

COMMON GROUND IN A LIQUID
CITY: ESSAYS IN DEFENSE OF AN
URBAN FUTURE by MATT HERN

>> Robert Prey

Vancouver has never had to work especially hard to woo its guests. With its stunning views and mild climate, this mid-sized city has long been the darling of developers, investors, immigrants and tourists. Repeated appearances on 'world's most-livable cities' lists notwithstanding, it was Vancouver's hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympics which has served more than anything to focus international attention on the city. But alongside the spectacle of the Olympic opening ceremonies, creeping onto TV screens around the world were startling images of protesters occupying Vancouver's streets in a massive 'Take Back the City!' rally.

Taking back the city is precisely what *Common Ground in a Liquid City: Essays in Defense of an Urban Future*, attempts to do. Matt Hern, a well-known Vancouver activist, urban studies lecturer and founder of Vancouver's highly successful Car-Free Day penned these essays with the expressed purpose of giving our visions of an urban future "a hard shot in another direction." Hern asks "Why can't we have a funky city without rolling over and showing our soft bellies to the market?" Why are the cities that usually compete with Vancouver for the title of the world's most liveable city—Geneva or Vienna for example—generally staid and dull places? It is questions like these which Hern attempts to unravel as he transports the reader across the world, visiting an unlikely assortment of cities along the way. Don't be fooled by the globetrotting itinerary however—this is a book about Vancouver. Hern uses his travels as a sort of foil to stimulate critical thinking about his hometown. Visiting ancient ruins in Thessaloniki, Greece, Hern ponders the importance of history for a young city like Vancouver. Istanbul provides an excuse to examine density and Montreal highlights the difference between good planning and over planning. In what is probably the most 'academic' of the essays collected in *Common Ground*, Hern visits the tiny village of Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories. This experience leads Hern to question

the role of social capital in a city as diverse and mobile as Vancouver and prompts him to ask “How can we imagine commonality and neighborhood in such a relentlessly liquid world?”

Other essays are somewhat less insightful, such as the one that uses New York to grapple with urban crime. Variations of the same solution—fewer cars, more democracy—are proposed repeatedly throughout the book. However, Hern does provide a very good discussion of government policies and possible solutions including some thoughtful non-market “third tier solutions” to the housing problems that are endemic to Vancouver.

While drawing loosely on the work of urban theorists such as Manuel Castells and Saskia Sassen, this is not an academic text. Hern’s writing is refreshingly clear and lively. This might be off putting for those who prefer a drier analysis. Sassen would never describe Vancouver’s suburbs as “vomiting off in the east.” Hern is at his best when spinning humorous travel anecdotes that reveal fundamental problems facing many cities; such as his account of desperately trying to locate a supermarket on foot in Las Vegas. The book almost feels like a conversation with a smart friend who has just returned from an around the world backpacking trip around the world. That said, Hern balances his critiques and anecdotes with a generous selection of extended quotations from the over two dozen experts, activists and academics he interviewed for the book.

On the whole, it is difficult to argue with Hern’s diagnosis of the trials and tribulations that a rising city like Vancouver will have to deal with. “The market puts us in a Faustian bargain” writes Hern, so that “almost any attempt to beautify, improve, develop, or embolden a community inevitably means it will price its most vulnerable/valuable citizens out and undermine all that good work.” Hern, however is contagiously optimistic throughout. Rather than provide a fixed set of answers, his intent is to jolt

citizens into asking “Why not?” reminding us that “Cities can do something other than smooth the way for capital and/or clean up its messes.” For anyone interested in our collective urban future, *Common Ground in a Liquid City* is an insightful look at what is at stake if we don’t get it right.