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CRITICAL APPRAISAL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLANNING THEORY

BASIL BRINK

Hierdie artikel begin met 'n oorsig van die ontwikkeling van beplanningsteorie en eindig met 'n omskrywing van sommige alternatiewe 'scenarios' wat die mens-omgewing verhouding uitbeeld.

Andreas Faludi stel in sy boek "Planning Theory" 'n definisie van beplanningsteorie. Hy vergelyk uiteenlopende benaderings tot beplanning en onderskei tussen die metodiek (wat beplanners en argitekte moet doen) en die werklikheid (die sosiale, politiese en ekonomiese werklikhede wat beplanners en argitekte moet probeer beïnvloed).

Onwetend het Faludi 'n intensiewe debat ontketen oor die beplanningsteorie en hierdie debat behoort verder gevoer te word ten einde kennis oor die metodiek en die werklikheid van beplanning te kan bekom. Hierdie kennis is noodsaaklik om 'n beter mensgeskepte omgewing daar te stel.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLANNING THEORY

On reviewing planning methods and theories about planning, the central issue for the past 30 years up to the beginning of the eighties, has been focused on whether planning is capable of rationality or not. Broadly speaking there are two camps – those that believe it is possible and desirable to plan in a comprehensive, systematic, rational way and those who believe it is not, usually suggesting alternative approaches.

The "rational-comprehensive" school includes Altschuler (1965), Ferguson (1975), Stuart (1976) and Faludi (1973). They maintain that despite very real limits to comprehensiveness it is still possible and desirable to plan in a rational, non-arbitrary way.

Altschuler (1965, p. 409) says that "Planning is . . . simply to infuse activity with consistency and conscious purpose", and maintains that Simon's theories of "satisficing" – look for a solution to a problem that is good enough as opposed to optimal – ". . . are essentially theories of irresponsible choice" (Footnote p. 301). He adds (p. 299). "In Organizations Simon and March discuss the satisficing model in their chapter entitled "Cognitive Limits on Rationality". By contrast, my concern is with social and political obstacles to rationality" what he refers to elsewhere as "a special knowledge of the public interest".

The proponents of alternative approaches to a comprehensive, rational planning method, maintain that it is impossible to consider all aspects of a problem and hence deny claim to comprehensiveness.

Ferguson (1975, p. 82) whilst supporting a Systems approach to architecture and city planning, nevertheless identifies limitations/restrictions to comprehensiveness in planning: "All this points to an inherent general weakness of the rational model: the analyst does not have the resources – time, energy, money, knowledge – to consider all relevant options and make a decision. Therefore in building his model, he abstracts selectively and sparingly from the real world with significant possibility for its distortion". Ferguson lists several factors which impede and undermine the systems approach:

- man's limited intellectual capacities
- his limited knowledge
- the costliness of analysis
- the analyst's inevitable failure to construct a complete rational deductive system or welfare function
- interdependencies between fact and value
- the openness of the systems to be analyzed
- the analyst's need for strategic sequences to guide analysis and evaluation
- the diversity of forms in which policy problems actually arise

A dogged determination to consider all aspects, variables or problem areas would prove too expensive, complicated and time-consuming. The planner has the awesome task of somehow finding a way through a maze of information overload whilst striving to keep the interest of the public at heart.

Ferguson (1975, p.83) and Faludi, (1973, footnote p. 150) are both of the opinion that there is only one seriously developed alternative to the rational-comprehensive approach – Charles Lindblom's method

of disjointed incrementalism, also referred to as the "science of muddling through".

Characteristics of Lindblom's methodology include

- The means available determine objectives chosen
- The costliness of achieving an objective is incorporated into the marginal comparison – differences in various means values are compared.
- Means and objectives are considered simultaneously, unlike a rigid systematic approach where objectives are finalised before selecting the means to the end.
- "Good" policy or planning is seen as being that of the consensus of various analysts, as opposed to the rational ideal which sets about proving in a systematic way that "good" policy or planning is the most appropriate means to desired ends.
- He advocates a succession of limited comparisons of marginal differences (increments) between "social states" differing only slightly from each other and from the status quo.
- Decision makers negotiate, bargain or confront one another in pursuit of their self-interest (which tends to guide people to serve the common interest as if by an invisible hand (Adam Smith). The mutual adjustment that is required in achieving consensus reflects the relative power of the parties.

Ferguson (1975, pp. 85, 86 and 87) expresses the following criticism of disjointed incrementalism:

"Fragmented and disjointed policy resulting in uncoordinated public and private action has, as often as not, resulted in

exacerbation of the problems”.

“While there are certain dangers in overstating the holistic orientation, yet to go to the opposite position and see the city as a disjointed congeries of noninterdependent parts is an even greater misconception. The suburb versus central city “partisan mutual adjustment” through political contention is only too vivid. Reason – synoptic or otherwise – informs us that interdependencies do, in fact, exist. Yet, precisely because of the partisan nature of the conflict, these same interdependencies are ignored with the resulting deferment of solutions to metropolitan problems. Meanwhile, the problems get worse.”

“He (Lindblom) has related various decision – making approaches to the planner’s understanding of the problem and to the degree of change involved. On this basis, his model is seen as useful only in situations involving low understanding and small change.”

“The final and perhaps most fundamental issue raised by the model is the prospect of means determining ends. One is reminded of the oft-quoted epigram of Einstein’s that the central malaise of our age lies in the fact that we are so much concerned with means that we give little thought to the ends to which these means are to be put.”

Faludi (1973), in his seminal book on Planning Theory concludes that despite all the obstacles and pitfalls that confront the planner or architect, he is still able to plan in a comprehensive and rational way, albeit with built-in limitations.

In “Critical Readings in Planning Theory” edited by Paris (1982) which was published ten years after Faludi’s book, a distinct shift in emphasis in the planning theory debate is evident. The concern is no longer the planner’s pursuit of rationality by using appropriate planning methods, but rather how the planner is used and dominated by the society he serves. In contradiction with previous literature and theory, the planner is not thought of as a high powered, independent agent of change, but rather as a bureaucrat employed in a large organization whose activities are set up by law and have varying relations to the complex facets of society.

Paris (1982 p. 6) debunks Faludi’s treatise on rationality in planning: “Of course planning should be rational, what else would we have it be?” leaving one with the impression that much ado had all been about nothing.

Accordingly theory and analysis are re-focused on the planner’s role in society:

- (i) His powerlessness to effect real change to the status quo (reminiscent of Lindblom’s disjointed incrementalism!);
- (ii) his expendability (. . . “during a period of limited investment or even overall disinvestment in the built environment town planning can be jet-tisoned.” Paris; and
- (iii) the influence of the socio-political context within which the planner functions. The views held here are not necessarily anti-planning, but anti-capitalist: the system within which planning is seen to operate.

Fainstein and Fainstein (1982, p. 149) see the planner as a useful slave to the ruling class and its adopted organizational – form, the state: “The activity of the planner, then, consists in applying conscious will to overcoming the contradictions of capitalism and in legitimizing state intervention as the product of a scientifically determined public interest.”

This “scientifically determined public interest” harks back to Altschuler’s (1965, p. 299) comment:

Hence their (planners’) claims to comprehensiveness, if they are to be persuasive, must refer primarily to a special knowledge of the public interest – but with a new emphasis on the capitalist state within which the planner acts.

It is evident from the above overview that planning theory has developed from a concern for prescriptive rational planning methods, to critical analyses of the socio-political system within which planning and architecture operate, i.e. a critical view of professionals by society and vice versa.

2. CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Although one may not always agree with the particular political slant from which planning is viewed, the idea that planners and architects look more critically at themselves in society and at society is positive, especially when the public distrust and antagonism towards planners and architects, which is becoming more acute, is considered. In the Architect’s Journal (1983, p. 44 and 45) comments in various newspapers illustrating the extent of public feeling in Britain are quoted. The Sunday Telegraph (14.8.83) asserted under the headline “The Uglification of Britain” that the public has a “distrust of all forms of modern architecture . . . So

far as the public is concerned almost any open space is preferred to almost any modern building”. The Mail (29.8.83) is more scathing: “The point about architects is that they were once well regarded. Now they are looked on as a menace.”

Wolfe (1982, p. 3) depicts a similar disillusionment with conditions in the United States “O beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, has there ever been another place on earth where so many people of wealth and power have paid for and put up with so much architecture they detested as within thy blessed borders today?”

Closer to home, Jack Barnett (1984, p. 21) writes that “Never before in history have man’s cities been transformed into such wells of ugliness as they are today. And they will become worse if the criteria dictating building development continue to be determined so predominantly by business, which regards buildings as income producers rather than as tools to serve the user’s spiritual and material needs.”

The public began to criticise any development contributing to urban growth as early as 1970 in the United States; with particular reference to its promotion of noise, traffic congestion, air pollution, crime, monotony and impersonality.

Public pressure on professionals to eliminate environmental aberrations is not fully mobilised as yet in Southern Africa, and seems a long way off when looking back at the forces of change emerging more than ten years ago in the United States.

According to Appleyard (1973, p. 86) this was accompanied by:

- (i) An increasing emphasis on citizen participation in the planning and design process. “In a few years we have moved from professional dominance of decision-making, through professional concepts of advocacy planning (where professionals represent deprived groups), to the point where people of all classes want the power of environmental decision-making for themselves.”
- (ii) Environmental impact assessments of nearly all significant new construction projects required by law in National and State Environmental Policy Acts.
- (iii) “. . . a shift from the design of new environments to a broader interest in existing environments, their conservation, rehabilitation and management is expected.”

3. SCENARIOS: REACTION TO THE MODERN MAN-MADE ENVIRONMENT

With comment and criticism (be it by the public of professionals, by professionals of professionals, by professionals of the public etc.) seemingly forming the foundation on which action and reaction is bedded as well as the spur to (re)evaluation of environmental change it may be useful to distinguish between the types of criticism levelled from various quarters.

One scenario presents the picture that the architects and planners are solely concerned with the technical side of their work to enhance their professional dominance. Should the public be so unwise as to enquire why a new shopping centre is to be built in a "uniquely rural setting" or why a "stream will be re-aligned and landscaped to become an integral part of what will then be a well-rounded one-stop centre" Stead, (1985, p. 22) they may anticipate a highly technical, rational justification, of the proposed development.

Timeous public demands could substantially affect the ease with which investment decisions are made and developers operate, forcing alternatives to be considered and environmental impact assessments to be made at the outset.

A second scenario holds that the public gets what it deserves. Consumers (the public) dictate what they want and where they want it for their maximum convenience, and the market responds. Consumer needs and demands guide the self-interest in the market to cater for their every whim. This is of course unlikely where monopolies rule the roost, as the lack of competition renders market subservience unnecessary. "The market really ceases to be an independent power when the large corporation has control, or great influence, over both buyers and sellers", according to Galbraith, (1981, p. 163). As the public pursue status via consumerism in their individual rat races, the need to make additional demands for a more human, less congested, spiritual environment is either not felt or the public are too apathetic to voice concern and participate in decision making processes. The effect may well be that suddenly one morning an office park, shopping centre and/or hypermarket mushrooms at the bottom of their paved garden (How green was my valley!).

But "schizophrenia" cannot be excluded – although the new anti-ecological monster is secretly admired as an asset and im-

prover of private real estate value, it is publicly condemned as an architectural nightmare which has been given free rein in a town plan.

Such ex post facto criticism of architects and planners by society is hypocritical, but it has the positive spin-off of keeping the professionals on their toes.

A third scenario, which has previously been briefly described, has the planners (and interest groups) blaming the State, Authority or Capital of the ruling class for using/abusing planners to further their profit – oriented ends whilst smoothing over the financial disparities and class conflicts resulting from their (the ruling class's) single minded pursuit of profit. Basic needs of the labour force are ignored, and crisis result when the workers unite to make their demands, at which point architects and planners are sent in to meet these demands as expediently (and presumably as cheaply) as possible. This is an interesting scenario, but calls for a complete turn around in the status quo to achieve Utopia – and in the meantime life goes on.

Environmental Psychology, the study of environmental influences on man's conscious and unconscious mind, provides the backdrop against which the last scenario is acted out. Terence Lee (1976, p. 14) hints at the esoteric and egocentric nature of architectural criticism resulting from an inbred architectural appraisal machinery:

"The public may comment and complain (and not infrequently does) but it is the judgement of colleagues that gives the architect his kicks, in both senses of that word.

The method itself (of obtaining kicks from colleagues) is the dissemination of drawings and more recently, of glossy photographs and slides, showing in the majority of cases the external elevations of buildings. People are occasionally depicted but their main *raison d'être* is to convey "scale". They are not normally shown to be using the buildings... Systematic scientific appraisals of the human 'fit' are almost non-existent.

As all individuals differ, Susan – Ann Lee's (1973, p. 113) directive that "Research in environmental perception has yet to establish, however, a theoretical base for what, in terms of built form, constitutes continual stimulation but not monotony, what is complex but not chaotic and where the line comes between ambiguity and confusion" is a seemingly impossible

task, as findings will be divergent from individual to individual, and even not correspond at various times in one individual's life.

It should also be remembered that the most diverse and novel environment becomes monotonous as the same actions are repeated in it day after day and year after year.

Subliminal or sub-conscious perception has been shown to carry on despite the sleep walking that is induced by endless repetitive images and actions, which reduce man's capacity to absorb and respond to new information.

Smith (1973, p. 379) describes a process whereby the mind, because of lack of environmental stimulation, becomes biased in favour of the familiar at the expense of the ability to process novelty, which has negative results: "A negative momentum is set up whereby preference is given to a diminishing number of patterns which eventually tyrannize the (perception) system. The door to new experience and the formation of new schemes of memory is firmly closed. The mind regresses." A rider to this negative vicious circle is that in sweeping away nature, childhood havens and historic buildings to create space for new monotonous environments, such fondly remembered places are wrenched from individual and collective memory leaving scars on the mind.

The scars accumulate as more and more clinical excisions are made, and a deeply rooted aversion to all things new is created. In this way antagonism and anger is directed at the "culprits" – architects and planners – without realising that their works are only a symptom of an indiscriminate development disease for which they (the public) are indirectly responsible.

4. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

It is more than likely that the above scenarios are not one-acts, but merge into the dynamic drama of an on-going (inter) play of man, his society and the forces and theories that shape and modify his environment and his mind. Together they form a multi-faceted picture of reactions to the built environment.

Jencks (1971, p. 29) proposes that dissection be turned to as a means of finding a way forward: "For it assumes that while there is a tendency for most systems to

move inexorably in certain directions as interrelated wholes, it is always possible to dissect their positive from their negative consequences and, given sufficient effort, suppress the negative ones." A critical evaluation of the complete, multi-faceted picture is essential to determine and separate all positive and negative consequences with the purpose of combining all positive aspects into a more comprehensive planning approach. This may seem like a plea for comprehensiveness once more, and it is to some extent, providing that a willingness exists to constantly revise the approach as the scenarios are illuminated more clearly.

Planners and architects are being forced to study, heed and act on public and professional criticism of their (market oriented) products, and new ways of actively involving society in environmental decision making will therefore have to be pursued.

The review of planning theory has indicated that alternative approaches to planning have been developed and more clearly defined as a consequence of critical debate. The refinement of procedural as well as substantive planning techniques is the essential contribution of planning theory, and hopefully makes it possible that more space may be reserved for the needs of man in plans.

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