

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2009

Review of *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America*. By Carl Abbott

Timothy Mahoney

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, tmahoney1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Mahoney, Timothy, "Review of *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America*. By Carl Abbott" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1254.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1254>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America. By Carl Abbott. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. x + 347 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$34.95.

This impressive survey of western urban history demonstrates *How Cities Won the West*. Its original conceptualization and persuasive argument are supported by an impressive amount of evidence. It should be considered as the “last stand” among urban historians who still feel the need to argue for the central role of urbanization in the development of the West.

Carl Abbott demonstrates that in the nineteenth century several kinds of towns and cities—raw outposts, gateways, industrial towns, irrigation towns (seeking to be the center of an “Inland Empire”), and tourist centers—competed for central roles that they believed would tip the balance of the national system to the West. He explains how this booster dream gradually became reality as first the railroads and then shifting “waves” of global capitalism enabled western cities to develop by extending urban networks across vast interior hinterlands where they “claimed natural landscapes” for their own economic, resource, and cultural uses.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, western cities as centers of processing and extraction industries were peripheral to the industrial core in the East. They were content to imitate eastern cities, even as they acquired distinctive western traits such as small downtowns, large skid row and vice districts, a “hodge podge” of neighborhoods, and broad bungalow belts. The dramatic shift in federal spending to the West during World War II that brought population, defense contractors,

military activity, and high tech industries to western cities served as a prelude to their becoming centers of the electronics, communications, and aerodynamics industries. Several small cities were transformed into metropolises with vibrant downtowns surrounded by “radically decentralized” rings of “suburbs of knowledge” where a new “creative class” lived. They “forg[ed] a new ‘Middle America,’” inventing new forms of housing, consumer behavior, entertainment culture, lifestyles, literature, politics, and later environmentalism.

Today, though “multi-powered centers” have sprawled into “conurbations” across the landscape in some regions, western cities—restrained by topography and a need for water—have higher population and land use density than eastern cities. Even so, the long arm of the metropolitan influence has transformed whole districts of the West into “weekendlands,” a “downhill archipelago,” and “fly in communities.” In these “enclaves of metropolitanism,” urban residents built second houses, crowded resorts, and ignored locals, who in pursuit of tourist dollars had no choice but to accept the “devil’s bargain” of tourism—more income in return for a higher standard of living that marginalized locals and eroded the “elemental” West.

Throughout this sweeping authoritative argument are numerous wonderful details, lucid explanations, and colorful references to novels about western cities—the Great Plains included.

TIMOTHY MAHONEY
Plain Humanities Alliance and
Department of History
University of Nebraska–Lincoln