In Selling the City: Gender, Class, and the California Growth Machine, 1880–1940, Lee M. A. Simpson provides us with a detailed account of elite and middle-class women’s involvement in promoting municipal development in California before World War II. Focusing on the state’s “second- and third-tier cities” (p. 10) such as Oakland, Redlands, Riverside, and Santa Barbara, she demonstrates that women played a central role in the city “growth game” (p. 170), as these municipalities competed with Los Angeles, San Francisco, and even Portland and Seattle, to attract population and capital. In doing so, Simpson contributes to both urban and women’s history by showing that women were influential actors in the “process of urban growth,” especially in the west (p. 8).

Relying on sociologist Harvey Molotch’s “city-as-growth-machine thesis,” Simpson maintains that city elites, male and female alike, used their economic and political power to “pursue policies that protect[ed] and enhance[d]” their own wealth. Seeking to increase property values, local elites aimed to promote population growth through civic boosting, economic development, and municipal planning. In many ways, this focus on elite economic activities reflects a Marxist perspective underlying the study. Despite elites’ concern with their own economic well-being, however, Simpson concludes that the resulting policies improved both the “quality of life” and “overall wealth” of these cities, ultimately “benefit[ing] the majority of the people” (p. 2).

The book’s strength lies in its detailed account of how elite and middle-class women gained the language and tools of capitalism as they engaged in city planning and growth efforts. Through what Simpson terms “apprenticeships” (p. 16), these women acquired property, discussed financial and business issues with their husbands, joined their local chambers of commerce, and sought to preserve and/or increase their property values by managing population growth. They participated in community-wide discussions on their city’s advertising campaigns, and they worked with male booster groups to promote both residential and commercial growth. In these municipal campaigns, middle-class women learned the power of selling California cities as ideals, where families could find “not only economic opportunity but also social, recreational, and spiritual outlets” (p. 78). Although she does not explicitly make the connection, Simpson demonstrates how elite and middle-class women gained the sophisticated publicity skills that they employed in statewide political campaigns at this time, particularly the 1911 woman suffrage campaign.

For public historians, the study’s close focus on civic boosting and planning offers new insight into the construction of historical identity as part of broader city growth strategies. The chapters on Pearl Chase and the city of Santa Barbara are particularly illustrative. Through the private, nonprofit Community Arts Association, Simpson documents, Chase reshaped the city of

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For public historians, the study’s close focus on civic boosting and planning offers new insight into the construction of historical identity as part of broader city growth strategies. The chapters on Pearl Chase and the city of Santa Barbara are particularly illustrative. Through the private, nonprofit Community Arts Association, Simpson documents, Chase reshaped the city of
Santa Barbara, emphasizing its Spanish past through Spanish revival architecture and historic preservation as a way to promote tourism and enhance property values. In essence, Simpson argues that Santa Barbara, as well as much of southern California, created its own identity of place from an architectural style. Simpson demonstrates the nuts and bolts of this social construction when she documents Chase’s use of rhetoric, personal presentation, and public education to persuade property owners to go along with her vision of Santa Barbara.

Although much of the study’s strength lies in its close focus on city growth efforts, this same focus tends to limit its broader implications. In documenting women’s economic interests in promoting civic growth, Simpson tends to underplay the multiple and competing motives inherent in civic boosting and the strategic way in which women activists employed domestic and/or economic rhetoric to achieve their ends. Elite and middle-class women could be simultaneously altruistic and profit-seeking, and their concern for public morality could shape their efforts to promote property values (or vice versa). At times, Simpson’s efforts to distinguish women’s participation in the city growth machine from more traditional domestic housekeeping concerns seems strained. How different was the campaign of Riverside women to establish a permanent sewage disposal farm from Jane Addams’ earlier municipal garbage removal efforts in Chicago? Rather than being distinct from municipal housekeeping, these civic efforts may be better understood as part of the longer history of women’s reform efforts.

Similarly, Simpson’s attention to elite and middle-class actors in California’s second- and third-tier cities, while illuminating, tends to obscure the ways in which working-class inhabitants may have also engaged in these broad civic projects. As she notes early on, women’s club buildings were important in giving middle-class clubwomen experience in buying and selling property, owning “stock” in the city, and earning revenue from rents (p. 56). Yet, working-class men and women engaged in similar pursuits in major metropolitan areas. Large labor associations in San Francisco and Los Angeles owned Labor Temples, which performed similar functions for trade unions as women’s club buildings did for clubwomen. Moreover, in Los Angeles, female trade unionists eventually financed and built their own women’s annex in the 1920s. How might these trade union activities, combined with the growing trend in working-class home ownership, change our understanding of the city growth game?

In the end, Selling the City offers important insight into women’s involvement in urban growth and development in the long Progressive era. As Simpson shows, elite and middle-class women were central players in the city growth game, working side-by-side with male urban planners to promote regional identity and urban expansion in twentieth-century California.

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