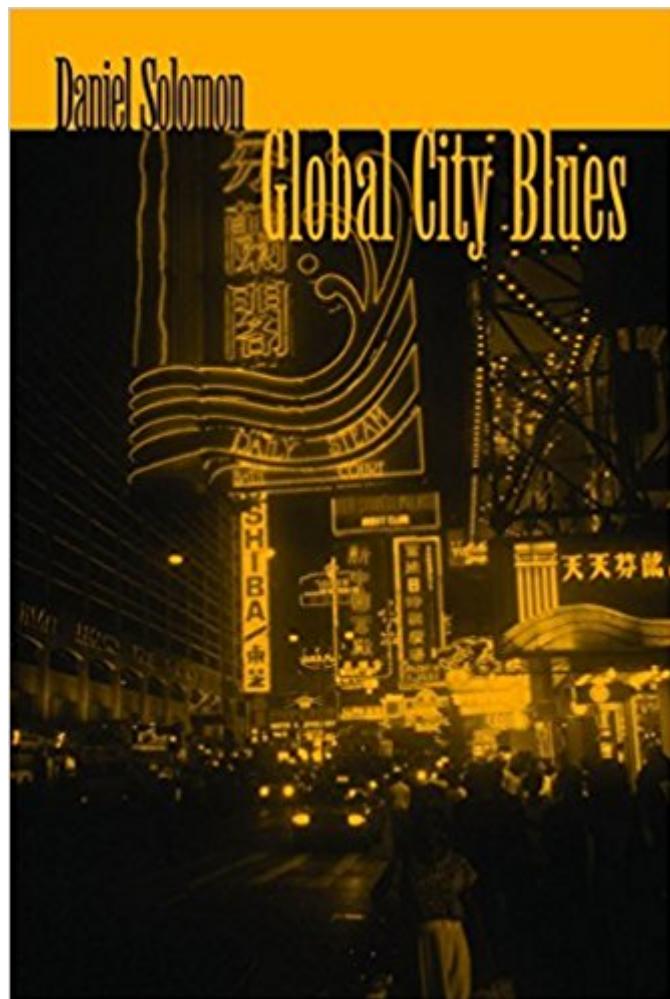


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Global City Blues



Synopsis

"This is a book about the making of cities and the buildings that compose them. It is about the conditions under which an architect engaged in those activities now works, how those conditions evolved and why they are changing. It is about the qualities of life that are threatened by the ways cities are built at the beginning of the 21st century and intelligent response to those threats. It is about why the city planning ideas and the cultural cuisinart that came in the box with modern architecture are a lingering menace." -- from Global City Blue. Much of the architecture and town planning of the past fifty years has been based on an unsubstantiated optimism about the promise of modernity. In our rush to embrace the future, we invented new ways of building that rejected the past and sent people headlong into a placeless limbo where they are insulated from each other and cut off from such basic experiences of location as the weather and the time of day. Despite calamitous results, many architects and planners remain enamored of the modernist ideals that underlie these changes. In Global City Blues, renowned architect Daniel Solomon presents a perceptive overview and an insightful assessment of how the power and seductiveness of modernist ideals led us astray. Through a series of independent but linked essays, he takes the reader on a personal picaresque, introducing us to people, places, and ideas that have shaped thinking about planning and building and that laid the foundation for his beliefs about the world we live in and the kind of world we should be making. As an alternative, Daniel Solomon discusses the ideas and precepts of New Urbanism, a reform movement he helped found that has risen to prominence in the past decade. New Urbanism offers a vital counterbalance to the forces of sprawl, urban disintegration, and placelessness that have so transformed the contemporary landscape. Global City Blues is a fresh and original look at what the history of urban form can teach us about creating built environments that work for people.

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Customer Reviews

Solomon's book was just the tonic I needed to regain my faith in the real value of the design professions. I had begun to despair that I was the only person who found the Prada posing of Rem Koolhaas and his ilk reminded me ever so much of the children's story "The Emperor's New Clothes." Solomon is apparently another like-minded soul, though his book touches on so much more than the soulless modernism that pervades the design profession (esp. the academy and the press) today. A committed urbanist, Solomon attempts to show that a very few showoff buildings may have their place in a city, but that a city cannot be made of Frank Gehry monuments. And most especially not of imitation Frank Gehry monuments! He writes with wit, passion, and clarity, three qualities that are often in short supply in tomes by architects. Major kudos to the author, and a strong "buy" recommendation to the reader.

I found this book to be so refreshing. Daniel Solomon is an architect and urban designer who writes eloquently and passionately about how cities get built and the huge forces to be overcome if we are to regain civility and harmony with our environment. His writing is funny and perceptive, taking to task the pretensions of Modernist dogma and the way our profession has been taught for the last fifty years. He writes about the need for 'background architecture' to repair the urban fabric and the idea of urbanism as a way of looking at our built environment. There are some fascinating stories about his home city of San Francisco and the fight to pull down the ugly urban freeways built during the 60's. The book is essential reading for urban designers and policy makers and all who care about cities and how they are built.

This author really states with such power and imagery how screwed up the modern world is. He describes the 'odorless gas of Modernist thinking' that has affected the way we design, plan and build that is anti-human and incredibly destructive to civilized living. Great stuff. I couldn't put it down.

The used book price was considerably less than a new one and was nearly brand new anyway. It arrived very quickly. The book was very interesting and insightful.

This is an interesting book about urban design. Mr Solomon explains how the way architecture and urban design have been taught has affected the built environment all over the world and why we need a new school of thought about making cities. The figures he describes as heroes are interesting.. Hopkins, Colin Rowe, some Chinese architect in Beijing, because they have resisted the forces of the media and current trends and have attempted something timeless. The book represents a personal journey by an architect who realizes there is something very wrong about the way our world is evolving but hasn't yet found the complete answer, only some clues as to another direction. It is a pity there are not more illustrations.

Although Solomon is a New Urbanist, his book is far less nuts-and-bolts than other prominent New Urbanist books such as Duany's Suburban Nation. Instead, Solomon has written a group of short, data-light, footnote-free essays on architecture and urban planning. Some of the essays were quite educational. I especially liked his efforts to explain the mentality of modernist architects and planners. For example, he points out that even though the Craftsman bungalows that dominated early 20th-century America delivered beautiful public spaces, their kitchens were "dark and segregated." By contrast, 1950s architects sought to make houses lighter and airier, but neglected public space. Their ideological heirs, the 21st-century "starchitects" tend to be from Los Angeles, a place that "teaches an architect to survive in, even to revel in, a world that is disjointed, irredeemably ugly to many outsiders, and far beyond the normal kind of civic grace that cities have aspired to." And because they are used to ugly streets, they are not so interested in creating buildings that engage with the street or neighborhood around them. By contrast, Solomon is from San Francisco, a place that teaches architects that urbanity still works. He also speculates that the urban renewal-induced destruction of American cities had a psychological cause: young men who served in World War II had "an absolutely unprecedented and life-forming experience of competence" during their military service, and thus were "ready to build the world anew." But Solomon admits that some of the intellectual ammunition behind postwar sprawl was built earlier: for

example, R.G. Tugwell, part of Franklin Roosevelt's "brain trust" suggested something very similar in 1935: "[go] outside centers of population, pick up cheap land, build a whole community and entice people to go into it. Then go back into the cities and tear down whole slums and make parks of them." And Solomon also explains the psychology of New Urbanism, pointing out that New Urbanism, unlike environmentalism, is not motivated primarily by concern over dirty air of global warming, but by the desire to recreate "the quality of experience", to create places where we can connect with the world around us. An environmentalist's list of necessary attributes of a good place might include hybrid cars or solar power; Solomon's list includes "places to walk", "encounters with others, particularly others who are different", "real air", and "knowledge of what town you're in and where you are in town". Where these elements are missing, people have no reason to go outside, and nothing but a "steady unrelenting diet" of indoor technology (internet, TV, air conditioning, etc.) that makes it difficult for people to distinguish between the virtual world of media experience and the real world of direct experience. (Thus the absurd spectacle of people mourning for dead celebrities such as Princess Diana). However, some of Solomon's glittering, unsupported generalizations are not so persuasive - for example, his suggestion that Mohammed Atta's hostility towards America was a reaction to "world tourism".

I question the premise of the books criticism. One cannot blame the inadequacies of the modern city on one or two architects (Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe). Those revolutionary architects were purely responding the changing environment that surrounded them; namely the industrial revolution. To continue to construct buildings and plan communities as they were a thousand years ago would be akin to using wax paper for windows and traveling via horse (as Solomon suggests). Fortunately technology does indeed affect us all and Architects have a responsibility to respond to it accordingly. I do agree that there are numerous problems with today's cities but turning the clock back to more idealistic times is not the answer, as the self proclaimed "New Urbanists" say.

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