

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT/
JAARVERSLAG VAN DIE PRESIDENT**

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Annual General Meeting, August 1990

FACING THE CHALLENGE OF THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

All professions need to respond to changes in the environment within which they operate and ours is no exception – as we enter the 1990s, town and regional planners are faced with a rapidly changing socio-political context as well as the pressures resulting from increasing levels of urbanisation and concern about sustaining the natural environment.

Planners need to consider in what ways we should adapt and how we can contribute to the planning and development needs of the new era, and with this in mind I will address three questions:

- What has changed significantly?
- Why should planners respond to the changing circumstances?
- What principles should guide our response as planners?

CHANGES IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

If we stand back from the turmoil of the almost daily fluctuations in business, political and social indicators, we can identify a few truly significant changes that affect the environment in which town and regional planners operate.

First of these is the recognition by government, the private sector, researchers, professionals, and all major political groupings that urbanisation is inevitable and desirable, but that it needs to be managed effectively if its inherent opportunities are to be realised (RSA White Paper 1986; Mallows 1988; Urban Foundation 1990).

Planners must play a key role in enabling our towns and cities to absorb an increasing number of people, and in promoting appropriate rural and regional development while taking cognizance of the extent of degradation (Huntley et al 1989) and the future needs of the natural environment.

Secondly, a new social order has emerged: the 1990s will need to be a period of far more participation in decision-making at all levels.

One of the bottom-lines of town and regional planning has always been the 'public interest'. This 'public interest' is now being defined far more widely and inclusively than before and it is looking for a system that will concentrate, at least equally, on the creation of opportunities for advancement as on the protection of existing rights.

The third change is in the style of decision-making. We are entering a period that is characterised by processes of negotiation and compromise (Breytenbach 1990) replacing the predominantly top-down, non-participative style of the last few decades.

Once again, the changes will have a major impact on the way in which planners approach their work and will influence the plans we produce. In particular, planners will need to become more accountable for their plans to the people who live in the places they plan.

The fourth change stems from the stated commitment by government to reduce its degree of interference in the daily running of the economy. This must be met by a greater degree of awareness of issues relating to a market-led economy and an obligation on the part of planners to respond on behalf of their clients and the public.

Fifthly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are starting to play a larger role in development. We can anticipate a growth of the NGO sector in South Africa over the next decade and planners will have to adapt to their requirements.

THE NEED FOR PLANNERS TO RESPOND POSITIVELY

It could be argued that there is no need

for our profession to respond to these changes because most of the products of town and regional planning are constant – roads, open space, sites for residential, commercial, educational uses and so on as well as basic infrastructural services such as water and sewerage.

While this may be true up to a point, it tends to treat town and regional planning as a predominantly technical undertaking, one that is non-political and virtually value-free. The logical response to changing circumstances from this perspective is to 'wait and see'. If the new decision-makers (whoever they might be) want different standards for site sizes, road widths etc, they will inform the planning profession which can then proceed using the new 'rules'.

This is a narrow view of the planning profession and its role in society and, I believe, it is one that will *not* carry us through the 1990s as a significant or relevant profession – in fact it's not an acceptable option for the profession. Instead, we need to take up one of the most exciting challenges to face the town and regional planning profession in a long, long time. There are a number of reasons for this:

Firstly, the purpose of planning is to be pro-active and to intervene in the process of development in various ways to try to ensure that the outcome is somehow better for the people and organisations concerned. There are different schools of thought within the profession about the extent of intervention that is appropriate, but this does not alter the concept of planning as a dynamic activity.

Secondly, it is widely acknowledged that the prevailing spatial patterns of urban areas and rural land uses – in which planners have played a part – have been substantially influenced by

the apartheid era, and display significant imbalances and inequalities in access to opportunities. Again there are different schools of thought about the extent to which members of the profession are responsible. It will not serve much purpose to get involved with the debate here, *except* to recognise that one of the fundamental premises of town and regional planning is the aim of balanced, integrated development. Therefore, planners need to respond pro-actively to try to correct these imbalances.

Thirdly, many of the constraints under which planners previously worked have been lifted and we can now look at issues and address them more realistically. We need to tackle unbalanced patterns of development with a sense of urgency if further spatial problems are to be averted.

Following from this, the fourth point is that in an era of rapid change and rapid urbanisation, our profession with its members trained and experienced in dealing with many types of change and the consequences of these changes, has a distinct contribution to make. The profession would do well to seize the opportunity for planners to take a more prominent and extensive role.

Fifthly, the need to respond positively is underpinned by our Institute's Goals, Objectives and Code of Ethics. Objective 'f' for example is *'to consider and monitor all questions affecting the interests of the discipline (i.e. town and regional planning) and, if considered desirable, to petition for changes where required'*. Our Code of Ethics states that *'a town and regional planner should be accountable to the community and strive to give members of the public the opportunity to have a meaningful influence on the development of plans and programmes. Participation should be broad enough to include people who lack formal organisation or influence'*.

SOME GUIDING PRINCIPLES

I am going to suggest thirteen principles or guidelines as to how individual planners and the profession as a whole can contribute to the planning needs of this new and still evolving era. They should not be viewed as a blueprint, but rather as a basis for discussion.

1 Widen the scope of planning

The conventional skills of town and regional planners will continue to be needed in planning land use and facilities, ensuring separation of conflicting activities and making continuous adjustments to meet the evolving requirements of cities, towns and rural areas. However, the products of our planning will have to become more diverse, more creative and more flexible; we will need to generate a wider range of planning products and initiate more inclusive processes.

On the basis of their training and experience as generalists in the field of land use and development, planners could fill a number of potential roles in addition to those outlined above.

2 More emphasis on coordination and management

On account of their holistic approach, town and regional planners are able to play a coordinating and educating role for other disciplines, and for various participants in the development process. This involves linking 'top-down' with 'bottom-up' initiatives; acting as an intermediary merger between different interest groups and sectors; and mediating at the interface between agencies that provide services (suppliers) and those communities which use them (users), between local, regional and national priorities, and between public and private sectors. It also involves trying to reconcile different goals and aspirations as well as teaching participants in the process (communities, public decision-makers, fellow professionals and other planners) how to participate more effectively.

3 Treat planning and implementation as a continuous process

Planners need to be actively involved from the early, concept forming stages, through to implementation and later monitoring.

4 Problem-solving and policy formulation

Planners could play a particularly useful role in understanding inherent conflicts, unravelling problems and working out the range of feasible policy options on which decision-makers can base well-informed choices.

5 Consultation

The practice of consulting people and communities as an integral part of the development process is still in its infancy and the implications of engaging in meaningful consultation are seldom fully understood by the organisations promoting the idea.

A practical problem at the moment is that in many instances planners consult with government, then the government agency implements the plan.

6 Get to know the 'public interest'

To be frank, the majority of planners don't really know the people we have been planning for due to lack of direct contact. We need to take active steps to get to know our 'public' and its interests at first hand.

7 Accountability

Our Code of Ethics requires planners to be *'accountable to the community . . .'* This question of accountability is central to planning practice, but what does the word mean to us as planners and to other participants in the development process – those who we serve and those who pay for our services? These are questions which the profession needs to consider carefully.

8 Bridging the gap

To move towards a more integrated society (in terms of opportunities) and to re-integrate the spatial form of our urban and rural areas, we are going to need a series of measures (some of them interim) to bridge the gaps that presently exist. Examples of these imbalances include:

- different sets of controls/standards/procedures;
- different levels of access to planning advice;
- different opportunities to contribute inputs to the planning and development process;
- different levels of proficiency at articulating one's needs;
- cities and towns characterised by spatial separation.

9 Cut jargon and engage actively with all participants

To the public at large quite a lot of what we say or write in reports is difficult to understand or, worse still, conveys different meanings from what we intend. If we are going to engage

more actively with the public, we will need to communicate in plain language, opening the way for more people to contribute to the planning and development process.

10 Development versus control

While it is accepted that land-use planning needs certain controls in order to be effective, an alarmingly high proportion of the time of professionally and technically trained planners (a scarce resource) is presently devoted to trying to 'control' rather than encourage development. When viewed in the context of the strategic planning issues facing the country the present degree of control is often inappropriate. We need to introduce greater flexibility to enable us to respond positively to pressures for change. For example, we could adopt more flexible application procedures and interpretation of Town Planning and Zoning Schemes to make provision for trade-offs and negotiation.

11 Mechanisms for redistribution

With the impending changes in legislation about land, we are entering a period of redistribution of opportunities in regard to land – its ownership and use. Town and regional planners can play a significant role by advancing guidelines that facilitate this redistribution while at the same time promoting economic growth.

12 Creating opportunities

We must recognise that neither planning nor planners can resolve all the problems of any particular situation. Accordingly planners should focus their activities more sharply on creating opportunities (in both physical and organisational senses) within which individuals and groups of people can realise their aspirations. This stands in contrast to the highly prescriptive, blue-print approach in which the technical/professional knowledge of planners informed the choices for people whose future was being planned.

13 Re-education of planners

We are going to have to re-educate ourselves in a number of areas (possibly by means of short, mid-career courses or changes to existing curricula at universities and technikons); to discuss what are appropriate responses to the emerging planning issues (possibly by means of discussion papers or sets of guidelines prepared by the Institute, or mini pre-conferences); and to engage in interactions with the people for whose benefit we are planning (by means of workshops with various participants).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, town and regional planners can and should play a significant role in moulding the New South Africa. I would encourage all members of our profession to accept the challenge before us and the Institute to take the lead in working out how these principles can be applied in practical ways.

The words of Peter Hall, although written in the context of metropolitan regions, are particularly applicable to our situation:

'All this suggests the age-old wisdom: that there is no such thing as a perfect solution to any problem. None of these archetypes will prove to be the planner's Holy Grail. It will always be necessary to weigh the different costs and benefits that accompany alternative ways of organising urban space. But, by combining elements of each, it may be possible to guide the growth of the metropolitan region in such a way that its citizens – young and old, rich and poor, car-owning and carless – are allowed to make those trade-offs for themselves. The best we can hope for, in this process, is to use planning not as a way of imposing designs and life styles on people, but freeing them to make unconstrained choices for themselves. That is all that planning can finally achieve, and all that planners should ever want to achieve.' (Hall 1984 p253)

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