

Political ecology of exurban “lifestyle” landscapes at Christchurch’s contested urban fence

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship of planning ideals of sharply defining edges between urban density and greenspace and alternative urban greening arrangements as they are manifested in a case study of exurban “lifestyle blocks” on the fringes of Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. Exurban development outside Christchurch’s urban growth boundary – called the “urban fence” – provides an example of tension between municipal attempts to curb sprawl and exurbanites’ desire to live in the dispersed settlements outside of urban boundaries. These struggles play out at different scales and in a range of different metropolitan contexts. This paper reports on the results of an ethnographic study of Christchurch urban fringe residents’ residential land-use narratives and practices. The paper focuses on landscape preferences and concerns of a sample of small-scale productive land users and explores the implications of their versions of urban greening in the context of policy visions for the urban edge. A political ecology interpretation highlights relationships in this case study between competing claims about fringe greening and fringe landscape practices. These contests over the landscapes of the urban edge illustrate ways that municipal and regional planning visions for the urban edge conflict with the ideals and practices of those residents and land use managers who might otherwise be some of the strongest supporters of urban greening initiatives. Competing discourses about the urban edge relate in different ways to concerns about abrupt urban containment and to practices that act on these concerns. I briefly discuss promising examples of edge greening in this case that may provide models for participatory management of contested and multi-use greenspace at the urban–rural fringe.

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Introduction: Greenspace as a container for urban growth

Legible boundaries at the edges of cities are used as logical ordering mechanisms for many modern cities (Hall et al., 1973). In many municipalities with sharp urban edges, the reinforcement of these boundaries with visible greenspace is used to make the boundaries more legible and also more legitimate (Herington, 1990;

Kühn, 2003). Visible greenspace plays a conceptual role in making these urban boundaries part of what defines the urban (Bunce, 1981). The “urban fence” is an urban growth boundary used in British colonial contexts influenced by “town and country” planning, where “town” lies inside the fence, and the green landscape of “country” lies outside it (Hall et al., 1973; Herington, 1990). The benefits of nearby green areas are used rhetorically to support a vision of particular relationships between the urban and the rural: orderly development within the urban fence and unimpeded non-urban use of land outside it (Harris, 1969; Hall et al., 2004).

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Benefits associated with this land use arrangement include reduced energy consumption, increased local food security, and constraints on increases in land value likely to work against urban containment ideals by encouraging the replacement of rural land uses by exurban residential development (Riddell, 2003). Greenspace provision and urban containment are together seen to address common problems of contemporary urban form, particularly of urban sprawl, such as environmental degradation, increasing spatial disparity in urban quality of life, and cost of service provision. A broad class of perceived problems with urban growth tends to be associated with changes to greenspace form or to access to greenspace, both because this is a highly visible landscape change, and because “green” landscapes are symbolically important in both obvious and subtle ways that relate to urbanization’s landscape changes (Perkins et al., 2004; Pincetl and Gearin, 2005). Increasing evidence from studies of urban deconcentration suggests that the rhetoric of green urban boundaries may encourage tensions and dissonances between planning discourse and land use practice (Jobes, 2000; Kühn, 2003; Murdoch and Lowe, 2003; Hurley and Walker, 2004; Forster, 2005). The study of amenity migration to urban edge “lifestyle” landscapes discussed in this paper suggests that such dissonances may lead constituents of fringe landscapes who could (by their own expressed practices and ideologies) be important supporters of fringe policy to become disillusioned with planning policy, and to feel disempowered in relation to planning processes. Further, the study suggests that public discourses of greenspace that are meant by municipal planners to help contain urban growth may instead function to support residents’ rationales for *contesting* strong urban containment by participating in sprawl beyond the urban fence. These contests over the landscapes of the urban edge illustrate ways that municipal and regional planning visions for the urban edge conflict with the ideals and practices of those residents and land use managers who might otherwise be some of the strongest supporters of urban greening initiatives.

Residents and managers attraction to urban edge greenspace may be in tension: people reproduce sprawl by moving to urban fringes for many of the same reasons that municipalities want to preserve these edges as greenspace. The proximity of extensive greenspace at the urban boundary makes it convenient for recreational use and for access to the benefits accorded to greenspace. Part of the logic of growth containment stems from the increasing difficulty of access as the edge extends further from urban centers. But the attractiveness of urban edge greenspace often means that urban residents want not only to be able to access these landscapes for recreation, but also to be able to live

there to enjoy rural residential “lifestyle” while still having access to urban areas.

This paper examines a case study reporting on residents’ and managers’ experience of contests over policies for sharply delineated and contained urban growth at the edge of the Aotearoa New Zealand city of Christchurch. Two recent changes in Christchurch’s greenspace policy domain have been shifts in normative policy ideals for land use planning at all scales of government and the ongoing contestation of planning for urban containment by urban edge residents. These changes in land use policy in Christchurch provide an opportunity for explicit discourse about concerns and practices, and for considering tensions in greenspace planning at urban edges – particularly in terms of questioning the form of urban growth and the role of greenspace in the context of sustainability. These tensions often remain problematically implicit at many stages of planning processes, or they emerge in highly charged emotional and symbolic ways that the planning process is poorly equipped to handle. This case study examines different frames through which policy makers and urban edge residents view urban edge greening at a critical moment at the emergence of an implementation plan for the new Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy that was proposed during the course of this research.

Using the results of a study of residents’ greening practices and ideals related to City of Christchurch official plans to briefly trace representations of urban edge greenspace as a source of urban ordering and containment, I explore the tensions highlighted by breaching and questioning of the normative ordering ideology of the “urban fence” in Christchurch. I focus on the concerns respondents raised about the spatial arrangement of urbanization and urban greenspace, the primary practices by which they arrange and manage their greening projects, and the public discourses by which they connect their concerns and their practices. Explicating and examining tensions and possibilities demonstrated in Christchurch residents’ attempts to use greenspace practices and policies to address the pressures of “sprawl” may open the discourse on the relationship between urban containment and urban greening to fruitful comparison and critique.

Methods: Ethnography, interviews, landscape analysis, political ecology interpretation

The methods and interpretive frames that organize this study are informed by the central themes of the political ecology tradition within cultural geography. As Robbins (2004) summarizes them, political ecology’s central questions ask about why and how environmental

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