

Friedman, Avi.

A Place in Mind: Designing Cities for the 21st Century.

Montreal, Quebec, Canada: Véhicule Press, 2016 (revised edition)

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In his quest to define “place”, Avi Friedman sets out to “offer the fruit of [his] personal and professional quest for the authentically human in places.” Indeed, grounded in an experiential approach, this book presents Friedman’s reflections, in the form of easy-to-read narratives, on thirteen personal experiences, each of which triggered a particular inquiry.

The book’s thirteen chapters are consistent in their structure and presentation starting with an observation about a place that Friedman had personally experienced and which triggers a particular inquiry (through a series of questions), followed by a narration that traces the historic evolution of the inquiry’s subject matter until our contemporary era. The places vary: four are in Italy, three in the UK, and the remainder spread over Turkey, China, Israel, Mexico, the USA, and Canada. While the chapters’ inquiries also vary, they may be broadly grouped into physical and non-physical subjects. The physical ones highlight eight attributes that are inherent to designing cities, including: eating places like restaurants and coffee houses (chapter 1: Fiore di Zucchini in Montepulciano), architectural styles (chapter 2: Teatime in Istanbul); markets (chapter 3: Turnips in Dalian); children’s playgrounds (chapter 4: Swings in Petach Tikva); work spaces (chapter 6: Emails from Broughton Hall); public squares (chapter 8: The Heart of York); public art (chapter 12: The Soapstones of Iqaluit); and sacred spaces/buildings (The Spirit of Assisi). The non-physical subjects feature five approaches, rather than physical attributes, that impact the design of cities, including: a sparing and un wasteful approach to design that decreases consumption (chapter 5: Wandering in Tijuana); an environmentally sensitive approach that builds with not against the natural setting and the landscape (chapter 7: The Winds of Fargo); an historic preservation approach that conserves urban and rural landscapes (chapter 9: The Kitchen of Pina and Felice); a regulatory and legislative approach that promotes a humble and cohesive urban landscape (chapter 10: London’s Humility), and last, an accessible and sustainable approach to urban agriculture that ensures food security (chapter 11: The Clay Pots of Matera).

Because of their experiential focus and wide-ranging subjects, the narratives provide a broad-sweeping presentation that can be immensely useful for those who are new to urban planning and design. This is certainly a book that whose accessibility for a wide readership is attributed to the fact that it is devoid of confusing jargon and to the seamless flow of its ideas such as when Friedman narrates the transition from farmers’ markets to wholesale distribution centres and to the emergence of suburbia and the supermarket, and then relates this transition to the design of contemporary kitchens (pages 58-59). Simultaneously however, such a broad-sweeping and accessible approach often comes at the expense of depth, which varies between the book’s chapters. Some chapters offer a deeper understanding of the subject at hand, like the children’s playgrounds in chapter 4 where Friedman draws on empirical research and provides the readers with references to valuable sources for further reading (e.g., pages 69 - 70). Yet, other chapters, such as chapter 7 (The Winds of Fargo) constitutes of series of normative statements that emphasize that design must consider nature without discussing how this might take place and without referring to the steadily growing body of empirical research on contemporary urban design that, for example, caters for climate change mitigation through compact and transit-oriented development, or that tackles climate change adaptation through enhancing the resilience of cities by integrating landscape ecological urbanism and green infrastructure. Similarly, chapter 9 (The Kitchen of Pina and Felice) presents the conservationist-functionalist dichotomy vis-à-vis the sense of place reconciliatory views. Yet, absent from this discussion is the crucial discussion of the physical qualities and perceptual and functional aspects of historic places (i.e., meanings and activities) that trigger a sense of place, and how may the various historic preservation strategies (e.g., restoration, reconstruction, and adaptive reuse) conserve this sense of place. Equally

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important, while this chapter poses the question “What, then, constitutes a heritage building?” (page 150), the ensuing discussion overlooks how heritage significance is determined through value assessments that transcend the aesthetic and the economic values.

Considering this book’s scope and presentation, I highly recommend it as an introductory reading for laypersons seeking a better understanding of the design of cities. This book might also be useful for an introductory level course on urban planning and design if each of the chapters is paired with sources that provide examples of empirical research on the subject matter in order to augment its broad-sweeping approach by delving more deeply into each of the inquiries’ subject matter.

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