It would be impossible to understand the 19th and 20th century socio-economic development of Western Europe without cities. However, for several decades following industrial revolution western societies became fascinated with anti-urban trends, to call only the most famous utopias of Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright and LeCorbusier. Soon they realised, though, that urban decline means also socio-economic decline, and in the course of post-war welfare state strategy the first urban renewal initiatives were undertaken. But the late 20th century processes such as globalisation, deindustrialisation and informatisation have rapidly changed the context in which cities are embedded, so that urban policies had to adapt to these new circumstances. The book of Paul Stouten shows how the process of urban renewal (or later: urban regeneration) evolved in the period since 1970s.

The book comprises nine chapters, which can be divided into two parts. The first four chapters discuss the theoretical, historical and political context of urban regeneration. Among them, especially interesting from a policy-oriented point of view is the third chapter, which presents the evolution of urban policies in the Netherlands. The other four chapters describe urban regeneration in the city of Rotterdam, and in particular in the core city district of Oude Noorden. In the last summarising chapter the question is addressed, how urban regeneration policies can be shaped in the context of sustainability.

Urban development is the not well-known face of Rotterdam, the famous harbour city. Rotterdam forms together with Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht the agglomeration of Randstad, one of the largest urban agglomerations of Europe. Among the cities of Randstad, Rotterdam is characterised by high unemployment rate and also high share of ethnic minorities. The history of urban renewal in Rotterdam dates back to the 1970s, and, according to Stouten’s words ‘Rotterdam’s approach to urban renewal became an example for other cities in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe’ (p. 223). Powerful protests against decline and demolition of old districts can be seen as one of the reasons underlying participatory urban renewal policies.

How can the title Changing Contexts… be understood? Stouten makes a distinction between two different periods of urban policy in the Netherlands. In the first period (from the 1970s to 1993) preference was given to the public sector, for example special rights were introduced to facilitate the purchase of dwellings by the municipality. In the
following years the approach has become more market-oriented, what at least in part can be traced back to the general trend towards liberalisation of public services. Another difference is the fact, that in the course of time the focus shifted from neighbourhood-scale interventions based mainly on physical improvements, to integrated urban and regional scale strategies, which include also strong socio-economic aspects. For that reasons, the first approach is called urban renewal, and the latter − following the definition of Roberts (2000) − urban regeneration.

There are many controversies about the results of urban renewal driven by the public sector. As the author states ‘politicians and social scientists have tended to ignore the positive results achieved by urban renewal’ (p. 223). He admits that ‘seen from a sustainability point of view, “building for the neighbourhood” strategies (the kind of Dutch urban renewal policy – A. R.) cannot, in hindsight, be classified in all its aspects as sustainable development’ (p. 224). In particular, some socio-economic problems, such as unemployment and dependency on social transfers, have not been solved by urban renewal. Indeed, such problems cannot be solved merely by small-scale urban renewal actions, because their reasons are structural. Also, in the course of time new problems occurred, for example related to the integration of ethnic minorities. Not disregarding all these issues, Stouten argues that urban renewal led to significant improvements in housing and living conditions in many deprived neighbourhoods.

The author seems to be sceptical towards the trend of far-reaching liberalisation, and suggests that the goals and instruments of urban policy should be redefined. Stouten sees the broad concept of sustainability, including environmental, social and economic dimensions, as a useful framework, although, as he remarks, this concept is often understood in a narrow sense. It is an interesting observation of the author, and I would add to this from my own perspective that the term ‘sustainability’ became a ‘trendy’ word and tends to be used inadequately, in situations which do not exactly meet, or even contradict the original idea. On the other hand, some scepticism arose about the question, how and when sustainability in general, and urban sustainability in particular can be achieved. To shatter these doubts, the author provides a set of criteria of urban sustainability, which are based on the literature, and applies some of these criteria, mostly the social ones, to the evaluation of urban regeneration in Oude Norden area (chapter 8). The results of this evaluation are generally positive, though some critical statements are made, and policy recommendations are given.

The book of Paul Stouten not only gives an interesting overview of urban regeneration processes in Rotterdam, but also sets these processes in a broader theoretical and political context, and provides arguments for the thesis, that we still need to look for new ways to strengthen the role of cities, but the experience of the past should not be disregarded. A more flexible and integrated approach to urban regeneration is necessary, which includes ‘typical’ urban renewal measures, but is not restricted to them. For that reason, the book is recommendable for scholars, students and practitioners interested in urban regeneration and urban sustainability, also, or even especially, in the countries which do not have yet much experience in this field, for example in post-socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe.
REFERENCE


Adam RADZIMSKI

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (Poland)