

Book Reviews

Oregon plans: The Making of an Unquiet Land Use Revolutions. By Sy Adler. 2012. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press. 240 pp. Paperback \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-87071-651-5

The fundamental struggle in land-use planning is to find an appropriate balance between economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. Enabling such a balance to exist requires, at times, seemingly dichotomous priorities: a genuine interest in public input and participation, and deft political machination to appease and mediate between influential stakeholders, many of whom are paid lobbyists. The actors in the politics of land-use planning rarely select a single arena within which to achieve their goals. Instead, they operate within the sphere of influence—be it legislative, administrative, or judicial (through litigation)—they believe is most conducive to success. Consequently, the decisions in land-use planning are not made in isolation from any particular political process—community plans and zoning ordinances are not quietly conceived in the confines of government buildings, nor are they immune from public and private scrutiny. Land-use planning is an intensely debated and, at times, grueling process in which multiple interests collide in almost every imaginable political venue. Sy Adler's *Oregon Plans: The Making of an Unquiet Land Use Revolution* is a story about the push and pull between the entities involved in the creation of land-use policies and goals in Oregon, and how opposing interests reached resolution and compromise.

Oregon Plans is an exhaustive chronological inventory of the personalities, legislation, interest groups, and numerous bureaucratic entities that created and implemented Oregon's land-use plan. The level of detail in this volume is impressive. As a historical account of the legal and political context for land-use planning in Oregon, the book is impeccable. Adler recounts and explains virtually every nuance, every peculiarity that precipitated the formation of Oregon's program, drawing deeply from both interviews and historical archives, and frequently utilizing quotes from influential politicians, officials, and activists. At times, however, the depth of detail becomes overwhelming. The prose is often cluttered with acronyms and planning jargon, which can make it difficult for non-specialists to interpret certain events and their significance. The technical writing style and heavy reliance on names and acronyms are understandable given they are necessary to tell the story; absurdly long and bureaucratic sounding agency names, committee titles, and legal language are fairly ubiquitous in land-use planning. A more fundamental critique of *Oregon Plans* is that it lacks the contextualization and clear, explicit analysis that is necessary to extrapolate the lessons learned in Oregon to the field of contemporary urban and regional planning.

The backbone of Oregon's land-use policies, and the focus of Adler's book, is a piece of state legislation called SB100. This bill, although it morphed significantly from its original form to when it became law in 1973, reflected a growing sentiment that the state was rapidly losing farmland and other valuable natural resources to urban sprawl. Some constituents believed local governments, the entities responsible for regulating growth, had succumbed to "capture"—a phenomenon by which private development interests exert inordinate influence over land-use

decisions, to the detriment of the public good. Environmentalists, planners, and state officials, notably Governor Tom McCall, believed the state needed to intervene to protect natural resources that were important to all Oregonians. These included the traditional common pool resources, such as clean air and water, but the priority was mainly on farmland. A theme throughout the book was the balance of power between the state and local governments; who should exercise more control over land-use planning decisions?

SB100 created two state institutions to interpret and implement Oregon's new land-use law, a commission and a corresponding staffing department. After consultation with environmental non-profits—notably the Oregon Environmental Council—industry representatives, state agencies, local government, and a massive public participation effort, the commission adopted a set of legally binding state land-use goals and corresponding guidelines. County and city governments were required to prepare comprehensive plans that were consistent with state goals, which would be reviewed and potentially approved by the state land-use department. The state had seemingly established ascendancy over local governments. But Adler explains that environmental interests, planners, and other proponents of SB100 had originally lobbied for even greater state dominion. The legislation had given authority to the state department to establish “areas of critical state concern” (it had been under consideration to include such areas directly in the legislation, but the idea was later scratched due to political infeasibility), which were potentially huge swaths of land that would be zoned and managed directly by the state. Resistance from industry and realty groups hobbled the initiative.

Oregon eventually found a functional balance between state and local authority, and more generally, between conservation and development. Adler contends that the success of SB100—84% of the farmland in the Willamette Valley had been zoned exclusive agriculture by 1980—could be attributed to a citizen watchdog group that helped ensure compliance with state goals; a citizenry with an interest in land-use reform; and tenacious, intelligent, and highly influential political leaders. All of these are valid conclusions, but there is an important piece of context that is absent from Adler's book: Oregon's land-use revolution occurred in the 1970s, an era characterized by a national interest in environmentalism. Several landmark pieces of federal legislation were passed, such as the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act, and others, which reflected the greatest cultural awareness of environmental issues in the United States at any period in history. The interest in land-use planning in Oregon likely was, to a certain degree, a manifestation of the broader national investment in environmental protection. In addition to providing a discussion of the larger political context, *Oregon Plans* would have benefitted from a more involved discussion of the socio-cultural implications of the state's land-use policies.

A topic that barely enters the periphery of the book, but could have been consequential, was the role of women in Oregon's land-use history. As Adler states, “Interestingly, a majority of the House Environment and Land Use Committee were women. In the early 1970s...the environment was seen as a women's issue” (p. 75). As the story continues, however, it appears that a majority of the key political actors in Oregon's land-use revolution were men. Adler had an opportunity here to open a dialogue about the role and influence of gender in the politics of land-use planning in Oregon during the environmental era. Was the presence of women in important legislative committees influential to the outcome of land-use policies? Did a house committee comprised mostly of women affect the political dynamics that shaped legislation? Rather than exploring these issues, Adler glances over what could have been a fascinating analysis of gender in land-use planning.

Another under-scrutinized topic in the book was the social and economic dynamic in Oregon's land-use policies. One consequence of the emphasis on farmland preservation, for example, was the tendency of zoning ordinances to lower the value of agricultural property. Once zoned exclusively agricultural, farmland was essentially taken off the table for development and its value within that context completely dissolved. Farmers who previously had been able to rely on their property to command a high market value, and potentially provide for their retirement, felt as though Oregon's planning practices had limited their capacity for economic advancement. While there was a majority consensus that farmland preservation was in the state's best interest, there is an irony in a policy that constricts the welfare of the stewards of the land it is intended to protect. Conversely, the members who participated in the state's public goal development process were of a completely different socio-economic demographic. Adler explains, "As a group, they tended to be long term residents of their county and likely to own their homes. Most had college degrees and relatively high incomes. Two-thirds were male. They clearly were not a representative sample of Oregonians" (p. 105). Although this seems like a significant inequity, Adler continues without critical examination. If the successes of public participation and outreach efforts are measured in the diversity of constituents they include, then Oregon's goal development process most certainly came up short.

Despite any inadequacies in Oregon's solicitation of public comment—and it should be noted that in many respects the outreach was robust and comprehensive—Oregon had begun a trajectory toward improved livability and, arguably, more resilient communities. Although resilience thinking had not quite entered the planning lexicon when Oregon's land-use revolution began (C. S. Holling published his influential paper on resilience in 1973), the legislators, activists, and planners who created and implemented SB100 had constructed a solid legal framework for creating more resilient communities. By emphasizing the preservation of farmland, for example, Oregon's land-use legislation implicitly acknowledged the importance of food security to livable communities. But it also tacitly prioritized farmland—and its comparatively longer benefit horizon—over untethered development and its associated short-term economic gains. The ability of a representative government to belay immediate economic benefit, and instead promote more sustainable development patterns, such as preserving farmland, is a strong indication of community resilience—and is a characteristic for which Oregonians should be proud.

Adler chronicles an important piece of land-use planning history in Oregon. The organizational structure of the book lends itself well to the extraordinarily complex political and legal proceedings that occurred. Adler captures that complexity and presents the underlying functions and circumstances consistently without noticeable bias. The book will undoubtedly provide valuable information for those seeking insight into Oregon's land-use planning policies. It's an important story to tell, particularly given the theme of resilience that underlies some of its conclusions. But do not expect a revealing analysis of the consequences and implications for modern planning. Adler does not attempt to unpack the difficult issues—like gender roles, environmental justice, and socio-economic disparities—that appear between the lines of *Oregon Plans*. That likely was not within the scope of the book. But those are the planning issues that quietly pull the connection between the social, environmental, and economic realms out of balance; and which most require productive discourse and fearless exploration.

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