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Marius Fiskevold

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Sten Gromark

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Magnus Rönn

Nordic Association of Architectural Research, Sweden

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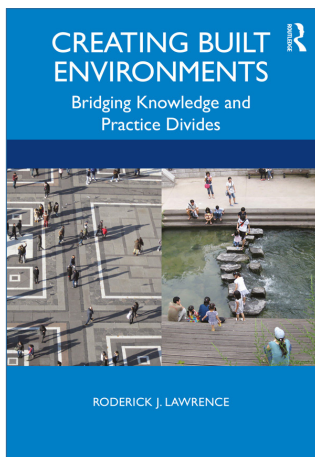
P O Box 124 Blindern, NO-0314 Oslo, Norway.

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BOOK REVIEW:
RODERICK J. LAWRENCE
CREATING BUILT ENVIRONMENTS.
BRIDGING KNOWLEDGE AND
PRACTICE DIVIDES

REVIEWER: MATTIAS KÄRRHOLM



Roderick J. Lawrence is a well-known pioneer within research on the relation between people and the built environment and has a long and impressive track record when it comes to publications on urban issues related to, for example, housing, health and ecology. In his recent book, *Creating Built Environments. Bridging Knowledge and Practice Divides*, Lawrence focuses on the complex inter- and transdisciplinary processes needed for the (co-)creation of built environments. The book is divided into two parts. The first and main part of the book presents us with five important themes related to the production of the built environment and includes chapters on nature, health and well-being, food, housing and radical change. The second part gives a presentation of methods and concepts, summarising why and what kind of critical thinking that is needed for these processes. The examples and cases given throughout the book are numerous and rich. They include both well-known and (at least to me) somewhat less-known contemporary urban planning projects that in different ways try to tackle contemporary issues, often relating to different aspects of sustainability. The strength of the book lies in these illuminating examples from all over the world. The analytical part is shorter, and the main messages of the book (as for example summarised in the introduction) are not very new or especially detailed. They are, however, important and perhaps something that we might need to be reminded of again and again, including, for example, conclusions such as: cities are sources of problems, the built environment is a key component of ur-

ban/societal development, and the production of the built environment needs a combination of different kinds of knowledge. Throughout the book, Lawrence also has several important points to make, for example, that the contemporary belief in scientific knowledge, quantitative data and technological solutions tends to devalue the knowledge of professional practitioners and that financial actors, such as property investors, increasingly marginalize built environment professionals. Here, I very much agree with Lawrence, there are a lot of different perspectives and knowledges that are important for the process of producing the built environment, perspectives that increasingly seems to be downplayed.

Although there certainly are interesting insights in the book, I still think that the theoretical and conceptual part summarizing the book is somewhat lacking in precision. Lawrence here focuses more on listing all the different aspects of co-creation and its complexity, rather than on advising us on how to really work through this complexity. He shows that the creation of the built environment is complex and that it is an inter- and transdisciplinary affair, but how can we then navigate these processes? Here, the conclusions are quite abstract, giving us systematic listings and presenting us with different concepts in diagrams and boxes. As an architectural researcher (rather than a practitioner), this is perhaps also my main complaint. There is a tendency throughout the book to discuss things at a very general level and to use the cases to develop kinds of synthesizing panoramas, rather than critical analysis. To me, concepts and methods need to be put to work in order to make sense. How can these concepts and listings be helpful? The lexicographical and systemic approach can be pedagogical, but the problem of box diagrams and check lists (so much favoured also by the technocrats that Lawrence criticizes) is their analytical weakness. If we are not told how to put them to use, or how they can help us to think around a problem, they might at worst become tools that allow us to think less rather than more. The discussion around inter- and transdisciplinarity in this book, although bringing up important aspects, thus focuses more on presenting the different ingredients of the complexity than on giving us much guidance on how to analyse it properly. The descriptive focus on how everything relates to everything, leaves us with quite abstract, common-sense conclusions. One reason for this might be that the book largely builds on a series of short descriptions of projects. The many examples means that these, by necessity, are presented quite briefly, leaving little material for the theoretical analysis to draw from. The theoretical material follows a similar collage structure. Lawrence draws from many different theoretical fields and positions (also spanning across history) but does not really give us a platform from which these different perspectives can be evaluated and discussed.

These more critical comments are, as noted, from a researcher looking for new insights and for help into how the cases can be instrumentalised into new knowledge. Despite this, however, I do think that Lawrence's book works well as a textbook for students or practitioners. It presents different aspects of what goes into the complexity of creating built environments, drawing from decades of research experience and an interesting series of relevant empirical cases. My wish (if I may be so bold as to have one) would, however, be that Lawrence could follow up this book with a new one, also based on his long work and intimate knowledge of different cases, but where he allowed himself to be clearer about his own opinions and arguments, allowing himself and his own perspective more place.

