

Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Urbanism Without Effort: Reconnecting with First Principles of the City

By Charles R. Wolfe

Urbanism Without Effort: Reconnecting with First Principles of the City is 134 pages, not including notes, preface and index. It has four chapters plus an introduction and a closing chapter. It was published in 2019, following an earlier edition that was offered only as an e-book.

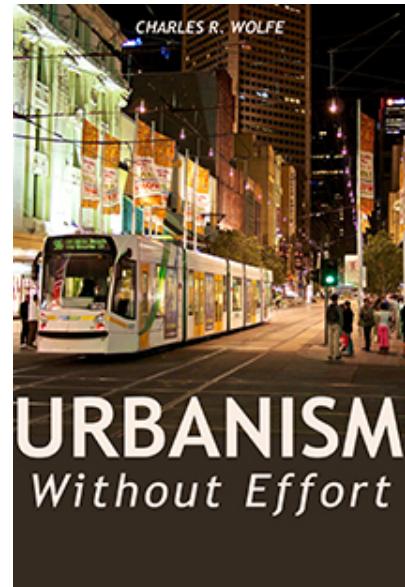
Charles R. Wolfe is an attorney, land-use consultant and college lecturer. He lives in Seattle and London.

This book has a caution for urbanists: Don't get carried away by urban design concepts and public policies. If you do, Wolfe warns, you won't get the cities you want. That's because, while mixed uses, transit-oriented developments, parking reforms and bike lanes may be helpful and even necessary, they aren't sufficient to make your city come to life.

What's missing? Basically, he argues, the unplanned city of spontaneous meetings, lively corners, unique combinations of retail and housing, street trees, benches and sidewalk cafes. You cannot create these things with a master plan, but you can recognize these places by paying attention. And once they are seen, you can nurture them.

"Understanding what lies beneath an enticing, well-scaled urban setting—a comfortable sidewalk cafe, children playing safely in an alleyway—can inform policy and planning efforts that more fully resonate with the particular *culture and context* of a place," Wolfe writes. "Without such a preface of integrity, we are left with merely catchy ideas plucked from a catalog of trendy, oversubscribed options."

If this sounds familiar, it echoes what Jane Jacobs wrote in 1961 in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, when she said that you cannot understand cities using deductive reasoning. (That is, by starting with a set of rules or principles that you impose on places.) Cities are too complex for such things. You can only understand urban places, Jacobs said, through observation and inductive



reasoning. Once you see something that works, then you can try to figure out why it works—and how it can be encouraged.

So how can you see success? Wolfe offers a way: with something he calls an “urban diary.” Walk around your city, see where people are congregating happily and safely and take photos of the people and the places. Then ask why these places work and others do not.

Much of this book is Wolfe’s own urban diary, with street scenes from North America and Europe. There are photos of Paris’ Luxembourg Garden and sidewalk cafes, the *passeigs* of Barcelona (walkable boulevards), small retail courtyards near Covent Garden in London, the pedestrian nightlife of Florence, Italy and an alleyway in Seattle where neighbors watch movies projected on the walls.

What you will notice as you study these photos, Wolfe says, is that the best urban places encourage people-watching as a pastime. Often there’s an interesting mixture of the built and natural environments, such as along waterfronts or at the edges of parks. Some lively places are where transportation connects with land use. Buses and streetcars bring people into the area, and restaurants and benches give them a reason to linger.

There’s more: Good urban places usually have older buildings that have been adapted for new uses. There is almost always a variety of land uses, from retail and work to residential. There’s density and street life. There may be a number of transit modes, from walking and cycling to cars and transit. There are “porous borders” between public and private spaces, so you don’t find blank walls. Rather, you see windows, gates and doors. There may be landmarks, interesting architecture and colorful plazas.

Wolfe has a particular affection for corners, which he calls “one of the central places of urban life.” That’s for two reasons: They are crossroads, which increases the activity around these intersections, and they have a three-dimensional quality that makes them “visible and accessible.” Little wonder, then, that stores want to be on corner lots.

Are there such places in Urban Atlanta? Yes, and some are obvious, like the Beltline and Little Five Points in Atlanta or the square in downtown Decatur. What we lack is a place for documenting these examples of “naturally occurring urbanism” and discussing why they work so well.

But even if we did, Wolfe would urge us to be cautious. Jumping to the conclusion that we know why some places work and others don’t, can lead us to do things that could destroy the thing we value. How? Because, he writes, “we sometimes regulate away the urban vitality of our cities by attempting complex, prescriptive fixes—aimed at modeling or reclaiming what used to evolve naturally—and ironically squelch first principles of human shelter and transportation.” So, observe and learn, but go easy on the prescriptions.

Also, he counsels, know that what works in one place may not work in another. Many visitors have been enchanted by the San Antonio River Walk. But when they try to build something similar back home, they are often disappointed. That’s because it isn’t just the river or the walk, but the boats, the bridges, the architecture, the trees, the sidewalk umbrellas and the crowds that make the San Antonio River Walk so special.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we’ll discuss Charles R. Wolfe’s book about “naturally occurring urbanism” and how we can better appreciate and protect it.

Our meeting will be **Feb. 4, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at 1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

There's more information about this discussion at the [Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website](#).

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are “big ideas” in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

How to get your copy of *Urbanism Without Effort*:

- You can download an e-book edition from the Amazon, Barnes & Noble or Apple websites.
- You can order a paperback copy from [the publisher, Island Press](#), or from Amazon.
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).