

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

Where We Want to Live

By Ryan Gravel

Review by Ben Hecht

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BOOKS

Boulevards and Beltlines

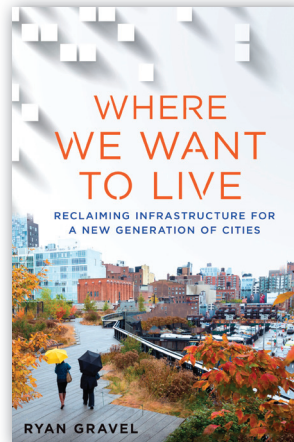
REVIEW BY BEN HECHT

Six decades of building a physical environment organized primarily around cars instead of people has profoundly changed us.” It’s around this premise that Ryan Gravel builds his new book, *Where We Want to Live: Reclaiming Infrastructure for a New Generation of Cities*. In many ways, the book is both a manifesto and a blueprint for how to change cities back to places organized around people first.

Gravel uses Atlanta’s ambitious Beltline initiative, an idea he conceived for his 1999 Georgia Tech master’s thesis in architecture and city planning, as a case study of the possible. His vision for the abandoned rail corridor that encircles Atlanta first gained momentum as a grassroots campaign by local citizens and civic leaders. The city is now translating it into 33 miles of multi-use trails, parks, and a network of pedestrian-friendly transit links that connect people to each other and to the entire metropolitan Atlanta region.

The project emerged from Gravel’s belief that urban sprawl, fueled by cars, “is undermining the very set of social constructs that America was founded on.” Sprawl “favors social isolation and heightens our sense of difference between groups of people,” he writes. Its effects “separate us from each other. They divorce housing from retail from office from recreation from worship.”

But Gravel observes that a new generation of city-dwellers wants to move beyond this car-centered environment and lifestyle. They haven’t entirely rejected cars; they just want to be much less dependent on them. And they want to form stronger social, economic, and cultural connections with their cities and each other. In a time of political gridlock and growing feelings of powerlessness, Gravel’s inspiring account shows such people, from more than 45 Atlanta neighborhoods, turning outdated assets and seemingly worthless land into a place they want to live in.



**WHERE WE WANT TO LIVE:
Reclaiming Infrastructure for a
New Generation of Cities.**

By Ryan Gravel
236 pages, St. Martin's Press, 2016

Gravel begins his story not in Atlanta but in Paris. While living in the French capital before graduate school, he noted how 19th-century infrastructure decisions there, such as the creation of the grand boulevards, had transformed and defined the city’s unique character. These choices stood in sharp contrast to those in his childhood home in Georgia, where car culture and the shopping mall had become “the physical manifestation of our preferred lifestyle.” With the Beltline initiative, Gravel hoped to reverse some of these trends in Atlanta. If racism and “white flight” were some of the drivers of sprawl, the Beltline, with its positive impact on many long-underserved neighborhoods, could use physical remnants of the city’s rich history that preceded car culture to help reintegrate neighborhoods and repair past wrongs.

As the project took shape, it became clear that it could expand to address several other concerns that directly affect the way people live, from economic equity to environment to health. It not only connected segregated populations but also encouraged people to use parks, grow fresh food, ride bikes, and drive their cars less. Taking these accomplishments as an example, Gravel puts forward a thoughtful roadmap for other would-be pioneers. His theory of “catalyst infrastructure” suggests how citizens and leaders across the country can harness existing physical assets, from the river in Los Angeles to the street grid in Detroit, to effect fundamental change in the habits of individuals and communities.

BEN HECHT is president and CEO of Living Cities, a collaborative that represents 22 foundations and financial institutions working toward more livable, equitable cities. Previously, he cofounded the nonprofit One Economy Corporation and served as its president for seven years. He is the author of *ManagingNonprofits.org* and other books.

If the book falls short at all, it is when Gravel goes beyond his experience and training as a planner and architect. Although I couldn’t agree more about the importance of building health considerations into urban life, I had a hard time understanding Gravel’s concept of “a legal obligation to public health” or what an actionable path toward it would be. Similarly, his aspiration to use infrastructure to distribute economic opportunities with greater equity could not be more important today, but his recommendations for achieving this goal are lacking.

These modest shortcomings notwithstanding, Gravel does an excellent job highlighting my favorite thing about cities: their ability to function as seemingly living, breathing, adaptive organisms. Whether discussing Detroit, Brooklyn, or Los Angeles, he illustrates how cities are always morphing with the times. In contrast to suburban layouts, with their unchanging cul-de-sacs that likely never will host more than a limited number of single-family homes, cities’ public streets adapt to changing technologies, from horses to streetcars to subways. Private property owners along those streets adapt to market conditions, changing their holdings’ purposes from commercial to residential to (these days) even agricultural.

Despite the fact that its subtitle, *Reclaiming Infrastructure for a New Generation of Cities*, sounds like it describes a work only a planner might love, Gravel’s book provides inspiration and lessons with much broader appeal. The formula used in Atlanta—big vision plus courageous leaders plus broad public engagement—can apply to almost any important public problem. More people should try it and stick with it the way Gravel and his compatriots did.

Fundamentally, *Where We Want to Live* is a story about people, not infrastructure. It’s about citizens coming together to honor the past, begin to heal old wounds, make choices about the life they want to lead, and reclaim their future. If they can pull off such an ambitious effort in Atlanta, with its deeply ingrained car culture and history of racial tension, what can’t we do? ■