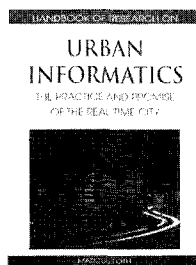


Demographic and Spatial Analysis



Handbook of Research on Urban Informatics: The Practice and Promise of the Real-Time City

Marcus Foth, editor. Information Science Reference, Hershey, PA, 2008. 506 pages. \$265.

Cities are big and diverse places, often confusing but always fascinating, full of questions, contradictions, and excitement. They are also increasingly full of information, seeping out in endless quantities from our wireless nodes, cell phones, laptop computers, GPS devices, transponders, radio frequency identification (RFID) tags, and hundreds of daily digital transactions. The field of urban informatics, a term credited to Rheingold in this book's preface and embraced by Foth and an international cadre of researchers, mines this pervasive technology for feeds of real-time data to model, visualize, analyze, and hopefully understand our dynamic and complex urban environments. Like the cities it studies, the *Handbook of Research on Urban Informatics* is big, diverse, with over 65 contributors from five continents, and exciting, with topics such as smart sensor networks, neogeography, and augmented reality. Unfortunately, like cities, it too leaves the reader puzzling over certain contradictions and lingering questions, the most worrisome being whether all of this research adds up to anything.

Sadly, this collection would seem to be worth no more than the sum of its parts, which is disappointing, given how intriguing some of its parts truly are. At its best, as suggested in some of the chapters, the field offers real potential for planners to use new technology and data flows to reveal hidden patterns of everyday urban life in much the same way that GIS highlights relationships unfolding on the landscape or simulation models help develop deeper understanding of complex economic, natural, and transportation systems. Connecting either of these existing research fields with real-time, or maybe even just more reliable, data is certainly a promising notion.

As a showcase of academic creativity applied to problems of real or virtual place-based information, the book is certainly worthy of attention. Particularly strong are sections II and III on the use of technology to improve participatory planning and community engagement, which present some excellent case studies from Michigan, Milan, Washington, DC, and elsewhere. Interestingly, this topic re-emerges in the more futuristic articles in section VI, "The Not So Distant Future": for example, the interactive WikiCity project at MIT's SENSEable City Lab and the mobile phone-enabled citizen science presented by researchers at Intel.

In the end, however, one returns to the problems of why these particular articles were included and what does it all mean when taken together. In his foreword, Townsend, the research director of the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, states that the field of urban informatics is "uncharted territory," but then does little to provide us with a map or even a compass to orient ourselves. How are we to make sense of all of this work? How do the pieces relate, if at all? Do

they form a coherent research agenda, and if so, toward what ends? How do these works build on or break from past uses of technology or information to understand cities?

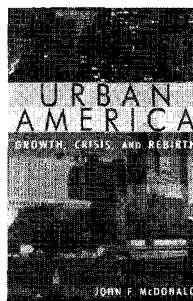
To this criticism, Townsend preemptively notes, as if to claim the shortcoming as a strength:

As I sat down to write this foreword, I considered the traditional task of trying to draw out common themes from the diversity of manuscripts—until I realized that to do so would completely miss the point of what the authors have accomplished. This group of authors has stepped outside their disciplinary silos to engage in a dialogue that I suspect many will be loathe to return from. (p. xxv)

Foth further validates this approach, describing the chapters as an "urban smorgasbord" and inviting us to "sample the 'dishes.'" Despite this clever spin, an understanding of "common themes" is precisely what we rely on a collected volume to provide. Without such synthesis, the book's claim to present "a dialogue" is rendered a hollow promise; we would be better off simply downloading these articles from the authors' individual websites and drawing our own themes. Although such nonsynthetic collections may be warranted, say, to gather historical "classics" as an introductory reader, this treatment of an emerging research area squanders an important opportunity to identify the unique contributions and perspectives—or at a very minimum, to locate the center and the edges—of the field. As the excitement, breadth, and insightful creativity of the various contributions suggest, Foth et al. may very well be on the cusp of new ways of understanding and shaping cities, but first they need to convincingly address some fundamental questions.

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Urban America: Growth, Crisis, and Rebirth

John F. McDonald. M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 2007. 408 pages. \$83.95, \$35.95 (paperback).

The main theme of *Urban America: Growth, Crisis, and Rebirth* is urban revival. As McDonald says in the preface, "[t]his book is thus a call to understand why it is reasonable to be hopeful, and a call for further effort to achieve positive results" (p. xiii). He claims,