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## Review of *Dispersed City of the Plains*, by Harris Stone, with Joan Stone and J. William Carswell.

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*Dispersed City of the Plains.* By Harris Stone, with Joan Stone and J. William Carswell. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999. Illustrations. xiv + 172 pp. \$48.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

It is both refreshing and informative to read a book that visually presents the reader with an atmosphere of engagement, interaction, malleability, and imprecision. Such was my mood while reading the hand-scribed text and viewing the wonderful sketches illustrating the authors' beliefs and values. On the one hand I often felt I was reading the private journal of a very sensitive and passionate individual, and on the other, I felt the medium was a graphic demonstration against the Cartesian precision of the computer. I felt invited, throughout the book, to write in the margins and engage in dialogue with the authors.

The book succeeds on several intellectual levels: it presents valuable historical references for the development of towns and cities on the Great Plains; it exposes the materiality and construction, and painful choices, in the restoration and rehabilitation of historic structures; and it lends a frame of values and iconographic references to the overlooked and little appreciated dispersed places and architecture of the middle territory of the United States.

My thoughts, however, wandered almost immediately to a passage from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* where he described a "City of Desire":

In every age someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructed his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had been until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe. . . .

On the map of my empire, O Great Kahn, there must be room both for the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes.

Unlike the balanced position of Calvino's Marco Polo, the authors here wish us to "eschew the centralizing model of the European and early American city" and stop rejecting "the paradigmatic qualities of fragmentation."

If we genuinely wish to identify a new set of organizing principles for American cities, recognizing, as the authors assert, "Enough time has elapsed," we must give much more credence to the interdependencies and symbiotic interactions among the domains of the environment, our public policies, global and local economic forces, available and sustainable technologies, and the local and regional socioeconomic values. Built form, as conditioned only by economic and technical, or aesthetic, paradigms will not produce sustainable communities.

Architecture, like art, is open to interpretation. Harris Stone and his associates have given us an invaluable insight into a special regional context of place and their view of the forces that have made it the way it is. However, we have to, in the words of their quilter, "do the best we can . . . with the material we're given" to make the human habitat both more liveable and sustainable.

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