

H-Net Reviews

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Sonia Hirt. *Zoned in the USA: The Origins and Implications of American Land-Use Regulation.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. Illustrations. x + 245 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7987-8; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5305-2.

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This is an excellent book and an impeccable introduction to American zoning for anyone interested in US city planning and urban geography. In one sense, it is a primer on US zoning theory and practice: it provides all the basic elements and history in a mercifully succinct manner in under two hundred pages. This would be an ideal book to give to a student or colleague just cutting his or her teeth in urban studies. Yet, at the same time, Sonia Hirt makes some original contributions to the field by clearly placing American practices in international and historical perspective. The book worked for me on both levels. I have been reading US books on urban history and geography for nearly fifty years, starting with postwar studies of zoning by the likes of John Delaphons, Stephen Toll, and Richard Babcock, and histories of planning and urban development by such authorities as Peter Hall, Mel Scott, and Sam Bass Warner; I even reached back to the pioneers of American urban studies like Robert Hurd, Herbert Swan, and Louis Mumford. It was a pleasure to encounter them again here and be reminded of the twists and turns of city making in the United States. It was even more of a delight to be shown that history with such remarkable clarity and in a new light.

Hirt does four things in this volume. First, she lays out the essentials of American zoning and planning without getting lost in the details. Second, she makes the comparative case for the uniqueness of the United States in terms of its degree of spatial homogeneity and protection of the idealized single-family, detached house. Third, she gives a quick tour of the history of spatial separation in cities and especially the rise of urban planning in Europe, before returning to the deep roots of “exclusive

domesticity” in America ideology from the colonial era onward. Finally, she provides a fine, brief history of the establishment of deed covenants and municipal zoning in the US case.

The essence of Hirt’s analysis is that American zoning is distinct from all other national planning practices, and that it is so because the spatial order of American society and cities is unique. In this, history matters in showing the depth of American ideas and permanence of US practices concerning what Hirt calls “spatial individualism”: freedom conceived geographically as isolation and elbow room. Frederick Jackson Turner goes to town, as it were. Along with this came a uniquely American preference for the single-family, detached house, which dominates urban space and legal practice as in no other country. Hirt certainly recognizes the importance of separating noxious uses from domestic tranquility as the foundation for zoning, but she is nicely attuned to two other things vital to spatial freedom in the American sense: freedom from having to mingle with the lower classes and races and freedom to profit from property development by keeping government at bay except to minimize uncertainty and risk. The desire for spacious, single-family housing segregated by class, race, and function was deeply ingrained in popular bourgeois culture.

One thing I particularly like in Hirt’s historical approach is that, unlike almost all other treatments of zoning and spatial segregation in American cities, this one does not begin after World War Two and does not put the bulk of the blame on the federal government’s mortgage policies. The New Deal simply put federal muscle and money behind what was already standard practice

locked into the fabric of urbanization by the real estate industry and Herbert Hoover in the 1920s. As is so often the case in the United States, government policy and business interests went forth hand in hand to build cities profitably.

I have a few minor quibbles here and there, as when Hirt overlooks gems of urban studies from the pens of Homer Hoyt, Robert Walker, Marion Clawson, Marc Weiss, and Greg Hise, but that is rather petty given Hirt's evident range of reading in US and global sources. Another minor point is that she repeatedly puts all the emphasis on the Industrial Revolution as the prime mover in the rise of cities when it is plain that the Commercial

Revolution of the early modern era had already done the trick. She also errs in saying that US industrialization lagged behind Europe's (everyone lagged behind Britain, but that is different). But how can I nitpick someone who *finally* recognizes the key role played by the city of Berkeley in American zoning history? I kept waiting for the usual East Coast bias in US history and was happily surprised that it did not emerge.

In sum, *Zoned in the USA* will be of value to planners, geographers, historians, and anyone else interested in American cities and how they got the way they are: sprawling, segregated, and dominated by single-family houses.

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