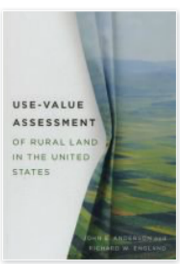
Green sought a conversational tone, and brief "starter" conversations; his interviewees chose the ideas. Some are old chestnuts: the Burnham Plan, Buckminster Fuller, the High Line. Some are modernist failures (the failure to fill San Francisco Bay). Some are modernist successes (the Tennessee Valley Authority).

Some provoke skeptical questions: Could we even build with "malleable materials" planned to be obsolescent? Or consider mega wind farms as sustainable? Some we may want to go out and buy, like a Styrofoam substitute made of mushrooms. Some are jaw-droppingly ambitious, like roads paved with solar panels.

Some are all planning (Grand Paris). Some are all art (the "lightning field"). Some are said to be trends (densification), while others combat problems many haven't heard of yet (alarm fatigue).

There is no conclusion. You get the idea.



Use-Value Assessment of Rural Land in the United States
2014; Lincoln Institute of Land Policy; 169 pp.; $30.

Fixing rural land assessment

The title may be technical, but the issue is as real as the bulldozer next door. Economists John E. Anderson (University of Nebraska–Lincoln) and Richard W. England (University of New Hampshire–Durham) take on *Use-Value Assessment of Rural Land in the United States*, which turns out to have been another well-meant program with unintended consequences.

It began in Maryland in 1957, as rural land was rapidly being developed outside Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Neighboring farmers saw their property taxes rising because their new residential and business neighbors required more services than farm fields, and because their own land now had greater potential for being developed. Farmers and advocates thought the process endangered agriculture and the family farm. Environmentalists thought it encouraged the alteration and destruction of ecosystems and the services they provide. The process appeared to be aggravated rather than addressed by a competitive land market.

Thus was born the idea—now implemented in 50 states—of assessing the land's value based on actual use rather than its market-determined "highest and best use." The authors describe the history and detail the different features of each state program, including for each the relevant statutes, eligible uses, eligibility requirements, and development penalty if a benefiting owner sells out.

The authors note that most use-value assessment procedures are a very blunt tool for any of their stated purposes. This can happen because of poor targeting: A wooded tract next to a national forest will often receive the same protection as a barren lot near an interstate exit, and even substantial property tax breaks do not seem to impede development for long. In addition, use-value assessment can simply be unfair, since other people—perhaps struggling owners of urban property—have to pay the taxes not paid by owners of land valued by its use rather than by the market. It may be more efficient for a state or locality to buy development rights or ecologically valuable land outright than to make this kind of "tax expenditure." (Not mentioned, however: The price of purchase is more visible politically than a tax break.)

The authors also point out that land taxation is "very efficient" (i.e., it doesn't "distort" markets very much), so they do not recommend moving toward income or sales taxes as replacements. They suggest four reforms of use-value assessment that might reduce or eliminate inappropriate property tax breaks:

- requiring annual applications and imposing more stringent requirements;
- imposing a serious development penalty;
- using technically accurate methods for estimating use value; and
- targeting the program toward lands that can be shown to produce "a significant amount of ecosystem services benefiting society as a whole."

Paying for compact redevelopment

Arthur C. Nelson, FAICP (University of Arizona), has written a policy guide and practical workbook, *Foundations of Real Estate Development Financing: A Guide to Public-Private Partnerships* (2014; Island Press; 175 pp.; $60 cloth, $35 paper, $34.99 e-book). He has recently made the case that existing surface parking lots can accommodate most of the U.S.'s coming need for nonresidential space and attached multilevel residential space. This book tells how to bring about this comparatively sustainable and locally beneficial outcome. "The future of the United States is redevelopment," he writes, and "the future of redevelopment is effective public-private partnerships."

But redevelopment in town is "vastly more complex" than building on a greenfield. Nelson says the market does not now provide enough profit to make it worth developers' while to take on many such projects. This is where the public sector—and his book—come in.

Some barriers lie within the traditional purview of local government: rectifying antiquated zoning, inadequate transportation and water infrastructure, pollution, a multitude of parcels and encumbrances, and neighbors' opposition.

According to the author, public-private partnerships must have a public purpose consistent with local plans, and they should not cost local governments more than necessary. After a chapter delving into the mathematics of development basics, Nelson notes that planning tools alone are rarely enough to bridge the gap and make a particular project profitable enough. He discusses six financing tools available:

- cash flow support (such as property tax abatements)
- fee reductions
- impact fee reductions
- cost shifting (whether from another level of government such as Community Development Block Grants, or from local Business Improvement Districts)
- loan support
- tax credits