



Bird on Fire: Lessons from the Worlds Least Sustainable City

Andrew Ross



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Phoenix, Arizona is one of Americas 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 bulls 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 cant 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 Arizonas 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 Communitys 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.



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