Planners rely upon planning history to provide a sense of their position in society and the importance of their work. To reinterpret that history is to change the background upon which planners operate in the present and to influence their vision of the future. Traditional histories of American city planning tell a story of gradual, but inexorable, progress, beginning with the reform movements of the late nineteenth century and leading steadily toward increasing social acceptance, technical advancement, and institutional consolidation. Personalities, famous plans, and legislative milestones march past, forming a narrative that is, on the whole, reassuring. Planning is portrayed as an activity that has emerged from tenuous beginnings to become a sophisticated profession, guiding urban change in the public interest.

Critical histories have arisen to challenge this view. The dissenting historians look beyond planning's technical achievements to its role within the social order, and find that planning has assisted in the creation of a cultural landscape consistent with the needs of advanced capitalism. Strung precariously between conflicting demands for political legitimation and capital accumulation, planning has left the structural causes of urban problems untouched. In this interpretation, planning has been an integral part of the urban real estate game, not its impartial judge.

Christine Boyer's recent book, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning*, advances this debate into new territory, and should prompt planners to reassess the social implications of their work. Boyer draws upon existing Marxist interpretations, but also introduces themes extracted from the writings of the French philosopher/historian Michel Foucault, whose recent death cut short a brilliant and productive career. The Foucaultian perspective places city planning among a growing array of cultural practices contributing to social control and the displacement of politics by allegedly neutral techniques derived from the social sciences. Foucault's concepts are elusive, but powerful, and readers of Christine Boyer's book will find their understanding of planning clarified and expanded. *Dreaming the Rational City* will inspire controversy, but its theses are vigorously argued, and planners and urban historians must come to terms with this new interpretation of planning's past.
Insofar as Boyer attempts to model her work after Foucault, *Dreaming the Rational City* is not intended as a conventional history of American city planning. Rather, it is a "genealogy" of city planning as a field of knowledge and set of institutional procedures. Genealogy is a particular type of historical inquiry. It is not the mapping of the linear progress of a society, revealing its underlying laws or deep meaning. Nor is it comprehensive, giving a complete picture of an era in all its dimensions. Rather, Foucault's genealogy begins by identifying a specific power relation in society, a "political technology" which controls and shapes men according to some received body of expert knowledge.¹ Obvious examples are the prison and the asylum, where the doctrines of the social sciences are linked with an institutional apparatus in order to discipline a subject population. The genealogist then attempts to systematically understand the "rituals of power" that are being enacted within the given social field. This means examining, in a most detailed fashion, the discourses and practices which have constituted the disciplinary process through time.² It requires a meticulous analysis of documents, artifacts, and events that are often overlooked in the grand sweep of traditional political and social histories. Without claiming to unearth a hidden key to these cultural practices, as in many Marxist and Freudian analyses, the genealogist strives to describe and dissect them, showing how they hang together to form a total system of control, an interlocking net of knowledge and power ensuring that individuals conform to the demands of the social order. Foucault's methodology has changed through time, and can't be reduced to a simple formula, but it is clear that his historical method is not focused on great events or the more obvious forms of political domination. Foucault's concern is the concrete social practices through which populations are molded to fit the needs of modern industrialized, bureaucratic societies. Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus have christened this approach "interpretive analytics," the hard historical work of diagnosing and analyzing the history and organization of current cultural practices...practices which are by definition interpretations. They quite literally and materially embody a historically constituted "form of life," to use Wittgenstein's phrase. This form of life has no essence, no fixity, no hidden underlying unity. But it nonetheless has its own specific coherence.³

*Dreaming the Rational City* is an attempt to apply such an analysis to American city planning. This Foucaultian genealogy is woven together with a Marxist diagnosis emphasizing economic causation. The methodological mixture is problematic, but Boyer's assiduous pursuit of the textual evidence has still produced an insightful interpretation of the American planning mentality during the first half of this century, one that restores the
critical dimension lacking in conventional histories.

Although one can begin a history of American city planning with the colonial period, as in the work of John Reps, the conditions that gave birth to planning as a state function and coherent profession date from the second half of the nineteenth century, when the expansive forces of industrial capitalism encountered the limitations of existing city form and administration. The congestion, poverty, and disease prevalent in the larger industrial centers prompted a reaction among middle-class reformers who were appalled by the degraded condition of the urban masses and fearful of the social unrest that might emerge from crowded working-class districts. During this period—the "prehistory of planning"--negative regulations and private philanthropy were directed at the problems of urban housing, social welfare, and civic aesthetics, as the first major steps were taken toward the comprehensive monitoring and reshaping of urban functions. Boyer skillfully retells this familiar story, emphasizing the connection between environmental reform and the imposition of moral order upon the lower classes. In Boyer's interpretation, these reformist efforts were not just well-intentioned attempts at civic improvement, episodes in the history of progress. Rather, each intervention was a sign of the growing attempt to impose a disciplinary order upon the American city.

The concept of disciplinary order is central to the entire book. As Boyer explains:

Michel Foucault speaks of disciplinary order as an integrated system not meant to be seen but infused across an apparatus of observation, recording, and tracking. In a similar fashion we can view city planning as a disciplinary mechanism watching over and regulating urban development in order to create an ideal spatial order.4

This disciplinary apparatus of spatial arrangements, regulations, and monitoring devices may be viewed as an attempt to transform the chaotic laissez-faire city into a smoothly functioning totality, with every space accounted for by the central authorities, and all individuals distributed to their proper positions in the urban whole. This does not require direct coercion, the old-fashioned exercise of sovereign power. The effectively disciplined city is not a military camp, but it does have much of the spatial slack and complexity wrung out of it, the uncontrolled space capable of sustaining indigenous political and cultural initiatives. Everything is in its place and, to the required degree, the spatial order mirrors the social order.

According to Foucault, discipline is a type of power, a means of bending human behavior to correspond with social imperatives. It is not a purely repressive power, in which the state or a ruling class overtly dominates the strata below. Foucault emphasizes
that discipline has a "positive" function: the training of a docile population, orderly and productive, conforming to socially defined norms and subject to both external surveillance and internalized self-supervision. Discipline does not replace other forms of power, it "infiltrates them, sometimes undermining them, but serving as an intermediary between them, linking them together, extending them, and, above all, making it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements. It assures an infinitesimal distribution of the power relations." Discipline is a much more subtle and effective form of power than violence or repression. It is less expensive and arouses less resistance; it can be extended more thoroughly throughout the body of society and it contributes to the productive efficiency of the economic system. "The disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate." The spread of disciplinary power is closely related to the rise of capitalism with its rigidly ordered apparatus of production, division of labor, and techniques to ensure the existence of a cooperative labor force. According to Foucault, disciplinary order was a precondition for the expansion of capitalism in the West, and has paralleled its growth.

The political technology of discipline is not an obvious apparatus on the surface of society, visible to all. The "panoptics of everyday life" operate underneath the formal, juridical structure of government, distorting its ostensible commitment to equality and liberty. Discipline is not the product of a conspiracy by a ruling class or the state; it is more like a network thrown over the whole of society, encompassing both rulers and ruled, but ensuring the reproduction of the existing social structure. Clearly, these themes are not new to Western social theory; Foucault is building upon the work of Weber, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Adorno, and other thinkers who have described the growing rationalization and bureaucratization of Western society.

Discipline always has a spatial component, and this is where Boyer establishes the link to city planning history. The application of disciplinary order to a city would involve the creation of a particular type of urban structure characterized by:

- the division of the city into discrete units devoted to specific functions;
- the distribution of individuals into these "purified" single-function spaces;
- constant monitoring of population characteristics and changes in land use and urban form;
• arrangement of the discrete zones in order to facilitate smooth production and economic efficiency;

• classification and regulation of behavior within each zone and definition of norms to govern everyday life;

• conversion of political issues to technical problems, relying upon expert analysis and complex social science techniques.\(^9\)

Boyer sees all of these disciplinary strategies emerging gradually from the reform currents of the 1890s. Even before city planning was launched as a distinct profession, the urban improvers of all varieties were constructing an apparatus to control and shape urban life: detailed surveys, inspections, welfare case files, architectural models, and the development of norms for parks, streets, and housing. The neoclassical architecture and formal planning of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, for example, may be seen as an impressive display of civilized values and moral order.\(^10\)

These sporadic, private efforts of the 1890s were no match for the rapid pace of urban growth, however, and by 1909 it was clear that only state power could modify the behavior of individual capitalists in the interests of long-term accumulation and social stability. The specialized profession of city planning came into being, charged with the task of creating an efficient city based upon scientific knowledge of appropriate land use configurations, transportation systems, and public facilities.

In her analysis of this period, Boyer explains the mutual dependence of urban panopticism and the economic imperatives of the City Efficient. Land use complexity was discredited, physical and social characteristics were more thoroughly surveyed, and class antagonisms were hidden beneath a "mask of neutrality" disguising the planner's defense of the general interests of capital. As one reads on, an ominous picture emerges of ubiquitous social control; but Boyer reminds us that the perfectly disciplined city was a utopian project, a dream, a frustrated desire of the planning mentality. Only some elements of the disciplinary project were imposed upon the American city. "Planners held few powers to enforce their disciplinary order and no way to make the general public accept their plans."\(^11\) The aspirations of the early planners meshed only partially with the needs of capitalism, and planners' proposals were taken up in a very selective fashion. Too much order would have destroyed the opportunities for profit created by congestion and spiraling land values.
As city planning spread throughout the nation during the 1920s, it was integrated into the system of real estate and land development. Zoning became the regulatory linchpin of American city planning, a pliable technique for the protection of private land values and for social segregation by class and race. Meanwhile, the new American culture of consumption and mobility evolved apace, with the automobile hastening the migration of both housing and industry to the suburbs, while skyscraping office towers proliferated in the old urban cores, surrounded by an inner ring of decaying, obsolete structures.

As the regional scale of urban problems became more evident, the first true regional plans emerged—*The Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, and the proposals of Lewis Mumford and the Regional Planning Association of America. The confrontation between these two clashing visions of the New York Region is surely one of the most interesting in all of planning history. Boyer sees both as manifestations of American planners’ inability to deflect the forces of development from their insensate course: suburban sprawl, CBD congestion, and inner-city decay. *The Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* proved to be a massively documented and exquisitely illustrated rationalization of the existing trends of urban growth, as Lewis Mumford had observed in his well-known critique of 1932. But for Boyer, Mumford and the RPAA were no closer to a practical solution to the unraveling of the American city, since their proposals were thoroughly utopian, with no chance of being implemented by the reigning authorities. Mumford’s Regional City was just “one more spatial utopia separated from economic realities.”

As Boyer’s narrative enters the New Deal years, the theme of spatial disciplinary order begins to recede. She observes that the hopes for a comprehensive restructuring of the American city according to planning principles could not be sustained in the face of recurrent failure: “Cumulatively, during the 1930s, planners would turn their backs upon the disorder of the American metropolis.” The void left by city planners was quickly filled by other actors with ideas of their own about the production of urban space: “The lawyers, real estate developers, and local politicians would be left behind to put together the last pieces of what would be known as the urban renewal game.”

Meanwhile, planners began to shed their preoccupation with static master plans. Faced with an economic and social crisis, planning began to “blend with government policy making”; it was interpreted as a “coordinating function” responsible for “programming, budgeting, organizing, and projecting.” The idea that city planning should be concerned with the decision-making process rather than substance—the physical form and social geography of
the city--gained strength. This dovetailed with the desire to install planning as an administrative function within local government, unencumbered with notions of "the good society" or its physical correlate, "good city form."

The main body of Boyer's narrative concludes with World War II, but this is followed by a brief tour through postwar developments in planning theory. "Technocratic postwar planning," Boyer argues, emphasized rational decision-making and efficient administration as it moved further away from engagement with the city as a complex historical artifact. Systems analysis and information theory promised improved, technically sophisticated planning to replace the old methods derived from the design professions. During the 1960s, social protest forced planners to pay attention to demands for public participation, but means were found to dampen and deflect the political challenge from the grassroots. "Mass protest politics were carefully contained and comprehensive physical styles of planning completely eclipsed."17 None of the old contradictions that had bedeviled city planning from the start had been solved. American city planning remained an ambiguous state function suspended between the conflicting imperatives of capital accumulation and political legitimation.

This is the gloomy denouement to Christine Boyer's history of American city planning. In her view, the American city has been placed in the custody of process planners, who preside over the destruction of urban complexity, and formalist architects, who are preoccupied with "personal aesthetic styles" and "private abstract languages." Both professions have become essentially antiurban and ahistorical, despite some bows in the direction of historical preservation and historicist design. They are subordinate players in a development process dominated by large corporations, the real estate industry, and the numerous political allies of these powerful interests. Architects supply the prestigious forms, and planners oversee the permitting process, making relatively minor adjustments to the city building enterprises of others. In the postwar period, "Allowing private interests to penetrate the public sphere excused traditional physical planning from engaging in a battle over urban space and form."18

Conclusion

In *Dreaming the Rational City*, Christine Boyer calls into question the conventional interpretations of planning history, arguing her case from a large body of archival materials. Applying the insights of recent social theory, Boyer has produced a complex narrative that will grate against the sensibilities of many practicing planners, who will dispute Boyer's pessimistic appraisal of the profession. But Boyer argues her case resolutely, and she offers substantial evidence that, like other bureaucratic activities of the
modern state, city planning has played a role in extending the power relations—"power-knowledge" in Foucault’s terminology—that infuse modern societies.

_Dreaming the Rational City_ is an ambitious attempt to combine a Foucaultian analysis of planning discourse with a Marxist analysis of planning as a state activity, but these two dimensions are mixed together in a somewhat confusing way. Boyer is quite right to assert their interdependence, as does Foucault:

> In fact, the two processes--the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital--cannot be separated; ... the technological mutations of the apparatus of production, the division of labor, and the elaboration of the disciplinary techniques sustained an ensemble of very close relations. Each makes the other possible and necessary; each provides a model for the other.

But Boyer tries to take on too much in one book. Her strong point is her analysis of planning thought or discourse; her bibliography consists mostly of books, articles, plans, and reports revealing the _intentions_ of planners to impose a disciplinary order on the American city. She maintains that she is only analyzing discourses, not causal sequences of events, but despite this disclaimer her analysis of texts is, in fact, blended together with an interpretation of planning _practice_ which is not well documented. We don’t really know the extent to which disciplinary order was successfully embodied in the structure of the American city, or the precise mechanisms linking physical form with disciplinary power. _Dreaming the Rational City_ hovers uneasily between two different kinds of analysis: one of texts and one of historical events.

Boyer pursues the theme of planning as a disciplinary technology effectively in the early chapters of the book, but this theme loses its vigor in the latter sections. Is this because planning gradually contributed less to the subtle mechanisms of social control, or did Boyer simply decide to abandon the theme in favor of a more conventional analysis of economic crisis, regional planning, and urban renewal? This is not clear. Many planners continue to address land use and urban design issues, and in the private sector planners and architects are busy fashioning large components of the "post-industrial" city. Surely, some intriguing correlations could be made between disciplinary order and the new urban landscape of "office park CBDs" and dispersed suburbs. One wishes that Boyer had commented upon this more explicitly in the conclusion of the book, thereby maintaining the Foucaultian theme with which she began her historical inquiry, and extending it suggestively into the present.

At the same time, the connections between urban form and social control are not likely to be simple and obvious. The old pitfalls of environmental determinism await the researcher
tracking down the "micropractices" of discipline that are encoded within the buildings, streets, and public spaces of the city. Foucault was aware of this difficulty. In an interview with Paul Rabinow, he made this clear:

Question: Is the actual plan for a building ... the same form of discourse as, say, a hierarchical pyramid that describes rather precisely relations between people, not only in space, but also in social life?
Foucault: Well, I think there are a few simple and exceptional examples in which the architectural means reproduce, with more or less emphasis, the social hierarchies. There is the model of the military camp ... It reproduces precisely through architecture a pyramid of power; but this is an exceptional example, as is everything military--privileged in society and of an extreme simplicity.
Question: But the plan itself is not always an account of relations of power.
Foucault: No. Fortunately for human imagination, things are a little more complicated than that.21

The American city is not a "complete and austere institution," and the connections between physical form and human behavior are dismayingly complex.22 The successful application of Foucault's concepts to the city will require much "gray meticulous scholarship," in both the archive and the field, if it is to produce more than suggestive parallels.

Boyer's analysis of city planning as a response to the oscillations in the capitalist economy seems unnecessarily monolithic, as though the connections were quite immediate and direct. At one point she states that "The whole development of city planning knowledge and regulation has been to facilitate this process ... of capital accumulation and circulation."23 But while economics is surely the historical anchorage of modern city development and city planning, the reduction of planning to a reflex of capital oversimplifies the city-building process. More subtle interpretations from the Left are available, and they might have played a larger role in refining the arguments in this book.24

Even if city planning were to become a more influential force, a pivotal question remains. As we know from Boyer's reading of Foucault, the imposition of more order on the city is not in itself an improvement. We must know which forms of order belong to the disciplinary apparatus of the modern epoch and which forms of order represent a genuine expansion of individual and community self-determination. A truly progressive analysis must answer Foucault's question: "How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?"25 This task of disentanglement is a difficult one: there is no simple
connection between urban form and freedom. Foucault warned against making facile links between spatial and social phenomena:

I do not think that there is anything that is functionally--by its very nature--absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice. So there may, in fact, always be a certain number of projects whose aim is to modify some constraints, to loosen, or even to break them, but none of these projects can, simply by its nature, assure that people will have liberty automatically, that it will be established by the project itself... 

Men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition.26

There are no city forms that guarantee freedom either, but there still may be cities and districts which provide the settings for serious political and communal life, as well as for the processes of production and consumption. These settings will not appear through the unsolicited beneficence of the market: only enlightened, democratic planning can reverse the atrophy of the public realm and reaffirm the historical complexity of the city.27

In her concluding chapter, "The City of Collective Memory," Boyer offers some fragmentary suggestions for the renewal of physical city planning, based upon the works of Aldo Rossi, Leon Krier, and other New Rationalist architects. Boyer admires these architects' concern with place, historical complexity, and the preservation of the public realm. It is true that these architects have offered some intriguing proposals for the reconstruction of the city; but in the context of today's urban development process, these formalist proposals are not a fitting remedy for the weaknesses of American city planning that Boyer has labored so arduously to describe. Instead of leaning on these European urban theorists, Boyer might have written a concluding chapter that emerged directly from her own analysis of planning history, pulling together the crucial themes of her narrative and setting forth some realistic alternatives for the city planning profession, given its embroilment in the economic and social currents of the world capitalist system.

In spite of these weaknesses, Dreaming the Rational City effectively portrays the intellectual path that has led to many of the current dilemmas in American city planning. Boyer ventures into some uncharted terrain, and the book bears the flaws of a pioneering effort, but it remains a most important addition to the literature on planning history and theory, a book that deserves a wide audience. It is a complex book, compacted with material, written, at times, in an opaque style. It applies concepts drawn from European philosophers whose writings are not models of lucidity. Its relentless critical perspective will seem exaggerated to many who credit planning with more worthwhile achievements than this book acknowledges. But Christine Boyer has sifted
through a century's worth of planning discourse in search of the significance of this cultural practice we call planning, and *Dreaming the Rational City* contains a sustained argument that American city planning has remained tangled in webs of power to a far greater extent than its public documents admit. We can only begin to dismantle those webs of power if we are aware of their existence. While it is important that planners develop the technical skills necessary to evaluate urban conditions and guide urban change, planners must also understand the social totality within which they work. It is all too easy to become lost in the details of daily practice, forgetting Max Horkheimer's crucial insight that:

> Rationalism in details can readily go with a general irrationalism. Actions of individuals, correctly regarded as reasonable and useful in daily life, may spell waste and even destruction for society. That is why in periods like ours, we must remember that the best will to create something useful may result in its opposite, simply because it is blind to what lies beyond the limits of its scientific specialty or profession, because it focuses on what is nearest at hand and misconstrues its true nature, for the latter can be revealed only in the larger context.  

It is precisely in books such as *Dreaming the Rational City* that this larger context may be found.
NOTES


Foucault's earlier writings on the "archaeology" of knowledge focused on discourses rather than social practices, in search of the rules governing the development and transformation of "serious speech acts" in the human sciences. By this, Foucault was referring to theoretical statements that claimed to be truthful propositions, worthy of being incorporated into a cumulative store of expert knowledge. Boyer echoes this quasi-structuralist approach when she says that *Dreaming the Rational City* is an analysis of discourses, and "does not contain a functional, causal analysis of the evolutionary history of city planning" (Introduction). However, Foucault eventually realized that the archaeological method, by itself, contained many internal contradictions; in his later writings he combined archaeology, the analysis of discourses, with genealogy, the study of social practices. For a discussion of this, see Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.


The term "panopticism" derives from Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) design for a prison, known as the Panopticon (1787). In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault describes the Panopticon as a paradigmatic disciplinary apparatus, "power reduced to its ideal form . . . a figure of political technology" that is "polyvalent in its applications . . . It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centers and channels of power . . . Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used" (p. 205).


List based upon Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City*, pp. 70-72 and elsewhere throughout the text.


Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City*, p. 82.

"Power-knowledge" (Pouvoir-savoir) is a hybrid term with a specific meaning in Foucault's writings. In their book on Foucault, Charles C. Lemert and Garth Gillan define its consequences as follows:

Power-knowledge assumes that power is not from the top down, from a dominant class upon a dominated class: power is immanent, diffused throughout society, on all levels. Second, knowledge (savoir) is not ideal and abstract, but material and concrete; it cannot be divorced from the workings of power throughout society, again at all levels. Third, as a consequence of the second, science cannot be arbitrarily divorced from ideology because science, as a form of knowledge (connaissance), is embedded in power relations (pouvoir-savior).


Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 221.


Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City*, p. 129.


