Book review


In pursuit of a more sustainable development, several countries and regions around the world are promoting higher urban densities. As research on the relationship between higher density and its impacts on living or environmental conditions suggests, that policy is not unambiguous. The editors of this book acknowledge the complex relationship between compact cities and sustainable urban form. Consequently, they ask if policies promoting higher urban densities are misdirected or if they really can contribute to sustainability. This volume is the third in a short series by the same editors (Miller and De Roo, 1997, 1999) dealing with several aspects of the field of environment and planning. It is a compilation of 23 articles, mainly case studies from ten countries.

The book starts with some brief introductory remarks and then presents the material in six chapters. The first one, focused on dilemmas of compact city development, includes three Dutch and two U.K. contributions. From the Dutch perspective, De Roo projects the apparent conflict between environmental planning and the compact cities policy against the background of new housing needs. Next, Dijst shows how the compact cities policy has been successful in protecting the Green Heart of Holland and points out its ambiguity concerning travel impacts. After that, Snellen et al. suggest a methodology for evaluating the impact of urban form on sustainability criteria. From the U.K. perspective, Jenks et al. stress the importance of residents’ perception of urban developments. Besides this, attention to the physical environment and the political arena is suggested to be essential for achieving a sustainable and attractive urban neighbourhood. Finally, Lynch and Doak argue that conservation planning has the potential to mitigate conflicts between urban planning and sustainability.

The second chapter considers the renewal or reuse of sites to increase density. Current regeneration problems in declined neighbourhoods are
discussed by Tijl and Diggelen for Amsterdam and by Hinsley for London, respectively. In the latter case, the importance of local initiatives and their participation in the planning process are stressed. Next, Hofstra argues that soil sanitation in the Netherlands is in concurrence with urban planning for new housing areas. After that, Meyer, drawing on cases from the U.S., asks who will have to pay for the soil sanitation before reusing abandoned industrial sites.

Chapter three draws attention to the measurement of environmental quality perceptions. Burby and Moore examine the impact of the location of heavy industry on residents’ perception of liveability in Louisiana (U.S.). Next, Leitmann et al. discuss three ways to rapidly assess residents’ perceptions of environmental problems in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Jakarta (Indonesia) – which is, incidentally, the only case study included here from a non-OECD country. Subsequently, Holten et al. describe a methodology that the department of urban development in Utrecht (Netherlands) uses to comprehensively weigh the environmental, economic, traffic, and other urban factors in an effort to improve the decision-making process for sustainability and liveability.

Next, chapter four shows how citizen participation strategies and methods are used in various countries. In an example from Australia, Snashall shows that, although the participation process costs time and money in the early stages of planning, it can ultimately reduce expenditure and increase benefits, both for the residents and the investor. Then, Schultz presents an example from Karlstad (Sweden). It shows how the interaction of planners with residents and residents’ participation in the planning process became a tool to address major environmental and health problems related with car use. Among other strategies, a campaign was launched to change individuals’ travel attitudes and behaviour. Furthermore, Holsen points out the long tradition and the benefits of public participation in Norway, while Washington discusses the evolution of a new environmental justice movement in the U.S.

Finally, the last two chapters draw attention to the transportation impacts of urban densities. In chapter five, Bouwman states that today, the environmental benefits of the compact city with respect to transportation (i.e. shorter distances travelled) are not unambiguous for the Netherlands. Nevertheless, she forecasts notable benefits in a long-term perspective till 2050. Next, by comparing travel patterns in the U.K. and in the Netherlands, Diepen suggests that a more thorough consideration of personal constraints and incentives is necessary for a better understanding of how urban densities impact travel patterns. Fouchier, discussing the Paris region (France), argues that higher urban intensities, defined by population and employment per urban hectare, correspond to lower rates of car ownership.