

# Secret of sustainable civilised society

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## THE CREATIVE CITY

Charles Landry  
Earthscan, £17.95

**C**IVILISATION is based on the city. Environmentalists who have taken the initiative on the need for sweeping reforms to our social system – to produce something they call a “sustainable” process – are obliged to offer a vision of how to restructure the modern city.

Charles Landry is an authority on the future of urban environments. He specialises in the creative use of culture in the revitalisation of intensively populated settlements. He is the founder of Comedia, a cultural planning consultancy. So planning

is a theme on which we can expect him to offer some valuable insights in this work, which is a wide-ranging survey of experiments in futuristic behaviour throughout the world.

These experiments are driven by well-meaning people who are attempting to overcome obstacles that prevent large sections of city populations from enjoying enriched lives. Unfortunately, these experiments may not be sustainable once the initial enthusiasm of their originators wanes with the passage of time.

Cities malfunction primarily because of a dysfunctional structure of property rights and taxation. These have caused the urban sprawl and the division of populations into the haves and have-nots. The modern planning system was an attempt to address part of the problem, but not at its roots.

Landry censures the limited vision associated with land-use planning. He favours a planning system that embraces ethical values and cultural technologies that would enable the authorities to liberate their communities from the tight constraints imposed by what he calls capitalism. In his view, planning should be extended to encompass land use and development as a subordinate part of the process. He wants “people-based departments” to be higher up the hierarchical tree. He fears that land use planning “oversimplifies issues and looks at problems through one lens leading us away from asking fundamental questions”.

Unfortunately, Landry – his heart in the right place, his imagination fertile – is the one who fails to get at the source of the problem. Contemporary land use planning, I agree, is a limited exercise. Even so, it pinpoints the nature of the problem. By looking at the land market we can trace the reasons why people are not free to spontaneously develop the cultural forms which they favour.

Landry notes that cities do create value, but he displays no awareness that the net gains are capitalised into the price of land. Without this understanding, and the policy implications associated with it, there can be no hope of curbing the anti-social activities such as crime and ecological havoc.

Well-meaning people like Landry wish to include poor people, but so have generations of past reformers who have patently failed. The solution will not be found in a generalised attack on capitalism. A more forensic examination of the urban problem is required if works such as *The Creative City* are to reach beyond the utopian dream to become blueprints for the decent urban society. It is not surprising that the practical solution proposed by Ebenezer Howard is omitted from this book. The sustainable city is built on the socialisation of the rent of the land, and the privatisation of other spheres of people’s lives: these are the primary principles for liberating the dwellers of our cities.