

# POLICIES & URBAN GROWTH

**W**ITH THE enormous increase in recent years of public policy planning and an equally vigorous output of urban planning literature, it is perhaps surprising that there have been very few good books for students on land policy and urban growth—a fundamental study area for those aspiring to a better understanding of the factors which influence the development of towns and cities. A welcome recent publication helps to fill the gap.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Darin-Drabkin, Director of the Institute for Land Resources Planning in Tel Aviv, has produced a readable planning primer to introduce students to the varied approaches to land policy throughout the free world. The 444-page book opens with a brief survey of the contemporary urbanisation phenomenon and follows with a fascinating chapter on future land needs for urban growth. Dr. Darin-Drabkin has calculated that, should the world's urban population increase by 2 billion—as expected before AD. 2000—the land requirement would be only 10 per cent larger than the area of France or 7 per cent of the surface area of the USA. He quotes Marion Clawson's estimate that it might be possible to settle 50-100 million additional people in the north-eastern urban complex of the USA just by using vacant land, without converting agricultural land to urban use. The problem of finding land for future needs is therefore not a quantitative one, although there are extreme demand pressures in particular locations.

The book includes well-researched chapters on the development of land prices in industrialised countries, the impact of the land factor on urban growth in the developing countries, international price level comparisons and the peculiar nature of the land market. These chapters provide the background for the main case studies of price formation in the Copenhagen region 1956-69, land acquisition in Sweden and the Stockholm experience, and the advance land acquisition policy in the Netherlands. From these, and other studies, Dr. Darin-Drabkin concludes that with the advance of urbanisation, what is required is a new concept of land ownership. What is the writer's main thesis?

## Book review by PETER HUDSON

After citing many case histories of the large rewards realised by the owners of land on the urban fringe which is subsequently converted to urban use, Dr. Darin-Drabkin finally concludes that the advance acquisition of such land by the public authorities is the best way of achieving planned development and equity between land owners and land users. "The purpose of urban land reform," he argues, "is not to reduce the rights of the individual to use his own land space, the private market has already done this through high prices. On the contrary, community land ownership will guarantee that each individual has an adequate space in a pleasant environment and with accessibility to jobs and services . . . . The public ownership of land needed for future urban development will insure the proper planning of the city region as a whole."

From this it can be seen that he is concerned not only with the financial returns stemming from the community's requirements, but also with the rational use of land within a preconceived planning system. This thesis, of course, is not new and has been advocated by writers from Ebenezer Howard onwards. Indeed,

**H**UGH O'Shaughnessy, in a story filed to *The Observer* (15.4.79) from Mexico, reports:

"The Government points to the vast fortunes which have been made, and are being made still, by land speculators. 'As the peasants still stream into this city, all the land speculator has to do is to keep his land idle and he's assured of making a fortune,' a social worker said. 'But,' he added, 'when the Government tries to tax real estate the Governor is called a Communist and is accused of undermining the free enterprise system.'"

the rationale behind this concept has been embodied in the British new towns and expanded towns legislation, as well as in other European countries. But there is more than one way of securing the economic rent for the community within a planning framework. It is interesting therefore to note that although Dr. Darin-Drabkin has usefully examined the application of land-based taxes in various countries, and appears to be inclined to favour such taxes as a means to stimulate urban renewal and the use of vacant land within developed towns and cities, he finally opts for the municipalisation of land as his preferred policy. Enthused, no doubt, by the methods of advance land acquisition used notably by the Netherlands and Sweden, Dr. Darin-Drabkin has elected to support a method of agricultural land conversion to urban uses which involves the payment of compensation to existing landowners. The arising financial burden (albeit a smaller burden than full compensation at urban use value) still has to be financed from tax receipts until the land becomes higher revenue-earning after its conversion to urban use. I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that the same results—the conversion of land to urban uses according to programmed land use planning and at reasonable prices—can be achieved through land taxation measures without imposing a mortgage on the taxpayer. This is where the author and I part company.

However, although we may not all agree with his thesis, we all have much to gain from his systematic and well-researched approach to what is a fundamental problem of economic development in the Western world. Dr. Darin-Drabkin has meticulously worked his way through the relevant literature and undertaken original and valuable research in a neglected field. His book is to be highly commended as essential reading to all students of land policy. We shall hear the arguments more frequently as this century draws to its close.

1. *Land Policy and Urban Growth*—H. Darin-Drabkin, Pergamon Press (Urban and Regional Planning Series, Volume 16).
2. *Administrative Implications of Site Value Rating*—P. R. Hudson, Land & Liberty Press.