

Urban containment strategies: A case-study appraisal of plans and policies in Japanese, British, and Canadian cities

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative assessment of the nature and impact of urban containment policies in three countries, through examination of strategic plans for six case-study cities. Recent development patterns and current planning policies are mapped and assessed, and compared to a conceptual model of strategic options for urban containment. Emphasis is on rationales for containment, locational attributes of areas where development is encouraged or curtailed, the overall supply of developable land, and policies relating to development densities.

The case studies demonstrate more stringent control on the location, timing, and density of development in Britain and Japan, with shorter time horizons and tighter development boundaries than in Canada. The Canadian cities, however, are moving towards higher densities, to enable transit-oriented development.

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Introduction

Rural–urban fringes (a.k.a. urban fringes) around cities in all developed economies are subject to low-density, piecemeal, leapfrogging development of the kind labelled urban sprawl (Kunstler, 1994; Burchell et al., 2002; Brueckner, 2000; Duany et al., 2001; Bourne, 2001; Heim, 2001; Theobald, 2001). Though such automobile-induced sprawl was experienced earliest in the United States, its threat to agricultural land supply raised particular concern in Great Britain (Hall et al., 1973), and hastened the development of land use planning legislation and controls (Relph, 1987; Cherry, 1988; Rydin, 1993). Protection of agricultural lands is an important planning goal in other crowded countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Japan, and in certain North American jurisdictions (such as Ontario,

Oregon, and British Columbia). Increasingly, the issues of energy-efficiency and control of greenhouse gases, and the desire for “smart growth” and transit-oriented development (TOD), also drive urban containment policies (Dawkins and Nelson, 2004).

This paper provides a conceptual model of growth management options, which is then employed in a comparative assessment of the nature and impact of urban growth management policies in Britain, Japan and Canada. It complements other comparative studies (e.g. by Rothblatt, 1994; Evers et al., 2000; Dawkins and Nelson, 2002) through its emphasis on mid-sized cities, and through its comparable mapping of spatial strategies. By concentrating on actual issues, plans, and outcomes in six example cities, I have attempted to provide local contexts from which empirical lessons can be derived. The paper is not intended as a thorough comparison of national planning legislation or practice, but rather as an evaluation of typical containment strategies and urban development patterns, and an assessment of the spatial linkages between them.

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Throughout, the focus of enquiry is on how planning policies control and re-direct development, rather than completely halt it: *some* peri-urban development must be allowed, and even encouraged in appropriate locations. The questions are how much development, where, and at what densities.

Strategies for containment of sprawl

Regional or structure planning was born of the need to control and direct urban development, and it is therefore no surprise that planners and the planning literature regard it as axiomatic that sprawl is bad. In recent discussions (see for example, Kunstler, 1994; Burchell and Listokin, 1995; Burchell et al., 2002; Buzbee, 2000; Speir and Stephenson, 2002; Burchell and Mukherji, 2003), concerns range from the practical (wasted commuting time, loss of prime farmland, inability to provide cost-effective public services), to the social (encouragement of social exclusion, atomization of family life) and the aesthetic (loss of valued countryside, sterility and uniformity of low-density peri-urban development). Two impact categories which are amenable to measurement and quantification receive particular emphasis; these are negative environmental impacts (e.g. Kahn, 2000; Johnson, 2001), and excessive costs for provision of urban infrastructure and services (e.g. Burchell and Listokin, 1995; De Sousa, 2002; Carruthers and Ulfarsson, 2003). But “objective” analysis may sometimes be a screen for emotional and almost religious attitudes on the “sacrosanct” and inviolable nature of the countryside (Bailey et al., 2004).

By contrast, there is much less support or empathy for sprawl, even when re-labelled as “country-estate” or “large-lot” development. The major advantages are seen in terms of economic efficiency, working through the hidden land of the housing market to provide households with maximum choice (of location, lot size, and house type) at minimum cost (Windsor, 1979; Ewing, 1997; Gordon and Richardson, 1997). Economists, free-marketers, libertarians, and of course rural property-owners uphold these market virtues. There is also recognition by theoreticians and by more thoughtful planners that planning does indeed entail both direct and indirect costs, resulting in higher housing costs and/or lower housing quality (Peiser, 1984; Evans, 1991; Simmie et al., 1992; Burchell and Listokin, 1995; Knaap, 1998; Phillips and Goodstein, 2000; Hall, 2001; Dawkins and Nelson, 2002; White and Allmendinger, 2003).

The strategies for containment of sprawl are various in their details, but similar in their essence. The main ideas were suggested by Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City movement around 1900, and were fully implemented in the Greater London Plan of 1945 (Hall et al., 1973, pp. 166–73). This regional plan imposed a

tight urban development boundary, beyond which a broad swath of land was designated as a “green belt,” within which development would be severely curtailed. The “overspill” population from London would be accommodated in independent and freestanding new towns beyond the greenbelt. The plan was largely successful, owing to the legislation of extremely powerful development control, which prohibited all as-of-right development, and the greenbelt idea was widely copied in Britain and elsewhere (Grayson, 1990; Lyle and Hill, 2003). Variants of the two-pronged development boundary and greenbelt approach have been employed to great effect in North America, notably in the metropolitan regions of Portland (Harvey and Works, 2002) and Vancouver (Tomalty, 2002). Their effective use requires stringent development control (a development permit system or DPS) and/or exclusive agricultural zones rather than conventional zoning (which typically allows some form of development as-of-right). Such strong control is increasingly labelled and promoted as “growth management” (Duncan and Nelson, 1995; Daniels, 1999; Heim, 2001; Carruthers, 2002), and is a major component in the related concepts of “smart growth” (Danielsen et al., 1999; Daniels, 2001; Alexander and Tomalty, 2002; Fillion, 2003) and TOD (Dunphy, 1995; Cervero and Kockelman, 1997).

Fig. 1 illustrates a variety of strategic options for urban containment (a.k.a. growth management), ranging along a continuum from most restrictive (A) to least (E). Options A and B both incorporate strong bounding through the use of a tight development boundary surrounding a small “urban envelope”. Within this “urban promotion zone” (the Japanese term) all development during the plan period is at moderate to high density, on central water and sewer services. In variant A, only the central city is allowed to expand, minimizing the perimeter length, whereas in variant B several neighboring villages may also expand within their own envelopes, and “strategic gaps” are maintained between built-up areas (BUAs) (Lyle and Hill, 2003). In both cases, there is strict development control outside the envelopes, of the greenbelt type. The term “rural reserve” is used here, to indicate the maintenance of a rural landscape and traditional rural land use/cover types such as agriculture, forest, or rangeland. Total consumption of greenfield sites is minimized through strong bounding, but at the cost of higher densities and higher housing prices in new development.

Options C and D show less rigid containment, as the development boundary is relaxed outward, and the size of the urban envelope(s) is increased. With more land available in the urban promotion zone, both densities and housing prices may be somewhat lower. Beyond the service development boundary, variant C still retains an extensive greenbelt or rural reserve, but on lower-grade land as-of-right development may occur. Such

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