

Melbourne Philosophy
Forum : Philosophical
Issues in Urban
Planning

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A follow on from last year's Utopian talk

Utopias?



Clockwise from top left:

- * 1920s: Corbusier's "Ville Radieuse" proposal for Paris
- * 1960s: 3D model of Paulo Soleri's "Arcosanti" proposed high-density settlement
- * 2000s: Architectural sketch of proposed Dongtan Eco-City in China
- * 1930s: Frank Lloyd Wright's "Broadacre City" vision

Realities?



Outline

- What is spatial planning
- What are key philosophical issues involved
- How these issues have changed/developed in 20th C
- Where we're at today
- Example planning issues and philosophical implications
- Tentative proposals for what 'good planning' is and how it relates to philosophy
- Qtns/discussion

What is Spatial Planning?

- Concerned with constructing good environments for human habitation
- And in western/liberal societies, the governance of such regions, taking into account the wishes of a myriad of individuals with different interests and rights
- Deals with multiple scales – from streets, cities, to large regions

Philosophical Qtns in Planning (1)

- What are cities and regions and how do they work, what is relationship between the parts? (Ontology)
- If all knowledge about a city is partial, then what and whose perceptions are important – what type is useful and how do we arrive at it? (Epistemology)
- Is the attempt to rationally plan a good one, given an uncertain future?
- How much does the environment influence human nature and possibilities?

Philosophical Qtns in Planning (2)

- In a pluralistic society, what is the 'good' we should aim for in planning cities?
- How do we balance public vs private goods in managing cities?
- How should various types of expert knowledge in planning be weighed against local, pragmatic knowledge?
- Is technological change affecting our cities inevitable and to be accommodated to – or should we actively try to shape/control its deployment to social ends?
- Should planners simply plan environments according to the will and preferences of the majority – or do they have a responsibility to intervene in debates to support the rights of marginalised / those less heard?

A 20th Century development of Planning's Intellectual Ideas

- Late 19th/early 20th C: Garden Cities, Planning as Physical Design to support social and political/economic progressive goals
- Early-mid 20th C: Corbusier and the Modernist Embrace of Technology & Rationalism
- 60s – 70s: Jane Jacobs and Democratic Challenge to Planning
- 70s-90s: Neoliberalism, Postmodernism, Planning's Crisis of Self-Confidence
- 80s-today: Reconstructions:
 - (1): New Urbanism, Design Patterns, Planning Cities for People
 - (2): Planning as an intellectual & professional activity, but situated within deliberative democracy
 - (3): Conceiving cities as multi-scalar, complex systems
- Caveats:
 - This is a very selective historical reading to illustrate a few issues
 - In fact, many of these ideas/movements co-existed and interacted
 - Names mentioned as a focus point don't imply subscribing to a 'great man' view of history ;)

Late 19th/Early 20th C: Garden Cities and Planning as a Spatial Design Activity towards Social Ends



Image showing proposed network of garden cities from Howard, Ebenezer, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, 1902.

- Reaction against early Industrial Cities and 'slums'
- Conceived of striking ideal balance between city and rural living
- Howard's original proposals included political & economic reforms hard to implement
- Largely led to 'garden suburbs' in practice

Corbusier and the Modernist Embrace of Technology and Rationalism



Illustrations for Le Corbusier's *La Ville Radiieuse* (The Radiant City) of 1935

<http://www.themodernist.co.uk/2012/03/le-corbusier-modernist-of-the-month/>

- Embrace of new technology
- Mass production
- Land-use zoning, technical methods of planning
- From 50s: use computer models to simulate traffic demand etc

Jane Jacobs and the Democratic Challenge to Planning



Jane Jacobs – “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”

Photo of demolition in progress of the Park East freeway, Milwaukee – from <http://www.museumofthecity.org/assets/jmosteiro/park-east-freeway-demolition>

Jane Jacobs, in 1961, while chair of the Community to save the West Village in New York, whilst at a Press Conference (from Wikimedia Commons)

Neoliberalism, Postmodernism, and Planning's Crisis of Self-Confidence

- Wicked Problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973)
- “If Planning is Everything, maybe its nothing” (Wildavsky, 1973)
- Neoliberal planning: set basic rules of the game :- then leave it to the intelligence and dynamism of the private market
- “From Philosopher-King to Municipal Dog-Catcher” – (Mees, 2000).

That is, planning arguably became too much a quasi-legal activity reduced to defense of private property, stripped of progressive, creative, and problem-solving elements

Reconstructions (1): New Urbanism, Design Patterns: Planning for Humans in Environments



Left: Jane Jacobs' house on Hudson St, Greenwich Village (<http://localecologist.blogspot.com.au/2009/10/janes-houses.html>)

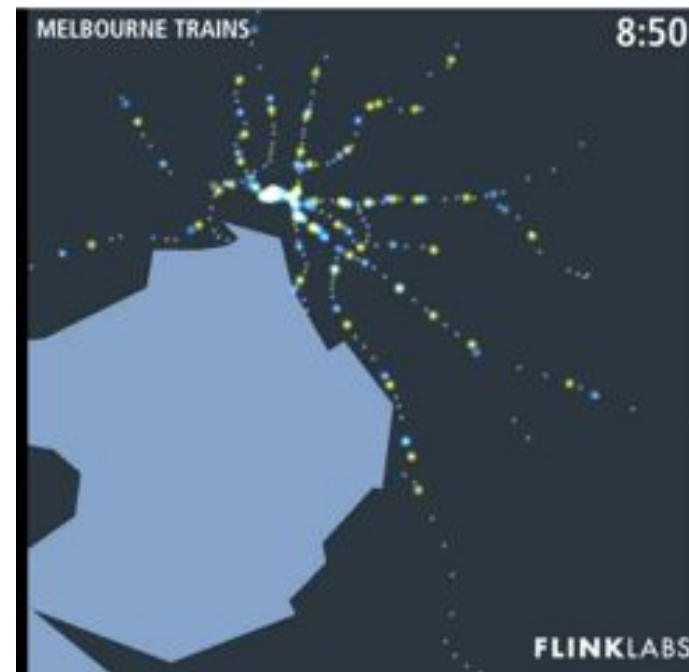
Right: A pedestrianised street in central Copenhagen (From <http://www.scancomark.com/Scandinavia-today/more-immigrant-fewer-social-problems-in-swedish-municipalities.131003022013.html>)

Reconstructions (2): Planning as Deliberative Decision-Making

- Habermas: Communicative Planning : where all have a fair right to participate, and the 'best argument' wins (not most powerful stakeholder)
- Healey: Collaborative Planning
- *Deliberative Democracy*:
 - Planners can lead a process
 - Everyone can participate – but try to get beyond their self-interest, really examine and reflect on issues
- Or more 'agonistic', networked democracy?
 - Community puts forward and develops alternate proposals

Reconstructions (3): Cities as Multi-Scale, Complex Systems

- Go beyond models of cities as equilibrium, static systems
- Draw from complex systems thinking and theory
- E.g. : Multi-agent modelling and simulation techniques



Still from a visualisation of people using Melbourne's Train network – by Flink Labs.

Video online: - <http://vimeo.com/5570311>

Spatial Planning as an Integrative Intellectual Tradition

- Draw from Urban Design and Architecture - esp 'Environmental psychology'
- Public policy
- Legal traditions
- Science and practice of decision-making
- Social ecology
- Social sciences
- Behaviour and environments
- Resilience and complexity
- Law and regulations
- Understanding of economics and politics
- Urban (capitalist) economics
- Resource management, e.g. Ostrom and commons management

Spatial Planning as Pragmatic Practice

- A strong grasp of procedures
- Strong negotiation and dialogue skills - understanding of needs of community
- Ability to be a strong 'generalist', both numerate and with spatial thinking and imagining skills
- Understand the basic dynamics of the property development process and industry
- Good at communicating with and working with others from multiple disciplines/backgrounds (GIS, Engineering, social planning, ...)

Relationship of Good Planning and Philosophy

- Critical thinking - Questioning interests and benefits of a proposal
- Looking hard at knowledge and value claims - being prepared to re-examine received wisdom, 'technocracy', but also resisting cynicism/relativism. Socratic tradition ??
- Attempt to look and project forward, but also recognise how to act given limits to knowledge
- Respect its own tradition - but continuously draw from other disciplines, and update itself raised on changing social, moral, technological circumstances.
- But: "A bias for action, not just epistemology" (Forester, 2008)

Example 1: Affordable Housing

- How do we frame the problem, and how to address it?
 - More land re-zoned for housing purposes on fringes of cities?
 - Reduce 'red tape' or 'green tape' on developers?
 - Encourage re-direction to regional cities?
 - Allow building more high-rise apartment blocks?
 - Change housing form, including culturally: more co-housing, or multi-generational housing?
 - Increase govt involvement, buy/build more social housing?
 - Or change economic incentives to reduce speculation – e.g. repeal negative gearing, or Georgist moving of tax base from income towards higher land and resource rent tax?

Example 2: Self-Driving Cars



- More efficient, so reduce oil use
- Safer than human-driven
- Potentially increase capacity of roads and parking
- Could do productive stuff, e.g. read/talk, while in transit
- Only so much room in a city geometrically – public transport still better w.r.t. this
- Will they further alienate pedestrians & cyclists from streets?
- Legal/liability problems

Photo source: <http://www.digitaltrends.com/cars/google-adds-lexus-rx450h-to-ongoing-self-driving-car-project/>

Some Concluding Thoughts

Planning deals with hard problems often without simple answers, but good thinking can get us closer to them.

- Creative and positive - but also an institutional responsibility to look at all 'angles' & problems that arise.
- We *do* need a profession and institution of 'planners' : but we also need communitarian challenges from the outside, to push new ideas and keep accountability. (E.g. see Buder, 1990, p214.)
- Particularly: to counterbalance powerful interests, and place new problems on the agenda like climate change

What might making the Philosophical personal mean in terms of relating to planners?
Some ideas:

- When talking to planners :- continuing to represent you own point of view – but at least a little, trying to see the world from their perspectives too.
- And even for political and personal issues in planning :- at times to step back a little, appreciate the complexity of the issue, and reflect on the interests, rights and concerns of others.

Further Reading & References

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