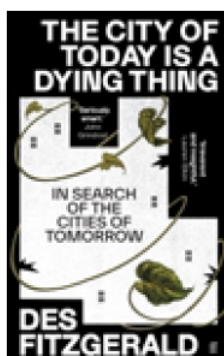


LEFT—
The City
of the Captive
Globe, 1972.
design by Rem
Koolhaas,
watercolor by
Vriesendorp.



BOOK *The City of Today is a Dying Thing*, Des Fitzgerald
Faber and Faber, 2024

James Soane

Any author declaring “I hate Paris” will attract attention. Maybe outrage is the *raison d'être* in our freefall world? Des Fitzgerald is a professor of medical humanities and social sciences, drawn to the big questions around nature and the nature of the city past, present and future. He attends conferences, makes site visits (inexplicably always in the cold) and conducts interviews in his quest to shed light on the wicked problem of urbanism. He's fond of describing situations and places as “weird”; it appears more than 20 times.

This could be a good summary of his thesis, should “weird” be defined as “uncanny, strange or unnatural.” The book is a forager's guide to a series of arguments for and against many of the theories that informed the urban explosion of the last century. However, much of his focus is on why people, designers in particular, are obsessed with planting trees. He is vexed by this, declaring in the introduction, that he is “against green cities.” As a reader, this is a perplexing start.

The work acts as a useful collection of pivot points in the debates around architectural ideas, starting in 1933 with the seminal CIAM conference, where Le Corbusier spoke of breaking with the past and advocating a *tabula rasa* approach. It also jumps back a hundred years to America and Britain, where debates circulated around the moral question about the way in which nature is essentially “good” for people. Fitzgerald suggests that the urban Victorian park is a “technology for soothing people,” introducing a new political dimension. He finds

the Garden City movement particularly sinister, judging Welwyn Garden City as having a “Wicker Man vibe” (a reference to the 1973 folk-horror film), and that Port Sunlight is both “a bit Albert Speer” as well as having “Bilbo Baggins energy.” This kind of light-hearted reaction masks the more serious critique that humankind is no longer in control of nature. Fitzgerald is sympathetic to the notion that urban greening may be a balm, but believes it to be a panacea. Pegging morality to nature find no traction here.

The argument becomes more challenging as we are drawn into the over-rehearsed, redundant dichotomy between classical and modern architecture. King Charles is dragged out, and a visit to the town he envisaged, Poundbury, is dismissed as both Las Vegas and Imperial Russia with a touch of 18th-century vernacular. Yet this is not even a city. He chooses the ill-fated Mound construction in London by Dutch architects MVRDV, intended to bring nature and people into the city post-COVID, as another example of hubris. The conception and execution were a disaster, but it was only ever an installation, so to conclude it demonstrates that transplanting trees into the city is always tokenistic seems problematic. Fortunately, there are far more poignant stories about saving trees in Sheffield and Melbourne, which tell of a deep connection between people and growing organic beings.

In parallel, interwoven observations around the prevailing psychology of greening are presented as soundbites and reportage. The curious construction of the book means we are often presented with the opposite argument to his own, ones that speak to the power of living with nature in the city, and