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Profilers' Picks

Power Failure: Politics, Patronage, and The Economic Future of Buffalo, New York

Authors: Dillaway, Diana

Publisher: Prometheus Books

\$24.00 Cloth (266 p.)

ISBN: 1591024005

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If judged solely on its merits as a research-based account, documenting decades of strategic and tactical errors that led to the decline of a once-great city hunkered down on the shores of Lake Erie, Diana Dillaway's *Power Failure* stands muster among works in the community and economic development genre.

The fact that Dillaway is a native of Buffalo, New York and a member of one of the city's old-line industrial families—a group to which she ascribes more than a small amount of responsibility for the city's decline—makes this a compelling read.

Dillaway, a community and economic development specialist, writes: "I have written Buffalo's story with some restraint. It is not a tell-all book, but I do not shy away from events when they are unflattering if I feel they contribute to a deeper understanding."

Her data, gleaned from interviews with city leaders and stakeholders beginning in 1987, is carefully cross-checked and verified to counter the fact that her conversations were conducted anonymously.

She lays out a tripartite case: "the study of form (the structure of power), function (the process of planning), and outcomes (initiatives)." That structure enables the book to track key causes of the city's decades-long decline from a shining example of American industrial and commercial power (and the host of the 1901 Pan American Exposition) to what it is today.

The power struggle in Buffalo blocked significant economic initiatives that might have helped the city overcome the loss of industry that occurred with breathtaking rapidity in the 70s and 80s. Dillaway recounts repeated blunders that hindered a downtown stadium, convention center, major hotel, rapid transit system, affordable housing and a university campus.

Power Failure leaves the reader to ponder whether the city's leaders' new focus on regionalization will protect Buffalo from further decline. Dillaway closes with a passage that is as much a caring bit of advice from a native daughter as it is a researcher's and author's conclusion: "Change occurs in the world so rapidly today that a city and its region must quickly adapt to new norms. Flexible leadership requires a planning process and partnership that is structurally clear. This, then, is Buffalo's challenge: to identify and implement a common ground of leadership that serves Buffalo and the region well."

The book may serve as a cautionary tale for other cities as well.

-Amy Quinn

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