

BOOK REVIEW

This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America

by Anthony Flint

The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, 298 pages

Reviewed by Jackie Begley

"In a calorie-conscious world, sprawl beckons like a hot fudge sundae," begins Anthony Flint in *This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America*, his analysis of the different forces that shape land use patterns in the United States. Although there has been an urban renaissance in the past 20 years, low-density suburban development still remains incredibly popular. People continue to want a suburban lifestyle despite the negative impacts of long commutes on the workday, as well as environmental and travel costs. In this clear, well-written overview of the sprawl debate, Flint reveals the array of voices as well as the imminent importance of these issues as we face population growth, global warming, and development that show no signs of stopping in the twenty-first century.

Anthony Flint is well qualified to write a comprehensive book on the nationwide sprawl discourse because he has years of experience writing about land use issues as a former Boston Globe journalist and currently as the manager for public affairs at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. *This Land* does a great job of reviewing the forces behind urban sprawl in the United States. It provides a well-researched examination of the political, cultural, and economic forces that have shaped development over the last century. The tenets of smart growth, New Urbanism, public health, and green building are explored and contrasted with the values of homebuilders, property owners, developers, libertarians, and financial institutions. The perspectives of stakeholders and players in development are objectively stated and the imperfections and inequities of these arguments are provocatively revealed to provide a clear framework for the current sprawl debate.

The author covers a wide range of material in his analysis, yet the narrative is well-structured. The beginning briefly covers the history of urban and suburban development in the United States, and outlines many of the reasons for the success of suburbia and the prevalence of the decentralized land use patterns today. After this framework is established, the smart growth counter-movements that have risen in the recent past are introduced. Following this, the pro-sprawl advocates are brought

into the dialogue. The section on property rights, which summarizes the most pertinent Supreme Court cases, includes a poignant description of an interview with Anthony Palazzolo, a plaintiff in a famous Supreme Court takings case. After laying out both sides of the debate, the book delves into the socioeconomic implications of these different land use policies, disaster planning, and finally, the author's recommendations for successful future development. The book covers myriad groups to carefully include the different voices in the discourse, including: the Earth Liberation Front (considered a terrorist organization in the United States), the U.S. Green Building Council, the Regional Plan Association, the American Dream Coalition, the National Association of Home Builders, co-housers, and equity planners, among many others. He presents the debate through case studies, interviews, and research. Therefore, the story is full of clear explanations, anecdotes, and concise investigation of the major issues surrounding growth throughout the nation.

The book contains a very good analysis of growth policies nationwide, statewide, and at the local level. There are a few fascinating state case studies, including an overview of the recent changes in land use policies in Oregon. Flint demonstrates the oscillating political and cultural mentalities of that state, which, with its urban growth boundary established by the legislature in 1973, had arguably the toughest growth management policies in the nation. This changed dramatically with the recent passage of Measure 37, which allows property owners compensation or exemption from the urban growth boundary zoning if they can prove their property has lost value because of the regulations, effectively removing much of the power of the growth boundary. Through interviews with residents, legislators, advocacy groups, attorneys, and property owners, the major causes of the tension are conveyed in a compelling and easily comprehensible manner. The case study of Oregon is just one example of the many that are interspersed throughout the book and help convey the complexities of the modern land use dialogue.

This Land covers basic issues that will engage readers unfamiliar with the sprawl debate and will provide new insights on the planning challenges for industry professionals. The book ends with Flint's recommendations for "six healthy habits for sensible growth," which consist of compromises and suggestions based on the different sides of the debate that are outlined in the book. These recommendations are thoughtful and not strictly pro-smart growth as it is commonly perceived (for example, he advocates for less government involvement). They include: not overly interfering with development, overhauling zoning to reflect modern concerns, reevaluating personal needs, reestablishing first-ring suburbs, and becoming more demanding and involved citizens. This last section, while practical and important, seems a bit superficial in comparison with

the profound analysis in the rest of the book. Nevertheless, this book is a respectable primer of modern land use issues in the United States, an increasingly relevant topic that is often overlooked by the public. It provides a good introduction to the subject, and would be an asset for people looking for a well rounded, comprehensible, in-depth view of the sprawl debate.

Jackie Begley is a master's student in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley.