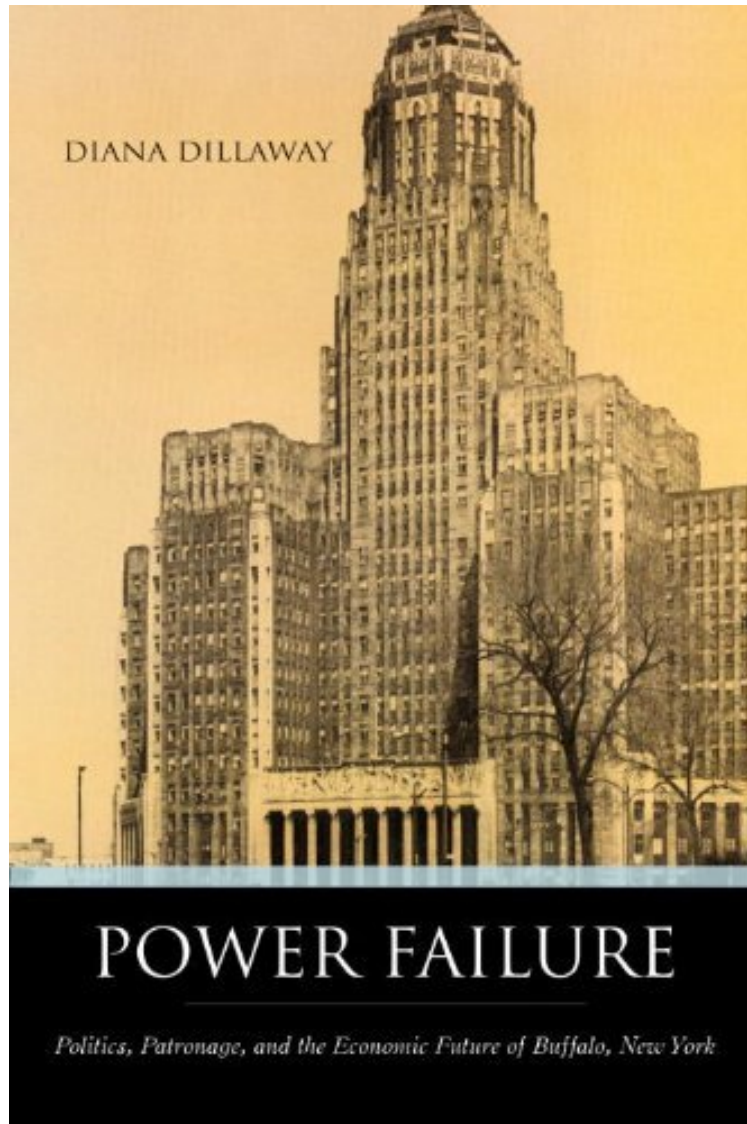


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Power Failure: Politics, Patronage, And the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York

Diana Dillaway

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Diana Dillaway : Power Failure: Politics, Patronage, And the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Power Failure: Politics, Patronage, And the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. A cautionary tale for cities facing challengesBy Steven PetersonThis is another book on the lessons to be learned from the decline of Buffalo, NY over the last half of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century. As one who cares a lot about this old city, I can only express my hope that the future

is better than the recent past. The author of this book, Diana Dillaway, is a child of Buffalo's elite. This fact allowed her access to many movers and shakers, to interview them about Buffalo's decline and how it has addressed the many challenges facing it. This provides interesting insight. On the other hand, as the price for those interviews, she does not attribute comments to individuals and leaves a lot of actors in the drama nameless. This undercuts the power of her argument and lets some people off the hook, remaining unaccountable for the results of their actions (or, in many cases, nonactions). This book is what social scientists call a "case study," an in depth analysis of one example. Dillaway lays out her purpose at the outset (page 13): "This case study tells the story of the leadership failure that left Buffalo in the difficult situation it is in today." She notes how three key elements intersected to produce the challenges Buffalo is currently facing: (a) power and its use (and misuse), (2) planning, (3) initiatives undertaken. Five factors interacted to produce the decline: transportation issues (the St. Lawrence Seaway allowed shipping to bypass Buffalo altogether); the steel industry (its stunningly rapid decline and disappearance from the Niagara Frontier, with the subsequent loss of thousands upon thousands of jobs), absentee management (large corporations moved headquarters elsewhere or were acquired by outside owners), militant labor (labor-management relations were often poisonous in the area), politics (a reluctance for the power centers to work together to address the challenges). There are so many examples of how things went wrong. Let's take a look at just a couple. The State University of New York at Buffalo was set to develop a new campus, which would include economic development spillovers. One location was downtown Buffalo. However, the movers and shakers resisted, perhaps because they did not want rabble rousing and minority students downtown. Whatever the rationale, they lost a major engine of development to the suburbs in a stunningly stupid defense of an indefensible status quo. Another example was light rail transit. After much back and forth, all that remained was a line from the Main Street campus of the University to downtown. A railway to nowhere, in a sense. Instead of being an engine of economic development, it did little to advance downtown and neighborhood interests. Old style political leaders, following the politics of patronage and ethnic favoritism, helped the city's decline. Machine politics in late 20th century America was not the road to a healthy urban economy. There are some errors in the volume (one candidate for mayor is called Les Fazio when it was actually Les Foschio). All in all, though, a cautionary tale of the need for development of collaborative, progressive coalitions to recognize the time for change and the ability to harness resources to create positive change. This did not happen in Buffalo in the latter half of the 20th century--and this proud old city has paid a heavy price. Frankly, names ought to be named, to shame those leaders who failed this city so miserably.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Missed opportunities

By WDX2BBSometimes it's nice to have an outside, objective viewpoint of your own situation. Such is the case with "Power Failure," which is subtitled "Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York." Residents of the area (that would be me) who read this will come away with their beliefs about the city's history and mistakes more than confirmed. Non-residents who read this will be puzzled about what the heck we've been doing up here for all these years in terms of economic development. Author Diana Dillaway takes a look at Buffalo as something of an academic case study. She has plenty of credentials, having worked in urban and community development for more than 25 years. Dillaway also spent part of his life in the Buffalo area, and is still fond of the place. She did a series of anonymous interviews about the area about 20 years ago, then went back years later and did some more research. The book is quite current by its end. About 100 years ago, Buffalo was the Silicon Valley of its time. It was one of the 10 biggest cities in the country, a hub for manufacturing and shipping. The cheap power provided by Niagara Falls put it on the cutting edge of development. It's been argued, half in jest, that Buffalo hasn't been the same since McKinley was shot at the Pan-American Exhibition in 1901. Still, Buffalo was a relatively big city in the early 1950's. Then events out of the city's control started to spin. The St. Lawrence Seaway allowed ships to go past Buffalo and the Erie Canal, and head straight to the Atlantic Ocean. Then the local steel industry faltered, as portions closed during the 1970's and 1980's, taking manufacturing jobs with it. Clearly, Buffalo had to reinvent itself. Just as clearly, as Dillaway painstakingly points out, Buffalo never did. She jumps all over the three big opportunities that presented themselves in the Sixties and Seventies. The biggest was the new state university campus, as New York took over the University of Buffalo. It was built in Amherst, in a relative island away from anything, instead of downtown, which could have used the population and energy. Dillaway says community leaders didn't really want the new campus near their precious downtown, an action which comes across as incredibly short-sighted now. Then there's the rapid transit system, which was first planned when Buffalo was a bigger city. The idea was to link the new UB campus to downtown and a pedestrian mall. Well, the rail line was built ... halfway to the Amherst campus, stopping on the city border, and the enclosure for the downtown portion was never built. Doing something halfway never works. Finally, there was the football stadium, constructed in suburban Orchard Park where its spin-off effects couldn't reach downtown. (Dillaway doesn't mention that the Buffalo Bills' owner Ralph Wilson preferred a suburban site, but it was still a missed opportunity.) Dillaway also reviews some of the political infighting and the discussion, of lack of same, among interest groups in town. It's tough to keep all of the committees and authorities straight in this story, but most of them didn't do much good. At times, this material can be dry to the point of dust. It's tough to make block grants fascinating prose. She's also an advocate of more regionalism in the area, probably more than most. And it would be interesting to hear the reaction of someone who knows more about Buffalo's efforts than I do. But her basic points are on target. What's

more, as is outlined, Buffalo isn't learning from its past. A deal for a Bass Pro store on the site of Memorial Auditorium dragged on forever. A signature Peace Bridge remains in limbo. Ugh. A city isn't doomed to repeat its mistakes, but sometimes around here it sure seems that way. 11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Failure of too much power without leadership

By Peter Lorenzi

This relatively short (218 pp.), concise dissertation of fifty years of the decline of Buffalo, New York from its position in 1900 as one of America's leading cities, to its inability to adapt to the post World War II economic shifts (40,000 jobs lost in one fell swoop from one firm alone in the late 1940s), and its following fifty years of turmoil, provides a sad litany of urban decline. Confession and full disclosure: I lived in Erie County from 1951 to leaving for college in 1969; my family stayed until 1978. My dad was a steel superintendent. Having lived through much of her time line, every scary story and sad anecdote Dillaway uses rings true. To some extent, this book is a distilled history of newspaper headlines and pictures that have lingered in my mind, well after I left the Buffalo area. Her first chapter provides "five factors of decline" that do a good job of capturing Buffalo's demise: transportation, steel, absentee management, militant labor, and competing agencies of influence. And the bottom line can be singled out to be a lack of leadership. The story of Bethlehem Steel alone offers a case study of management-union mutual destruction, providing a metaphor for the decline of the city. Buffalo boomed to some degree because of geography: the gateway to the American west, the Erie Canal, Lake Erie water and transportation resources, electricity from the Niagara, a rail hub. A city heavily Catholic (76%) and - in the past fifty years -- increasingly African-American, Buffalo's WASP-centric lawyers and bankers presided over a city whose population halved and manufacturing disappeared in fifty years. Key struggles over a new campus for the University of Buffalo (a private university until 1962), a railroad-to-nowhere light rail system, and a new football stadium are perhaps the most "popular" or at least visible instances of "the powers that be" frittering away opportunities, and Buffalo often seems positioned as a developing country, dying - as the late urbanist Jane Jacobs noted - with each new subsidy, bailout, and tax break. No one would expect manufacturing to remain as dominant today as it was fifty years ago, but the absolute inability to manage the transition to a global, knowledge-based economy Dillaway laboriously records in excruciating detail, decade by decade. The academic abstract approach to each chapter produces some confusion, such as "production output in 1972 dropping to .05 percent," (p. 106) corrected three pages later with "Buffalo's growth rate in production output had slowed to 0.5 percent," along with the extensive use of unattributed interviews (anonymity is necessary when the judgments are so harsh) and titles and pronouns to describe key leaders, most often without naming people. This produces an academic treatment without a strong narrative and no central characters, although "characters" abound in every decade. This is a tragic but useful summary of clear value to any native of Buffalo or person who simply loves the possibility of urban renewal, and wants to learn from the mistakes of others. And the saddest part is that perhaps some of Buffalo's best candidates for leading a revival have left town, and the mistakes don't seem to be in decline. Will regionalism help solve the problem? Can the schools turn Buffalo around? Can Buffalo tap water, cheap electricity and hard-working labor to mount a revival? Let's hope it's not like Hall and Oates sang: "Because the strong give up and move on, while the weak give up and stay." Let's hope they're wrong.

At the turn of the 20th century, Buffalo, NY, was one of the world's great industrial cities. In 1901, it played host to the prestigious Pan American Exhibition, which attracted millions of visitors to the city; its thriving downtown area was graced by buildings and mansions designed by some of the country's best architects; the city was the third largest producer of steel and, with the largest inland port, was a hub of commerce at the end of the Erie Canal. Today, due to financial distress and decades of mismanagement, the city has been put under the supervision of a financial control board. Population drain and an inability to attract new business have brought the city to the brink of financial collapse. The question on everyone's lips is, "What went wrong?" Community development expert and Buffalo native Diana Dillaway analyzes the history of planning and decision making in Buffalo that led to the current malaise. A member of the Wendt family, whose great grandfather founded one of Buffalo's oldest manufacturing businesses, Dillaway has used her access to the city's most powerful political, economic, and community leaders to reconstruct the factors that created the city as it exists today. She examines the most divisive debates of the past, including strategies for downtown and neighborhood development, planning for a rapid transit system, and battles over the location of a proposed university campus and a professional football stadium. A consistent theme is the protection of the status quo and turf battles among the WASP business and financial elite, ethnic Catholic communities centered on neighborhood parish life, and the Democratic machine with its entrenched patronage system. She finds that the only people interested in change were African Americans, whose efforts were consistently thwarted by a multi-term mayor who diverted community development funds for his own pet projects. At a time when Buffalo is trying to build a brighter future, Dillaway's insights, revelations, and prescriptions for change comprise urgent reading for community leaders and citizens alike. *Power Failure* speaks to issues of leadership and power facing every city and local government today.

From Publishers Weekly

Buffalo native and community development expert Dillaway chronicles the sad story of

Buffalo's decline from vibrant American port and industrial center to rust belt poster child. She lays the blame firmly at the feet of the city's white Protestant business elite, an old guard who, she claims, mismanaged the city because of their arrogance, bad judgment, racism, overconfidence and infatuation with their own power. The book tells of how beginning in the 1960s, this cabal refused to cooperate, with the rest of Buffalo's citizenry to adapt to changing economic and cultural conditions, such as the declining steel industry and the spreading Civil Rights movement. Missed opportunities to revitalize the city abound, including the failure to develop a light rail system and the equally shortsighted decision to reject the building of a new State University of New York campus in the downtown district. Strangely, Dillard rarely names those she is accusing, preferring to refer to them generically as, for instance, "one banker." As a result, this treatise is antiseptic and rarely humanized, an irony given the very human sources of the decay she cites. Although Buffalo's story is a powerful cautionary tale of the dangers that can accompany valuing turf and power over a city's well-being, the dry, case-study approach is most likely to appeal to city planners, academics and Buffalo residents. (Apr.) Copyright copy; Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "Diana Dillaway has meticulously set out the causes - economic and social - of the decline of Buffalo, N.Y., once the fastest growing and most promising city in the nation. Slowly eating away at Buffalo's vitality were economic forces beyond the community's control, and social and class conflicts that were clearly within the town's ability to remedy.... This compact volume is must reading for any North American student of urban history. It ought to be in every school and college library in Upstate New York. There ought to be forums and college level courses built around this study in Western New York." DOUGLAS L. TURNER Washington Bureau Chief, Buffalo News "This book provides a rare inside look at the machinations and power plays by elite banking and development interests whose focus on narrow self-interest contributed to the decline of a once-thriving major city. We are seldom able to hear these stories in the clear and graphic fashion they are presented here." G. WILLIAM DOMHOFF Research Professor in Sociology University of California, Santa Cruz About the Author Diana Dillaway (Ventura, CA), now a freelance writer, has worked for more than thirty years on urban and community development with nonprofit groups including the San Jose Development Corporation, the Foundation for National Progress, the Center for Business and Environmental Studies at California State University at Hayward, and the Local Government Commission (Sacramento) where she wrote "Capturing the Local Economic Benefit of Recycling" for local governments.