**BOOK REVIEW**

# Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel

## by Robert Alter
## Yale University Press, 2005, 175 pages

Reviewed by Gregory L. Newmark

Robert Alter's statement that the "runaway growth of the city effected certain fundamental transformations in the nature of urban experience" comes as no surprise to city planners. Those same social convulsions spurned the creation of the modern profession of city planning. Alter, a professor of comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, however, is focused not on the policy response to rapid urbanization, but the literary one. His beautifully written 2005 book *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* traces the evolution of the novel "as a searching response to the felt new reality of the European city."

Alter identifies the key new adaptation of this evolution as "the practice of conducting the narrative more and more through the moment-by-moment experiences – sensory, visceral, and mental – of the main character or characters," a procedure he dubs "experiential realism." *Imagined Cities* considers the use of experiential realism among selected works of Flaubert, Dickens, Bely, Woolf, Joyce, and Kafka. These authors develop this tool to offer very distinct reactions to the new city with Flaubert, Dickens, and Bely overwhelmed, Woolf and Joyce energized, and Kafka trapped. Alter has chosen these authors and this theme as they "may still have urgent things to say to us as dwellers of cities in which, along with excitements of urban life, problems proliferate much faster than solutions." Finding those solutions seems the task of city planning and Alter comments sporadically in this direction throughout the book. This review will present Alter's main insights regarding the authors with special interest devoted to Alter's consideration of the role of planning.

Flaubert's *The Sentimental Education* experiences Paris as a bombardment of fragmented and "transitory images, which are no more than shards of an ungraspable whole." Alter describes this presentation as phantasmagoria, in which "everything is seen as constant disorienting flux." City planning, in part, is designed as an antidote to such confusion and illusion. Alter notes the contemporaneous renewal projects of Baron

Hausmann's were expressly designed to bring order and stability to the French capital.

Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* revives metaphoric imagery from pre-modern folktales to intone anxiety about urban life. London is choking on the polluting detritus of its own industrial productivity. In this rather bleak looming environmental catastrophe, Dickens finds pockets of love and life, but the underlying concern for the future of humanity persists. Alter reflects this concern by titling one of the two chapters on Dickens 'Intimation of Apocalypse,' but also notes that at this point "urban planning was being put into practice in many cities across Europe and the United States . . . [to find] ways of making urban space more humanly habitable."

Bely's *Petersburg* presents a modern city whose origins were entirely planned, but, in Alter's words, "as with more limited projects of urban planning elsewhere, the vision of liberating rationalized order did not work itself out in neat accordance with the dreams of the planners." Instead, the city is shrouded in fog and besieged by industrial immigration. Bely describes an urban reality that is unreal, illusive, and alienating.

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, in contrast to the novels noted above, sees affirmation and energy in the new urban world. The characters are enlivened by their interactions with the heterogeneity of the city and the transient nature of these interactions in a bustling city heightens and reflects the reality of human transience. Alter sees some role for urban planning in fostering such a vision. He writes, "this upbeat sense of the city may be enhanced by grand avenues and gracious parks and other manifestations of enlightened urban planning, but it is chiefly the consequence of the sheer teeming variety of city life."

Joyce's *Ulysses* also reflects the enhancing power of collective life. Here there is "a super abundance of sensory data," in which Joyce, unlike Flaubert, "zestfully embraces the fragmentation." Alter claims convincingly that the narrative techniques emergent in the aforementioned authors comes to full fruition in Joyce's energetic, connective, stream of consciousness prose and uses the metaphor of the streetcar shuttling between places and people.

Finally, Kafka's *The Trial* returns to a bleaker view of urban life as realm of alienated monads cut off from both community and nature. Rather than being a spectator of the world, the individual is spectacle, observed but not approached, like a rat in a maze. Alter argues that the urban disorder and disjunction reflects Kafka's protagonist's inability to put his own life in order and leaves the reader with a haunting vision of the city as a trap closing in on its isolated inhabitants.

Through his discussion of the innovation of these authors, Alter presents planning as the structuring of physical space to foster social order and possibly aesthetic grandeur. This vision of planning certainly reflects a classical, if limited, concept of the profession. Alter, in the quotation above regarding *Petersburg*, recognizes explicitly that the best laid plans do not necessarily correspond to intended outcomes and he may even hint at an implicit hubris underlying all planning efforts.

The planning profession has, like the novel, evolved considerably since its emergence in the cataclysm of the initial industrial urbanization. Alter's contribution to planning literature is not in helping define the field. At best he defines a field as it was a century ago. Alter's contribution to planning literature is in demonstrating that since "every urban novel . . . is an imaginative mediation of the experience of the city," such writings provide an invaluable source of qualitative insight into contemporary perception of the urban realm.

Despite much chatter about narrative and story in planning, expressly fictional accounts are typically ignored. Alter shows the power of literary expression in comprehending the city. His book implicitly challenges planning researchers and educators to expand their epistemological purview to literature. Alter provides no clear guidance for how planners might actually do that, but he does hint that a consequence of such efforts will be new insights into the perception of planning. Those insights are worth pursuing. Alter reminds us to put literature back into planning.

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