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an outcome of everyday planning practice

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11. Territorial governance and urbanisation: an outcome of everyday planning practice

David Evers

11.1 INTRODUCTION

As the global population hurtles towards nine billion souls, few places on Earth remain untouched by human activity. In the Anthropocene, spatial planning and territorial governance assume a new meaning: allocating land uses responsibly to avoid undermining remaining fragile ecosystems while at the same time trying to avoid producing unlivable built environments. Our institutions are not necessarily up to the task: land-use decisions are usually carried out within antiquated governance and regulatory frameworks harbouring deeply entrenched incentives that powerfully encourage unsustainable development. A prominent example is the practice of encouraging urban growth to finance the public costs of previous urban development. In the context of “prisoner’s dilemma” competitive regionalism (Knox and McCarthy, 2005, p. 517), such “growth machine” mechanisms tend to trump notions of sustainability (Logan and Molotch, 1987, p. 87). Viewed in this way, sustainable urban development is much more than a question of good urban design; it is intrinsically interlinked to the system of payoffs and social norms regarding how we use land (Salet, 2018) and govern the territory (Cotella, 2023).

Although most urban development is now occurring in the global South, the global North is usually upheld as an example of best practice, particularly countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom, where land-use planning is presumed to be occurring prudently and efficiently. The rationale is that emulating these countries will produce similar (sustainable) effects. However, these so-called forerunners also struggle with their own inefficiencies and can fail to control urban development. Like elsewhere, planners in these countries are continually trying to learn from their mistakes and adapt to new circumstances. Rather than recounting a list of success stories out of context, which are often extreme cases anyway, it is more informative to understand the everyday practice of land development in these countries and ask to what extent observed land-use outcomes were the product of good planning or territorial governance.

This chapter does this by first interrogating the term territorial governance and its relationship to spatial planning. The following section begins with the argument that these terms are largely synonymous, although the former places more emphasis on the arrangements put into place to (re)allocate property rights and land-use decision-making rather than aspects of technical knowledge, urban design, or spatial quality. As such, territorial governance is deeply political, normative, and culturally embedded. The second part of the section turns to the drivers of urbanisation and the scientific literature devoted to explaining this. From this, it emerges that territorial governance is not in itself a driver but rather a filter, transformer, and redirector of other drivers like the economy and demography, and that everyday decision-making is much more determinative for the urban structure than iconic projects or policies

(Halleux et al., 2012). This has significant implications for the debate on how to promote sustainable urban development worldwide and for the European Union's call for an "integrated sustainable urban development approach" in particular (Carpenter et al., 2020, p. 227).

The next section integrates these ideas into a research design. It is dedicated to explaining how territorial governance and planning systems can be affected by the implementation of "interventions" (here meant to encompass the totality of plans, programmes, measures, projects, etc.) to promote sustainable urbanisation. It considers how and why these interventions were drawn up, how they entered routine planning practice, and what impacts they had on territorial governance and actual urban development. This was done by means of a comparative case study approach using country reports from the ESPON SUPER study on sustainable urbanisation as raw material (ESPON, 2019). For the sake of comparison beyond Europe, the United States (US) – Portland, Oregon – was appended as a case study and carried out through desk research.

The bulk of the chapter is then devoted to describing how (interventions to) territorial governance affect urbanisation in everyday planning practices in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Germany, and the US. The final section contains a reflection on causality and on the scope for promoting sustainable urbanisation on a global level, either within prevailing territorial governance structures or through their reform.

11.2 URBANISATION AS TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

11.2.1 Planning as Territorial Governance

A shift in planning terminology has occurred since the turn of the century: the terms urban and regional planning (US) and town and country planning (UK), both of which suggest the rational arrangement of land uses and city building, were seen as too restrictive to describe the activities now associated with the profession and discipline. Given competing interests between stakeholders on the process side and competing principles such as social justice and sustainability on the content side, planning cannot avoid addressing normative issues (Forester, 1987). Stances within planning theory run the gamut from arguments for overt advocacy of the downtrodden and voiceless, on the one hand, to pleas to be a neutral broker, on the other. Between these extremes are approaches that attempt to reconcile differences through, for instance, integrative negotiation techniques (Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987) or urban design methods where the unique attributes of a location are utilised to discover innovative solutions. In any case, planning entails the coordination, mobilisation, and regulation of actors and resources – in a word: governance – towards the admittedly vague "project" of "making better places" (Healey, 2010). The term "spatial planning" – a Euro-English neologism¹ – is increasingly invoked to describe this broader conceptualisation (Sykes et al., 2023, p. 270). Instead of ordering abstract space as a literal reading would suggest, spatial planning can be equated with place governance (Healey, 2017). Indeed, Nadin and Stead (2008, p. 35) formally define spatial planning as "the ensemble of territorial governance arrangements that seek to shape patterns of spatial development in particular places".

Spatial planning's ambition to control urban development is extremely heterogeneous because every "particular place" has its own unique characteristics. There are physical attributes to consider, such as topography, water quality and quantity, soil fertility, and infrastructure;

prevailing social aspects, such as economic development, segregation, and quality of life; and crucial institutional aspects, such as level of centralisation, regulatory tradition, and political culture. A place that is delineated, usually according to an administrative area where official land-use decisions can be made, is referred to as “territory” in Euro-English. Taken together, we can observe the linguistic convergence of spatial planning and territorial governance (Dühr et al., 2010; see also Chapter 1 of this *Handbook*). The following section turns to how this territorial governance can be employed to make urbanisation more sustainable.

11.2.2 Controlling Urbanisation

In market economies, land-use planning rarely initiates urban development but instead mediates initiatives put forward by others, usually for profit (Adams, 1994). Its power mainly lies in determining whether and under what conditions a proposal can be granted permission, usually in reference to documentation articulating public interests, such as a strategic plan. But what influence does spatial planning really have on urbanisation? A useful starting point for answering this question is provided by Colsaet et al. (2018) who provide an overview of the most salient factors determining the magnitude and shape of urban development as identified in the scientific literature. In addition to commonsense factors such as geographical barriers, the need for office or industrial space to accommodate a growing economy, and housing and retail to accommodate a growing population, there are some less obvious factors such as social preferences (e.g. for second homes, gardens, cars), the profitability of agriculture on land supply, institutional fragmentation, and municipal finances. Fortunately for planners, planning capacity and restrictions were also listed as salient factors. In a similar vein, the ESPON SUPER project argued that urbanisation should be considered a social as much as a physical phenomenon, as it is the collective outcome of individual land-use decisions made by human beings (Evers, Van Schie et al., 2020). Therefore, to understand urban development, it is essential to have a basic micro-level understanding of how these individual and “ordinary” decisions are taken.

To open the “black box” of everyday planning practice, we must recall the most common (dis)incentives for urbanisation. Land is an immobile and scarce resource, and most urban development is an expensive and risky endeavour. However, the potential gains are immense given the value difference between, for example, a hectare of farmland and a residential neighbourhood. A mediator in the process is usually a municipal authority with the power to grant or withhold planning permission. This entity must balance its incentives (e.g. revenue from fees, property taxes) against other aspects of the public interest. To move forward, a business case must exist where potential profit outweighs costs and risks. As institutional factors or the “rules of the game” determine the distribution of profits, costs, and risks over different parties, these often-hidden factors ultimately determine the magnitude, location, and even shape of urban development (Buitelaar, 2019; Debrunner and Kaufmann, 2023; Evers, 2004), and with it, whether the outcome can be deemed sustainable.

This raises the question of how current land development practices can be adapted towards more sustainable outcomes. In other words, how can these often-hidden factors be manipulated? One way is to examine how this is already occurring in different contexts. Especially in Europe, where very different planning traditions exist in proximity, the desire to make better places and control urban development is fed by international comparisons. There is a fairly long tradition of comparative planning research and an equally long list of policy failures

due to uninformed, incomplete, or inappropriate transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Still, transnational learning should be possible if sufficient heed is given to the respective contexts (Sykes et al., 2023, p. 270).

11.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research aims to uncover how everyday planning practices can be adapted to promote sustainable urbanisation. In formal terms, the research question addressing this is: What are the impacts of interventions drawn up to control urbanisation in Europe and the US? To investigate this, we surveyed the relative success of several territorial governance interventions designed for this end, also noting any side-effects. The research design employed was comparative case study research (i.e. the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Germany, and the US), a proven method to study institutional phenomena such as the way territorial governance affects urbanisation in different settings (Buitelaar, 2019).

The ESPON SUPER project² case-study material comprised the main data source. These case studies were selected to reflect the diversity of Europe, with attention paid to geographic coverage, urban versus rural areas, scale (national to local), and intervention types. All interventions were old enough to make ex post statements about their success. Comparability across cases was enhanced by applying a strict research design where the respective investigators in the field were obliged to use standard templates to collect and order written information and conduct interviews; the case study reports also had an identical structure (Farinós Dasí et al., 2020). The relatively high level of consistency provided a solid foundation for the present research. The US case attempted to gather the same kinds of data using desk research. Portland (Oregon) was selected as a case due to the large amount of written documentation available.

Given the indirect relationship between the interventions and urbanisation, as well as the importance of contextual factors, this research takes cues from strategic planning evaluation methodology. There, a distinction is often made between conformance and performance (Faludi, 2000). The former is concerned with whether physical outcomes are in line with the aims of the plan; causality is in this case implicitly assumed but rarely proven. The latter concept, performance, regards whether the plan affected relevant decision-making; in this case, causality can usually be ascertained using qualitative methods. Therefore, in addition to asking about impacts on substantive, procedural, or governance matters, the counterfactual question was posed to stakeholders: what would have happened if the intervention had not been implemented? This helped to gain insight into the degree of impact. During the interviews, respondents often stressed that the impacts were largely dependent on the context in which the intervention originated and were impeded by certain challenges. Again, it is impossible to know how much different the impact would have been under different circumstances.

More specifically, the research sought to reconstruct the following elements for each case:

1. A description of the prevailing territorial governance as reflected in routine urban development practice, particularly the key elements of the institutional context in which land-use decision-making occurs. This provides insight into how initiatives are taken, how planning permission is granted, and the development process.

2. The description of the intervention. In each case, dissatisfaction about the sustainability of the functioning of the planning system resulted in the implementation of a measure or reform. Examining the motivations behind this intervention and how it is crafted provides insight into the degree of perceived institutional malleability and political feasibility.
3. The impact of the interventions. An assessment of whether and how the intervention improved urban development practices (performance), as well as whether it resulted in more sustainable urbanisation (conformance). Specifically, it considers whether implementation failures and successes were due to factors such as technical capacity, participation, (lack of) strategic vision, coordination, leadership, or political will.

The discussion of the case studies in the next section will follow these three points.

11.4 EXPERIENCES IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Because all case study reports except for Portland, Oregon are freely available on the ESPON website (ESPON, 2019), this section will recall only the most salient details about the intervention's implementation, focusing on challenges and lessons learnt following the three topics raised in the previous section.

11.4.1 The Netherlands: Remnants of a Planner's Paradise

The characteristic Euclidean topography of the Netherlands and its large-scale urban extensions give an overall impression of a land of “rule and order” (Faludi and van der Valk, 1994). Dutch spatial planning, particularly at the national level, has produced world-renowned concepts such as the Green Heart, growth centres, and mainports, earning the Netherlands the epitaph “a planner's paradise”. Despite this reputation, planning has always been mostly a local activity and, surprisingly, not even that plan-led (Needham, 2014). Like elsewhere, most initiatives are taken by private developers or landowners whose ideas frequently do not conform to the local zoning plan. What ensues is a negotiation with the municipality regarding the merits of the initiative. In the ensuing decision-making on whether to grant planning permission, provisions enshrined in various sectoral and strategic municipal documents play a clear role, as do harder regulations (e.g. provincial ordinances, European policy). In the end, it is the city council that decides whether to draw up a new zoning plan accommodating the new development. Dutch planning has traditionally been typified as exemplary of the “comprehensive integrated approach” because it seeks to balance competing land-use claims (Nadin and Stead, 2008), but also belongs to the “market-led” planning tradition in that it is generally responsive rather than proactive (Berisha et al., 2023).

This case study regards an intervention introduced at the national level (for the full report, see Evers, Farinós et al., 2020). It came at a time when the Netherlands was experiencing a surge in greenfield development along highways, particularly industrial and commercial functions (Zonneveld and Evers, 2014). Rather than marking a heightened ambition, the intervention was introduced at the culmination of a decades-long deregulation strategy, supplanting the entirety of the remaining national urbanisation policy with a simple “comply or explain” rule – the “ladder” for sustainable urbanisation. The ladder mandates that all zoning

plans granting urban development rights must demonstrate (1) that there is a regional need for the development, (2) if located outside the built-up area, why an infill site was not chosen, and (3) whether it is multimodally accessible. Citizens were given the right to challenge plans if they felt the justification wanting. The intervention uses indirect power to control development: the harder it is to provide a credible explanation, the riskier the initiative becomes if challenged in court.

The interviewed participants had very mixed views about the intervention. In general, higher tiers of government were sympathetic, whereas municipalities were divided and private-sector respondents were largely critical. Compliance with the ladder was extremely low shortly after its introduction. It was only taken seriously after the courts began to strike down zoning plans for non-compliance. This created a flurry of litigation on definitions (i.e. what exactly is an “urban development”, “the region”, and what constitutes the “built-up area”?) which distracted from the purpose of promoting sustainable urbanisation. An evaluation in 2016 revealed that the most salient impacts of the intervention were indirect: it affected governance and the mentality of planners more than it did the size and location of development (Evers and Blom, 2016). For example, the requirement to argue a regional need intensified coordination between municipalities when planning for housing and work locations, sometimes resulting in regional allocations and overarching urbanisation strategies. Municipal planners found that the intervention forced them to be more critical about the desirability of developers’ initiatives. Some respondents indicated it also helped to restrain overzealous mayors and municipal economic development departments from overdeveloping. Since the introduction of the intervention, large-scale greenfield development has slowed, but most respondents argued this was more the product of the financial crisis than planning. After five years of implementation, under political pressure, the ladder was relaxed. In 2023, it again came under fire for potentially stifling small-scale greenfield development, which had been reframed as desirable. Following a populist far-right electoral victory, it was abolished entirely in 2025.

11.4.2 Belgium: Struggles Within a Planning Purgatory

In the European context, Belgium is often cited as a country with weak controls on urbanisation, as evidenced by the scattered developments along rural roadways. Tellingly, an aerial photograph of the Brussels region adorns the cover of the book *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Bruegmann, 2006). In stark contrast to its northern neighbour, it is common for individuals to buy plots of land and work with an architect to realise their dream house (Tennekes et al., 2015). Rezoning is often a non-issue as large swathes of the country were designated as urban in the 1970s and 1980s to encourage urban development. In addition, many people take advantage of the fill-in rule, which grants landowners the right to build a home between two others on a roadway. Finally, there is a widespread practice of “political service”, where citizens can ask elected officials for help with, for example, obtaining building permits. In most cases, local authorities are often willing to grant development rights to help recover the costs of prior development, a situation derided as a “rural Ponzi scheme” by De Decker (2017). The resulting chaotic and haphazard morphology of much of Belgium is, therefore, no accident, but a direct product of the prevailing territorial governance (Buitelaar and Leinfelder, 2020). Belgium has been placed in the “conformance” planning tradition (Berisha et al., 2023).

This case study recounts the efforts of Flanders to take control of urban development (for the full report, see Claus et al., 2020). This was enabled by a 1996 decree establishing strategic

planning, obliging “structure plans” to be made by the federal state (Flanders), the five provinces, and all 308 municipalities. A year later, Flanders published a plan articulating its intent to concentrate future urban growth in cities. The intervention was celebrated by planners, academics, civil servants, and politicians (Albrechts, 1999). It was felt that the common basis for decision-making (i.e. coherent territorial governance) offered by structure plans would not only result in better developments but also expedite the planning process. More recently, and in line with the EU’s “no net land take” target, Flanders pledged it would gradually reduce its yearly urbanisation rate.

The interviewed participants were positive about the impacts of the intervention on governance. The fact that the decree involved provinces in planning created a welcome intermediary level to coordinate spatial development (vertical governance). To assist structure planning, Flanders issued an influential document on how to calculate housing needs. It also ushered in a period of intermunicipal planning. In Ghent, for example, the 2003 structure plan involved intensive collaboration between municipal departments and the private sector, whereas the 1993 plan had been drawn up only by the responsible department (horizontal governance).

As regards the intervention’s substantive effect on urbanisation, opinions were more divided. The implementation was accompanied by a decline in greenfield development and a revitalisation of urban areas, but it is unclear whether this can be attributed to structure planning. Importantly, the intervention was soon challenged in court by developers and landowners, resulting in the (for planners) astounding decision that structure plans should not be used to deny building permits, effectively detoothing the intervention. This decision was reversed in 2009, but conformance is still not obligatory. According to the respondents, strategic planning does not play a significant role in managing urban development. In a tacit admission of failure, the Flemish government announced in 2014 that it would reduce land take using a more flexible, medium-term implementation-oriented instrument called a policy plan. However, this announcement had the opposite effect: fearing their development rights might be rescinded, landowners felt pressured to build quickly. At the same time, planning was decentralised so that the Flemish government and regions had little means by which to enforce the state’s land take target. In reaction, an ambitious multipronged strategy was approved in May 2023, which includes placing a moratorium on greenfield development, buying up development rights at market rates, implementing small-scale interventions to improve the sustainability of the diffuse urban structure, and tightening restrictions on exemptions. It remains to be seen whether this will result in less land take or spur more speculative development. In any case, the institutional volatility is remarkable.

11.4.3 Italy: Turning Competition into Cooperation

Constitutionally, authority for spatial governance and planning in Italy is shared between national and regional governments, but in practice, regions enjoy great autonomy in establishing planning laws, tools, and policies. As a result, planning and development practices vary significantly from region to region. Still, some basic similarities can be mentioned. Legally, both private actors and public authorities can take the initiative for a land-use change, and the municipality is charged with evaluating its conformance with the land-use plan in force. If this is not the case, initiators can obtain a waiver to the plan. If successful, an operational agreement is signed, and construction can commence. Traditionally, Italian local plans were detailed and rigid and, although they formally allocate development rights, ad hoc negotiations

between developers and municipalities are not infrequent. For this reason, Italy is usually placed into the “urbanist” (Nadin and Stead, 2008) and “conformance” planning traditions (Berisha et al., 2023).

This case study (for the full report, see Cotella et al., 2020) regards an intervention in Bassa Romagna within the Emilia Romagna region, one of the most heavily urbanised parts of Italy. Until the late 1990s, urban development in the region was driven by a pro-growth logic fuelled by inter-municipal competition, making it relatively easy for new initiatives to obtain planning permission. Typical developments included industrial sites, speculative developments (e.g. second homes on the seacoast), infrastructure, and commercial facilities. Development in the municipality of Bassa Romagna reflects that of the wider region: scattered, small-scale, and rapid. This was exacerbated by the financial crisis, as it impelled municipalities to sell off public land and encourage development to collect urbanisation fees (*oneri di urbanizzazione*), one of the most important sources of income. This spurred further competition between municipalities and, with it, urban sprawl.

The 2000 regional territorial governance law sought to put an end to such practices by introducing strategic instruments like the Municipal Structural Plan that could be applied at the inter-municipal level. In 2009, the Union of Municipalities of Bassa Romagna adopted such a plan to manage urban growth and promote sustainable development. It was more flexible than the regulatory local plans it replaced and was produced through an inclusive participatory process. It aimed to transform fierce inter-municipal competition into cooperation. From this time onward, development proposals would be evaluated for conformance with the Union’s plan. To further dissuade greenfield development, regional resolution No. 186/2018 doubles development fees for projects that convert agricultural land into built-up areas and, on the other hand, decreases these by at least 35 per cent (and up to 100 per cent) for urban regeneration.

The interviewed participants were positive about the intervention. They acknowledged that the plan met a real need for an integrated spatial vision that could unite horizontal (municipalities and sectors) and vertical (government tiers) interests in the fight against sprawl. In addition, the planning process was praised for its inclusiveness and ability to gain support from a wide range of public and private stakeholders. Concerning implementation, it was noted that a crucial enabling factor was an institutional reform that granted greater powers to municipal partnerships (from soft “association” to the harder “union”). On the other hand, success was hindered by the financial crisis, which changed how some stakeholders viewed growth, leading some respondents to conclude that the intervention had arrived too late. Nevertheless, a majority felt that the plan had caused a paradigmatic shift from a very regulative and atomistic approach to a more strategic and integrated spatial planning culture. As such, most felt the plan successfully reduced inter-municipal competition by removing geographical, cultural, technical, and political barriers and raising awareness about transparent and inclusive public participation and the importance of reducing land consumption. Notably, all respondents agreed that urbanisation in Bassa Romagna would have been less sustainable (diffuse urbanisation, land consumption, overexploitation of natural resources) had the plan never been implemented.

11.4.4 Germany: Challenges of a Federal System

Although spatial planning is legislated at the federal level, for example the Spatial Planning Act, each state has its own planning laws, regulations, and policies resulting in a patchwork of parallel systems managing how land is used and transformed. Further down the governmental ladder are different types of regions and municipalities engaging in strategic and land-use planning. Existing alongside this complex territorial governance system is a system of sectoral planning for transportation, infrastructure, water management, nature, energy, and the like.

The German system tries to resolve conflicts between the various planning competencies in advance and explicitly. This is arranged partly through a set of general rules. In addition, policies must clearly state what is “negotiable” (i.e. what can be balanced against other interests), and where one interest clearly prevails over another. The result of all this is a complex web of relationships between superior, subordinate and equivalent interests. (Evers and Tennekes, 2016, p. 90)

The German planning system is often located within both the “comprehensive integrated” and “regional economic” approaches (Nadin and Stead, 2008) and more recently placed into the “market-led” planning tradition (Berisha et al., 2023).

This case study concerns a national target to reduce land consumption (i.e. urbanisation) from about 130 hectares per day (ha/day) in 2000 to 30 ha/day in 2020 (for the full report, see Hellings et al., 2020). Following the zeitgeist of the early 1990s, the intervention’s rationale was grounded in the notion of intergenerational environmental justice. It argued that open landscapes and fertile ground were rapidly disappearing in Germany, often without a proven need. For example, housing construction was being fuelled by increased per capita consumption of living space rather than demographic growth. This trend was encouraged by local authorities seeking to broaden their tax base. Paradoxically, regions with a shrinking or stagnating population often saw considerable land consumption. This was most acute in the eastern states which, after unification, underwent rapid suburbanisation of housing and retail. In addition to consuming land, it eroded the liveability and service levels of cities.

The 30 ha/day target for 2020 was set by the Federal Government in 2002. In 2016 it was modified slightly to “under” 30 ha/day by 2030. Given that the national level cannot impose or approve land-use plans directly, it serves as a soft policy to be implemented by others in everyday planning practice. The main tool is persuasion: convincing lower tiers of government to work towards the goal. For its part, the Federal level passed a 2013 law encouraging infill development and policies promoting urban regeneration and a 2017 federal ordinance to encourage compact development. Given the legal impediments to imposing top-down controls on urbanisation at the national level, various alternatives such as a cap-and-trade scheme for land urbanisation have been considered (Henger and Bizer, 2010).

The interviewed participants widely supported the intervention in principle. One criticised the decision for a quantitative rather than a qualitative target, while others lamented the lack of control to enforce the policy. Even though the target itself was widely supported, implementation was hindered by a lack of responsibility: “While the Federal Government and the state governments see implementation as the task of the municipalities, the stakeholders in the field of municipal and city planning would like to see more instruments and information from higher levels” (Hellings et al., 2020, p. 16). This difference of opinion was reflected in the positions taken by the interviewed stakeholders. Nevertheless, there are signs that the

30 ha/day target has had an impact on urban development practices. Although it is impossible to establish causality, the rate of urbanisation has been cut in half since the target was set. Moreover, a recent study revealed that land consumption decreased more significantly in states with comparatively high regulatory intensity (Eichhorn et al., 2021), suggesting that planning matters.

11.4.5 The United States: Fighting an Uphill Battle

The US has a dubious reputation among planners as the country that “invented” urban sprawl (Fishman, 1987). Indeed, the American planning literature has noted that land-use policies and instruments such as transport planning (Nivola, 1999), growth caps (Davis, 1992) and (exclusionary) zoning are themselves responsible for creating or exacerbating sprawl (Ewing et al., 2022). Although there is no national planning to speak of, development occurs in similar ways throughout the nation, and it should be added, not so dissimilar from parts of Europe. Like the Netherlands and Germany, land zoned for urban development carries rights to build. In other cases, landowners can negotiate with municipalities for exemptions (variances) or work with them towards a new zoning plan (Hirt, 2007). This often results in a plan no larger than the size of the development, called “spot zoning” (or “postage-stamp plans” in the Netherlands). Like Belgium, many Americans dream of self-built or commissioned homes, but most of the housing stock is still produced by professional developers. And, like many European countries, various US states have instigated “growth management” to promote sustainable urbanisation (DeGrove, 1992). For this reason, the US could be placed into the “market-led” planning tradition along with the Netherlands and Germany (Berisha et al., 2023).

Of the many US growth management policies nationally – Wassmer (2006) reported that almost a quarter of metropolitan areas pursue some form of urban containment – the most iconic and well-documented is Oregon’s Urban Growth Boundary (UGB); it is arguably the most interventionist and most successful as well (Ewing et al., 2022). Since the 1970s, municipalities in the state have been required to draw borders around their cities showing where urban development may occur. The size of the UGB depends on population projections and can be adjusted over time, but the modification process is laborious (Sullivan, 2018). As Oregon’s largest city, Portland is of particular interest because its UGB, established in 1979 and hardly expanded since, covers the entire metropolitan area. Moreover, it has the “territorial governance distinctiveness” of having a directly elected metropolitan planning agency (Dong and Zhu, 2015).

Portland’s UGB has undergone countless evaluations. Already in the 1990s, there were reports that the policy was achieving its objectives, and this has been the general consensus ever since (Kline et al., 2014; Nelson, 2004; Song and Knaap, 2004), although there are dissenting opinions (Giovannoni, 2021). Dempsey and Plantinga (2013), for example, found evidence that UGBs are effective in directing urban growth, but that other factors may be more important. Grout et al. (2011) provide further nuance, calculating that the price differential (a proxy for impact) was high near the south and west borders of Portland’s UGB, but not to the east, suggesting that the UGB geographically redirects urbanisation but does not necessarily reduce it. Most of the critical literature has focused on the potential side-effects of the UGB, such as lowering property values outside the UGB despite their attractiveness as building sites. However, part of this attractiveness owes itself to the UGB, by keeping the countryside relatively pristine and increasing scarcity. Indeed, these complaints could be interpreted as

indications that the policy is working as it should! Other criticisms regard housing prices. Here it has been difficult to establish causality, as Portland’s UGB policy has been accompanied by affordable housing schemes (Nelson et al., 2007). In any case, Oregon demonstrates that it is possible to steer urbanisation even in institutional environments relatively adverse to planning.

11.5 CONCLUSIONS

Given that most of the interventions surveyed in this chapter were orientated towards redirecting and/or reducing urbanisation, it is tempting to evaluate their success in terms of the actual development which occurred (conformance). This is, however, not scientifically valid: there are too many intervening variables and no control groups. On the other hand, there seems to be substantial evidence that the interventions affected territorial governance and planning practices. In this sense, we can conclude that, over time, they could indirectly affect urbanisation. Table 11.1 summarises the case study findings.

Table 11.1 Overview of case studies

Case study	Context/challenges	Impact/innovation
<p><i>Netherlands: ladder</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market-led system • National level intervention • Generic rule for zoning plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sprawl due to decentralisation and deregulation of planning • Poor compliance until plans struck down; “juridification” and political backlash 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modest impact on development • Stimulated regional governance and programming development • Mandated self-reflection about desirability of plans
<p><i>Belgium: structure planning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conformative system • State level (Flanders) • Strategic planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sprawl due to historical development rights • Intervention defanged even before it could prove itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accelerated sprawl in the short term • Promoted regional coordination • Promoted interdepartmental coordination
<p><i>Italy: inter-municipal planning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conformative system • Metropolitan level • Strategic planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sprawl despite rigid plans due to easily obtaining variance • Intermunicipal competition for development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intermunicipal coordination enabled by national regulation • Change in planning culture to more flexible/adaptive
<p><i>Germany: 30 ha/day rule</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market-led system • National level • Quantitative target 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of legal powers to implement or enforce target • Differences between states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of the target helped garner consensus • Impact via citizens challenging plans
<p><i>United States: UGB</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market-led system • Metropolitan level • Place-based policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General hostility to planning • Political instability and spoils system can thwart long-term agreements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective in redirecting urban growth (not reducing it) • Elected metropolitan body gave legitimacy

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Several commonalities emerge from this table that could serve as lessons to countries wishing to draw up interventions to change planning and development practices towards sustainability. For example, the Netherlands and Germany both employed a relatively simple rule at the national level to steer urbanisation by remote control: implementation is carried out by local planning authorities and enforcement by citizens. In both cases, greenfield development slowed, but it is uncertain whether this could be attributed to the intervention (conformance). What does seem certain is that the intervention affected the mindset of local decision-makers (performance). Interestingly, what is cited as a blessing in Germany (citizens legally challenging plans) backfired in the Netherlands.

All cases cited inter-municipal competition as a major obstacle to sustainable urbanisation. Most of the time, the intervention was found to improve or even enable regional governance. This was an unintended byproduct of the Dutch ladder, but for Italy, one of its hallmarks. In both cases, however, it was a national regulation that enabled governance innovations at the regional level, and in both cases, there was evidence of a change in planning culture. Flanders had elements of both: structure planning was a governance innovation with the distinct aim of curbing sprawl. The same is true for Oregon: an elected metropolitan authority was instated to implement planning. Like Italy and Belgium, this helped to fill the “regional gap” in planning and counter public-sector compartmentalisation. It should be noted that such innovations and improvements are sometimes undermined by parallel rescaling of territorial governance, such as the decentralisation of planning in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Another indicator of impact could be the extent to which the intervention encountered resistance, either by vested interests or institutional inertia. In this case, the Dutch example is illustrative. The ladder had little effect on planning practice until it was validated through the courts. Afterwards, it was perceived as a threat by those who had speculatively bought rural land on the urban fringe, and subjected to political attacks until its demise in 2025. On the other hand, Portland’s UGB has been consistently and vehemently denounced by development interests (indicating effectiveness) but has withstood these attacks for decades (Sullivan, 2018). Again, the democratic status and institutional embeddedness of the metropolitan authority likely contributed to this success.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that urbanisation is highly path-dependent. Importing interventions from abroad will not change development practices at home unless these are so internalised that they instigate institutional change (i.e. different payoffs, players, and modes of interactions). In most cases, this can take a long time. Moreover, cities themselves are path-dependent (it is easier to densify a diffuse city than a compact one) and dyssynchronous in their phase of development (Dembski et al., 2019). Managing urbanisation through territorial governance remains an imperfect balancing act with no easy answers or easily transferable best practices (Berisha et al., 2024). Instead, each system is struggling within and against its institutions to varying degrees of success. Comparative research might not be able to deliver readymade solutions, but it can broaden the horizons of planners and policymakers mired in everyday development practices to inspire them to craft suitable interventions towards sustainable urbanisation.

NOTES

1. European integration has required the production of jargon to standardise concepts between the EU member states. As English is de facto the common language, Euro-English often redefines existing English words using meanings from other languages. Land-use planning in Dutch in German is literally “ordering of space” and in French “territorial arrangement”, giving birth to terms like spatial planning and territorial cohesion (see also Chapter 1).
2. See <https://www.espon.eu/super>.

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