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Commentary on Flemming

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COMMENTS ON DAVID FLEMING'S "THE SPACE OF ARGUMENTATION"

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I suppose it's not well known in the argumentation community that there is a small and recent, but nonetheless influential, literature on rhetoric and argumentation within the field of urban planning. John Forester's work, especially his *Planning in the Face of Power* (University of California Press, 1989), is exemplary. However, urban planning is a small field, planning theory even smaller, and those interested in argumentation still fewer, so it's a pleasure to welcome David Fleming to the group.

I enjoyed his paper and believe it's a topic eminently worth pursuing. He writes that there are two relationships between argumentation and the city: public discourse helps make the good city, and the good city is conducive to discourse. In this paper he takes on the second, and—it seems to me—the more difficult and problematic of the two claims. He goes on to investigate three writers on urban design, namely Jane Jacobs, the new urbanists, and Christopher Alexander (an author I do not know well).


(Some parenthetical points on this score. A particular reading the author might find especially rewarding is Patrick Geddes (e.g., *Cities in Evolution*, London: Ernest Benn, 1968 [1914]). Though Geddes is exasperating, there is much more to him than meets the eye, and he—like his acolyte, Mumford¹—was concerned about the region as a self governing community. Incidentally, in many respects the greatest flaw in Jane Jacobs is that she misrepresented her predecessors, especially Geddes, who anticipated many of her themes. Also, Prof. Fleming should reconsider the local planning example in Las Cruces. It really raises questions other than the ones the paper addresses—questions about the role of rhetoric in the nitty-gritty of daily practice. My recommendation would be to drop this section and instead to expand on the present paper by considering one or two additional books on urban design.)

He goes on from these readings to provide principles for design conducive to community dialog. Here I have some differences with him. First, the good city is often treated as an ideal city, or a nostalgic memory of an ideal city, one that is pedestrian, non-alienating, dense with activity, and replete with human contact and communication. But that kind of city is partly nostalgia, historically ephemeral, and perhaps nonexistent. I doubt that he wants to make good discourse dependent on an ephemeral city.

Second, He gives several principles for design of the city. But if we contradicted any of the principles (such as density and size principles), couldn't we still have good discourse?

In general, Prof. Fleming's principles are too broad and all-encompassing. In a world of fragmented spaces, Prof. Fleming would be better off reducing his proposals to the place: the forum, the conference room, the parliament building, the university. Perhaps the best we can hope for is the preservation and enhancement of disconnected spaces for discourse. My recommendation, then, is that he moderate his claim and focus not on principles for the good city but principles for good places even in the bad city.

Notes

1. For an introduction to Mumford's views on planning issues see David R. Hill, "Lewis Mumford's Ideas on the City," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 51: 407-21. 

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