

GLOBAL CITY BLUES

Daniel Solomon (Island Press, 2003)

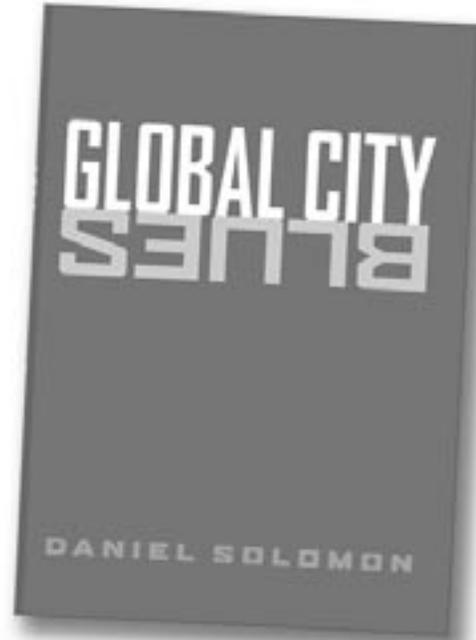
BY MIA LAYNE BIRK

Daniel Solomon is one of the founding architects of the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) and a leader in the New Urbanism movement. His new book is a collection of essays providing a fascinating and hopeful set of insights into the growing field of progressively integrated urban architecture and planning. It brims with interesting stories and inspiring leaders, architects, planners, and developers. I highly recommend it for all working to enhance the character of our cities.

His writing style is elegant with densely-packed phrases. For example, Joseph Eichler, a post WWII homebuilder, “was an aesthetic missionary, and a successful one, but his noble accomplishment was part of something far from noble — the set of postwar policies that built our sprawling, isolated suburbs and wrought ruthless damage on our cities and city-regions.” The University of California Berkeley’s postwar campus building experience is, “a huge physical reification of forgetfulness, a drunken stupor frozen in concrete.” I understand that his speaking style is similar, with each sentence carefully constructed to convey maximum meaning.

The book includes an overview of the incredibly destructive forces and philosophies that led so many cities in the latter half of the 20th century to separate land uses, build appallingly cheap and ugly low-income housing, and destroy their downtowns, neighborhoods, and fabric of urban life. Mr. Solomon heaps candid scorn on Le Corbusier, Rem Koolhaas, Carolyn Wyman, and others who led the dehumanizing separatist construction movement. He heaps an equal amount of praise on progressive architects like Professor Wu Liangyong of Beijing and *Collage City* author Colin Rowe, leaders like San Francisco’s former mayor Joe Alioto, and pragmatic ideologues like Alice Walters.

Mr. Solomon dwells at length on the land-use history of his hometown, San Francisco, succinctly explaining the succession of street grid plats laid out by various planners and traffic engineers who often worked at odds to each other. This was followed by the



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country's first freeway revolt, which inspired cities like Portland to follow suit. Other essays showcase impressive projects from a proposed development in Indonesia to a fish-out-of-water development in Plano, Texas, to ones in Los Angeles, San Jose, Dallas, and China. He injects humor, explaining the battles one must do with a triumvirate of building cost-controllers, marketers, and safety code compliance fanatics. And he offers an inspiring insight into the award-winning HOPE VI program, a Clinton-era CNU-inspired effort to replace the legions of crummy, low-income temporary housing with permanent, livable communities.

Taking the book as a whole, one is left with a sense of progress in the right direction, of the goals of progressive architecture melding in spirit with progressive urban planning and transportation. And yet, when I think about my own 15 years working to improve pedestrian and bicycle transportation through both the public and private sectors, I find my spirits sinking a little lower. In my experience, the vast majority of planning departments are still functionally and spiritually separate from those of transportation, environmental quality, housing, and buildings. And this creates a variety of barriers to achieving Solomon's urbanist vision.

These barriers range from contradictory project goals (take any small town main street — the highway department wants to move traffic while the people want to slow traffic and cross the street) to overly complicated permitting processes to confusing and overlapping responsibilities that frustrate and anger citizens. There may be lots of us out there talking the talk, but we have a long way to go in walking the walk, together.

Thanks to Daniel Solomon and his colleagues for their leadership, vision, and, relentless challenge for better cities.

Mia Birk has 15 years experience in the transportation field, focused on energy-efficient and environmentally-sensitive planning, design and implementation. She is an Adjunct Professor at Portland State University, teaching Pedestrian and Bicycle Issues for Masters' students in urban planning. As a consultant, she has developed over 60 bicycle, pedestrian, trail, and corridor plans. While at the City of Portland (1993-1999), she developed Portland's Bicycle Master Plan and managed the public process, design and implementation of over 160 miles of new bikeways, thousands of bicycle parking spaces, and a bikeway maintenance program. She is a frequent contributor to bicycle- and pedestrian-related publications and has spoken at dozens of conferences.

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