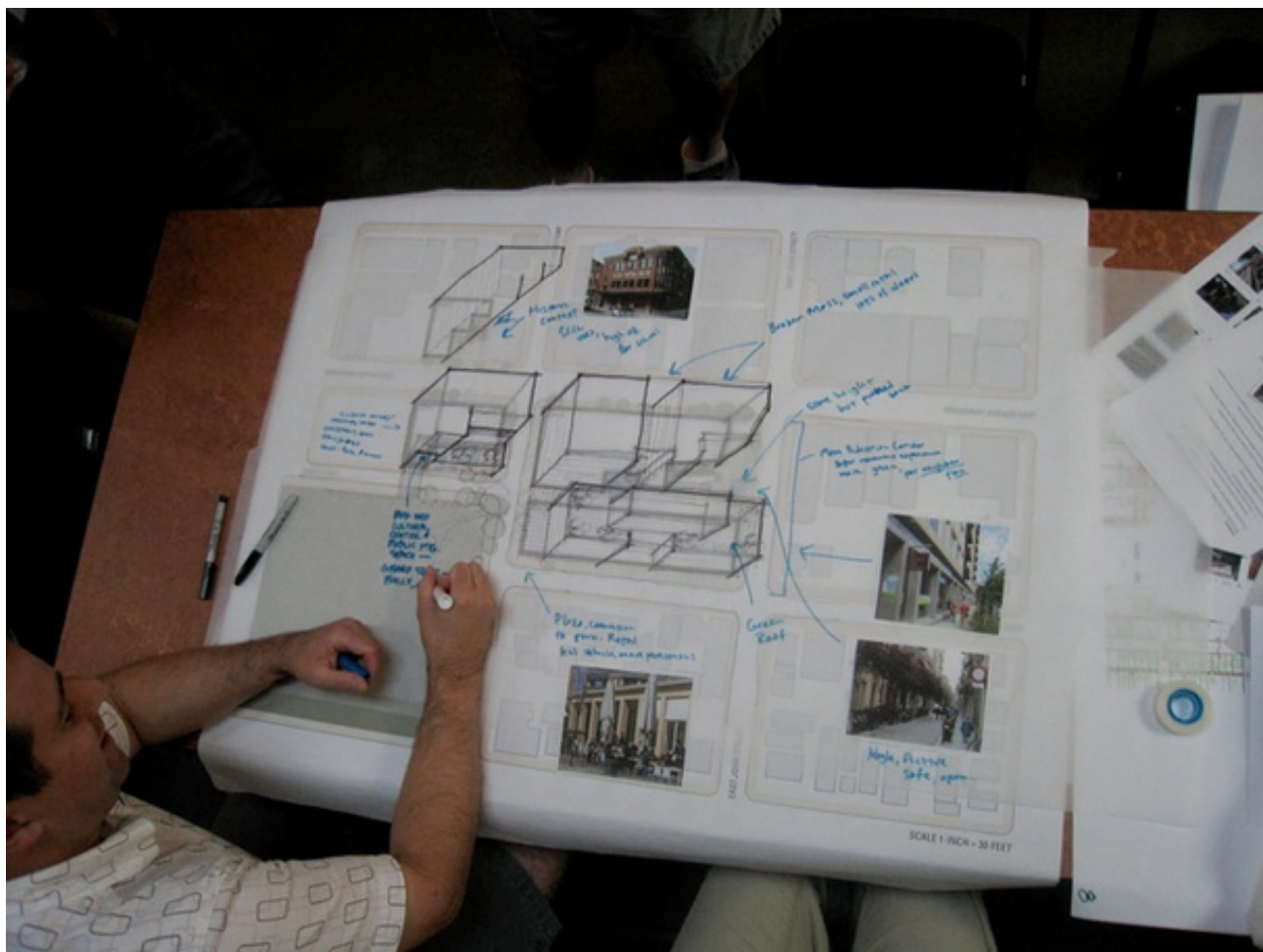


# Yes, There's an 'Urban Planning for Dummies' Book

## Democracy in America

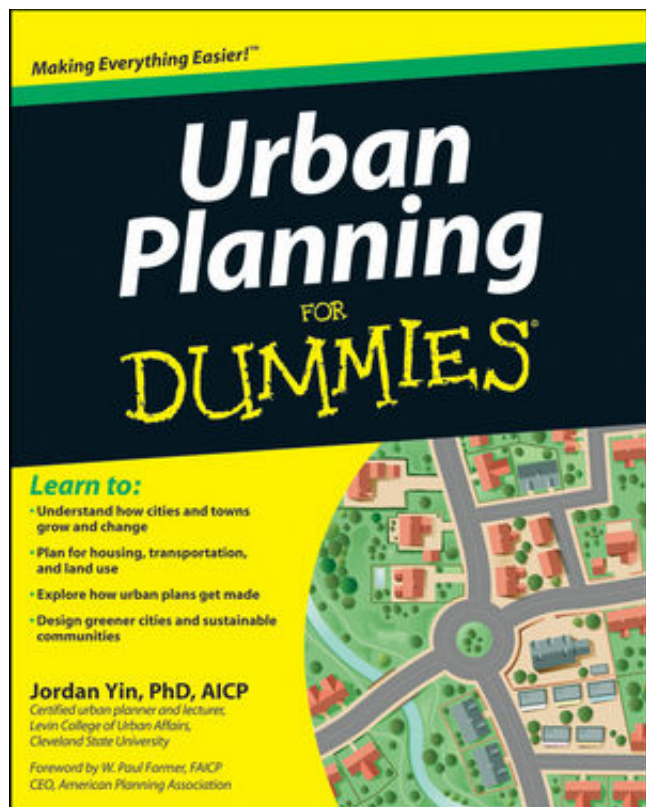


Flickr /jseattle

"*Urban Planning for Dummies* is a lot like *Sex for Dummies*," says Jordan Yin. "We're already doing it, let's just do it better."

Yin, an urban planning professor at Cleveland State University, is the author of, yes, *Urban Planning for Dummies* – a new and slightly curious addition to the *For Dummies* series of instructional books.

It's a pretty wonky subject to see in the straightforward and simplified style of this series, and raises the instantaneous question many of these books raise: who would actually want to read this? But Yin argues there's a huge audience of people that are already involved in planning in their cities. An easy-to-digest breakdown of planning, he says, is exactly what's needed to get more regular citizens involved in and educated about the process – even if they're just a bunch of dummies.



**This book is clearly not for professional urban planners. But aside from urban planners, who would want to know this stuff?**

At a very practical, pragmatic level in terms of how the machinery of urban planning really works, it depends on elected officials who do not come in as professional trained planners, it depends on volunteers who serve on planning commissions, whether they're elected or appointed, it depends on all the people who are volunteers for non profit organizations, it depends on folks who show up to be part of planning meetings to participate in the process. My argument is that this is a pretty huge audience. All these hundreds of thou-

sands of people across the country are already doing this. So here's something that they can pick up, and also those folks that are going to move into the pipeline – the dentist in Madison, Wisconsin, who gets asked to be on his local planning board because he's an upstanding citizen. If the average person doesn't get involved, it doesn't work well.

### **Is this also a guidebook for empowering NIMBYs?**

In a good way, I hope. The book is there to bring some perspective to however it is someone wants to get involved and be part of the process. And I think that if people have concerns, they should be able to bring those forward. The gears work by having a diversity of opinions. And if it's the case where people really feel strongly against something, I hope I'm providing a way for everyone to get in the conversation in a constructive way. Because we all know that there were plenty of things that were not good ideas but that got made better both by people who supported them but also by people who provided some constructive criticism.

**So if you're just a regular citizen, a non-planner or official, and you've got an idea about how to make your city better, could you buy this book and make it happen?**

That's the intent. I think one of the goals here was to demystify how cities work. And that can be both interesting and overwhelming to people. Usually people are interest-

ed in one part of it. Why did that bus route get cancelled, or why are there all these vacant houses in my neighborhood or how come this factory is either closing or opening, and how that's related to their local strategic or comprehensive plan. But what most times gets lost there is how communities go about doing this. Making a plan really isn't that difficult. It's just a set of steps that we go through to figure out what are we going to do next. Unpacking how it is that these decisions about the future get made was something I really tried to present in a general way to give people a chance to be empowered. Fundamentally, planning is very simple. And some places made it maybe a little too complicated, though arguably for good reasons. But if we all planned our dinners the way we planned our cities, we'd starve.

**Some of these *For Dummies* books can actually be pretty useful: *Making Candles and Soaps for Dummies* or *Ham Radio for Dummies* stand out as offering some practical knowledge. Others, though, are not exactly revolutionizing how people can function in the world: *Cosmetic Surgery for Dummies* or *Food Styling and Photography for Dummies*, for example. Where does *Urban Planning for Dummies* fall on that spectrum?**

I think they know the market for their books better than I do. I think it falls between a niche and a mass market. There's this growing awareness about environmental issues, about quality of life, about economic development that does get people up off the couch and into public hearings. It gets them interested or perhaps even concerned about where their community is heading. And then I think that there's this mass market side to it, which is that we mostly live in cities and towns and metropolitan areas. It's something that a great number of people experience every day.

**But do we really want a bunch of dummies planning our cities?**

Yes! Absolutely. And who do you think is doing it already anyways? That's the point. If the people who are already involved in planning did things just a little bit better and had a little bit more of an opportunity to make those dialogs work and more people came to the table, I think that provides the opportunity to do things with cities, especially the really hard things, like saving energy and putting things closer together and doing transit oriented development. Big issues change a lot of peoples' lives, and that makes them hard to do. A lot of professional planners, I think, are very gunshy because if you propose big things you have to deal with a lot of people. There are many opportunities to get a good combination of big picture and little picture issues out there. Having more dummies planning cities is, in fact, what we want because

that's who lives there and that's who needs to be on board if we're going to make the really big changes that we need to make.

*Photo credit: Flickr/jseattle*



Nate Berg is staff writer at The Atlantic Cities. He lives in Los Angeles. [All posts »](#)

[Don't miss the latest from Cities – subscribe to our daily email](#)