

Land value maps – they could become best sellers!

I MUST confess that, after reading the preface to this book, my enthusiasm for continuing with the rest of it was about on a par with that of a vegetarian offered a double helping of cold steak pie.

To my mind, the author of a book advocating change or reform should start by explaining what deficiencies in the present set up he is seeking to remedy. A person pressing for a new system of rating in Britain, for example, should commence by explaining the unfairness and harmfulness of the present system; an engineer offering a new type of mousetrap should be at pains to explain how present designs are costing the public much more in lost Cheddar cheese than they are saving in the curtailment of rodential activity.

What Mr Howes wants is for his profession – his fellow chartered surveyors, valuers, planners etc – to make a greater use of land-value and property-value maps; yet he points to no major problems that arise from the present limited use (or non-use) of such maps, and the reasons he *does* give for his desire are hardly such as to make his reader's spine tingle with sympathy.

He believes that his profession could make a greater "contribution to the knowledge of property values, an area ... (often) ... so cloaked in mystery that mythology sometimes replaced methodology."

So, having a personal interest in cartography, he apparently conjured up the idea that the greater use of value maps would remove some of the mystery and enable "cause and effect of changes in land and property values" to be more effectively charted.

Just what practical benefit the public would derive from the better-informed planners was not explained and I found the author's case unconvincing.

I was not surprised to learn that the questionnaires he sent to some 170 United Kingdom local authorities, asking about their attitudes to the production and use of value maps, brought a number of dusty answers.

BOOK REVIEW

By Bert Brookes

C. K. Howes
Value Maps: Aspects of Land and Property Values, Norwich: Geo Abstracts, £6.75.



● Christopher Howes

● Of the 170, 117 had never produced value maps and 83 of these did not contemplate doing so.

● A number said, perhaps predictably, that they had insufficient staff resources to enable them to produce such maps and saw no use for them anyway.

BUT MR HOWES is nothing if not persistent, and I have to admit that, around chapters 3 and 4, my negative attitude began to soften.

It is in these sections of the book that he reveals that the production of value maps, some relating to land values only, some to "property" values (land plus buildings), has been quite common abroad, and that even in the United Kingdom some quite interesting maps – of the City of London, parts of Putney, Uckfield, Lewes and elsewhere – have been produced and used for urban planning and other purposes.

He mentions, also, the land-value maps of Whitstable produced for the site-value rating study in 1964.*

Overseas, value maps have been produced for Chicago (based on the 1933 studies by Homer Hoyt and the annual Blue Books issued by George C. Olcott), for New York City, for towns and cities in Australia and New Zealand (where land-value taxation is in force the maps are, of course, based on land values) as well as places in Japan, South Africa, Austria, France, Norway, Sweden and (again as an adjunct to land-value taxation) Denmark.

Examples of a number of these maps are reproduced in the book, no knowledge of cartography being needed to find them of uncommon interest.

Perhaps it is no surprise to learn from the book of the widespread tendency for such maps as these to be concealed behind a smokescreen of secrecy.

It is almost axiomatic, in some places, that the maps are produced for officialdom only, there being a strange apprehension that exposure to the gaze of the common-or-garden public would compromise them beyond redemption.

One notable example of this is New York City where, for more than 30 years (1900-1934) the city's land-value maps were available to the public. Then, in 1935, the curtain came down, and the maps, though still being produced, are now kept for official eyes only.

The same attitude is common in the United Kingdom.

Yet the citizens of Chicago, through the Olcott Blue Books, can check annually the value of most of

their city's sites; and Denmark provides the outstanding example of land-value maps, one of the main purposes of which is to satisfy the public about the fairness of their assessments for land-value taxation. The maps are produced in booklet form for each taxation area and are freely available to all who want them.

But apart from their obvious value in countries such as Denmark, how does Mr Howes envisage that value maps would justify the effort involved in producing them?

How would they enable his profession to make the enhanced contribution to the public's appreciation of property values that he is convinced it could make?

THE AUTHOR makes an impressive effort to demonstrate this in a comprehensive study of a British city – Norwich. He shows how the information available from the Norwich rating assessments, despite its shortcomings, can be used to produce several different types of property-value map, some designed as straightforward illustrations of the city-wide property values, others to show how values in the various areas of the city varied between 1965 and 1974.

Against this background, he sees the maps as a method of displaying the "dynamic of property values", making for easy interpretation by plan decision-makers and others. He concludes that they display value data in a manner that is more comprehensible than the conventional tabulated form.

He may be right but, despite the painstaking persuasion of this book, it is difficult to see local authorities in Britain finding the will – and the resources – to change their traditional practices.

Land-value maps, in their function of showing the tribute which the land-owner is able to extract from the land-user will, of course, always have their appeal to the public, whether or not land-value taxation is in force. Indeed, I would hazard the guess that, despite the absence of land-value taxation in Britain, a book of land-value maps for every city in the United Kingdom would be the year's best seller – and not just among the planning profession.

**Rating of Site Values. Report on a Pilot Survey at Whitstable. Rating and Valuation Association, 29 Belgrave Square, London SW1, February 1964.*

Rent hikes in Enterprise Zones

RENTS have risen in Britain's enterprise zones where rates, the local property tax, have been eliminated.

This is the claim by Michael Ward, the chairman of the Greater London Council's industry and employment committee. He has argued that there is an inverse relationship between rents and rates: "the lower the rates, the higher the rents."

He says: "Land prices in the Isle of Dogs have been pushed up because of the rate exemption, to as much as £150,000 per acre for industrial land and £400,000 per acre for office development.

"Cuts in rates end up in primarily subsidising landlords with windfall gains, rather than the industries they are meant to encourage.

"It would be far better to raise the rates within the Enterprise Zones, forcing those landlords who have speculatively hoarded land to bring it on to the market at much lower land prices, and using the rate income to develop factories and industries directly on the lines being pursued by the Greater London Enterprise Board."

ROSE STEVENSON, a 69 year old widow, had an easy remedy when she found that she could not afford to pay £1,200 (\$1,560), the rates (property tax) on her three storey London home. She moved the demolition men in, and within a week she had chopped off the top floor and left gaping holes in the side of the house. This devalued the building, and encouraged her council to send a tax demand that was revised down to £756!

REGISTERED SECRETS

BRAITN'S Law Commission has launched a consultation exercised to find out if the public should be allowed direct access to the land ownership register for England and Wales.

The register is secret – in contrast to Scotland, where citizens have the right to inspect the files and discover who owns land.

The Commission has focused its enquiry around the question whether the identity of a home owner should be kept secret or not.

But 50,000 leaflets circulated by the Commission does point out that access to the register could speed up development of vacant sites, and make conveyancing cheaper for house buyers.

LETTER: Prof. Britton replies

SIR, I feel that David Richards has both misrepresented my arguments and failed to understand them.

If it were not so, he would not have described me as one of those who are "so convinced of the importance of government intervention for the farm workforce" ("The case for laissez-faire", July-Aug., p.69).

I have always been in favour of a greater liberalisation of international trade, but I always emphasise that such a move would be hurtful to the interests of many British farmers (as well as to many continental farmers) if they could not get their costs down to those of New Zealand dairy farmers and N. American grain growers.

Mr. Richard Body evidently believes that the British family farm can compete with freely-imported produce from wherever it comes. I think he tends to underestimate the diseconomies of small-scale production.

It is seriously straining the meaning of words to say that "most farmers are not the recipients of farm subsidies". People who put forward this proposition usually quite overlook that even if the government (or the European Community) paid out no cash subsidies at all, farmers would still be substantially subsidised by the tariff protection (levies, etc) which keeps our prices above prices in world markets.

This large element of subsidy is, of course, paid by the consumers (often without their realising the situation),

and does not appear in budgetary estimates at all.

Prof. D. I. Britton,
Ashford, Kent.

David Richards comments: The title of Prof. Britton's paper was *Is there a case for farm income support?*, and his conclusion was yes, perhaps for a whole generation, while farm prices are gradually and judiciously lowered to world levels. This puts him firmly in the opposite camp to Richard Body as regards "the importance of government intervention for the farm workforce."

When I used the words "farm subsidy", I had in mind the whole package of farm support, not just direct cash grants, as all the figures I quoted demonstrate. Does Prof. Britton deny that most farmers, as farmers, receive no net benefit from that package?

To quote Dr. D. W. Pickard of Leeds University, "since 50% of the output comes from 13% of the farms, it is not unreasonable to assume that 13% of the farmers receive 50% of the [price] subsidies. These large amounts of subsidy have a detrimental effect on the rest of the farmers because they result in higher land prices and rents [and interest rates and feed prices]."

Irish land tax

Cont. from P.120

Now that the principle has been established, independent experts should evaluate the "adjusted acreage" formula – and come up with proposals for a revised land tax which the FitzGerald government could consider adopting if it is re-elected in three years time.

*Read GARY NIXON'S comments on the Irish economy in the next issue of *Land and Liberty*.