**What Americans Build and Why**


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The purpose of *What Americans Build and Why* is to foster understanding of the “forces that have shaped our built landscape” in five facets of American life in which facilities play a key role: housing, health care, schools, work, and retail. The book is written from the point of view of an environmental psychologist, that is, from one whose interest is determining the effect the built environment has on human behavior and well-being. The author concludes that bigger has not been better for Americans and that to recover our lost “sense of togetherness,” we need a return to physical environments that support interactions between persons. The author favors “smallness,” citing new urbanism city planning, smaller schools or the school-within-a-school concept, workplaces that support places for collaboration as well as individual focus, and a post-mall retail environment built with an eclectic mix of stores, farmers markets, and park space, as positive steps toward regaining spaces that facilitate development of interpersonal relationships.

Throughout the book, the author repeatedly mentions the effects that government policy (one section is titled “I’m from the government and I’m here to help you”) has had on sprawling suburbia, the growing size of schools, reshaping of the office work environment, and favoring commercial real estate development of malls and big box stores. Then, in a twist of irony at the book’s end, the author calls for “help from our government to reshape our physical landscape.” The reader is left wondering whether changes to policy will create a better future or create additional unintended negative consequences.

This reviewer was intrigued by the author’s treatment of school size. Devlin cites a seminal work written in 1959 that called for the elimination of small high schools in order “to affordably offer the depth of curriculum in science and math required to be competitive in the world.” Here we are a half-century later with a fraction of the school districts and much larger high schools, still decrying our students’ performance in science and math. The author also cites the researchers published in 1964 that indicated there are more benefits to smaller schools than large schools. The widely held belief that larger schools are less expensive to operate than smaller schools is refuted by studies showing that the cost per graduate is less at smaller schools. The author hints at non-facility-related forces that affect education, but this reviewer’s recent personal experience in two areas of the country, where decisions not to build a second high school but to maintain one instead were driven in large part by athletics, led one to believe that there are forces in education that remained unmentioned in the book.

The book is well documented and cites both academic and general literature, that is, understanding why the United States has sprawled over the past half-century. Urban and city planners, policymakers, educators, and undergraduate and graduate students in the fields of environmental psychology, architecture, and urban planning will directly benefit from the learnings gleaned from this moderately heavy read. Others of us who wonder how our cities sprawled and how, such as how we can effectively “shrink” them, reduce our commutes, and put walking back into our daily lives, will also have new ideas on which to ruminate.

This reviewer’s view of America’s built environment will be the same, nor will those who take the time to read this book. When driving to, in, or past a new city for the first time, one will notice the sprawl or compactness, the possible modes of transportation, and the author’s explanations of why things are the way they are.