Planning, Urban Crisis and Urban Management

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Throughout the world urban areas in general and large cities in particular pose fundamental problems of control and management. In poorer countries crises are imminent if not ever present as facilities such as water, power and sewerage, taken for granted elsewhere, are often non-existent or failing. In advanced capitalist countries, too, many cities are in decline following the end of the long boom, shifts in technology and markets, the disintegration of national economies, energy problems and rapid industrial restructuring. Falling populations, diminishing city finances, growing unemployment and social problems are common enough features of cities in Australia and elsewhere.

Urban planning, which during the 1960s and 1970s experienced a massive expansion as it was called to cope with growth, now has to confront the substantially different problems of decline and economic restructuring. New criticisms came from the political right, challenging the very existence of state intervention. Left critics who see planning as 'functional' for capitalism meanwhile stand uneasily defending the need for state activities. Just how important, then, is town planning?

In this paper we review and criticise a number of different approaches to understanding the significance of urban planning in Australia, especially as these relate to the changing context of planning. Such alternative approaches to planning represent both changing perceptions over time and competing explanations derived from different theoretical and political positions. Reacting to critics in the 1960s planners sought to define their job as that of technical expert. In response radical critics argued that technical expertise alone overlooked class relations and the routine operation of political power. The third idea discussed is the notion of planning as a form of 'urban management': some radical critics responded with a fourth argument, namely that planning amounted to little more than ideological practices obscuring the unconstrained domination of urban change by private interests.

Social democratic critics of that approach, however, argued that urban planning is necessary and inevitable in all modern societies. The implicit functionalism of that approach is rejected. Weaknesses in radical as well as orthodox respectives need to be overcome in order to advance a more systematic and rigorous basis for the analysis of urban planning.

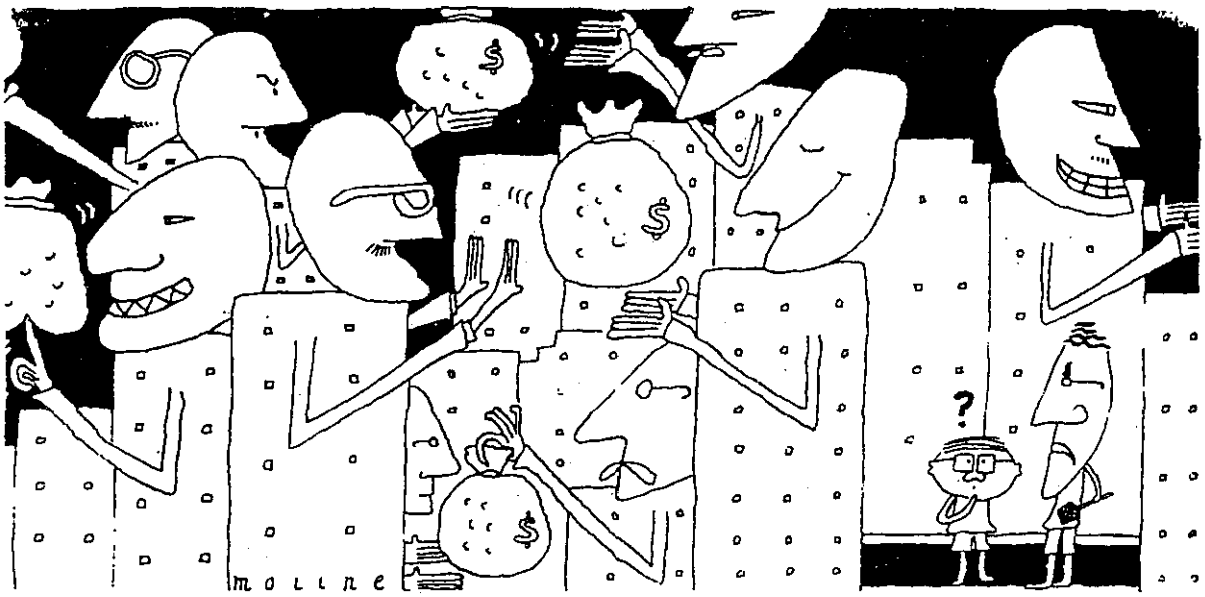
PLANNING AND URBAN CHANGE

The role and content of urban planning has grown dramatically since the second world war. Substantial claims for technical competence have been advanced by planners equipped with new 'scientific' approaches to studying and managing cities (e.g., Eversley 1973). Cost benefit analysis, impact analysis, local planning, structure planning and regional planning have waxed and waned. Planners' claims to competence, however, have not gone unchallenged as

established professions and practitioners themselves claimed central roles in ordering the built environment (e.g., engineers, architects, valuers, estate agents, developers). Even so, the emergent town planning profession has been successful in gaining a position of some prominence. Such an achievement, however, is increasingly questioned in the light of the ever more complex problems being posed by cities and in cities and the growing appreciation that urban planning in itself has few powers for tackling these issues (Alexander, 1982; Neutze, 1982).

Urban planners responded to change in two main ways. First, they focussed on a range of technical/scientific skills intended to promote planning to the status of a city 'science' (McLoughlin 1969; Chadwick, 1971; Faludi, 1973). As the problems increased and the success of solutions remained limited, the scientific approach has lost much credibility. The second response has been to seek reorganisation, based upon the belief that planning was failing because it did not sit in the right place within the structure of government. In Australia, as the competence of the old main-line departments such as roads and construction was questioned, urban planners were able to advance their claims as having particular expertise as 'urban managers'. Conflicts between the old power blocks created the space for planners to establish themselves and the question was raised whether it should step forward and control. Planning has been constantly reorganised as a function itself and within the overall structure of government. Each attempt can be seen as a way of resolving the conflicts and problems posed by cities and urban areas in general. Yet all attempts at reorganisation so far were destined to fail (see Troy and Lloyd (1982) for federal attempts; Bowman (1978); Power, et al (1981) for change at a state level). Planning's failures, however, have been seen in turn as a product of its weak organisational presence and its peripheral status alongside main line departments rather than any inherent weaknesses. The arguments typically used to justify organisational reforms which have led to centralisation, concentration and intervention of a broader scale is that they will provide the basis for better control of urban areas and thus a more successful contribution to production and prosperity. Such a view, however, rests on a number of dubious assumptions. First, it assumes that more planning leads to greater efficiency. Greater intervention by urban planners however does not in itself lead to greater efficiency: State agencies are not necessarily any better (they may be worse) than private organisations. Professional ideologies, for example, are very similar across the two sectors. Second, reform of the land market, though an explicit intervention, may only streamline the conversion process of land rather than transform the market. Third, a focus on efficiency assumes consensus regarding equity issues and the need for public intervention. However, as Wilenski comments with regard to Sydney (1978:85):

> ... it would be naive to assert that Sydney's present ills could have been avoided simply if politicians and bureaucrats had worked at the decision-making and coordinating mechanisms and got them right. Sydney's present inequalities are at least in part a result of the inequalities of wealth and power in the city. The fact is that most of Sydney's disadvantages are disadvantages of its less affluent and less well organised citizens. If it is going too far to say that Sydney has developed in the way it has because it suited the interest of this minority of its citizens, then at the least one can argue that the development process was allowed to continue for so long in the way that it did because it did not much disadvantage them.



URBAN MANAGEMENT, CONTENT AND CONTRADICTION

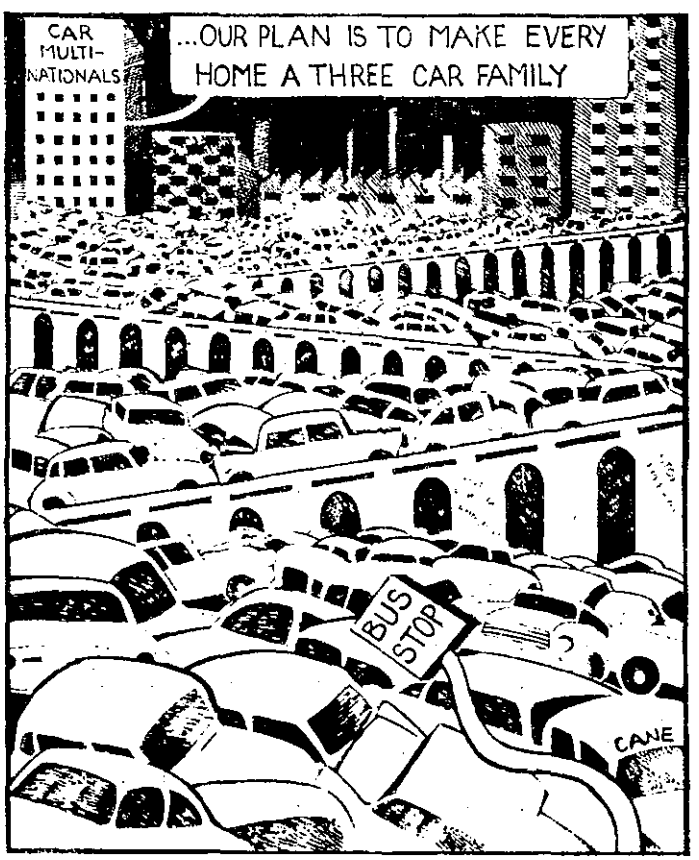
What are the specifically urban phenomena which planning might control and can we separate the management of cities from the environment (social, political and economic) in which they are located and of which they are a part? Certainly it is possible to find content definitions of what planning or urban management is thought to be, e.g., Paterson (1978). Usually these imply that it is simply concerned with the provision and regulation of a range of services (see also Neutze, 1982 for a critical review of concepts of planning and urban management). Never, however, can planners satisfactorily define or resolve what is a specifically 'urban' problem (see also Jones and Stilwell, 1983). Often 'urban' is effectively equated with 'built environment', particular administratively defined areas, or even those things over which governments have most control, specifically public sector investments.

Despite the outward importance of public activity, cities are overwhelmingly private market arenas (Katznelson, 1981; Parkin, 1982). They are sites for the production of goods and services and places where most people live out their daily lives. In that sense while we may have difficulty defining 'urban' processes there can be no doubting the significance of cities in advanced societies. Their functioning is central to the functioning of the economy and it is precisely this importance which both enhances the image of planning and at the same time undermines any claims that planners might have for comprehensiveness.

Recognising the contradictory position of planning constitutes a necessary step in reinterpreting and reanalysing its role. It is argued by many on the left that urban planning is largely irrelevant to the major processes of change taking place within market economies. Hence Kilmartin and Thorns (1979, 101) argue that 'the ability of the state to exercise control over the private sector through town planning is poor and probably restricted to rather minor matters such as planning standards'. Planning, however remains one factor operating in the space-economy, and indeed often may have a disproportionate impact upon

certain minor sectors of the economy, e.g., small business, and petty entrepreneurs. Such roles assist the popular image of planners as managers but have relatively little to do with the control and management of accumulation at an aggregate level. More generally, the regulation of land uses affects both capital and labour since in undertaking this function planners influence the sites regarded for new factories, warehouses, and homes. This 'spatial management' affects rates of return, prices in different commodity markets and costs of operation. It also may influence the ways and the rates at which the built environment can change and thus aid or inhibit accumulation.

The precise function planning plays in any locality will in part depend upon particular local circumstances. In many situations planners may 'simply' administer laws about how cities should function. To a degree they regulate and control the way land is used but, despite the rehetoric of planners, planning is not an inherently 'creative' activity. Planners are frequently the legal guardians of a 'spatial status quo'. Indeed, much land-use planning derives its greatest influence precisely through powers prohibiting or modifying change. Planners rarely have the ability to initiate change, more often acting to preserve. In all cases, however, planners and the planning system itself do not create the situations to which they attempt to apply these laws. Yet increasingly they are being asked to bear the responsibility for the health and vitality of metropolitan economies.



Moving urban planning to a central directive role within state bureaucracies without first recognising the strict limits on what urban planning may achieve, therefore, is little more than cosmetic. Reorganisation of planning by shifting departmental responsibilities cannot resolve real problems that exist with regard to the legal powers planners hold and the very complex social and economic systems operating in urban areas. Urban planning in practice almost invariably boils down to the implementation of a statutory land-use planning system, whether it be in the centre of a government's structure or on its periphery, whether it be a local government or a state government. There is rarely anything in the training of planners, their operational milieux, their professional organisation or statutory responsibilities which equips them with any special competence for large scale administration and policy formulation affecting other than land-use issues. Very often, sadly, attempts by planning educationalists to broaden the base and scope of planning

education result in the loss even of traditional land-use planning concern. This renders young planners good critics of planning's shortcomings but ill-equipped to confront practical questions of land-use policies.

PLANNERS AS MANAGERS

The identification of planning as 'urban management' clearly conflicts with the reality of urban planning's relatively weak capacity to manage and control cities. It was a recognition of this contradiction that provided a key component in the critique of Pahl's urban managerialist thesis (1970, 1975). Planners and planning were central to Pahl's attempt to define a series of 'gatekeeping' roles around which a new sociology of the city could develop. The concept was substantially refined by Pahl himself in response to critics who demonstrated the extreme difficulties of trying to identify any specific individuals or groups that could be 'held responsible' for what happened in cities. Urban managers came increasingly to be seen as 'mediators' rather than independent managers. But whatever the weaknesses of Pahl's formulations it promoted the study of planning to a central place in urban sociology (see for instance Norman 1975; Williams 1978).

In recent years the widespread adoption of political economy approaches which stress the importance of the organisation and structuring of capitalist societies (see for example, Kilmartin and Thorns, 1978; Sandercock, 1976; and Stilwell 1980) has resulted in cities being viewed less as separate entities and rather more as arenas in which general social processes are played out. Within such perspectives planning has often been condemned as ideology and the very weakness of planning powers is seen as providing ample proof of the way the state has sought to maintain a pretence of regulation while at the same time actually allowing the market to operate freely (Paris, 1982). Whilst arguing against making too firm conclusions at this stage, Kilmartin and Thorns (1979, 101) suggested that urban planning in Australia exercised few positive powers and if anything 'favoured the privileged and penalised the underprivileged'. Hence, radicals have viewed planning as something inherently contributing to the reproduction of exploitative social relations.

More recently there has been a reaction to such views. While not returning to an uncritical acceptance of the role of planning, Sandercock has argued that planning cannot be dismissed as simplisticly as some political economy approaches might suggest:

> 'Physical planning is not going to disappear. Both capitalist and socialist countries find too much value in the regulation of land use and development for that to happen (Sandercock, 1982, 14).

This, however, tells us nothing about the particular nature of urban planning in different societies at different times. It is ahistoric and rests on a functionalist acceptance of the necessity and inevitability of physical planning. Crucially, it does not say anthing about the relationship between state planning and capital accumulation, nor about its impact upon class relations or its contradictory role in specific societies. Thus while we find ourselves in sympathy both with positions which are critical of orthodox acceptance of the benefits of planning and also its dismissal as state ideology we would argue that

a redefinition of planning requires a more elaborate analysis than simple assertions that it is difficult but necessary.

TOWARDS A REFORMULATION

Debates over the role of planning have become somewhat sterile and it is clearly necessary to change the basis for analysis. Recent work within marxist and weberian perspectives has opened up a number of debates around the role of the state, conflicts within and between government departments, class relations and the emergence of a new class of technical and professional workers. City planning stands as an activity and a profession at the centre of many of these relationships. It did not develop as some simple functional response to the needs of the state and the capitalist class. The emergence of a new professional activity was part of a complex process of social and economic change. The contradictions imposed by developments in production and reproduction, the inadequacies of existing technical competence, social conflicts and tensions all underlie the emergence of planning capacities (Sutcliffe, 1981). Its progressive advancement through the ranks of government departments has to be viewed in relation to changing relationship within government, contradictions and tensions within the state as well as surrounding it (Williams, 1982). For example, we should stop seeing 'planning' and 'planners' in monolithic terms. Many planners are low level bureaucrats with very little power or influence and their work is largely routine within existing bureaucratic state or local government organisations. Questions such as these have been largely ignored in attempts to establish planning's value to capitalism. In contrast we maintain urban planning most often exists in a mediating relationship between fractions of capital as well as between capital and labour and that a class perspective on planning would provide a new and important focus to this area of work. For example, zoning is a way of resolving conflict over alternative forms of development and can affect which investments take place.

Above all else it is essential to recognise planning's contradictory roles. Cities remain vital to advanced economies. Moreover, the reproduction of social relations, increasingly threatened by economic crisis and restructuring, becomes problematic without cities changing. For example, gentrification can involve substantial change in the class pattern of access to housing and location without involving any change of land-use. The rapid loss of manufacturing employment from Australian cities and associated growth of unemployment have both occurred without land use-change. Economic decline, quite simply, involves processes and relationships about which the control of land is at most marginally relevant. As constructive radical critics come to take wider political economy perspectives on modern cities (McLoughlin, 1983) so, therefore, the reasons for supposing that town planners should be expected to understand or affect processes of change diminishes. Planning is charged with substantial responsibilities in these areas yet at the same time its powers favour stability rather than change. In Australia as in most other western capitalist socities land-use planning systems are based on statutory powers affecting the capacity of private individuals and agencies to change land-uses. Such planning often involves the preparation of maps and written documents indicating desired changes but these rely on other initiating development. The ability to affect major investment decisions of the state rarely lies with town planners. Other planners employed in state agencies, however, may be of greater importance, e.g. highway officials, land commissioners. Town planning is neither simply an ideology (planning does exist and it does have effects) nor is it all powerful (its powers are very limited). It is, instead,

historically and spatially specific, reflecting the constellation of conditions and relations present. It is not monolithic, neither is it inevitable in particular forms. Rather it involves relationships and processes which must be analysed in action, rather than be discussed in a static and univeral framework. It is highly desirable that our debates are shifted to this more fruitful ground.

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