

REVIEW OF / RECENSIÓN DE: Dean Saitta. *First Cities: Planning Lessons for the 21st Century*. Elements in Anthropological Archaeology in the 21st Century. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 2024, 94 pp. ISBN: 978-1-009-33874-5. Online ISBN: 9781009338769. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009338769>.

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The Cambridge Elements series launched in 2019 with the aim of providing readable, up-to-date, short-form introductions to academic topics, with scope for authors to highlight not only recent disciplinary developments but also their individual perspectives on them. In this book, *First Cities: Planning Lessons for the 21st Century*, Dean Saitta has exemplified the strengths of this format, and avoided most of its pitfalls.

The book has two stated objectives: “The first is to synthesize archaeological knowledge of ancient cities in a way that strengthens a comparative understanding of urbanism across time and space and, by extension, the field of urban studies. The second is to show how this body of knowledge is relevant to several challenges that concern urban scholars, planners, and policymakers today” (p. 2). In pursuit of these twin goals, Saitta’s book is divided into two short sections outlining the theoretical context and orientation of the work, two lengthier sections discussing case studies of early urbanism across the globe, and two closing sections summarising the key lessons for contemporary urban studies.

In Section 1, Saitta steps lightly across the quagmire surrounding the use of the terms ‘city’, ‘ancient’ and ‘urbanism’, offering brief, flexible, and ultimately pragmatic working definitions that emphasize the essential processes (rather than features) of urban life: population agglomeration; intense social interaction; diversity in demography, social roles, and specialisation; and placemaking through the structuring of the built environment and its impacts on human experience (pp. 2-3). To this reviewer, this approach is wholly sensible, shifting the focus from what cities *are* to what they *do* (or more specifically what *people* do to constitute them).

Section 2 introduces the theoretical background to the study. Urbanism has been a central topic in recent debates around archaeology’s contemporary relevance, which, for simplicity, Saitta (drawing on Smith, 2023) groups into two main perspectives. The first (“Scientific Realism”) argues that the general laws and principles derivable from the study of ancient cities can inform urban planning and problem-solving today (see *e. g.* Ortman *et al.*, 2015). The other (“Interpretivism”) advocates for a more pluralistic understanding of human placemaking, where the variability apparent in the past can broaden our horizons for policymaking and action today, including by integrating Indigenous perspectives (pp. 6-12; see *e. g.* Graeber and Wengrow, 2021; Millhauser and Earl, 2022). Seeking a middle ground, Saitta argues for an “engaged pluralism”, which involves “(1) putting general and particular studies in conversation with each other and (2) using both of them to address societal needs” (p. 12).

While this might be viewed as fence-sitting, the subsequent Sections 3 and 4 amply demonstrate Saitta’s commitment to this pluralistic approach. Here, in a diverse selection of case studies of early urbanism drawn from Eurasia, Africa and the Americas, he balances comparative, quantitative and generalising metrics with qualitative, nuanced and culturally specific observations. In his discussion of sites including Çatalhöyük, Tell Brak, Nebelivka, Mohenjo-Daro, Jenné-Jeno, Tres Zapotes, Monte Albán, Teotihuacan, Caracol, Chaco Canyon and Cahokia, Saitta calls particular attention to evidence of collective governance, the reproduction of domestic structures at larger scales, zoning and connective infrastructure, ethnic and demographic diversity, and sustainable resource management. While each case study is treated necessarily briefly, Saitta offers the key observations in a clear and characterful manner, supported throughout by relevant and up-to-date sources. Particularly enjoyable are the thought-provoking and sometimes unexpected parallels Saitta draws between his case studies, and with present day contexts (not least, the site of Nebelivka and Nevada’s Burning Man festival).

The closing Sections 5 and 6 offer reflections on how these and similar case studies might inform current and future city-planning. Drawing on the work of urban theorist Richard Sennet (2018), Saitta argues the deep past offers ample evidence of cities offering 1) synchronous public spaces accommodating multiple activities; 2) porous boundaries; 3) place-marking structures and monuments; 4) architectural “shells” capable of being restructured and adapted to changes uses; and 5) “seed planning”, the varied use of the prior four features in local, community-led contexts, as an alternative to master planning. While some may be skeptical that such features of ancient cities can

inform modern planning policy, Saitta's contribution is valuable even in simply framing these past communities in such terms. This book largely eschews traditional concerns like surplus mobilization, bureaucracy, monumental building works, and social hierarchy, to highlight aspects of collectivism and cosmopolitanism in ancient urban contexts. It is little surprise to find Saitta (p. 57) quoting Graeber and Wengrow's (2021, p. 4) *The Dawn of Everything* in his final pages, on the "carnival parade of political forms" that we might appreciate by abandoning social evolutionary perspectives on urbanisation and state-formation.

The book is not without its shortcomings. Section 2 is billed as "a brief history of archaeological thought about cities in history" (p. 5), though aside from a passing reference to V. Gordon Childe's (1950) seminal paper on "The Urban Revolution", the literature discussed is entirely from the 21st century, and largely from the past decade. While this is understandable, with this recent scholarship most informing the scope and sentiment of the book, anyone hoping for a historical overview of archaeological urban theory will be disappointed.

The figures, while generally well chosen, are relatively few in number, and the maps showing the locations of the case study sites are rather spartan, giving little to no sense of geographic context. This feels somewhat regrettable, in a volume concerned in part with sustainable landscape use. If the illustrations can be somewhat muted, the language occasional verges on the adulatory. Statements such as "[t]he ancients held what can only be described as progressive attitudes about immigration and immigrants" (p. 47), or "[t]he ancients were experts in using all of Sennett's open design forms to promote inclusive, cosmopolitan cities" (p. 57) are thrown out a little uncritically at times, though no doubt with good intentions. Saitta's aim is evidently not to dwell on the more unsavoury aspects of urban living, which he makes only passing reference to, in the second-to-last paragraph of the book.

Finally, wide-ranging though Saitta's case studies are, his coverage is neither balanced, nor universal. Mesopotamia and Africa receive four pages apiece, while 'Europe' and 'Asia' (read, the Trypillia mega-sites and the Indus Valley culture) are accorded three each, before the 18 pages on Meso- and North America that one senses are Saitta's real comfort zone. South America, China and central and western Europe are all absent, despite the presence of distinctive, early urbanising communities in each. This unevenness is partly forgivable, however, not just given the limited space of the Elements format, but because the author is explicit in his wish to present sites that a) speak to his thematic interests, and b) may be little known to many readers. In his conclusion (p. 56), Saitta writes that "I have been centrally concerned with the relationship between urban built form and cosmopolitan, sustainable placemaking. In so doing I have sought to enlarge the sample of cities that can be used to build urban theory." In this, he has certainly been successful.

Ultimately, Saitta demonstrates that if, as archaeologists, we want to embrace broader audiences and contribute to contemporary debates, then the stories we choose to tell are of paramount importance. To end on a note of personal reflection, Saitta's approach resonated strongly with this reviewer, especially regarding the place of urban archaeology in my academic career to date. During my undergraduate degree, some 12 years ago, the case studies of ancient urbanism I encountered were largely the traditional 'big hitters' of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, China and the Maya (with a paper on Jenné-Jeno set by my Africanist tutor). As a teaching assistant during my PhD at UCL, I was first introduced to Cahokia, Caral, Nebelivka and Chaco Canyon. With the publication of *The Dawn of Everything*, it felt like many such ancient communities were being introduced to audiences beyond the academy for the first time.¹ Now, with the publication of a book like Saitta's, aimed as an accessible, up-to-date primer on the subject –and featuring sites like Songo Mnara, Khirbat al Fakhar, and Chunchucmil– it strikes me that the range of stories we can tell within the 'mainstream' of comparative urban archaeology has expanded dramatically in a fairly short time. I look forward to incorporating this book, and its diverse and thought-provoking case studies, into my own teaching, to encourage students to critically expand their concepts of urbanism and its possibilities in the past and the present.

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¹ Incidentally, my time at UCL coincided with the years in which Graeber and Wengrow (the latter based at UCL) were writing *The Dawn of Everything*. It struck me as a testament to the intellectual exchange fostered by the department, that many of the case studies which featured in the "World Archaeology" course on which I was a teaching assistant, and for which many of the faculty provided guest lectures on their regions of expertise, appeared prominently in the book.

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