



## Can a City Be Sustainable?

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**Can a City Be Sustainable?**, by Worldwatch Institute, Washington, Island Press, 2016, 414 pp., US\$25.00, ISBN 13: 978 1 61091 755 1

Can a city be sustainable? Good question. In its latest State of the World annual report on the progress towards a sustainable society, the Worldwatch Institute explores one of the biggest challenges facing the world in this emerging urban century.

The State of the World series dates back to 1984; some may remember its original incarnation as a compendium of facts headlined by Lester R. Brown. Perhaps a sign of the maturation of both the organisation and the environmental movement, along with the ongoing challenges and ever-growing complexities of achieving sustainability goals, the series has become issue-focused annual reports since 2004, starting with the consumer society (Worldwatch Institute 2004) and tackling a range of issues since from global security (Worldwatch Institute 2005) to food production (Worldwatch Institute 2011). The special focus issue concept seems to have evolved and strengthened in the past five years, whereby the annual compendium impetus of the series takes a back seat to a themed, edited book.

And so it is with the current report. The special focus in 2007 was “Our Urban Future”, and in 2016 Worldwatch set out to investigate our present urban reality in three parts: Cities as Human Constructs (Part 1), the Urban Climate Challenge (Part 2), and Politics, Equity, and Livability (Part 3).

Gary Gardner, Director of Publications for Worldwatch and one of three Project Directors for this State of the World report, authors most of Part 1. In the first chapter, he sets the stage by “Imagining a Sustainable City” through a somewhat twee, but still thought-provoking, narrative of daily life in an imagined future urban utopia. Its utility may depend entirely on the reader’s predispositions; it is unclear whether it would engage sceptics. This is followed by chapters that analyse urban sustainability through the lens of energy and material flows (Chapter 2) and systems (Chapter 3), and finally a review of cities’ visions of sustainability (Chapter 4). Part 1 concludes with a consideration of “possible energy constraints to further urbanization”, by Richard Heinberg, which begins with the incomplete and misleading assertion that urban lifestyles are more energy efficient, but with the important question of “How long can the trend toward urbanization continue in the face of this century’s energy and climate constraints?” (p. 66).

From this somewhat ponderous (and in some cases misguided) start, the pace picks up in Parts 2 and 3 with contributed chapters from a variety of authors and organisations. Ten “City View” summaries are interwoven among the topical chapters to provide case studies undertaken by local governments and non-profit organisations. With a worldwide distribution— Shanghai, Freiburg, Melbourne, Vancouver, Singapore, Ahmedabad and Pune, Barcelona, Portland, Oregon, Jerusalem, and Durban—they cover a range of spatial extents, population sizes and densities, and issues of concern.

Part 2 comprises over half of the book, with chapters on cities and greenhouse gas emissions, global sprawl; environmental footprints and energy efficiency of buildings; renewable energy; transportation; water use and recycling; solid waste, and rural-urban migration, lifestyles, and deforestation.

Part 3 seemingly pivots towards the social issues in cities; its chapters look at remunicipalisation, the role of biodiversity; urban planning for diversity and social cohesion; and social justice. And, with that last chapter, “Urbanization, Inclusion, and Social Justice”, the volume ends. Certainly this is an important topic, and it could be argued that social justice is at the heart of urban sustainability for both current and future generations. Yet, it is an abrupt ending of an individual topic that does not bring the volume to a conclusion nor, indeed, address the question posed in the book’s title.

In that vein, this State of the World report is as much frustrating and disappointing as it is interesting and engaging. Most succinctly put, the book is more an overview than a synthesis—an edited compilation of disparate contributed chapters. In this, it follows the unfortunate example of so many edited academic volumes, which do little to progress a topic area given the lack of integrative synthesis in favour of publishing and/or promoting individual projects and research programmes.

Some will shrug this off as the way things are done in the world of interdisciplinary science books; but it is important to consider how this results in missing the aim of the State of the World series or, indeed, the expectation the title creates. There is a sense that the urban research arena was unfamiliar territory for the three Worldwatch project directors, which results in a book clearly imprinted by the unquestioned perspectives of their highly regarded and accomplished chosen advisors and contributors. Problems can emerge in the regurgitation of well-trodden tropes and issue-framing at the expense of assessing the state of the science and research that informs urban sustainability’s accomplishments and shortfalls. This comes through strongly in Part 1 where Gardner adopts without critique the outmoded urban metabolism concept to make his point on energy and material flows, even going so far as to unhelpfully promulgate a misguided organismal metaphor (Golubiewski 2012), which is contradicted by a more appropriate ecosystem concept in Chapter 17. Further inconsistencies occur throughout the book, e.g. whether the lifestyles of urban dwellers impose more or less environmental impact than their rural counterparts, dependent upon how such impact is defined (e.g., energy efficiency vs. broader consumption footprints) as well as geopolitical and economic development contexts. Since each chapter is offered as an island unto itself, this essential component of urban sustainability is left unexamined.

Of more concern is framing the bulk of the book around climate change in Part 2. Although intertwined, it is an odd and surprising choice to force urban sustainability through the climate change lens instead of directly examining urban environmental and social issues, such as resource consumption, biodiversity, land use, and public health. This results in considering these issues as merely co-benefits (p. 106) of efforts to deal with urbanism’s influence on climate change. Instead, they deserve primacy, and in fact, may resonate more strongly and directly with the diverse array of stakeholders who need to connect with urban sustainability but do not connect with climate change arguments. At least one author acknowledges that sustainable development concerns, not climate change ones, will drive transformative change in the transport sector (p. 210).

The content and structure of the book suffer from this imposition, most visibly in Part 3, which does not hold together. It seems to contain the leftovers that did not fit into Part 2. It begins with an interesting chapter (16) on remunicipalisation, which focuses especially on the energy sector and climate change effects. This is followed by a short chapter (17) on biodiversity that provides a succinct overview of a topic at the root of many urban sustainability issues and deserving fuller treatment in this volume. It is well-aligned with the micro chapter on land issues (15), couched only as “Rural-Urban Migration, Lifestyles, and Deforestation” placed at the end of Part 2, but which would have more strongly reinforced terrestrial ecosystem considerations if placed alongside biodiversity concerns—in an appropriately themed section. That Part 3 serves as a catch-all section entitled “Politics, Equity, and Livability” further indicates the project directors’ unfamiliarity with the topic at large. For example, Tom Prughi opens chapter 17 acknowledging “The means of addressing greenhouse gas emissions related to building and transport energy use, urban form, and waste are technically straightforward, even if socially and politically challenging ... However, cities also lie at the root of an additional important source of emissions—deforestation and change in land use—and these drivers are both under-appreciated and perhaps more problematic to address” (p. 263). Here the single

issue focus of rising greenhouse gas emissions and their consequences has overtaken the complex, amorphous problem of sustainability in coupled human-natural systems in urban ecosystems. This belies the failure of this volume to step outside the climate change box in order to get to the heart of the urban sustainability problem.

Why frame the book around climate change when the complexity of sustainability is the issue?

Neither this nor the title is answered. It remains a catalogue of statistics and projects without synthesis or resolution.

And yet. Despite its flaws, the volume is worth a read. As a land systems scientist and urban sustainability researcher, I wanted to like this book, and in some ways I did. I settled down to read with good will based on an affinity for and appreciation of the Worldwatch Institute's reputation. The opening line, "This is a book about hope" hooked me, especially given the tumult of 2016, including continued challenges for the environmental sector. For those engaged in the research and operations of urban growth, development or sustainability, this catalogue of ideas, examples, and projects provides statistics on the trajectory of this urban planet, as well as inspiration and lessons from city profiles and projects. It is a study in the art of the possible.

Given its breadth, there will be new insights for urban practitioners and subject matter experts (as there were for me). It is useful as a reference for research, projects, and inspiration. Perhaps more importantly, it will reach the wider State of the World audience: surely it is a must read for policy-makers and practitioners. It could be a good resource for newly elected city councillors and mayors, especially those who need to get up to speed quickly on subjects new to them. No matter their background, any local government official would do well to note the policies that work "often due to visionary leadership in city halls" (p. 192).

And certainly for the *Urban Policy and Research's* readership, it may well be fruitful reading. Australasia garners hardly a mention in this volume with the notable exceptions of Sydney and Melbourne. Wellington is mentioned twice, and Auckland only once—included in a list of growing concern over electricity security. Given the dearth of examples, it is safe to say that this corner of the world has not mainstreamed urban sustainability (nor are existing efforts widely known); perhaps this book can influence thinking and action.

In the end, this is an uneven effort. At the same time that I relished the chance to peruse all the work canvassed in the book, I was sorely disappointed when I reached the end to realise no real attempt was made to answer the title question. So I read it a second time. Same result: an engaging and exasperating read that short-changes sustainability by not trying harder. Indeed, Gardner admits this and the avoidance of undertaking a synthesis to answer the title question at the outset in Chapter 1 when he acknowledges, "lurking behind each success story is a nagging question: Are these cities doing enough? Have their efforts delivered them to the doorstep of true sustainability...the answer would seem to be 'No, not yet'" (p. 9).

The Worldwatch website asserts the State of the World report "remains the most authoritative 'go-to' resource for those who understand the importance of nurturing a safe, just, and healthy global environment through policy and action". This volume is a go-to resource, but the authority and value-add is questionable. Perhaps it does more than the original compendiums, but the analysis of the topic at hand is lacking and for that, it suffers. Here are some more questions for Worldwatch: Is the current State of the World series as authoritative as Worldwatch purports? Is the current series an improvement on the previous incarnations? Is it delivering on its potential? Is the series holding its value? Is this what we expect from this beloved series? How can these volumes best fulfil their mission?

To be sure, this State of the World poses a big question. But, I propose we short-change sustainability, and thus ourselves, when we don't try harder to figure out the answer. A litany of examples is interesting (mostly), but not enough. Sustainability will require elevating the debate, and will continue to depend on robust analytical tools and earnest syntheses (both of which may require new methods and approaches) for improved understanding.

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**Off the Plan: The Urbanisation of the Gold Coast**, by Caryl Bosman, Aysin Dedekorkut-Howes, and Andrew Leach, Clayton South, CSIRO Publishing, 2016, 200 pp., ISBN 9781486301836

This volume, edited by Caryl Bosman, Aysin Dedekorkut-Howes and Andrew Leach is an homage to the city of Gold Coast. For those looking for a study of cities in the tradition of Sassen (2001) they won't find it here, although themes of the global city and economic change do feature. Rather this text takes a sustained and critical gaze at the Gold Coast through the lens of urban history, examining the city from multiple perspectives focused on the historical development of the city's urban form and urban systems (Davis' [1990] critical but sympathetic look at Los Angeles comes to mind here). The editors ask us to look beyond our assumptions and, through their retelling of the city's story, reconsider how we imagine the Coast. This book will be of interest to anyone with an interest in cities but especially those who work or study across planning and tourism. Given the clear and unambiguous written style, I imagine this book will be of interest beyond the academy to those who grew up on the Coast, as I did, or indeed the millions of Australians who have holidayed on the Coast at some time in their lives.

The book is structured around ten core chapters, which each take a different focal point from which to trace the city's development in relation to various sectors and systems including biogeography and the natural environment, tourism, transport, property development, architecture, governance, marketing and statutory planning. While each of the ten substantive chapters traces a chronological path over roughly the same time period, there is novelty in each telling. The authors have each provided detailed historical accounts of their specific topic based on primarily secondary document analysis drawing from sources that include the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Council documents and websites, government reports and historical texts. Bosman's chapter on Changing Landscapes provides the only "voices" within the text, drawing as it does on interviews with long-term Gold Coast residents. This chapter is something of a relief as it breaks up the historical detail that borders on overwhelming in a couple of the chapters. That said, for a book steeped in detail, it is an easy read and the editors have ensured continuing of voice across the chapters. I found the chapters on the environmental history "sketch" (chapter 2) and transport (Chapter 4) particularly interesting because they answered questions about the Coast I had asked myself many times such as why are the train stations so far from everything else? What came before tourism on the Coast? Chapter two traces and links the "complex relationships between humans and the biophysical environments on which they depend" (p. 17). We hear so much about the role tourism has had in shaping the development of the Gold Coast (indeed this books recounts that story from several different angles) but much less about the role of Aboriginal subsistence patterns and early-European practices, which this chapter outlines. With its focus on the