

BOOK REVIEW

Keith Pezzoli *_Human Settlements and Planning for Ecological Sustainability: The Case of Mexico City_* MIT Press, Urban and Industrial Environment Series, 1998 (ISBN 0-262-16173-7), 437 pages with index. Hard cover, \$40.00.

Review by Mark J. Spalding

_ Human Settlements and Planning for Ecological Sustainability _ goes to the heart of what is needed to accomplish sustainable development in an urban setting. Particularly it describes the balance needed in the most difficult urban setting, a megacity in a developing nation, and perhaps the worst case of all examples of such cities, Mexico City. In short, Pezzoli explains why the ideas of conservation of natural areas and the scientific necessity of protecting the land through which aquifers are recharged is simply overwhelmed by the most basic of human needs, shelter. "The study provides a critical coevolutionary account of both state-society relations and environment-development relations in the dynamic growth of human settlements." (Page 3).

The fascinating part of this well-researched, well-documented book is that it is really three in one. First, it tells a compelling stand-alone story about the development of the Ajusco greenbelt zone, a story in which Pezzoli has made excellent use of government and NGO documents, personal interviews and media coverage. He covers the politics and policy of the government, of the popular resistance of community activists, and of the well-intentioned but sometimes misguided external actors. The story is supplemented with excellent graphics and photographs that make an otherwise difficult scenario much easier to visualize. Second, it is a theoretical text that examines the urban development models applied to our cities and tests them in this incredibly complex real-world example. Third, it is a history book tracing the pre-human historical biogeophysical formation of the Valley of Mexico and its human transformations (intentional and otherwise) through to today.

This book and the study it contains are vital to our future. It is estimated that by the end of this decade half of our world's population of 6 billion will live in cities, and up to 1.5 billion of them will have to struggle in order to achieve a subsistence livelihood. The story of Ajusco, which Pezzoli clearly knows in detail, tells of this heart-rending struggle for space to live and build homes that produces an equally saddening destruction of the natural environment in an area intended for conservation. He sets forth the many and diverse efforts made by the government to prevent the settlement of the mountainside – many of which perversely backfire. In doing so, Pezzoli provides a complete view of the circumstances. The reader will empathize with those struggling to survive and with the desperate needs to conserve the land.

Structurally, the book is divided into four sections. Section 1 relates to the global and comparative context-setting theories for addressing sustainability in urban human settlements. Section 2 covers the political and environmental history of the Valley of Mexico. Section 3 is the case study of irregular settlements in the Ajusco area of Mexico City's ecological reserve. The book closes in Section 4 with the analysis of the political ecology of urban settlements under these adverse circumstances and correctly argues for a much more holistic view of managing these challenges. The lessons learned in Mexico City are ones that should be studied for potential application in many of the world's other megalopolises. In the case of Ajusco, the humans won the space they needed to survive, but at the expense of sustainability because the natural area needed for sustainable balance was lost. The development of the Ajusco greenbelt reduces forest cover, it both contaminates and reduces recharge of an important aquifer, and it further extends the area which must be serviced by the government.

This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in urban planning and the struggle for sustainable development in the urban context, especially in the developing world. It is also an excellent text for Mexico scholars who want to better understand Mexico City and why it has become both the dynamic center of the nation, and an example of the inability of government to take a positive, proactive political-ecological view due to the lack of checks and balances among the executive, legislative and judicial branches.

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