

Lauster, Nathanael.

*The Death and Life of the Single-Family House: Lessons from Vancouver on Building a Livable City.*

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The state of Canada's urban system has come under increasing scrutiny as the effects of overheating real estate markets in Vancouver and Toronto spill over into other Canadian cities, all in the midst of record levels of household consumer debt, an intransigent homelessness problem, increasing reliance on the automobile and growing concerns regarding climate change. One character in this unfolding drama is the single-family house, a ubiquitous feature of the North American urban landscape, but one with special significance in the current conjuncture. In his new and timely book *The Death and Life of the Single-Family House: Lessons from Vancouver on Building a Livable City* University of British Columbia sociologist Nathanael Lauster traces the rise of the single-family house and in the process unpacks how this current conjuncture came about, how urban residents are coping, and what can be learned.

This book will be of interest to readers looking to expand their understanding of city planning, suburbanization, and urban sustainability. Clearly written, thoroughly researched and well documented, the book is well suited to a broad audience including casual readers, undergraduate students and graduate students. The book is organized into an introduction and eight substantive chapters, each presenting a unique analysis. The book also includes a detailed appendix outlining Lauster's data sources and research methods, which on its own is an illuminating resource.

In chapters one and two, Lauster begins by laying out an original argument regarding the rise of the single-family house; namely, that the proliferation of the single-family home, as a cultural symbol, commoditised form and concrete space, can be explained in terms of how the detached house was written into zoning bylaws, building codes, fire codes and other related bylaws. Moreover, Lauster stresses that these regulatory practices are not only important for understanding the spread of the single-family house but that this spatial form can be interpreted as a regulatory-creature in and of itself. As a regulatory creature built by municipal governments seeking to quell urban disorder, the single-family home has created its own habitat—the great housing reserve—largely to the detriment of urban affordability, democracy and sustainability.

In chapters three through six, Lauster uses the city of Vancouver as an empirical site to trace exactly how the house was brought to life as a regulatory creature, how contemporary Vancouver residents experience home amidst the scarcity of the detached house, and what regulatory lessons the Vancouver experience offers other cities. Vancouver has special significance insofar as the city has transformed, since the 1960s, from having the greatest proportion of detached houses to having, with the exception of Montreal, the least proportion. Lauster argues that many urbanists have overlooked this important Vancouver lesson, including the 'acts' that facilitated Vancouver's escape from the stranglehold of the detached house. These 'acts' of building around the house, over the house, and renovating the house are examined in detail, as are the lived experiences of Vancouver residents, many of which make themselves at home without houses.

Among its many strengths is the way in which the book offers a renewed perspective on urbanization in general and suburbanization in particular. *The Death and Life of the Single-Family House* clearly states that regulatory transformations, rather than geography, demography or cultural values, explain the growing prominence of the single-family home as well as, in the case of Vancouver, responses to it. In developing this argument Lauster's recommendations regarding the single-family home are unequivocal: as "an invasive parasite," a "Frankenstein's monster, sewn together and brought to life," the single-family house is best left to die; however, the agency and, by extension, power of this regulatory creature is open to scrutiny. While granting the by-laws and codes agentic

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capacities in shaping the city it is unclear to what extent culture and capital still overlap with and inhabit this mode of existence. To borrow a metaphor used by Lauster to exemplify the invasiveness of the detached house, as instrumental as a warming climate has been to the proliferation of the fungi invigorating the pine beetle population, the book raises more questions than it answers about the 'climatic factors' (i.e. culture, capital) that continue to invigorate the regulatory existence of the detached home.

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