabling us to "adapt our lives to a world that climate change is altering before our eyes." (Russell 2011, 3)

Russell's book is timely, contributing to the conversation on climate change in ways that are often overlooked. The central thesis of *The Agile City* is that

dramatic carbon reductions need not rely on undeveloped or unproven technologies, such as hydrogen cars, large-scale solar power production, and nuclear fusion. Many of the tools we need to reduce carbon emissions in the US are readily available, generally are not prohibitively expensive, and provide many benefits outside of reducing carbon emissions. According to Russell, America has only just begun to pursue the cheap and relatively easy strategies of energy conservation and community adaptation.

While a great many treatises explore the need for conservation, few texts focus on the important nexus of architecture and urban planning with the clarity of *The Agile City*. Thus, while many current leaders debate among grossly expensive investments for new power generation, many of which further degrade the environment and quality of life for all people, *The Agile City* points out that the simplest and most effective solutions are right under our noses.

The Agile City is structured in three parts, each focusing on a different conceptual area of urban planning and development. Russell begins with a discussion of land use and property rights traditions in the US. Following this discussion comes a section on the dysfunction inherent in the way the US traditionally approaches economic growth, both from a land use or planning perspective and via the tax code and regulatory structure. Finally, Russell concludes with a broad overview of the important features of an agile city of the future. This section highlights what cities around the globe are already doing to reduce their carbon footprint while simultaneously improving their quality of life.

Part one of *The Agile City* is titled “The Land,” and aims to highlight American attitudes towards property ownership and its relation to wealth creation. Americans’ notions of land ownership and the restrictions on an individual’s property are not static concepts. With broad strokes, Russell paints a picture of land ownership

during the American Revolution and the major structural changes that America has undergone since. Whereas a majority of Americans lived in rural areas at the time of the American Revolution, today America is an overwhelmingly metropolitan nation. He makes two salient points in this section that form the core of his argument. First, the political debates surrounding land use are long standing, dating back to the framing of the Constitution. In simple terms, Alexander Hamilton tended to argue that the greater needs of society should at times outweigh the wishes of the individual, while James Madison and Thomas Jefferson argued that any subordination of personal freedom to governmental discipline was a dangerous proposition. Second, American perceptions of land ownership restrictions have evolved greatly over time. He cites the growth in Not-In-My-Backyard attitudes that have over time restricted land use. The growth of zoning laws around the country represents an imperfect attempt to reactively deal with the problems endemic to the growth of the modern metropolitan area. What was once been considered to be an unacceptable intrusion of government regulation is now a commonplace practice nearly everywhere.

Yet for the many prescient points that Russell makes, the first section of the book is perhaps the weakest. While it is true that American perceptions of land use are constantly evolving, the current status quo shows remarkably few signs that Russell’s example solutions for changing ownership ethos are possible on a wide scale. The urban boundary line he points to in Portland is not a new concept, yet it has only been adopted by a tiny number of other cities in the decades that it has been in place. The same is true for his thoughts on rethinking property rights using land trusts or mitigation banks. While they show promise in other countries, Russell ignores the often visceral reaction many Americans have to change in general, much less changes in what they are allowed to do with their property. The places

that have been able to make those changes have done so only due to disaster scale events that necessitate a change. Furthermore, places that experience disasters still tend to be resistant to change, such as is the continuing case with the rebuilding of New Orleans, or the use of the site at Ground Zero in New York City. Russell's optimism about the potential for change is difficult to buy in to, and undermines his argument that proactive change in land use efforts is possible on a national scale.

Russell's strongest arguments for building an agile city occur within the second section of his book. Like the first section, he begins with an overview of American economic history, this time focusing on America's approach to real estate, transportation, and water. For example, since 1933 the American real estate market has been dependent on home buyers purchasing the largest home they possibly can. Generally, such properties are single family houses on undeveloped land at the suburban edge. (Russell 2011). American tax policies provided generous tax write-offs to homeowners allowing for easier purchase of outsized homes. The combination of these factors, coupled with lax regulation, is what brought about the housing collapse of the late 2000's. Russell's approach to counter the problems inherent in America's home financing system, aside from a fairly dramatic reform of the federal tax code, is to emphasize the "uniqueness" a given area in real estate development. For example, what architectural styles are unique to the area, and what makes a place feel special? Real estate developments that answer these questions add value to a community and should be incorporated into a metropolitan development scheme. Conversely, strip mall developments which emphasize aesthetic similarity nationwide should be discouraged because they tend to detract from a sense of uniqueness.

Russell also points out what most Americans already know, though it is rarely acknowledged: the US cannot continue to build more and more highways to ser-

vice ever expanding metropolitan areas. Many places in California, the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, and even in the South, in places like Atlanta or Houston, are discovering that the need for more highways already far outstrips the space available for them. Highways can only grow so large before they crowd out everything else around them. Furthermore, they are expensive to maintain and highly inefficient in moving people in and around a metropolitan area. Russell's argument here for development of more mass transit, from buses to subways, light-rail to commuter trains, is not a new one. Even still, his argument is well articulated and clearly demonstrative of the path that most cities will eventually go down. Many cities are implementing mass transit strategies now not due to forward thinking or liberalism, but rather out of sheer necessity to cope with overburdened highways and overcrowded streets.

Next, Russell undertakes discussion of the American approach to water resources, or rather, the lack thereof. While water is vital to every American and to the economic growth of the US, it is often taken for granted. Of the three areas covered in the second section of *The Agile City*, the section on water is by far the most vague on what can be done. While the challenges that many places face regarding water supplies tend to be dependent on local conditions, Russell does not offer the overarching conceptual approach to addressing water quality issues that he offers for real estate development or transportation infrastructure. His basic point is well taken: that water should be made a priority. But once a community chooses to do so, there is little guidance on where to go from there.

Russell concludes with a discussion of what he calls the modern "megaburb." (Russell 2011, 125). A megaburb is Russell's conception of the urban and suburban areas that are interconnected to make up greater metropolitan areas. The megaburb is the final result of ever expanding suburbs that intermingle residential and commercial areas. The old idea

of commerce occurring in business zones located downtown and suburban developments occurring on the city periphery where commuters can get away from the city is not reflective of modern metropolitan areas. Yet most suburban communities still cling to this conception in an attempt to preserve the autonomy from the city. The fates of most suburban communities, Russell argues, are directly tied to the cities they surround. Russell's proposed solution to address these issues has two facets: first, communities must work together more cooperatively, perhaps by forming and strengthening regional planning and development entities. Second, denser in-fill development between separated suburbs should be encouraged to promote greater regional unity, rather than the seclusion that was at one point prevalent.

The most interesting section of *The Agile City* is the third section, titled "Agile Urban Features." Russell uses this section to promote some of the underutilized concepts that have the potential to both improve community wellbeing while simultaneously reducing carbon emissions. Rather than emphasize the newest technologies or the large scale projects being undertaken by national entities, Russell highlights a series of guiding principles by which agile communities around the globe have already used. For example, he places heavy emphasis on the building techniques used prior to the invention of electricity and air conditioning as examples of efficient temperature controls. People not only survived, but were comfortable as well, prior to A/C simply by designing dwellings that promoted airflow and heat exchange. Thus modern buildings, he argues, could be designed in similar fashions to take advantage of natural heating and cooling while requiring only a little electricity to maintain a comfortable temperature.

Because Russell is an architect by training, it is not surprising that he embraces the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards developed by the US Green Building Council.

While many of his points about the benefits of the LEED program are highly accurate, he does not devote much effort to discussing some of its shortcomings. He glosses over the fact that LEED certification is a costly and time consuming process which increases the cost of development. Though it is possible to build a structure to LEED standards without certifying it, this does not tend to be the norm; most buyers of such buildings demand that it be certified. Couple this with a growing number of cities that now require LEED certification of new construction, and the picture is not quite as rosy as Russell makes it out to be. So while LEED building standards have many benefits, it is still not a perfect system.

Russell concludes by returning to a discussion of America's economic growth model and the long-term impossibility of sustaining it. His ideas are similar in many respects to the writings of Thomas Friedman and other economists about the need to move from a consumption-growth economy to something else. Regulations, he argues, must be tailored to promote the right kinds of development by offering incentives for private development to undertake projects that not only are profitable, but also beneficial to the communities they impact. Regulation should be about incentives first, and saying no to proposals counter to these incentives second. Development must take into account all costs, not just to the developer, but also to the local government, the community, and the environment.

Perhaps the most interesting idea he posits in this discussion is the economic growth and increase in property values that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s following the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. As polluted areas were cleaned up and restored, the value of the areas, both intrinsic and realized, skyrocketed. He cites the cleanup of Lake Washington in Washington State as a prime example. The lake, which was used as a sewer up until the 1960's, has been restored to near pristine condition. Property values on the lake

have risen steeply as a result. (Russell 2011)

The Agile City is a highly recommended read for anyone interested in urban planning, economics, or urban development. People interested in architecture or history will also find many of the insights into American history and regional architecture fascinating. It is readily readable and does not overwhelm the reader with statistics or technical jargon. While some of Russell's ideas can be at times overly optimistic, it is somewhat

refreshing to look on the bright side of a subject as difficult as climate change. Finally, Russell's frequent use of real world examples being utilized around the globe today provides demonstrative guidance for further study and implementation. The buildings and communities that he highlights are proof of concept that many of the solutions to climate change already exist. They are the answer to the problem of climate change posed from the start of the book: "What do we do about it?"

References

Russell, James S. *The agile city – building well-being and wealth in an era of climate change*. 2011. Washington: Island Press.

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