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Review: The Working Landscape—Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place

By Peter F. Cannavò

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Cannavò, Peter F. *The Working Landscape – Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007. 425pp. ISBN 9780262532921. US\$29.00, paper. Recycled paper.

As concerns about the environment gain importance among all the sectors of modern society, the dichotomy between development and preservation becomes even more accentuated. In this book Peter Cannavò calls this contrast a “presumed incompatibility” promoted by environmentally insensible urban development agents on one side and hard-line preservationists on the other, which results in a never ending tug-of-war. Furthermore, the author argues that “founding” (as he calls development) and preservation may seem to be antagonistic, but, in reality, they are both integral to the “practice of place,” thus coexisting in dynamic stress and equilibrium.

Focused on the idea of place as a means for humans to make sense of and feel secure in the spatial world, *The Working Landscape* addresses, throughout its seven brilliantly arranged chapters and postscript, the need for democratic governance of places. The language is simple yet enriched by the academic expertise of the author and the notes he borrows from well known scholars, which make the book a great reference for professionals and students interested in learning how to balance the necessity of urban development and the preservation of natural and cultural assets.

The first chapter introduces the discussion on the meaning of place as a geographic, political and philosophical creation as opposed to space, an abstract entity. It also brings in considerations of founding and preservation, their aspects and how they both can positively influence the governance of places. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 expose real cases of land use in the United States named, respectively, *The Northwest Timber War*, *Sprawl* and *Rebuilding Ground Zero* that can be easily translated into similar situations anywhere else in the world. Worth mentioning here is the postscript, which refers to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the lessons it taught.

In chapter 5, titled *The Crisis of Place*, the discussion on place as a meaningful social asset deepens as Cannavò analyses how the contemporary politics of development and preservation are set against each other. It is a more emphatic criticism on radical developers and extremist environmental advocates. Chapter 6, carrying the title of the book, presents the author's suggestion for the best approach towards having this polarized argument come into a common ground, promoting cooperation and integrated land-use planning. He points out that a democratic, regional structure would restore the “practice of place.”

The final chapter is a rich collection of propositions, ideas, advice, and examples of what has already been successfully put into practice in the political sphere and could be applied as an agenda for interacting with the three landscape types defined by Peter Cannavò: cities, rural and agricultural areas, and wilderness. Anyone involved in themes like urban development, natural and cultural conservation, land-use management and other subjects that deal with places will find this book a great reference, if not an inspiring piece, on how to approach these subtle matters.

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