



From the ground up: Local efforts to create resilient cities, by Alison Sant

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BOOK REVIEW

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Cities are responsible for 75% of global carbon emissions. Reducing carbon emissions in cities is vital to combating climate change. At the same time, cities need to become resilient to the consequences of climate change, such as heat stress or floods. It is obvious that adaptation of cities is required, and this can only be successful when citizens are involved in shaping these transformations. This is the context where Alison Sant's book *From the Ground Up: Local Efforts to Create Resilient Cities* is situated, with a particular focus on U.S. cities.

Many scholars study how collaborations between residents and officials take shape in city-making or urban planning trajectories. The interaction between governments and citizens who start up local initiatives sparks questions, such as how these initiatives can be best supported by governments. Another challenge is to quantify or showcase the impact of local initiatives, particularly when they are restructuring large parts of the public space. According to Sant, the U.S. context specifically provides a fertile ground for local communities to take action in response to climate change. Although this often happens because of inactive governments who ignore or even diminish public spaces, Sant shows how this can be turned into something positive: lively, resilient public spaces and thriving communities. Sant collected many examples of local communities taking initiative and collaborating with organizations and civil partners to design sustainable and resilient cities. Various U.S. cities are covered where communities are implementing solutions to mitigate climate change and simultaneously improving equitability and livability in neighborhoods and communities.

Through its collection and presentation of material—including pictures, infographics, and extensive interviews—the book contributes in a practical manner to creating cities that are fair to all, livable, safe, and designed for people. The book also argues how, in many neighborhoods, race influences to what extent one is confronted with safety and livability problems. Following Sant, the way forward is through the implementation of urban tactics in which equity and justice are essential. One approach is to reestablish our connection to nature by restoring nature in cities. Another tactic is for citizens to claim back public spaces, sometimes through guerrilla efforts such as the Park(ing) Day (Chapter 1), otherwise more institutionalized as in the St. Anthony Green Streets initiative (Chapter 4). Yet, as Sant argues, these initiatives always need to start from action on the level of neighborhoods and driven by citizens.

The book contains both descriptive and prescriptive parts detailing how resilient cities are created “from the ground up.” It is structured in four parts, each with three chapters. In each part, the level of scale increases: starting from streets, to neighborhoods, to cities, to large-scale ecological restoration projects. The first three chapters contain street-level initiatives which all aim to contribute to inclusive cities. In San Francisco, residents reclaim parking lots for green spaces (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 shows how streets get safer in Minneapolis through increased use of bikes and shared biking. In Chapter 3, accessibility initiatives started during the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City are showcased. Chapters 4–6 scale up to the neighborhood level. These chapters are particularly useful to understand the required interaction between residents and officials to get initiatives going. In Chapter 4, resident projects show how not only resilience to floods in New Orleans is addressed, but also the resilience of the community by paying participating citizens a living wage for their community work. Residents in Portland, Oregon (Chapter 5) experience similar climate issues and use green spaces to mitigate risks that the water brings. Chapter 6 includes green space initiatives in Philadelphia, where workshops were needed to resolve conflicts between residents and officials.

In Part III, readers learn about the amazing life of trees in the U.S. In this part, Sant brings original ideas into city-making, for example, how local initiatives need big data to get governmental support, as well as highlighting that local initiatives do not always bring fortune to all residents. The “City of Trees” initiative in Washington, DC (Chapter 7) illustrates how data on trees and their impact is essential for political commitment. This part of the book, including tree initiatives in New York City (Chapter 8) and Baltimore (Chapter 9), further discusses the challenge of gentrification associated with increasing green spaces and number of trees in cities. This results in some communities contesting tree initiatives. The last three chapters of the book showcase large-scale restoration projects that are still driven by citizens despite their size. These are projects restoring nature in San Francisco (Chapter 10), growing oysters in New York (Chapter 11), and dealing with the moving coastline in Louisiana (Chapter 12). The initiatives in all the chapters exemplify that it is possible for citizen-driven changes to make an impact, independent of scale. I would have liked to see a more in-depth description of how these initiatives are governed, and the role of technology within these initiatives. Most initiatives in the book, despite their scale, often still seem to be dependent on one or two key coordinators which make them appear rather fragile.

Parts I, II and IV of the book are concluded by an essay from an invited author. While the chapters function as show-and-tell elements, the essays, in my opinion, are where readers can find most suggestions on how to apply the knowledge that is in the book to other contexts and cities, even outside of the U.S. The most important piece of knowledge in the book, namely that local expertise and involvement is needed to design successful urban solutions for climate change, is not even that groundbreaking. However, the contribution of the book lies in its practicality and applicability, showing us how this knowledge is operationalized in real-life cases and communities. As such, this book can be best read by fellow city-makers, urban planners, as well as researchers interested in the bottom-up approach for inspiration and to find applicable ideas for setting up community initiatives that last.

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