

# Urban Squares as Places

Jon Lang & Nancy Marshall, *Urban Squares as Places, Links and Displays, successes and failures*, 2017, Routledge, pp296 \$50 on Amazon

Reviewed by  
Judith Ryser

In this book the authors, both based in Australia, aim to synthesise research from scholars and their own studies into a "coherent collection of statements about urban squares". Inspired by many, in particular Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, Matthew Carmona, Robert Getje, Vikas Mehta, John Montgomery and Charles Landry they conceived their work as a handbook for urban designers.

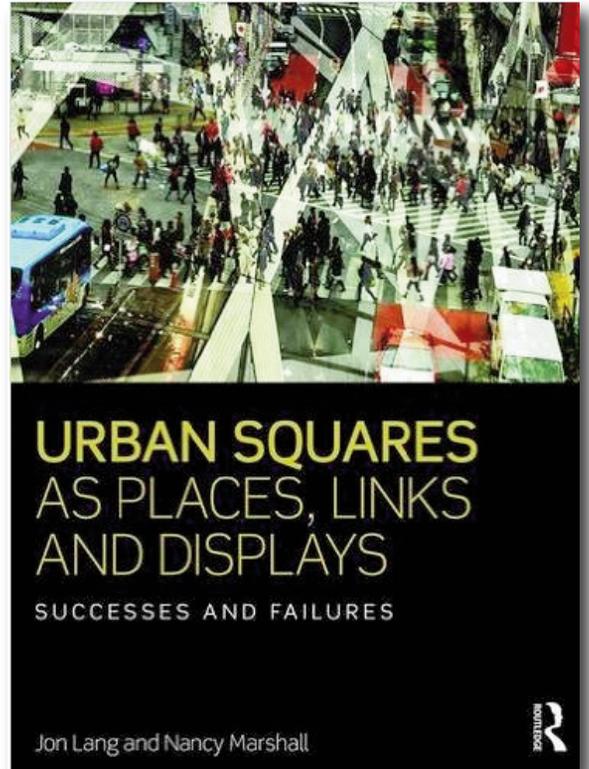
This may explain the very systematic structure of the book and coherence between chapters, each with an introduction, a conclusion and a comprehensive list of references. The bulk of the book consists of case studies from which to draw lessons according to their own typology of urban squares and their design preceding the case studies.

An analysis follows of "what works and does not work" in their view based on their examples selected from many parts of the world. The book is topped with a prologue and tailed with an epilogue. The former is explaining why the authors are concerned with squares, which they see as the most important open spaces in the dense core of cities, greatly valued by pedestrians.

The open spaces they examined are squares, plazas, gardens, greens and parks in public and increasingly private hands. They elaborate on the rationalist and empiricist approaches of modernism and propose a third way forward, a normative, evidence based approach to designing or refurbishing squares. What they consider most important for the design of squares is what makes them popular, safe, enjoyable, well used; conversely they note what makes them dull, disliked and unused. They observe that squares change over time and may divert independently from initial intentions to become either successful or disappointing.

They distinguish between lively urban squares and quiet urban squares. The latter include examples from London for tranquillity (Russel Square Bloomsbury, Empire Square London Bridge, Nevern Square Earls Court), as opposed to inadvertently dull squares designed by 'starchitects' (City Hall Plaza Boston, I M Pei), or empty squares due to their monumental size (Brasilia, Oscar Niemeyer). They add their own studies, for example Robson Square in Vancouver Canada, a set of sunken squares which they compare with Paternoster Square in London.

The introductions to both the four parts and 14 chapters of the book with copious references are leading to some repetition. On the other hand this makes it easy to dip into specific parts of the book. As illustrations of their arguments the authors use a large number of photographs, many taken by themselves and their assistants. There are scarcely any drawings though. Plans with scales and sections would have been a



useful complement for urban designers as photographs cannot represent space very well. Taken at eye level, they tend to include only parts of squares and cannot reproduce their spatiality in their entirety; in bird's eye view they are not what people experience when using the squares.

The typology of squares proposed by the authors divides into three categories: ownership types of squares; purpose of squares based on instrumental functions; and aesthetic attributes and how they translate into meaning. The instrumental functions are further subdivided according to design criteria: size, degree of enclosure, configuration and internal design. The link with the immediate and wider urban contexts are mentioned but not elaborated in detail although this is an important aspect of the location and function of such open spaces. Examples from all over the world intend to make the book of global use and their concluding "Notes on the Designing or Upgrading of Squares" draw on that assumption.

This urban design handbook could be perceived as a companion to 'Urban Revitalisation, remaking cities in a changing world' (Carl Grodach and Renia Ehrenfeucht, Routledge 2016) which has a similar didactic approach, albeit at a larger scale and from an USA perspective. ■



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# The Railway Metropolis:

Reviewed by  
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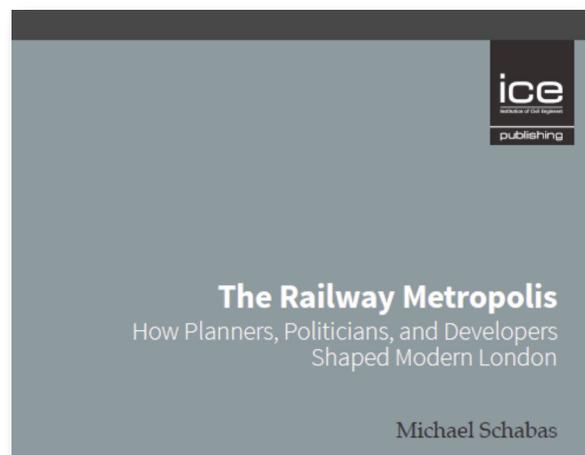
How Planners, Politicians and Developers Shaped Modern London  
by Michael Schabas

This is a really important book. Reflecting on the author's account of rail development in modern London, one realises that a new paradigm is needed for thinking about London's planning. Probably the most famous book published on London's planning is *London 2000* by the late Peter Hall. His narrative forecast the vast region that is now the real London as opposed to the administrative area of the GLA, but he envisaged a vastly dispersed population living at lower densities and hugely dependent on the private vehicle. Michael Schabas has been associated with virtually every railway project in London over three decades. He explains that no other city grew as large before widespread car ownership. Inner London lacks an express road system or even the wide avenues of New York or Paris. London is less dependent on the automobile than any other megacity. In a memorable phrase he pithily concludes "It is a city built by merchants, not princes."

As someone who assisted Professor Colin Buchanan at the GLDP inquiry in the 1970's where the four ring roads proposed in the plan (only the outer orbital – now the M25 – was built) attracted huge public opposition, I can confidently assert that the scale of rail building in London that has materialised was never foreseen. The six lines that transformed London: Docklands Light Railway, Jubilee Line Extension, High Speed One, Overground, Thameslink and Crossrail have enabled London to grow at densities never envisaged in the 1970's when threads of Abercrombie's dispersed strategy for the future London were still lingering in County Hall. Londonism is a term coined by The Economist to describe a creed which is pro-finance, pro-immigration and investment hungry and was championed by Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson and now Sadiq Khan. It would not have been possible without the massive rail investment that has dramatically improved both connectivity and productivity in the capital city.

The book is copiously illustrated and details the planning, technology, choice, design and funding decisions that have shaped London's rail network since 1980, and the changing operating practices, fares and management that have been equally critical to the modernisation of London's transport system. What marks this book out from the vast railway literature glimpsed in any second-hand book shop is the extensive coverage given to how the political and administrative decisions were made, the mistakes, the sub-optimal choices, the naïve assumptions. The author concludes that nevertheless none of the new lines built in London has been a mistake and many have succeeded beyond expectations. But almost all schemes have taken longer and cost substantially more than originally promised.

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Evaluating the achievements and mistakes of the last quarter century, London – in the author's view – gets a Len Goodman score of "7" out of 10. He is optimistic that if the lessons described in the book can be applied the mark for the next quarter century will be higher.

But the lessons surely go beyond this. In a telling conclusion Michael Schabas points out that connectivity is often more important than capacity or crowding relief and that politicians should insist that a wide range of options be developed and tested before committing to back one with large amounts of money. For me what the book demonstrates beyond peradventure is that politicians must have the vision and the commitment to embark on transport infrastructure projects whose utility and benefit will materialise only long after they have held office. To conclude this book is required reading for the Mayor. It provides convincing evidence for the management of Southern Railways to come under the aegis of Transport for London. ■



How London got the Docklands Light Railway, Jubilee Line Extension, High Speed 1, Overground, Crossrail and Thameslink, and what's next