

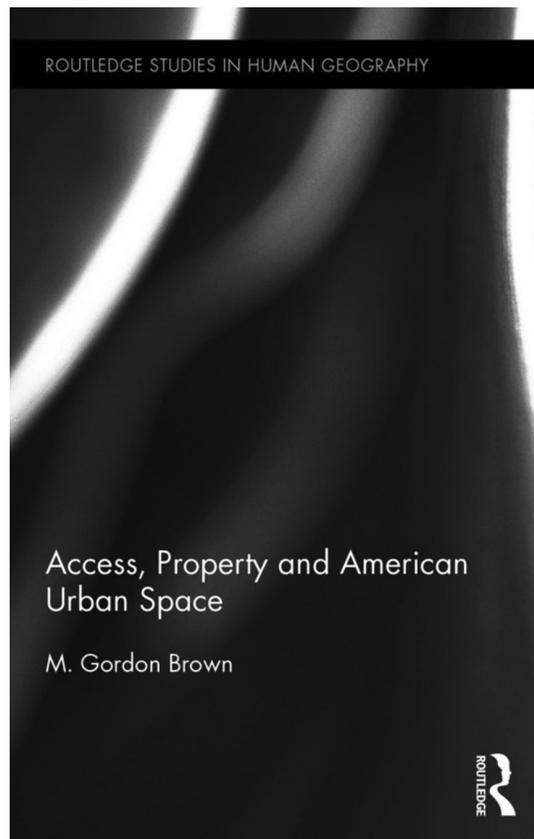
## Living on the Grid

City planning and urban architecture are two fields of study where real estate valuers should at least be conversant, although not necessarily expert. Embedded in both the literal and figurative structure of cities, one can find a messy confluence of economics, politics, history, design, and sociology. The amalgamation of these elements creates the urban form.

In *Access, Property and American Urban Space*, M. Gordon Brown laments the economic decline of our US cities. Nothing new there. Jane Jacobs first sounded the alarm almost sixty years ago.<sup>1</sup> The New Urbanism movement of the past quarter century addressed some concerns with initiatives such as bringing back front porches, banning garages to alleys, and even introducing narrow streets to shopping malls to create “lifestyle centers.” All these efforts celebrate the pedestrian.

Brown’s contribution is his unique insight that reminds us why the once ubiquitous street grid still makes sense. He views urban dysfunction through the prism of spatial form and access. In other words—how we get to places matters.

For an appraiser, Brown’s book offers practical insights as well as larger historical and critical perspectives. In *Access, Property and American Urban Space*, Brown addresses much more than planning and development per se, as he also probes why many significant real estate projects have not worked well. His criticisms have been described by real estate strategist Stephen Roulac as multiperspective, if not multidisciplinary. Brown supports his analysis with numbers and graphics showing how a quantitative analysis might improve spatial relationships for sight lines, traffic patterns, and plot dimensions. Valuers are always being charged to sup-



### ***Access, Property and American Urban Space* by M. Gordon Brown**

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Geography, New York, 2016, 260 pages;  
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port adjustments. Brown’s perspective goes well beyond a paired sale.

For real estate practitioners who are seldom involved at the front end of the projects they

1. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 1961).

must rent, sell, or value, *Access, Property and American Urban Space* can serve as an insightful diagnostic to explain why something did not work, is vacant, or is prematurely obsolete. Brown lays out why poor location alone is not enough of an excuse. Access is not the same as accessibility. Patterns of disconnection plagued many suburban office and retail projects that now languish in decline.

Brown, an eclectic academic and litigation consultant, started with a degree in communication. He worked as an urban planner, then earned a Wharton MBA, left management consulting in New York to get a master's degree in architecture in London, and capped it all off with a doctorate from the United Kingdom. The Chicago-based polymath laments the emergence of cities where he finds "community without propinquity." Borrowing the term from the field of social psychology, Brown uses propinquity as a synonym for friendship.

Although Brown references over 5,000 years of known human settlements, he claims it is in the United States where cities experienced a regime shift following WWII. In Brown's analysis, the dense urban fabric of many older cities, too often characterized as blight, were bulldozed for towers in the park. Meanwhile their suburbs viewed street grids as obsolete or simply boring. Consequently, suburban streets morphed into "curvilinear dendriform" patterns. Dendriform, of course, references the tree and branch-like configuration of so many suburban subdivision streets.

Brown also looks at how "general purpose technologies" serve many diverse needs. He mentions railroads, the internet, and the internal combustion engine as examples of general purpose technologies. He believes that urban street systems also should qualify as such. He argues, however, that the concept of surface transportation in the United States is sadly limited and narrow. For instance, too many US street systems have been appropriated for functionally specific develop-

ments, such as shopping or tourism. The modern street system fails the test of serving more general needs. Consequently, the transportation systems of post-WWII America ignore communication and community.

Moreover, spatial expanse, according to Brown, is part of the American myth. Planners negate the problems of distance by assuming it away in the cloud of digital technology. Conventional wisdom calls for fusing the pastoral with technology to avoid the need for cities. Brown disagrees. He asserts that for better connectivity and, yes, access, maybe streets themselves can be a sort of communication technology.

*Access, Property and American Urban Space* tends to idealize the rectilinear city grid as a general-purpose technology like our digital networked web. However, limiting access points—as freeways and gated communities do—serves only to disconnect people from one another and disrupt the very communities they seek to bind. In praising the rationality of the grid, Brown evokes both psychology and sociology to explain why their isomorphic essence is both appealing and effective for a community to thrive. Brown takes mid-century utopians to task (chiefly Frank Lloyd Wright), for enshrining the concept of every person and their park, which he believes is as elitist as it is unsustainable.

Instead, Brown mines the writings of America's Founding Fathers and finds they understood how property ownership and democracy were integral. Whereas the small blocks and many corners of city grids were dismissed by the elites of city planning as existing purely to enrich land speculators, Brown cites the deliberations for the platting of upper Manhattan (what we know as Midtown). There, Gouverneur Morris and others preferred rectangular streets to circles, ovals, and stars because the latter group adversely affected the convenience and utility of *access*. They celebrated speculation. Small parcels, small blocks, lots of connections. The more, the merrier! Thus,

convenience of access in urban forms becomes the link between economic and social vitality.

Brown's short treatise is written as a critique, not a textbook. The exhaustive bibliography suggests the library that has informed Brown's ironic perspective, otherwise earned from a career of peripatetic globetrotting. Imagine each chapter as a lecture, rich in references and assuming a sophisticated audience. Reading this on a Kindle or with a smartphone handy is recommended. Overall, I found *Access, Property and American*

*Urban Space* to be most successful as a gateway book. It provokes contrary perspectives and serves as an invaluable reference to the very resources that have informed the eminent M. Gordon Brown for so many years.

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**About the Reviewer**

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