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Imaging Philadelphia: Edmund Bacon and the Future of the City (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Maurantonio, Nicole. "Imaging Philadelphia: Edmund Bacon and the Future of the City." Review. *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 79, no. 1 (2012): 92-94.

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Scott Gabriel Knowles, ed. *Imagining Philadelphia: Edmund Bacon and the Future of the City*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. Pp. 178. Notes, index. Paper, \$50.00)

Time capsules are artifacts that at face value appear antithetical to the enterprise of history. Capturing frozen moments in time, time capsules flatten the dynamic and contingent nature of the past. Yet, as the contributors to *Imagining Philadelphia: Edmund Bacon and the Future of the City* argue, the artifact is simply an entry point opening up larger questions of the complex relationships between past, present, and future. In this case, the “time capsule” is a single text, famed city planner Edmund Bacon’s 1959 essay, “Philadelphia in the Year 2009.” When read with the benefit of twenty-first-century hindsight, Bacon’s essay, chapter 1 of the volume, seems romantically utopian at best and naively simplistic at worst. Bacon appears at once eerily prescient and hopelessly out of touch. Fortunately, the contributors to *Imagining Philadelphia* conceived of this project as more than simply a catalogue of Bacon’s forecasting successes and failures. *Imagining Philadelphia* encourages readers, in the words of editor and contributor Scott Gabriel Knowles, to interpret Bacon’s essay as “less a prophecy than a gamble, a hope that big ideas could win the day, while achieving some serious and useful results along the way” (110).

The volume’s contributors, hailing from the fields of history, urban studies, and city planning, seek to historicize Bacon the planner and “idea man” alongside the circumstances determining Philadelphia’s fifty-year course—a course that at times bore little resemblance to the city Bacon envisaged in 1959. Bacon, the contributors repeat, was not simply a “floating ‘great man’” (5). He was *not* Philadelphia’s version of Robert Moses. Bacon was a formative player in Philadelphia city planning who was, by virtue of his relative *lack* of political clout, forced to contend with and negotiate between varied interests throughout the city. In chapter 2, Gregory Heller cites architect Louis Kahn’s take on Bacon, whom he called “a planner who thinks he is a politician” (20). Based upon Heller’s biographical work in chapter 2, this assessment appears spot on as Bacon was forced to “sell” his ideas that attempted to fuse his own commitment to affordable housing with his interest in citywide commercial revitalization.

What led Bacon to a vision of a Philadelphia restored to its former place of prominence within the American urban landscape—a city where “no part . . . is ugly or depressed”? (17). The answer, writes historian Guian McKee in chapter 3, lies in the disjuncture between Bacon’s faith in design and in ideas. Attributing Bacon’s failings to a lack of political power, McKee maintains, is insufficient. Simply, Bacon “believed far too deeply in its [design’s] power” (61). By privileging the power of design, Bacon subscribed to an overly deterministic understanding of the relationship between economics, culture, and the built environment, says McKee. This philosophical flaw left Bacon out of step with the changing contours of Philadelphia’s deindustrializing landscape. When Bacon penned “Philadelphia in the Year 2009” in 1959, the seeds of the city’s decline had already been sown. Philadelphia’s industry was leaving the city, along with much of its population. Crime was on the rise and racial tensions were simmering. Bacon placed too much emphasis on the reinvigorating power of design and particularly the 1976 World’s Fair/Exposition. As Knowles points out in chapter 4, the economic impact of world’s fairs was anything but predictable.

However, Bacon didn’t have it all wrong. In fact, he had a great deal right. As Harris Steinberg, director of PennPraxis argues in chapter 5, Bacon’s 1959 essay presaged, among many developments, Philadelphia’s shift to the tourism sector during the Rendell mayoral administration in the 1990s. Bacon predicted the resurgence of Philadelphia’s downtown residential neighborhoods. Bacon saw in Philadelphia the city where American democracy found its footing. Although Steinberg is careful to take note of that which figured in a rather cursory way in Bacon’s vision—specifically poverty and racial tensions—Steinberg ends with hope. Should we imagine a Philadelphia revitalized fifty years from now? Absolutely. Will such revitalization come to fruition? Time will tell.

Imagining Philadelphia raises a number of important questions regarding what went right and perhaps, more significantly, what went awry in the post–World War II period that marked Philadelphia’s decline. The volume is admirable in its aims and has seized a document rife with possibility as its locus of inquiry. However, the volume also at times seems to fall victim to precisely the critique it situates itself against—“the great man” narrative of history. “Philadelphia in the Year 2009” undoubtedly requires a closer look at Bacon and the circumstances underpinning his vision. In pointing to the planner’s own intellectual boundaries and considering the counterfactual—what *could* have been—the contributors generate the unanticipated effect of

recentering Bacon himself. With Bacon occupying the center of the volume, all that was changing within Philadelphia—its demographics, economy, politics—seems to fall out of the story, receiving brief attention at opportune moments. Much was changing in Philadelphia between 1959 and 2009 on an institutional and neighborhood level, which warrants greater discussion. The contributors make overtures to some of the racial tensions characterizing the city, for instance, but ultimately *Imagining Philadelphia* is a look from the top down. For a reader with knowledge of the changing contours of Philadelphia in the postwar period, this may be less an issue. Otherwise, it would be easy to lose sight of the dynamic state of the city and the people living within it.

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