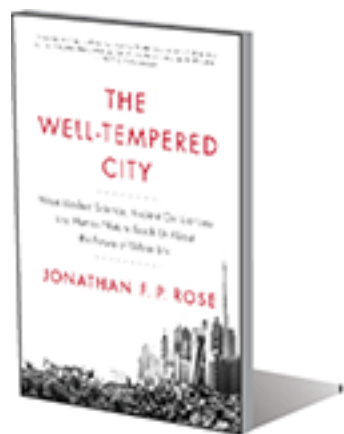


Striking the right chord

Scott D. Campbell *The Well-Tempered City* What Modern Science, Ancient Civilizations, and Human Nature Teach Us About the Future of Urban Life
Jonathan F. P. Rose Harper Wave, 2016, 478 pp. [±](#) Author Affiliations
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Previously an industrial eyesore, a 3.6-mile swath of the Cheonggyecheon River became a park in 2005.

"PHOTO: DBIMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO"

Unsustainable, inefficient, often violent, and marked by stark inequalities of wealth and opportunity, cities are increasingly vulnerable to social and economic crises, natural disasters, climate change, and other challenges of the coming era. Yet in *The Well-Tempered City*, Jonathan Rose remains

passionately optimistic about our potential to rebuild innovative, resilient, integrated urban communities and restore balance and harmony.

Rose writes neither as a scholar nor as an architect but rather as a keen urban observer and enlightened practitioner who fluidly crosses disciplinary boundaries: green building design and infrastructure, water ecology, community development, and public education, with detours into urban history, cognitive science, and the spirituality of happiness and community. He is a voracious collector of best practices and has a good ear for stories (a master synthesizer more than original theorist). The book is curiously both wide sweeping but also personal, reflecting the cumulative experiences, wisdom, and beliefs that Rose has amassed over his long career.

Rose organizes the book chapters around five qualities he ascribes to the “well-tempered” city: coherence, circularity, resilience, community, and compassion. These themes provide a broad structure, although the author strives to include so many ideas and case studies that the effect is both impressively wide-reaching and hurriedly under-documented, with most examples serving as brief illustrations rather than fully developed evidence. (I would have welcomed more primary sources with scholarly citations.)

Readers with a nascent curiosity about urban history will enjoy the breezy opening chapters on urbanization, diverse models of city building, and contemporary sprawl. Environmentally minded readers will engage with the discussion of water, energy, and material flows in cities (and then should be encouraged to read more rigorous scholarly texts on urban metabolism, industrial ecology, and urban political ecology).

The strongest chapters are those in which Rose has the most direct and rich professional and community expertise: on green buildings and green urbanism (chapter 8) and also on natural infrastructure (chapter 7). Here, he narrates a grand tour of innovative, sustainable, often socially just projects. These stories provide encouragement that today's designers and planners are doing remarkable, inventive, and inspiring work.

Toward the end of the book, Rose more broadly explores happiness, spirituality, altruism, and compassion in the city. These are rather speculative but also the most thought-provoking chapters, in part because most scholarly writing on cities tends to steer clear of these so-called “soft” issues, safely adhering to cool analysis and structural critique.

There is a risk in having a scholar review such a book. We are professionally prone to find flaws in logic and documentation and skeptical of broad-sweeping generalizations and optimism. And we are wary of metaphors, knowing both their rhetorical-cognitive power but also their limitations.

At the core of this book is the metaphor of the well-tempered city, which resonates with our era's focus on sustainability, resilience, and restoring human-nature balance. It is an appealing metaphor, and Rose strives to also link personal attributes (mindfulness, compassion, harmony, and altruism) to cities. Can one make that leap of scale and scope?

Urbanists have learned that most metaphors fall short and can misguide urban planning; cities are not (just) gardens, or machines, or artworks, or marketplaces, or innovation laboratories, or zones of conflict resolution, or ecosystems. Cities are none of these, or rather, they are all of these (and more) in an irreducible, ever-changing assemblage. Urban complexity leads to a city's dynamic culture and economy but also to a persistent turmoil of uneven development, instability, and disharmony that can be managed and improved through design but never fully “resolved.”

We can therefore imagine the well-tempered city, but building and maintaining it rarely can be realized. Alas, a city cannot be tuned like a pianoforte. Nevertheless, striving toward an aspirational but asymptotic goal might still be a useful target for an era that is often lacking a higher vision for its cities.

The Viennese social satirist Karl Kraus declared, “I demand from a city where I should live: asphalt, street cleaning, a front door key, heat, and piped hot

water. Coziness I provide myself" (1). This is an enduring tension in the urban planning field: Should our municipalities just provide the basic infrastructural necessities, or must they also provide meaning and a comfortable (or even a spiritual) sense of place? Rose engagingly argues that the two are connected—that the health of the city's economic, social, and ecological networks is linked to promoting compassion, collective altruism, and a larger sense of purpose.