

URBAN VILLAGES and the Making of Communities

Edited by Peter Neal¹

Book review by Danie Schoeman²

This book with its inviting, glossy, coffee-table-book appearance, depth in quality, and text that is richly integrated with exceptional graphics, boasts a foreword by HRH The Prince of Wales who initiated the Urban Villages Forum, a group of planning, architectural and property experts who investigates ideas on an urban village, an international vision of neighbourhood (USA)/ *Quartier* (France), within an urban environment and how it may offer clues for a new generation of urban planners.

Neal presents a document that has recognized urban critics, academics and practitioners that have extensive international experience in the creation of successful mixed-use neighbourhoods, as contributory authors. An urban village primer is presented referring (*inter alia*) to Ebenezer Howard³ and his garden city/suburb movement at the turn of the twentieth century as one of the most significant influences that has been attributed to urban villages (2003:4).

The primer is topped with a keynote essay, "Authentic urbanism and the Jane Jacobs⁴ legacy", to complete the introductory part of the book. Jacobs referred to cities *with* problems, not cities as problems (2003:17) and with this background, her principles – including the importance of mixed-use neighbourhood – are discussed as point of departure.

The book mainly documents on the making of communities in a tale of two continents, Britain and the USA, as a result of their visible current dualism. Britain is seeking to establish a new urban renaissance within which urban villages can make a

significant contribution, while America is meanwhile trying to adopt models of smart growth that increasingly draw on the principles of traditional neighbourhood development (2003:13).

The model of the urban village is defined by the broad principles of mixed land use neighbourhoods. This concept is explored in four different sections in the book. Firstly, the context of the model is addressed. Primary strategies that are being adopted to reshape Britain and America's urban environments such as the current strategic framework in which urban villages may be placed and even the affect that new digital technologies will have on neighbourhoods are discussed.

The second section takes a broad look at design issues that are fundamental for the creation of liveable neighbourhoods. The physical design of neighbourhoods and a focus on neighbourhood design principles that contribute to the identity of place are presented. Equally important is connectivity and movement to the sustainability and functionality of the neighbourhood with the social structure as a parallel. The latter outlining the fundamental components that conspire to bring life and activity to the urban village.

The third stage of *implementation* of an urban village project is considered to be the most complex and challenging in which a series of management and funding activities must be integrated. Key activities that are necessary to kick-start the inception stage of a project are introduced and then the complex issues associated with land assembly, community consultation, funding, assessment of project viability and the contribution of

physical planning initiatives are addressed.

Learning by example constitutes the final section where a series of case studies that represent many of the characteristics of sustainable neighbourhoods, are presented. Certain projects have been selected from the UK, Europe, North America and Australia as examples. A variety of development and regeneration scenarios are illustrated that include tight urban retrofit projects, large-scale infill and brownfield rejuvenation projects, and urban extension and greenfield development.

This book should provide practical value to practitioners, academics, students and all who are involved in the process of developing and regenerating our current and future urban communities. It is as much applicable to South African circumstances as to circumstances in other countries mentioned in the book. It would be a great asset to a tertiary curriculum in numerous disciplines.

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3 Ebenezer Howard, the author of *Garden cities of tomorrow*, London, Swan Sonnenchein, 1902.

4 Jane Jacobs, the author of *The death and life of great American cities*, London, Penguin Books, 1991.