

# Book Review: Cities: An Environmental History

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*There is increasing concern over the unchecked expansion of cities today and the detrimental effect this is having on the planet, as induced climate change and ever increasing demands upon the world's resources take effect. In this book **Ian Douglas** aims to tell the story of cities – why they exist, how they have evolved, the problems they have encountered and those they will face as our century progresses. Reviewed by **Ron Johnston**.*



**Cities: An Environmental History. Ian Douglas. I.B.Tauris. May 2013.**

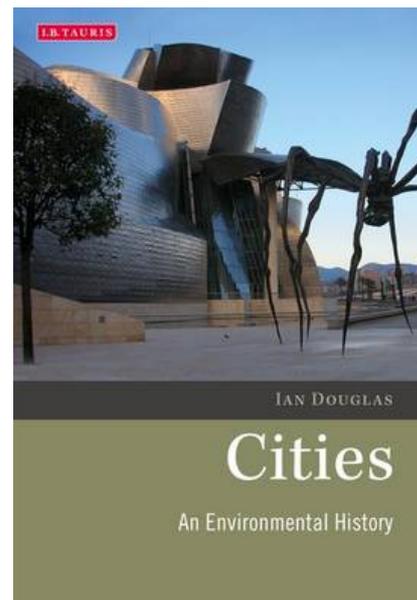
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In much of the world – and certainly most countries in its temperate zones – there is very little of what can be accurately termed ‘natural landscapes’. The original forests and woodlands have long been cleared, although in many places the land has become wooded again; wetlands have been drained; rivers have been canalised; and the flora and fauna very substantially modified. Nowhere have such changes been more extensive and intensive than in urban areas, where the landscapes bear no recognition to what was previously there.

For several decades, Ian Douglas has been in the vanguard of scholars focusing their research on environmental transformations resulting from urbanisation; *Cities: an Environmental History* brings together an accessible overview of some of that work. It covers not just the landscape changes in the areas occupied by cities, now home to over half of the world's population, however, but also the interactions between cities and their hinterlands – ecosystems from which cities not only draw the necessities for their residents' livelihoods (raw materials, water, food etc.) but also into which they direct many of the unwanted by-products of the activities undertaken there (wastes and pollutants, for example).

Douglas' book is in effect a series of essays on selected aspects of those ecosystems – using historical as well as contemporary material. There is a relatively brief introductory chapter on the origins and expansion of cities ('Trading village to global metropolis') followed by chapters treating a range of topics to illustrate the nature of the complex city-hinterland ecosystems: 'Foods, goods, materials and ornaments: the metabolism of cities'; 'Smoke, fumes, dust, and smog: changing the atmosphere of cities'; 'Water from the hills, the ground, the sea and the roof'; 'Sanitation, sewage and mountains of trash'; 'Urban sounds and smells'; 'Cities and a dynamic earth: urban changes to the land surface and responses to geophysical hazards'; 'Urban greenspaces'; and 'Urban sustainability: cities for future generations'.

Between the introduction and those eight chapters, however, there is an intriguing oddly-placed one on 'Communities responding to disasters and threats: vulnerable and resilient cities'. This covers two main topics – 'Plagues, epidemics and chronic diseases as drivers of urban environmental change', emphasising public health responses to such events; and 'Opportunities provided by fire, disasters and wars to reshape and redesign the urban environment', illustrated by the rebuilding of British, German and Japanese cities after World War II and of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina – plus two others covered in much less detail: the lagged recovery from disasters in areas occupied by 'marginalized sub-populations'; and environmental improvements as a result of health and safety legislation.



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As in that discussion, throughout the remaining chapters the dominant format is on brief case studies, using published exemplars of the topic under consideration. These are only weakly linked into an overall framework (in some modes of academic discourse they would be termed 'under-theorised'). In the chapter on air pollution, for example, Douglas concludes that what he terms 'ecological modernization' policies designed to tackle these problems was not 'undertaken to develop a more harmonious relationship between capitalism and the environment, or even between capitalism and human health' but rather 'to make industrial production and railroad and automotive transportation more congenial to the economic interests of one segment of the capitalist class – local growth coalitions' (p.105). Greater focus on such hypotheses would have made for a more challenging book; readers will have to search elsewhere for a fuller appreciation of the drivers for urban environmental changes – both positive and negative.

Four pages of 'Final thoughts' suggest key lessons for present and future cities drawn from the preceding ten chapters and incorporate a call for 'holistic integrated thinking about the cities of the future and their urban environments' to prevent situations where development (undefined) takes place in the hope that 'the environment can be fixed later'. Sustainability is the key concept underpinning Douglas's concerns – but the concept (and the associated one of 'sustainable development') is never rigorously defined (can it be?): indeed the first section of the chapter on 'Urban sustainability' is about parks and other green spaces and much of the rest is about adjusting urban structures and lifestyles to the contemporary situation.

This is a book based on wide reading which brings together a wide range of, well-illustrated, material easily accessible to a variety of audiences. The task of encapsulating the environmental history of cities in little more than 300 pages is a daunting one, however, and perhaps not surprisingly the coverage is only partial: I searched in vain for any mention of the classic material on 'urban heat islands', for example, nor of the finer-grained influences of building design on urban environments; and, to take just one more example, the classic von Thünen model could have been used to considerable effect in explorations of city-hinterland structuring.

And one general complaint – which applies to many books and publishers. Why – when it is so easy to create footnotes in standard word processing software – do publishers make it so tedious for readers to track down sources they would like to refer to? A numerical superscript in this book refers you not to a footnote, nor even to an endnote at the end of the chapter: instead it sends you to a separate, consolidated section at the end of the book, which you have to keep flipping through to find; and even then that is not the end of the search, for all that you find in these notes is a name and date, and then you then have to search again for the full details of the sources in the later bibliography! What a waste of entirely unnecessary time and effort (and paper?)!

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**Ron Johnston** is a professor in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol. His books include *Environmental Problems: Nature, Economy and State* (1989) and *Nature, State and Economy: A Political Economy of the Environment* (1996). [Read more reviews by Ron.](#)

