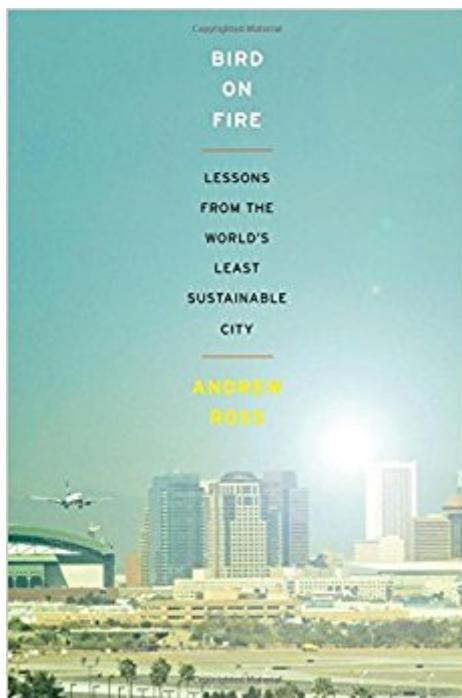


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# Bird On Fire: Lessons From The World's Least Sustainable City



## Synopsis

Phoenix, Arizona is one of America's fastest growing metropolitan regions. It is also its least sustainable one, sprawling over a thousand square miles, with a population of four and a half million, minimal rainfall, scorching heat, and an insatiable appetite for unrestrained growth and unrestricted property rights. In *Bird on Fire*, eminent social and cultural analyst Andrew Ross focuses on the prospects for sustainability in Phoenix--a city in the bull's eye of global warming--and also the obstacles that stand in the way. Most authors writing on sustainable cities look at places like Portland, Seattle, and New York that have excellent public transit systems and relatively high density. But Ross contends that if we can't change the game in fast-growing, low-density cities like Phoenix, the whole movement has a major problem. Drawing on interviews with 200 influential residents--from state legislators, urban planners, developers, and green business advocates to civil rights champions, energy lobbyists, solar entrepreneurs, and community activists--Ross argues that if Phoenix is ever to become sustainable, it will occur more through political and social change than through technological fixes. Ross explains how Arizona's increasingly xenophobic immigration laws, science-denying legislature, and growth-at-all-costs business ethic have perpetuated social injustice and environmental degradation. But he also highlights the positive changes happening in Phoenix, in particular the Gila River Indian Community's successful struggle to win back its water rights, potentially shifting resources away from new housing developments to producing healthy local food for the people of the Phoenix Basin. Ross argues that this victory may serve as a new model for how green democracy can work, redressing the claims of those who have been aggrieved in a way that creates long-term benefits for all. *Bird on Fire* offers a compelling take on one of the pressing issues of our time--finding pathways to sustainability at a time when governments are dismally failing their responsibility to address climate change.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Bird on Fire...has done something more than nail a list of fundamental problems, both societal and environmental, with our big city. Unlike author Richard Florida, who likes to lecture about what a city like Phoenix should be doing to set things right, Ross describes what led to our less-than-sustainable straits, then outlines what's in place for us to rectify the many mistakes local government has made." - The Phoenix New Times "Ross's conclusion - that if sustainable urbanism is "not directed by and toward principles of equity, then they will almost certainly end up reinforcing patterns of eco-apartheid" - is a bracing challenge." Publishers Weekly "If Phoenix could be greened, any place on earth could do it. And as this book makes clear, democracy and social justice will be every bit as key as solar panels." - Bill McKibben, author of Deep Economy "Books by Andrew Ross are always exhilarating adventures at the cutting edge of social thought, but Bird on Fire is particularly fascinating. Rather than recounting the green virtues of some demi-paradise like Vermont or San Francisco, he descends directly into the ecological and economic hell fires of Phoenix. The result is a landmark study of the micropolitics of the struggle for urban sustainability where the stakes are the highest." - Mike Davis, author of City of Quartz "Bird on Fire is a stunning report from the front lines. Ross vividly shows how and why our big cities are one of the top places where the fight to contain climate change will either be won or lost." - James Gustave Speth, author of The Bridge at the Edge of the World and co-founder of the National Resources Defense Council "This is a superb and important book. With a sweeping command of the subject, Andrew Ross reads from the entrails of Phoenix a story with hopeful insights for all of humane civilization. His graceful prose and political clarity make Bird on Fire not only useful but also very compelling and pleasurable to read." - Christian Parenti, author of Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence "Bird on Fire is a triumph. The future and sustainability of Phoenix are not local questions, but ones of national and global importance. Andrew Ross examines them with a keen radar for the interplay of power, class, greed, prejudice and the mythology of both the American West and the great Sunbelt migration. In the process, he has also given us the finest history we have yet of modern Phoenix, a massive metropolis whose consequence is cloaked by its reputation for sun, golf and right-wing politics. This is a must-read." - Jon Talton, author of South

Phoenix Rules and former columnist for The Arizona Republic "A must-read for anyone who thinks that city transitions to more sustainable policies and practices are a snap." --American Scientist"Examines the troubling prospects for sustainability in the sprawling city of Phoenix, Ariz.; draws on interviews with 200 planners, developers, politicians, and other influential residents."--The Chronicle Review"...terrifying, maddening, depressing and hopeful all at once. Kind of like Phoenix itself." - Tucson Weekly

Andrew Ross is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University. He is the author of Fast Boat to China, The Celebration Chronicles, Nice Work if You Can Get It, and No-Collar. He has written for ArtForum, The Nation, and The Village Voice.

I agree with metzmatt. I skimmed and skipped and shut my eyes and fell asleep. It is LONG and overly burdened with details that simply don't belong there. Yes, Ross spent two years in Phoenix, and it is understandable that, as an academic, he wants to emphasize some important information that can't be found in the popular press or elsewhere, but too much is indeed too much. He needed a good editor, but I don't know of any academic who will easily admit such a fact. It is not an easy book to skim, either, because Ross does not organize his chapters with an understandable lead and a nice, crisp summing-up as a finish. As for his so-called "liberal bias," well, I myself am a liberal and, yes, a work of this sort SHOULD have a point of view, but, really, he simply scoffs at folks he doesn't agree with, and his snotty dismissal of tactics which he calls "greenwashing" (a description which might very well be accurate) is a bit off-putting. Nevertheless, the book has made me want to visit Phoenix just to see the renascence of the downtown area which he spends a great deal of time and ink in describing. I've lived off and on in California all 83 years, and I never before had been impelled to visit Arizona, not even to see the Grand Canyon. Chalk one up for "Bird on Fire" right there.

As a third generation native of Phoenix, all I can say is that this book is required reading for anyone who loves Phoenix and the southwestern United States. The era of ponzi-scheme growth ("building houses for people who build houses") is over. And so is the era of obsessive lawn care, and water-features, and city planning by real estate developers. If Phoenix is going to survive--much less, thrive--this book will be an important part of changing people's attitudes toward what it means to live in a desert and how to create an urban mentality which lives lightly in a fragile environment. Phoenix could lead the way. But, as this book illustrates in so many ways, my beloved

city will probably end up being an object lesson instead.

A very interesting assessment of the city of Phoenix and sustainable cities in general.

I live in Albuquerque and travel often to Phoenix to visit family. This book unearths fascinating pockets of urban revival as well as darkly incriminating facets of life in the big city, Desert Southwest style. It reads more like an adventure than a social critique. I couldn't put it down.

To my knowledge, there is no other book out there that attempts to do what this book has done. You don't even have to be concerned so much about sustainability to get something out of this thorough look at what is going on in Phoenix these days, and why it is this way.

I like science and I like city planning, so this was a relatively enjoyable and pretty easy read. I never knew so much about Phoenix and Arizona. It is not the kind of information that would make you want to move there however. Since I'm sure Phoenix is not alone in facing many of the same environmental/social problems it was a bit dispiriting at times. Thought provoking but with a definite 'liberal' spin - lots on global warming, land development and immigration. Many of the issues that have put Arizona in the news, but with more background. It is not all grim, and the author does have optimistic sections as well, but I'm sure the Phoenix booster club doesn't endorse it.

Absolutely superb. Whether in corporations, government or one's personal life, nothing matches an intelligent outsider's perceptive view of strengths, weaknesses and potentials of any enterprise. Phoenix has long typified mindless urban sprawl, which makes it an ideal candidate for a study of potential pathways to sustainability. As a resident since 1972, I can vouch for Ross's conclusions. Compared to earlier histories, this is a gem that offers rare insight into why Phoenix is the nation's second hardest hit city in the Great Recession. However, it's not a Phoenix only book; his observations relate to every urban area. Fortunately, most readers may console themselves, "Well, at least we're not THAT bad." In Southwest terms, this is a gem dropped into a patch of 'Teddy Bear' cholla (that's the "Jumping Cactus"). People stay clear of it because its barbs will cling to anyone who brushes past. Ross's "barbs" are very real, which is why Phoenix decision-makers will read, lament, denounce and stay clear of this book. Why? The Phoenix elite have a very good life, and see no need to change. The one-in-six residents for whom hunger is an issue (according to local billboards) have no means to change or to be heard. Every week, a 53-foot trailer loaded with

free food from St. Mary's Food Bank is parked in a church lot near my South Phoenix neighborhood. The downtown is overrun with homeless beggars who pack the main library and new trolley system to find some cool comfort in the summer. The debilitating weakness of Phoenix is its uncaring government. Non-violent crime is among the highest in the nation; the Phoenix police, dubbed "cash registers" by others, tell victims, "We don't take reports of burglaries ... call your insurance company." More than a billion dollars a year is spent on prisons; virtually nothing on rehabilitation, except for private charities. Until local government cares about more than the comfort, wealth and status of the elite, nothing will change. Ross cites the myriad problems that made Phoenix "the world's least sustainable city" and in so doing cites Phoenix as an abject (sic) lesson for cities everywhere. It makes this an invaluable book for everyone, anywhere, who is interested in a better community. In Phoenix, any and every problem has one answer, "It's a dry heat!" It doesn't solve anything, but it lets people imagine life in Phoenix -- despite its problems -- is better than anywhere else. In brief, 'Bird on Fire' is a superb and thus frightening look at what an urban area can become when the elites don't care and good people are ignored. In other words, "Don't try the Phoenix example in your hometown."

This is a great read on Phoenix and its relevant issues of sustainability. Highly recommended.

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