

BOOK REVIEW

Market and regulation in American urban sprawl: a different view

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'Zoned out: regulation, markets and choices in transportation and metropolitan land-use' by Jonathan Levine, published and printed by RFF Press, Washington, DC, ISBN 1-933115-15-7 (soft-back 2006), \$26.95

'Zoned out' addresses a very topical debate: the role of planning and government regulation in creating an urban form that is less dependent on the motorcar, more conducive to walking and public transport use and one in which the ability to live in the place of one's choice is not overly determined by one's class, income or ethnicity. Whether coached in the language of 'smart growth' and 'new urbanism' as in the US, or 'sustainable communities' as in the UK, the problem of how to adapt resource-intensive urban structures to the environmental imperatives of our age is pervasive in industrialised societies.

The book takes as its departure point the debate within transportation planning about how alternative forms of urban development relate to travel behaviour, and whether policy intervention in the former can be justified on the basis of changes they might produce in the latter. This debate is framed by a widely accepted view that the sprawling form of US cities is the direct consequence of unfettered market ordering and thus the most economically efficient. Any negative impacts of such ordering, such as congestion, pollution and so on, would represent market failures and thus be acceptable targets for policy intervention. On this basis, policy prescriptions for a different pattern of urban development would be justifiable as long as they could demonstrably correct those failures and improve market efficiency. However, as causal relationships of this nature are notoriously tricky to establish, the status quo tends to prevail.

The book proposes a different approach to that debate. Levine's well informed account sets out to debunk the idea that the low-density residential areas

that make up suburban America are the pure product of a free market on land and property. He demonstrates how low density is imposed on the market by restrictive municipal zoning, and this prevents any demands for higher density, public-transport based developments to be met. Therefore, rather than express the choices of everyone, municipally imposed exclusion of dense developments has prevented a large number of households, who would otherwise have opted for denser, pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods, from exercising their choice of where to live. This view of municipal zoning as a market force and not market regulation is deeply entrenched in US thinking about land-use planning, and Levine identifies its origin in a particular interpretation of communal property rights enshrined in US law. This is quite different from the interventionist status attributed to most other land-use planning instruments, especially those emanating from the State and Federal governments.

In the book, Levine adopts a different view from that of proponents of 'smart growth' in that he does not think the alternative to exclusive zoning should be 'inclusive zoning', i.e. the imposition of denser and more mixed development through regulation. His argument is that—given the open nature of land markets in the US—compact, mixed, public transport-friendly developments will only occur if and where there is demand for them. The existence of repressed demand for such developments in US metropolitan areas is exemplified through case studies in Atlanta and Boston, looking at the mismatch between people's preferences for transportation and land use characteristics on the one hand, and the actual attributes of the neighbourhoods in which they live on the other.

In the last chapter of the book, he sketches what he calls a foundation for policy reform which would allow the spread of 'smart growth' developments and reduce the spread of single-use, low-density, car-dependent

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settlements. It begins with the need to recognise local zoning as market regulation rather than a market force, and thus subject to the same need for a balance between local, regional and national objectives as any other form of government regulation. Paradoxically, this should lead to more rather than less reliance on markets to provide a better combination of development forms, as the potential product of a more flexible combination of market and government regulation than the one that exists today. Therefore, instead of limiting the debate to a straightforward dichotomy between 'planning' and the 'market', in which the status quo is taken as 'natural' and the interference of planning as 'unnatural', Levine suggests a more nuanced view of the relationship between planning and market solutions, in which denser urban patterns would emerge from less, rather than more municipal regulation, but with a greater amount of strategic planning.

Although the book is very informative about the terms of the debate over the merits of different urban forms as conducted in the US, it feels sometimes strange to a European reader, much more used to a 'command and control' form of land use planning and a general acceptance of government intervention in

markets to secure broader social benefits. The fact that most of the key issues the book deals with are not circumscribed to the US does not negate the fact that the way these issues are defined and addressed depends on the history of urban settlements and of planning in each country. In spite of the declining role of the state in western Europe and the emergence of more collaborative forms of governance at all levels, the European view of planning is still open to more sustainable development patterns being imposed on private developers through regulation which simultaneously constrains any alternative options. The recent policy drive by the UK Government to produce sustainable communities with high housing densities, a mix of land uses, and 'zero-carbon' homes, built around public transport nodes, is a clear example of that.

It would be unfair, however, to criticise Levine's book for not extending his argument beyond the US context, as this was clearly not his objective. His careful deconstruction of the relationship between market and regulation in American urban sprawl should be compulsory reading for those who want to understand the dynamics of US urban form and how alternatives might emerge.

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