

# Book Review: New Urbanism: Life, Work and Space in the New Downtown

by Blog Admin

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*This edited collection examines innovative urban redevelopment projects around Europe and North America which are at the forefront of new urbanism and which are termed **New Downtowns**. The book addresses major questions such as: What does a sustained urbanity for the 21st century look like? Does the imagination of a European city continue to inspire new urbanism within and beyond Europe? And can a future urbanity for the 21st century be planned at all? Reviewed by **Karl Baker**.*

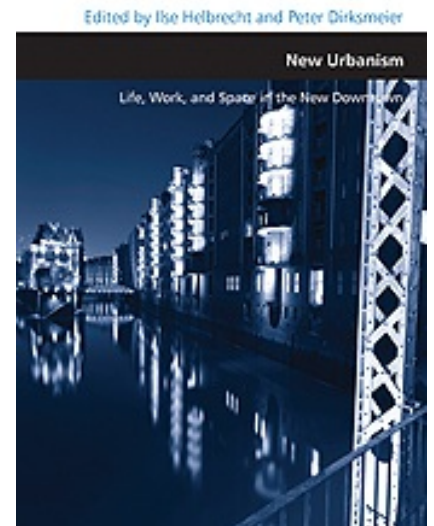


**New Urbanism: Life, Work and Space in the New Downtown. Edited by Ilse Helbrecht and Peter Dirksmeier. Ashgate. May 2012.**



The threat of the swish yet sterile downtown haunts today's most progressive planners and city makers. Corporate towers in London's Canary Wharf or clean white condos on Vancouver's waterfront obviously reflect a success of sorts. But for many urbanists these new developments somehow fail in providing the diversity, vitality and *urbanity* that are imagined as the hallmarks of today's most successful inner-city districts.

This elusive quality of 'urbanity' and its 'plan-ability' is the subject of Ilse Helbrecht and Peter Dirksmeier's *New Urbanism: Life, Work and Space in the New Downtown*. Focused around the case of Hamburg's [HafenCity](#), the editors have assembled twelve essays that investigate the challenges of engineering urbanity afresh while situating this 'urban renaissance' project within a broader discussion of post-industrial waterfront redevelopment.



HafenCity is an intriguing instance of the 'new downtown', a global phenomenon where 'pieces of city' are constructed on the sites of obsolescent railway yards, docks and factories. The Hamburg project is ambitious – eventually intended to house 12,000 residents and 40,000 workers through a forty per cent expansion of the city's inner city area. While following current planning orthodoxy for high-density, mixed-use development, HafenCity is unique in the extraordinary efforts made in pursuit of a 'planned urbanity'.



HafenCity

This is not neo-liberal Canary Wharf-style urbanism. HafenCity involves a heavy dose of local state coordination and property ownership, ensuring a fine-grained mix of uses, residents and property values. While the most recent British brownfield redevelopment throws in affordable housing quotas and regulations for ground-floor retail, HafenCity goes many steps further in cultivating an inner-city environment that supports a diverse population and range of uses.

Introducing the concept of urbanity that ties the book together, Loretta Lee's contribution distinguishes between the positive socio-cultural 'urban way of life' and the particular built environment or aesthetic experience that the term connotes. Also in the mix are experiences of serendipity, exposure to difference, and unexpected encounter that make up what Sharon Zukin might refer to as an 'authentic' form of urbanism. This 'urbanity' then is as much a way of being urban as it is a way of building the city.

The links between qualities of the newly built environment and the quality of social life are the most interesting aspects of this volume. Ingrid Breckner and Marcus Menzl, for instance, study 'neighbourliness' in Hamburg's new downtown. The reclamation of the inner-city for residential living has been a central feature of the urban renaissance and this essay prompts an intriguing line of thought about the way in which residents in newly-built districts achieve a sense of belonging and engage in localised social relationships.

A number of international comparative cases are also introduced that offer insightful counterpoints to HafenCity. Susanne Heeg shows how easy it is to get new-build pieces of city wrong. Looking at the South Boston waterfront she examines how the dominance of real estate interests through the past two decades has produced a sanitised and dull city district constructed as profit-driven 'mono-structures' – either office towers or apartment blocks depending on the mood of the market.

The more successful Vancouver waterfront is viewed through the lens of changing political ideologies in David Ley's essay. Documenting the shift from 1970s 'small is beautiful' lowrise to Hong Kong-style neoliberal towers in the nineties and Wall Street-financed 'eco-density' today, the False Creek stretch of waterfront illustrates a range of dominant development models that have been replicated across the world.

Constructing a living city from scratch on large ex-industrial plots is obviously challenging. Making big sites work in ways that support the diversity and buzz of historic inner-city districts with complex layers of fragmented ownership, myriad building forms and established social and economic livelihoods might be viewed as an impossible ask. Yet at HafenCity the planners have tried and not without some success. Maïke Dziomba's essay details some of the meticulous public sector work to influence private developer's constructions and ensure a range of property values at HafenCity. The City for instance, resisted selling plots to the highest bidder, instead selecting developers on the conceptual quality of their proposal.

Establishing urbanity as a lived social reality is more difficult than constructing towers – or getting the landscaping right (although that's still an achievement in itself). The jury is still out on whether HafenCity works in being a 'real city', and most acknowledge that it will be years before a fair judgement can be made. But if serendipity and encounter with difference are central to an authentic urbanity, Rolf Lindner's concluding chapter suggests that HafenCity does not yet make it: "what is missing is the element of contradiction ... sources of friction ... [and] secret places".

To what extent city-makers foster contradiction and friction and resist smoothing over the interesting differences and messiness inherent to the city is certainly an important question. What seems clear in the lessons proposed by various authors is that allowing for built flexibility and 'incompleteness' while working against what Richard Sennett has called '[over-determination](#)' is an essential precondition for establishing a built framework that fosters the very best of urban life. Leaving a degree of open-ness in city planning allows residents to contribute to the making of their own built environments, provides spaces for the unexpected and might even allow a few secrets to develop in hidden nooks and crannies of the new downtowns.

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