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Sizing up the City: Urban Form and Transport in New Zealand
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microclimatic issues are not even mentioned in this book. Urban microclimatic issues play a crucial role in urban sustainability. For instance, in terms of energy consumption, although density and housing types are key factors influencing energy use, they make sense only if they respond to the local microclimate. In terms of community vitalization, too, urban microclimate is decisive because it influences pedestrian comfort, which is the key to attracting pedestrians and encouraging outdoor activities, and consequently abandoning car-oriented transportation. Not giving due consideration to this environmental design issue is the main disadvantage for this book which has “sustainable” in the title. Thirdly, although there is a good attempt to interconnect all the rules, the discussion of each rule is slightly over-simplified and often isolated from other factors. For instance, the book suggests an interconnected green system, but it does not consider the safety issues that can be prevalent in large-scale green spaces within cities. The green infrastructure is only referred to in terms of urban infiltration and water treatment, passing over any other concerns such as waste treatment and power supply.

Urban sustainability is an extremely wide, comprehensive, interdisciplinary and under-explored area. Although the book is well structured and well discussed with respect to certain concerns of community development, it still only touches a small fragment of the holistic concept of sustainability. As Condon mentions in the last paragraph, it would take another book to continue the discussion. Design strategies for sustainability should involve more discussions and consider a wider range of disciplines. It is intriguing to imagine the title Rules for Sustainable Communities as a general one for a series of interconnected books focusing respectively upon all the different aspects of sustainability in a holistic manner.

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Philippa Howden-Chapman, Keriata Stuart & Ralph Chapman (Eds)

This edited collection publishes a series of papers given at two summer schools held by the New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities in 2008 and 2009. The central themes are the impact of the private motor car on the city and the potential role of urban structure in encouraging more sustainable forms of travel. Hence, the topic is critical, and one that has been researched intensively over the last 30 years, with much debate and difference in opinion in terms of the potential for and impact of increased densities and mixed uses. It is interesting to see some of this thinking applied to the New Zealand context, where cities are typically dispersed in nature and heavily dependent on motorization, often growing rapidly from the 1950s onwards, when the dominant mindset was to plan cities around the use of the motor car. The book is structured by three themes—patterns,
disciplinary perspectives, and policy perspectives—with a final section considering a future research agenda and conclusions.

There are some interesting chapters. Ewing et al., for example, provide the starting point for much of the analysis in the book, introducing their work from the US examining what reductions in vehicle miles travelled (VMT) and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions might be possible with compact development rather than urban sprawl. They argue that the most compact metropolitan areas generate around 25% less VMT per capita, and that a doubling of neighbourhood density would result in an approximate 5% reduction in VMT (pp. 21–23).

Preval et al. are nicely positioned next, considering an often-repeated concern: that the majority of the public have a preference for owning a home in the suburbs, or in New Zealand’s parlance, “a quarter-acre pavlova paradise” (p. 34). They query this conventional understanding: apartment-based inner-city living or smaller-lot housing is becoming more popular for the younger age cohorts (typically the 20–30 age bracket) but also for wider groups such as ‘empty-nesters’; and certainly most people would like to live within walking or cycling distance of local shops, parks, schools, and employment. Also, there are few examples of attractive new higher-density urban developments, and the current well-connected urban suburbs tend to be unaffordable to many—hence, there may be a significant unknown and latent demand for urban living.

Woodward and Lindsay examine the role of cycling and the likely health impacts of increasing short urban trips by cycle. This is an interesting dimension in the sustainable transport debate: alongside the potentials for VMT and CO₂ reduction there are potential major health gains from increased activity levels—in reduced heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, dementia, diabetes, and depression. These impacts hugely outweigh any increased cyclist fatalities from vehicle crashes.

Harris considers transport and the urban realm, arguing that “highway engineering has tended to treat towns as obstacles to be bisected ... while rail managers have focused on long distance bulk freight and largely given up on maintaining passenger services” (p. 81). He discusses the fragmentation of public transport under competitive regimes, for example where ticketing is not integrated between companies—a familiar issue across many cities (p. 88). All of these issues are very problematic if New Zealand’s cities hope to match the policy rhetoric and become more sustainable. Harris considers that the alternative to a system focused on moving vehicles is to make “place-making” an explicit goal of transport planning—now that would be progress!

Overall, the book is an interesting read—a good introduction to the urban structure and travel topic and its application in a highly motorized country such as New Zealand. The chapters tend to be a little short, and so don’t really allow much empirical analysis or discussion; and their quality is variable. Much of the commentary is a little uncritical of the relationships between the built environment and travel, taking for granted that compact development will automatically produce lower VMT. Unfortunately, the reality is often a little more complex. The debate on self-selection is ignored, though it must be important in New Zealand, where many people purposively choose to live in dispersed urban areas. Perhaps it will be difficult to persuade many of these of the benefits of urban living relative to the space available in the suburbs. However, in policy-making terms, this is what should be done, and the conclusions are clear: urban structure
needs to be much more fully utilized as a tool in the transition to more sustainable mobility.

Some emerging themes are developed: that urban structure, public transport, walking, and cycling work well together as a package; there are many “co-benefits” such as reduced CO₂ emissions, a positive impact on city design, and health impacts from more active travel. Resilience should be seen as a more important issue in design, particularly in view of climate change, oil scarcity, and the likely higher cost of motor car usage in future years. The conclusions are fairly conventional: that the nature of urban development in New Zealand is a major contributor to CO₂ emissions, and that changes in urban form offer a significant long-term potential to reduce them. We have perhaps known this for some time; but the problem of implementation remains. There are signs of changed approaches and attitudes—living in denser urban centres is becoming more popular for some; the quality of life in urban centres is becoming much better, with increased opportunities as more areas become redeveloped in attractive ways; and a greater level of investment is being used in public transport. But, of course, there is a long way to go—reducing New Zealand’s reliance on the private car will be a difficult and lengthy task.

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