Spatial justice and the NIMBY effect

An analysis of urban densification debate in Switzerland and the Netherlands

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Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Citation (APA)
Herdt, T., & Jonkman, A. (2021). *Spatial justice and the NIMBY effect: An analysis of urban densification debate in Switzerland and the Netherlands*. 85-87. Abstract from AESOP 2021 online conference, Gdansk, Poland.

Title: # Spatial justice and the NIMBY effect: An analysis of urban densification debate in Switzerland and the Netherlands

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What is seen as just in a society largely depends on public reasoning, which occurs in public debates. This paper analyses public debates around land use and densification in Switzerland and The Netherlands to understand how private and public interests interrelate in the tensions of urban growth. The paper is based on the hypothesis that while a consensus on the desirability of densification may exist in public, its implementation may cause direct tensions on a local level where it affects the quality of the immediate living environment. Therefore, insights into the acceptance of densification at a local level are considered important factors for successfully implementing densification projects.

The research is based on quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis covering public media outlets of different reach between

2010 – 2019. During that time, both countries implemented policies to limit land take and promote densification to answer the demand for housing in metropolitan areas. With their relatively high population densities and historical awareness of the scarcity of land and environmental concerns, both countries are at the forefront of sustainable planning. At the same time, both countries strongly differ in their specific planning approaches and historical perception of private property.

Focusing on environmental qualities and sustainability goals as indicators of spatial justice, the paper explores conflicts and looks into how private and public interests were addressed in public debate. Findings show a strong focus on private interests that dominate the debate and general disconnection of public and private interest in both countries, despite differences in policies and discourse. Here the highrise as urban densification typology is strongly influencing public debate. To counteract the found NIMBY effects, it is suggested to implement formal deliberative planning processes and instruments of governance which balance interests and maintain support for densification policy to gain a greater acceptance.

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