



## A & E — Growing Pains

**A new book from Penn paints a rosier picture of Philly's green prospects.**



Seems we never make the list. Portland, San Francisco and Seattle get all the love. Philly? Discarded by the greeners as a polluting postindustrial wasteland.

A new book changes that. [\*Growing Greener Cities\*](#) is a collection edited by Penn profs Eugenie Birch and Susan Wachter, and taken together, its essays detail with real-life examples, what cities around the world are doing to make green more than a buzzword. [Disclosure: I'm a student in Penn's city planning department, and will be taking Birch's class this fall.]

We recently interviewed Birch about what Philly's doing right, and why the city should get more attention than it does.

---

### **How would you define a green city?**

“We were looking at the sustainability issues from the point of view of city systems—how you deal with water, open-space systems, the public realm. We were looking at greening from the most experimental and perhaps unaffordable efforts at this point down to affordable green housing.”

---

### **How is Philly doing?**

“It’s a tremendous leader. There’s the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society’s work with community gardens—it’s an international leader. Another area is the work that the Water Department is doing with drainage issues and infrastructure. A lot of really sensational things are going on in Philadelphia. Philly is equal to other cities that have been more highly touted.”

---

### **Why isn’t Philly ever named on lists of green cities?**

“Because people get distracted. Philadelphia isn’t alone. Many cities in this category are distressed industrial cities. But Philadelphia, under the radar, has been doing really remarkable things that are hidden. They should be heralded.”

---

### **What can we learn from cities that do get named at the top of the list?**

“We can learn branding. The parts aren’t yet adding up to the whole, and this is one of the missions for [new city sustainability director] Mark Alan Hughes: not only to promote new initiatives in greening cities, but also to launch an informational campaign that shows other cities what cities like Philadelphia can do.

“Look at the work the Center City District is doing in terms of advocating for greening. If you take a look at one of their recent plans, they show all the assets we have in terms of green areas, but they also show ways we can green and make our streets fit into our system. The Fairmount Park system itself is a huge, huge asset. Places like New York are always blabbing what they’re doing—Philadelphia should just get out there and say, ‘Hey guys, look at us.’”

---

### **Was city planning always about sustainability and greening?**

“It was always that way, but it didn’t always use those words. From day one the public realm—parks, streets, open-space systems—has been an essential focus of city planners as they incorporate these systems, the green infrastructure, into the comprehensive plan.”

---

### **How did the vocabulary change?**

“Over time we tend to put old wine in new bottles. That’s happened very effectively in the green movement. We don’t even have to go back to the early 20th century—you can go back to Earth Day. The public owes it to its constituencies to create a public realm that’s green and sustainable. This public realm should not be disconnected little pieces of greenery, but a whole system that should frame a region.”

*Jeff Barg writes the Angry Grammarian column for PW.*