

# Change and continuity in spatial planning

Vanessa Watson

Review by Professor Wallace van Zyl, Fish Hoek, Cape.

**This is part of a series of world case studies edited by Professor Mandelbaum of Penn University, which includes Warsaw, Israel and New York's Battery Park. It is the detailed story of metropolitan planning in Cape Town under political transition and how the vision of redistribution and compact city were influenced by political and economic factors.**

**Vanessa Watson is well known for her excellent research at UCT, to which she returned from London in 1980, to be closer to the action. This mirrors my own experience when I returned from Canada and the US in 1975. The author guides us through the politics of resistance to the euphoria of transition and the letdown of the "new" planning (or is it development?), which she describes as a "learning experience" for all of us.**

Such a rich and dense text compels me to select highlights only. The book opens and closes with a discourse on planning theory, in particular Foucault's concept of power "operating in a capillary fashion from below" or the comforting words that power is not "uni-directional" and that planners power depends on routine or tactics like bargaining and compromise. Then Stepan's ideas on political transition (Ruptura) are neatly applied to our "double transition" both into a liberal democracy and global economy. When Escobar reminds us of the brighter side of planning which hid the dark side of domination, this strikes a familiar note.

Watson sees her narrative as part of the "new" practice movement which academics and practitioners co-operate, a welcome trend that is not entirely new. Her two main methods are to use the archives of the authorities and to conduct revealing interviews with major actors, which yield some unique quotes. This confirms her belief that case studies describe a particular situation and are

not always amenable to generalization, and that process rather than plan is critical. Not blueprints but development strategies!

Long before the basic needs approach of the RDP, there were progressive forums at work like the Urban Foundation and WESGRO. The first body has been called the conscience of big business, and commissioned metropolitan studies nationwide. In the case of WESGRO, the Western Cape Economic Forum was established in 1992 and the advisory Urban Development Commission emerged out of this. Not surprisingly, the planners in the City Council and RSC (later CMC) saw the Commission as a vehicle to legitimize the metropolitan plan. The rivalry and different approaches of these two bodies are an amusing sub-theme of this book.

Due to its staff and graduates, the philosophy of the UCT planning school has permeated spatial planning in the Cape. In particular, a minimalist and modernist approach tinged with urban design was advocated

(e.g. quality public spaces, linear activity corridors, mixed use and higher density). Since 1994 local government reform has been prominent in South Africa with a strong ANC centrist trend. For example, greater Cape Town shrank from 61 to 39 to six large municipalities in record time. Now we have a Unicity with its floor crossing! All this means that planners must adopt a new management style, more entrepreneurial and political. Spatial planning is demoted to become one of several competing line functions in the local government arena. Planners' traditional role as "synthesising generalist" is undermined. In the subtle shift from "tiers" to "spheres" of government, maybe municipalities cannot be so easily overruled by Province? Planners should brush up on the art of persuasion in discourse coalitions.

Page 115 refers to the Technical Report on the metro framework (MSDF) and states that planners should produce texts and documents, while implementation and investments are left to others. This could be read together with a telling statement that those disciplines that draw on credible bodies of knowledge have an advantage in the exercise of power. For example there are drastic differences between spatial planning and the macho mindsets of road engineers, whose unrealistic standards and rigid road hierarchies often win the ear of politicians. Not only could desirable activity corridors be destroyed in poor areas, but proposed Toll roads on the Cape Flats could also undermine vital principles like spatial equity, pedestrian access and sustainable development. Even if we disagree, SANCO's cry of desperation that "everything is technical, forget about politics", describes such

conflicts in the development realm.

We should also be wary of continuing a "dual city" mentality in our plans, but disparities in Cape Town still persist between the beautiful green spine of the Peninsula and the brown of the harsh Cape Flats, or between the glitzy Waterfront and CBD skyscrapers and the crime-ridden, poverty-stricken townships. There was a brief flirtation with the Curitiba model, but this was frustrated by a housing subsidy that promotes low-density, individual boxes instead of high-density, low-income corridors. Density and intensity are vital.

In the Eighties, no one disputed the need for a physical plan and so four spatial elements were based on historical precedent, but not necessarily on natural or inevitable solutions. In defining the Urban Edge of a metropolis, we should also consider socio-economic interaction and human behaviour.

I have attended public meetings on this Edge and note that it was recently changed to suit Tygerberg's requirements, so once again politics rules the environment. The edge bristles with problems, as does the viability of the Philippi.

Far from disappearing, the fragments of our cities continue to multiply. Developers concentrate on rich gated compounds, up market malls and mega projects, which reinforce a sprawling metropolis (Figure 9.1). Instead of adopting a "land banking" policy so successful in Stockholm, strategic sites are privatised like Century City, Milnerton Racecourse, Green Point Common or maybe Wingfield, The former Olympic node. By contrast, Watson pleads for genuine transformation projects and partnership located on the borders between wealthy and poor suburbs or local short-term projects using informal norms sensitively. She also adds ethnic multi-culturalism and the right to be different.

It is a pity that "spatially integrated, equitable and sustainable cities (are) falling off public agendas" or that social welfare rhetoric is seen as outdated. This move away from reconstruction, and redistribution to a market-friendly economy does not inspire, in view of massive corporate fraud and war talk in Western boardrooms.

In sum this is a realistic and painstaking narrative, not for speed-reading! In view of a shortage of good SA texts, this is a 'must read' for all who care for the future of our country. The references are comprehensive and the illustrations well chosen.

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