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H. S. Coblentz

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Location and Land Use

By

WILLIAM ALONSO

Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1964.

Pp. xi, 205, \$5.50

The author, an Associate Professor of Economics at Harvard University, is Acting Director, Center for Urban Studies, Harvard University, and teaches Regional Planning at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

As many have now realized, city planning is no longer a matter of zoning and putting up a building; a whole theory and practice of planning has been built up around it and other disciplines. Of particular significance in the last ten years has been the growth of regional techniques of analyses. These have been given a new impetus by the use of computers. In this particular work, Mr. Alonso believes there might be value in generalizing and articulating with care the classic theory of rent and location. This has been discussed on and off during the last hundred and fifty years in our western society. There is a close relationship between the methods involving economics and geography. This is not a simple text because it is essentially a monograph dealing with a very profound subject, and a working knowledge of advance mathematics is necessary in order to do the work proper justice.

To many practitioners of city and regional planning, these theories seem of remote value, but it is absolutely necessary for practicing planners, from whatever discipline they come, to know that there are people working in the "back room" to enable practices to be built out of reliable theories. Fortunately or unfortunately, many of these theories very rarely get into the arguments in a planning commission hearing. This is as it should be because a public hearing is basically a matter of an appointed or elected group making a decision on the basis of sound professional advice rendered it. It is not a dispute between the theorists and planning commissioners.

A question of where an individual arriving in a city and wishing to buy some land to live on is discussed from two viewpoints—the economic and the ecological. There has been a great argument of recent years between the ecologists and the economists; the economists tend to argue that sentiment has no part of it, that the individual in question is an economic man faced with the double

decision of how large a lot to purchase and how close to the center of the city to settle. The ecologists respond that the individual would also consider the apparent character and racial composition of the neighborhood, the quality of the schools in the vicinity, the distance from relatives living in the city, and a thousand other factors. Putting it more succinctly, the individual merely wishes to maximize his satisfaction by owning and consuming the goods he likes and avoiding those he dislikes. Complicating this, of course, is the fact that an individual is, in reality, a family. Family decisions may have to be reached in a family council or be the responsibility of a single member.

The economist, and particularly Mr. Alonso, says, "We are not concerned with how these tastes are formed, but simply with what they are. Given these tastes, the simplified family will spend whatever money it has available in maximizing its satisfaction."¹

The individual has at his disposal a certain income that he may spend as he wishes; it equals land costs, plus commuting costs, plus all other expenditures. Mr. Alonso rightly points to the fact that land values in American cities have boomed since World War II. Curiously, as he states, this boom has taken place largely in the periphery of metropolitan areas, while the center land values have increased little and, in some cases, actually declined. He instances Robert Park's² theories on ecology of 1929, which theorized that improvements in transportation and population growth increased the advantage of the center.

Since World War II, there has been a rapid increase in urban population, in automobile ownership, and in income. Why then has there not been a rise in land values at the center?—and he goes on to examine the effects of the three changes selected.

This work provides a most useful addition to the theory of land value, one that must become increasingly important if we are to make the most of the new techniques available in the development of land. Somebody said, some little time ago, "We know how to get from here to the moon; we have theorized on it and we have experimented and now we have carried the experiments into practice." We need to use this same approach in connection with the development of the rapidly growing metropolitan areas in North America.

H. S. COBLENTZ*

1. P. 18.

2. R. E. Park, *Human Communities* (The Free Press 1952).

* Executive Director, Valley Beautiful Citizens Council, Inc., Phoenix, Arizona.