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BOOK REVIEWS

The Zoning Game

By

RICHARD F. BABCOCK

Madison, Milwaukee, and London:
University of Wisconsin Press. 1966.

Pp. xvi, 202, \$5.75

In writing this book, Mr. Babcock had valuable experiences, a fashionable topic, a foundation study grant and enthusiasm. He also had excellent material for two or three essays. He has stretched the material, and sometimes the reader's patience, in a book with a clever title.

In fact, "clever" is a good overall characterization of this effort from which Mr. Babcock emerges as being much more interesting than his treatment of the subject matter. Still, it is lively in places and laced with uncommon good sense. There is more than enough to make it worthwhile albeit uneven reading for a wide audience in the field of urban affairs.

Not unexpectedly, Mr. Babcock concludes that contemporary zoning is mostly a dirty sport which taints its players and tarnishes American landscapes. Anyone who has played a hand or kibitzed in the zoning game is apt to agree with Mr. Babcock's assessment.

For knowledgeable lawyers like Mr. Babcock, the rules are chaotic, and most of the players are unfit. For them, the zoning game is often an abuse of the judicial and administrative processes. To urban planners the game is likely to be an over-publicized perversion of a useful concept. To developers, the zoning game is alternately a focus of fear and contempt. Clearly, most professionals, especially the better ones, don't like the game.

The situation is much less clear for the amateur player, the ordinary citizen of the metropolitan region. In his lifetime, he may become involved in a zoning game only once or twice, typically with reluctance. Once in, however, he can play with zest. To a professional, an amateur is often guilty of breaking rules, ignoring precedents, injecting personal prejudices, and voicing irrational arguments. Zoning hearings can easily become the protest demonstrations of the suburban middle class.

This understandably disturbs Mr. Babcock. Yet, any abuses by amateurs must be seen in a broader context of growing alienation

for today's urban dwellers. As the web of metropolitan life thickens and government becomes more impersonal, amateurs can easily lapse into civic anomie. Zoning proceedings occasionally let them feel they are being heard. The fact that their statements are often gibberish to professionals is a commentary on the mutual education job that needs to be done and is not necessarily an indictment of the zoning process per se. Simply because other forums are lacking, zoning matters assume unwarranted importance in the workings of local suburban government.

Mr. Babcock has provided an interesting, if not definitive, explanation of why zoning doesn't work. In his view, a major cause is that amateurs are not qualified to take part in the zoning process as it is presently structured. Perhaps he is correct. It is unfortunate, however, that his views did not extend further and suggest ways in which amateurs can play a more meaningful and constructive role in determining the pattern and character of their communities.

If real reforms are to take place, amateurs and professionals must be more involved and must confront each other, both in zoning and in the many other games our society uses to decide what directions urban life shall take. This notion of joint participation is, of course, not new. Yet after several years of lip service to the concept, the number and quality of gut-issue contact points have not really improved in the suburbs, much less the inner city. Most liaisons between amateurs and professionals still are shadowed by paternalism, ritualism, parochialism, or most recently, nihilism.

Certainly, administrative reforms like those suggested by Mr. Babcock are needed but so are deliberate efforts to insure that, one way or another, any number can play the zoning game. It may not be a very good game these days, but it is usually one of the very few "pro-am" events in town. Even without a prescription for the larger malaise of growing disengagement between professionals and amateurs, Mr. Babcock's book on zoning should force the reader to recognize that the real name of the game is "involvement."

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