

Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898–1938. By Keith D. Revell. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. x + 327 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. Cloth, \$42.50; paper, \$26.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-801-87073-9; paper, 0-801-88206-0.

Reviewed by Clifton Hood

This book provides an ambitious analysis of urban policymaking in early-twentieth-century New York City. Keith D. Revell focuses on the civic culture of the experts—engineers, sanitarians, economists, city planners, lawyers, and others—who planned and built the modern city. As they confronted a series of urban problems, Revell contends, the experts sought to create new approaches to decision-making and new public institutions that would achieve their vision of a planned metropolis. While their discourses were technical and professional in nature, these experts were, at heart, political actors who were animated by a shared conception of urban interdependence and system. Revell rightly takes an expansive view of politics, viewing it as extending beyond electoral matters to encompass a variety of ways of exercising power and pursuing group and special interests, including the culture of expertise itself, corporate planning, competing conceptions of the city and the metropolis, and changing understandings of the proper role of government.

No comparable study of New York's built environment covers as broad a swath of policy areas or offers as sophisticated an analysis of policymaking as *Building Gotham* does. According to Revell, the consolidation of the five separate boroughs into greater New York City in 1898 produced an array of complex and unprecedented problems that the city's existing decision-makers could not comprehend, much less resolve. This threat to the success of the greater city set the stage for experts to advance their own policy preferences and to develop new approaches to governance. In six chapters that are organized both chronologically and topically, Revell explores the experts' responses to some of the main challenges facing early-twentieth-century New York City. He begins with an examination of the Hudson and Manhattan Company's completion of a subway system below the Hudson River between New Jersey and Manhattan and the

Pennsylvania Railroad Company's construction of extensive tunnel, station, and bridge improvements, two important instances of corporate development that scholars of planning who stress the primacy of the public sector often miss. Then Revell considers the more problematic case of railroad-freight planning, wherein experts who wanted to rationalize the movement of goods through the harbor following World War I encountered conflicts with the private railroads and the Interstate Commerce Commission. These conflicts stemmed from incompatible institutional perspectives and interests, which planning could not reconcile. His third chapter continues this investigation of the obstacles to planning and of the convoluted transition from an ideology of privatism to an ideology of the public good by looking at the construction of an "underground city" of sewer, subway, and water-supply infrastructure. He writes that the experts who were involved in these underground projects faced two unappealing choices: first, between cooperating with unsavory private corporations and increasing the authority of centralized public bureaucracies; and, second, between tapping private wealth for public purposes that did not necessarily further private agendas and raising user fees for a public that had come to expect urban improvements on the cheap.

This discussion leads Revell to his next subject: a study of the implementation of new patterns of municipal finance that were designed to pay for the urban infrastructure by increasing the city's access to private wealth. The fifth chapter, on zoning, and the sixth, on regional planning, address other dimensions of the planners' efforts to cut through the tangle of private rights and public power that impeded the fulfillment of the system ideal. Revell concludes that zoning was an institutional success but a cultural failure: it was accepted as a tool for land-use restrictions but rejected as an expression of metropolitan interdependence. Regional planning was even less successful, as it ran afoul of local leaders in the city and the suburbs who did not relish competing with a centralized planning authority that would probably curtail their powers.

The book's trajectory nicely captures the quandary of specialists operating in a complex metropolitan environment that both generated serious policy problems and was dominated by powerful private and public actors with their own agendas and perspectives. After scoring a major early victory with the Pennsylvania Railroad improvement—a success, Revell maintains, that was facilitated by the support of the

railroad corporation and by the project's dependence on engineering know-how—the experts continually encountered institutional obstacles that thwarted their efforts to implement urban planning in New York. Their overall record, then, is mixed. While their endeavors markedly improved the quality of urban life, they failed to establish a culture that integrated the entire metropolis with its local communities and reconciled political autonomy with urban interdependence.

There are teleological elements in Revell's approach to his subject. He concentrates so much on the experts' pursuit of system and rationality that his account sometimes becomes overdetermined and lacks consideration of the sorts of accidents, happenstance, and chance that are the stuff of history. It may be asking too much of an author who deals comprehensively with so many issues, but Revell might have rectified this problem by delving more deeply into the professional cultures of his specialists. Another shortcoming is his insistence on New York City's uniqueness. New Yorkers did assert that their city was the biggest, the most complex, and the most important—but the residents of cities elsewhere in the world made similar claims. While New York City had a distinctive physical and political setting, much the same was true of Los Angeles, London, Paris, and Berlin. Moreover, as Daniel Rogers observes in *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (1998), the culture of expertise that took shape during the Progressive Era cannot be fully understood in local or even national terms. Rather, city planners, public health practitioners, economists, and other specialists were embedded in international networks. Revell could have illuminated New York's situation by paying more attention to the larger context and by making comparisons with other major cities.

These relatively minor shortcomings notwithstanding, Revell has produced an outstanding monograph that raises the bar for future studies of urban policymaking in New York City. His book should be read by every scholar of twentieth-century American cities, political reform, and professionalism. Its detailed and nuanced examination of municipal finance will be of special interest to business historians. Revell is a gifted young scholar, and I look forward to seeing more of his work in the future.

Clifton Hood, professor of history at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, is the author of 722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York (1993). He is working on a cultural history of New York City's economic elites.