

THE ROLE OF PLANNING: CLUB MYKONOS AND A SENSE OF DÉJÀ VU

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INTRODUCTION

The workshop on the *Future of the Planning Profession*, held at the Club Mykonos on the West Coast, in November 1995, saw the beginnings of some important and necessary agreements about where the profession should be heading. However, it also became clear during the discussions that there is no general agreement about what the focus of (urban and regional) planning is or what its role should be. On two issues at least I had a strong and disturbing sense of *déjà vu*. I regard these issues as being so fundamental that I record them here, to contribute to the emerging debate on planning and its future.

THE ROLE OF PLANNING

The first relates to the role of planning. One strong theme which emerged was a call to broaden the statutory definition of what constitutes urban and regional planning, in order to facilitate broader access to the profession. What was not clear, however, is where this broadening should stop or what defines planning's edges or, indeed, its focus: indeed, there was a disturbing tendency to define (urban and regional) planning as anything which people do in the general field of development. In order to explain my sense of *déjà vu* on this issue, it is necessary to resort briefly to being anecdotal.

In the early 1970s (a time when planning conferences and publications in South Africa were almost exclusively dominated by technical issues associated with unthinkingly, accepted,

standardised, constructs relating to layouts and the built environment), and soon after I had published a monograph entitled *Metropolitan Planning and Income Redistribution*, I gave a paper at a conference organised by the South African Institute of Town and Regional Planners, arguing that the way environments are built profoundly impacts on economic opportunities, income flows, human welfare and quality of life and that the (then) current practices needed to be re-examined, and reformulated, in terms of these perspectives. I was roundly attacked from the floor by a member of the Council, who argued that what I was talking about was "development", not "planning": by implication, that while development may have a role, it is something which other professions, not planning, should be doing. At Mykonos, a similar disturbing tendency frequently revealed itself, but in the reverse: a similar suggestion that there is a distinction between "spatial" and "development" planning but that the former is less important than the latter. It therefore appears that in 20 odd years we have travelled the full length of the continuum.

I strongly refute this distinction. There is no distinction between spatial and developmental planning: there is only a distinction between good and bad planning. Planning at all scales clearly has both spatial and a-spatial (policy) dimensions. Frequently (in fact almost inevitably) both are represented in any particular task, although the relevant emphasis will vary.

Good planning is firmly based on two ethical legs. One is humanist and developmental. It is driven by an

understanding of human needs and involves a constant search for ways to assist people's efforts to improve their quality of life. The other is environmental. It is driven by an understanding of natural processes and of the need to promote sustainability and place-making (Dewar and Gasson 1994).

When the planning issue at hand is primarily spatial, such as the making of settlements, the challenge is to create enabling spatial ordering systems which accommodate a full range of human activities and needs in ways which enhance, and give dignity to, peoples' lives, and which create opportunities for young and old, for employment generation, for recreation and so on. When planning is not driven by these concerns, the inevitable outcome, when wilful action is required, is a crude process of land splitting (not design), resulting in living environments which are generated by the requirements of technology rather than human need, which are stultifyingly sterile and monotonous, which debase the human spirit rather than give dignity, which hinder rather than enhance peoples' efforts to improve their quality of life, which degrade the natural environment, and which deplete non-renewable resources. Sadly, environments of this kind are the norm not the exception, on the South African landscape.

Similarly, it is impossible to engage responsibly in (predominately a-spatial) policy formation without being driven by the same concerns and, since policies inevitably have direct or indirect spatial outcomes, by a vision of "what should be" in terms of settle-

ment. Attempts to do so represent bad planning and, again, regrettably there is no shortage of instances of this in South Africa.

Two cases can be cited as examples. One is current housing policy. Although the policy contains a rhetorical commitment to more compact, integrated and efficient settlements, the policy instruments reflect little understanding of spatial outcomes: in fact, the instruments, and the ways in which they are being used, entrench the sprawling, monofunctional, sterile and fragmented urban forms of the past. Another, at a regional scale, relates to industrial decentralisation. In the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, billions of rands were spent in the passionate pursuit of decentralisation while economic policy was, equally enthusiastically, geared towards import substitution which, by definition, favoured the growth of the largest cities.

While planning is certainly broad, therefore, and allows for some specialisation, this can only occur within limits. The non-negotiable kernel of the discipline is the management of the impact of human actions on the natural and cultural landscape. In this task, its unique contribution lies in optimising the operation of the whole, not maximising the performance, of any one part and this, in turn, demands fusing spatial and a-spatial dimensions. Its central role is to place before society a new and improved set of possibilities based not necessarily on what is popular in the short-term ("what people want") but on sensitive understanding of human need and of the realities of context at a number of scales ("what is possible"). In pursuing this, the real client of planning (and thus the ultimate measure of planning actions) is common people, both of this generation and generations yet unborn, for the impact of human actions on the landscape commonly outlives any one generation of users and the vigorous defence of the public good may frequently conflict with shorter-term individual desires.

Unless planning embraces this specialist function within the broad field of development, and becomes daringly good at it, its crisis of confidence will continue, for it can offer little that

other professions claim to be able to do as well, or better.

PLANNING AND POLITICS

My second concern relates to the relationship of planning to politics. The first point on the list of draft resolutions adopted by participants at the Mykonos workshop reads: "we commit ourselves to the principles of the RDP". The thought that crossed my mind is that, if a similar group had met some 40 years previously, would they have resolved to commit themselves to the principles of Apartheid?

It is a question of some significance. I am not, of course, suggesting that there is a coincidence between the two policy programmes. It is certainly true that a great deal of what is contained in the RDP document corresponds with sound planning concerns. The point is, however, that both are politically-driven programmes. Inevitably, political programmes such as RDP come to mean different things to different people over time and the rhetoric in which they are couched will inevitably be appropriated to very different ends by different interest groups. It will be one of the central functions of the planning profession to interpret these differences and keep the programme on track. To do this, it must articulate its own constant, carefully defined, principles. It is rather a matter of the RDP, fortunately and appropriately, adopting some planning principles which should never have been off the planning agenda, than planning adopting RDP principles.

This should not be interpreted to mean that somehow planning can stand aloof from the political milieu in which it is practised. Of course, it cannot. It is precisely for this reason that it must have its own principles to maintain its direction and to play its role positively. To illustrate this, I return to the anecdotal.

In 1975, a group of us in Cape Town established the Urban Problems Research Unit, not only to conduct developmentally-related research and challenge conventional wisdoms but also to offer *pro deo* professional services to disadvantaged communities

and to fight for policy changes (this was more than a decade before the emergence of larger, and no doubt more effective, NGOs such as DAG, Planact, BESG or Coreplan). Examples of the type of work with which we were engaged, included arguing against squatter demolitions in Crossroads (and subsequently in many other places as well); contesting Group Areas removals in Paternoster (a test case - this project later extended into negotiations to obtain a community fishing licence); contesting expropriation cases for disenfranchised communities: attempting to get informal sector activity recognised as a legitimate form of income generation; arguing for the repeal of the Group Areas Act and of other legislation antithetical to development; changing housing policy; and so on. The fora in which these activities were conducted varied and the climate was frequently intensely political and hostile (fora included the Supreme Court, the offices of Ministers of State, evidence before Government Commissions and so on).

The very reason that we were able to enter deeply into these issues and debates (often far more deeply and effectively than people coming from overtly political positions could do) was that we rigorously argued from the ethical position of planning (an humanist and environmental ethic) and we took the argument, based on those principles, wherever it led us.

The planner is not the servant of any political party or programme, of any élite, or of any particular interest group: he or she is the servant of common people, both present and future. If the profession is to play its societal role positively, it is of paramount importance that it scrupulously protects, and is seen to protect, its independence. It was the failure to protect this independence historically which has, arguably more than any other factor, damaged the credibility of the profession.

CONCLUSION

Planning in South Africa potentially sits on the threshold of one of the most important and exciting moments in its history. The moment which so

many have hoped, and worked hard, for over many decades has arrived. Ironically, however, it will pass the profession by if we cannot restore credibility and show indispensable value. This restoration of credibility will not be achieved simply by institutional restructuring (such as changing the composition of the Council) or by the adoption of new procedures which promote greater accountability, transparency and participation. These are necessary innovations but they are not sufficient. Rather, the future of the profession will depend on how successful it is in demonstrating its own unique contribution to societal development: this, in turn, requires it to demonstrate mastery in terms of its substantive focus and to exercise its independent professional position within a complex, changing, political climate.

REFERENCES

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