

ENVIRONMENT

Contaminated Land: Reclamation, Redevelopment and Reuse in the United States and the European Union Peter R. Meyer, Richard H. Williams, and Kristen R. Yount. Edward Elgar, Brookfield, VT, 1995. 223 pp. \$69.95.

This timely book addresses the topic of reclamation, redevelopment, and reuse of contaminated lands (urban brownfields) in the United States and the European Union. This emerging issue is important to urban areas on both sides of the Atlantic.

The book is broad and oriented toward understanding the regulation and policies concerning environmentally contaminated land. It features a historical overview and approaches the brownfields problem without getting bogged down in the minutiae of health science or development finance. The main aim is to generate a deeper understanding of risk, cost, and regulatory issues that have impeded redevelopment of brownfields. The book provides a general approach to facilitating redevelopment of brownfields, which the authors view as a public good.

The book is organized in four parts. The first provides an introduction to the contaminated land problem, and sets forth a framework for evaluating the issues of history, political concerns, public role in land control, liability, regulation, and capital investment barriers. Next is a discussion of contaminated lands in the United States, followed by a third section on the situation in the European Union and its member states. Significant emphasis is placed on the United Kingdom. The last section compares and contrasts brownfield policy on both sides of the Atlantic and sets forth broad policy approaches to management and regulation.

The authors' research methods include a thorough literature review and comparative critical analysis and synthesis of available secondary sources. Little or no primary research is included, although brief case studies prepared by others punctuate the work at strategic points. The lack of any empirical analysis makes the book fairly general and, in some instances, diffuse, abstract and a bit hard to follow.

Contaminated Land fills an unserved niche in the literature. Few other books are available on this topic, and they deal solely with superfund sites, or derelict lands in the United Kingdom, or surveys of brownfield legislation throughout the United States. Despite the timeliness of the book, and the authors' reasonable attempt to update the book near press time, some important regulatory changes have occurred, rendering the portions of the debate that address state laws in the United States somewhat obsolete (e.g., covenants-not-to-sue and risk-based corrective action standards).

The work has several strengths. It has an excellent literature review and a very good overview of legislative backgrounds and the evolution of Superfund and other brownfield regulation in both the United States and the European Union. The conceptualization of the dimensions of the brownfield problem is well done, and the authors do a very good job of setting the boundaries of each of these dimensions. The book also contains many useful insights, especially on the risks of brown fields and the downside of the joint and several liability aspects of United States environmental policy. I also found the discussion on the equity aspects of getting potentially responsible parties to fund site clean-up (when their actions at the time were legal) to be very stimulating. Despite the apparent lack of applicability to the United States, the discussion of brownfield approaches taken in the Netherlands and Germany was also interesting to read about.

The book suffers from a few weaknesses. Most troubling is the tenuous United States-European Union analogy, The United States at the federal level, with its majority voting and 200-year track record of democracy, does not correspond well to an evolving supranational political shell with super-majority

voting, divergent legal approaches, and least-common-denominator environmental policies. This is further exacerbated by the closeness of the United States-United Kingdom situation: the main lessons for the United States seem to come from Great Britain, but they are not directly discussed on a nation-to-nation basis. Further, the organization of the book seems diffuse at times, particularly toward the end.

In terms of content, I disagree with the authors' contention that access to development capital is not related to risk-averse behavior on the part of financial institutions. For example: ". . . [T]he tighter the supply of development capital, the more difficult it would be to reclaim previously contaminated sites. This straightforward proposition, rather than describe (sic) a causal chain involving contamination mitigation, severs the causal link!" (159). The authors provide no evidence for this oversimplification, and seemingly contradict themselves by saying that "major write offs due to efforts to avoid liability exposure" are a factor in the recent North American experience with risky loans (Table 7.4). Avoiding the complexities of this debate can only hinder development of useful recommendations for curing the capital shortfall.

Their main prescription is a decentralized collective approach, to the exclusion of privatized or nationalized approaches. The decentralized approach is heavy on citizen involvement (a subject not discussed in detail until the end of the book). My main question concerns the feasibility of this approach, which depends on arguable hidden assumptions. For example, is contaminated land itself (not the negative externalities it causes) a private or public good? Some of the financing mechanisms set forth by the authors (tariffs, or progressive wealth tax, rather than a consumption-based tax) do not seem well supported by economic theory.

The book is nontechnical, and therefore very accessible. It should be successful in addressing its intended audience, which would include government regulators, people interested in the evolution of environmental issues, and scholars doing comparative analysis of policymaking. For planning practitioners in the United States, the parts of the book on the United States and the United Kingdom are most applicable. The book would be more interesting for European Union practitioners, because their regulatory situation is still evolving. In sum, this book is well worth reading and makes a substantial contribution to the debate and literature on brownfields redevelopment.

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By **Robert Simons**

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Source: Journal of the American Planning Association, Summer96, Vol. 62 Issue 3, p402, 2p  
Item: 9607210582