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Book review

Dealing with the 5 Ps of access. Review of Elements of Access: Transport Planning for Engineers, Transport Engineering for Planners. By David M. Levinson, Wes Marshall, Kay Axhausen (2017). Network design lab. 336 pages (electronic version $8,88; paperback $68, 88; hardcover $98,88)

There is an indissoluble link between land use and transport. It might sound hair-rising to those who theorised the positive utility of travel, but basically, most of the time we spend travelling is to reach places where we can carry out activities. Since the pioneering studies of Robert Mitchell and Chester Rapkin in the '50s, several scholars have studied the link between land use and transport and tried to foster a constructive dialogue between these two domains. Nevertheless, they are still deeply separate, in terms of disciplines, professions and planning domains.

The book is clearly aimed at bridging this gap, and more. It fosters an informed dialogue between transport engineers and spatial planners, grounded on mutual (more than reciprocal) knowledge. Furthermore, it tries to help both to communicate accessibility and its various facets to the public.

After a first and very brief introduction of the notion of accessibility, the very essential "constituent elements" (as the authors call them) of accessibility are described, each in a separate chapter: the People, about human behaviour; the Places, about land use; the Plexus, about the transport network. The last two chapters deal with interactions between the two sides of the coin: chapter V - the Production – deals with the economics of accessibility, tying together the previous sections. Chapter VI – the Progress – tries to address the coevolution of place and plexus over time, suggesting a look into the future.

One may argue that chapters II and III ("the People" and "the Places") are especially addressed to land use planners, while chapter IV ("the Plexus") to transport engineers. But the authors' aim is that both transport engineers, land use planners and anyone else get the whole of it, possibly finding their own path and freely jumping around the book.

The authors have been attempting to combine the two perspectives for long time, and the key notions of access, place and plexus already appeared in some previous works of David Levinson. This book seems to be a synthesis of previous works, not so much in terms of volume (336 pages are quite a lot) as in terms of being the expression of decades of experience and very extensive knowledge. To deal with the relationship between land use and transport, mentioning so many aspects and notions as the authors do, and following a logical order is not easy. And to follow the train of thought is quite hard, both due to the frequent internal references (that are indeed very useful) and to the fact that some issues are treated in quite a cursory way. But these are two sides of the same coin: the pros and cons of putting together so many things.

To facilitate understanding, the 5Ps of access (no mention by the authors to the fact that each of the constituent elements begins with "P", but I guess it is not a coincidence) are treated separately. The authors explicitly declare this choice, resting on pedagogical reasons, but at the same time they are aware of fuzziness and interactions between the notions and domains they deal with. Not by chance, the book is structured as a hypertext, with many internal references. This is essential to manage the multiple interactions between transport and land use and between several of the elements that are described. And it is very helpful for those reading it on an electronic device, but I cannot say the same for the paper version; handling the internal references on paper is much more demanding. Also, it seems to be missing some editing, especially for captions, images, internal references and footnotes that sometimes make the page quite unbalanced.

At the beginning of the book the authors say that land use planners understand transport from the perspective of the traveller ("the way everyone does"), without considering the system as a whole, while transport engineers tend to ignore land use and people's behaviour. And they underline the missing role of education, since it is here that the roots of land use/transport integration should be seeded. The book aims to provide a bridge between the two, helping engineers to understand people and places and planners to understand systems and technology. Maybe the authors would not agree with me, but a quite personal impression is that ultimately, throughout the book the style is that of an engineer (as to my knowledge all the authors are) that tries to explain as simply as possible land use-transport interaction to a spatial planner. (it could be called: "Elements of Access (for dummies)"). And albeit the focus is both on the transport engineering and spatial planning sides, as a spatial planner I missed a bit some of the complexity that planners and geographers might bring to the discussion.

A last point concerns bibliography: around 250 references are provided, but many of them are self-references and in general there seems to be an imbalance between USA and the rest of the world in terms of cited scholars and schools of thought.

As a spatial planner, I am satisfied with this book; I already have a background on people and places, so I am interested in the transportation side and I really enjoyed the reading. I found so much food for thought that I surely recommend it both to scholars and students in engineering and planning disciplines, as well as in transport geography (but preferably in the electronic version).

Elisabetta Vitale Brovarone,
Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning – DIST, Politecnico di Torino, Viale Mattioli 39, 10125 Torino, Italy
E-mail address: elisabetta.vitale@polito.it

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