

Towards a philosophy of social planning: Cities and social planning

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Abstract: Given the conspicuous and wide-ranging effects emanating from planning, this paper takes as its starting point the proposition that all planning, not least that directed at Australian cities, must address and resolve the issue of legitimacy in terms of *what justifies its decision-making and intervention(s)*. Specifically focusing on the discipline of social planning, with its complex relationships with that segment of the real world that we call 'social reality' or 'social practice', the paper argues that such planning must justify its legitimacy not only in terms of its actions and consequences, but, more significantly, on the basis of a substantive and critical examination of the values, knowledge, politics and ideologies that have underpinned its emergence throughout the 20th century and that currently inform and drive it.

Drawing on a much more substantive study currently being undertaken by the authors which examines the ways in which shifts in political ideology, changes in the acceptance and validation of different knowledge sources, and the growing awareness of the city as a living system of diverse forces which have been used to justify the presence of social planning throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, the current paper briefly examines the history of the developing relations between urban planning and social expectations, and analyses the increasing acknowledgement of the importance of the social dimensions of cities within planning strategies.

Introduction

Given its ubiquity, the term 'planning' is more usually preceded by one of a variety of qualifiers intended to give it a more specific focus and meaning – and perhaps, therefore, to suggest a greater acceptability and persuasiveness. Some qualifiers thus relate to the scale and/or type of place to which the planning is directed – local, municipal, regional, national, urban and metropolitan being common examples. Others refer to general 'fields of endeavor' – physical, economic, social, infrastructure and health being familiar prefixes. Of these, 'social' is one of the most ambiguous of the adjectives that can precede and define planning. In this context the descriptor 'social' can imply 'in the public interest, and of general concern'; it may signal 'people's interaction and participation'; or it can simply suggest a distinctive, albeit ill-defined, sphere of interest or activity, different from the 'economic' or 'physical'. Combining this qualifier with a noun – planning – that is already both ambiguous and wide-ranging in its meaning is thus a bold and complex move.

Yet over the past hundred years the idea of social planning has gained much currency, and a large number of articles and books have been published on the subject. A brief review of some of the extant literature reveals that social planning has been practiced within a diversity of interrelated fields during this period, some of the most noted being social work and community organization; social policy development; social welfare; social service planning; land use planning; and development planning in the Third World (Kahn 1969). Within these diverse fields social planning has been conducted in one form or another by governments (at all levels and of all political persuasions), as well as by corporations, not-for-profit organisations, and individual communities (Moffatt 1999).

Despite its differences, however, it is broadly argued in much of the literature that social planning shares many of the features of other forms of planning. Thus, for example, most accounts provide descriptions of procedural steps in social planning which are very similar to those given by authors in other fields. As Kirk observed, in its broadest sense “all planning is social planning in that it has social effects – intended or otherwise” (1980, p.154). Yet while conceding this, the question remains: what makes social planning distinct from these other forms? In response, many sources claim that social planning is exclusively or centrally concerned with social *reality* and social *practice*. Thus, while not denying that *all* planning has social implications, the argument is that social planning is that which deals *directly* with social issues. Quite what this means is not clear: sources do not state precisely where the boundaries between social and other concerns in planning lie, and no one has yet defined the term social to the satisfaction of everyone else! Nevertheless, definitions of social planning imply both a unique concern for social issues and the application of the ideals of planning to *the direction of social reality*. In doing this social planning brings to the forefront of planning such issues as social activity, social concern, social development, social environment, social interaction, social interest, social pattern, and social policy.

Given its necessary brevity, the aim of this paper is not to discuss social planning in general but, critically, to examine the issue of the *legitimacy* of social planning in terms of *what has justified the emergence of social planning over the past century?* In this context legitimation is the act of providing reasons for and bestowing acceptability upon some proposed set of actions, decisions or ‘rules’. It thus refers to the circumstances and/or means by which an act, process, or ideology *becomes* legitimate by its attachment to certain norms and values within a given society. In this sense it is a measure both of acceptance and persuasion. Something becomes legitimate when one approves of it, and thus when one consents to it – though

whether such consent is explicit or tacit depends both on the circumstances and the individuals involved (Weber 1981; Dogan 2005).

In unpacking this issue the paper draws on a much more substantive study currently being undertaken by the authors which examines in more detail three specific themes associated with legitimation. These themes emerged from a mixed-method empirical analysis of extant views and attitudes within the planning profession, which drew on (i) archival research across a range of published British, American and Australian sources; (ii) a series of six unpublished in-depth interviews, carried out by one of the authors, with individuals aged between 50-85, each of whom had worked in the field of 'social planning'/'social dimensions of planning' for over 20 years; and, to a lesser extent, (iii) the findings of a recently-completed survey with 60 social planning practitioners within Australia. Such a 'mixed-methods' approach has the dual advantage, firstly, of providing more complete answers to research questions through the combination of multiple sources of information, and, secondly, of allowing the findings to be validated through triangulation

The first of these themes focuses on relations between *economics*, *political ideology*, and *social policy*, and examines the ways in which capitalism in its various emerging forms – from 'unfettered capitalism' based on free-market fundamentalism through to 'organized capitalism' (Hilferding & Bottomore 1981) and 'social capitalism' (Coorey & Totaro 2009) – has provided a frame for social intervention, and thus social planning. Within the capitalist system, as Ferges has noted, social planning and policy often operate as a "palliative or corrective instrument" for the machinations of capitalism (1979, p.50).

In parallel with this, the second theme analyses what sources of *knowledge* have been seen to have given authority to and thus justified social planning intervention. This examination therefore provides insight into the ways in which social planning processes have been legitimated through the belief that knowledge can be applied to deal effectively with social issues. It thus traces a shift from the importance of social science knowledge and the role of the expert planner, to the legitimation of planning processes comprising the agglomeration of more pluralistic forms of participant and experiential knowledge, with the role of the planner being recast as the facilitator and manager of such processes. That the two themes are intrinsically interwoven, with social planning partaking of *both* politics and knowledge, is neatly summarized in Khan's observation that, like other forms of planning, social planning, is a question of "policy choice and programming in the light of facts, projections, and application of values" (Kahn 1969, p15).

Yet while both these themes are of critical importance, it is only the third, which explores the developing role that social planning has played in city/urban planning over the past century, and what has justified this transformation in the role of social planning, that can be dealt with here.

Cities and social planning

Without being able to provide a comprehensive history here, it might be noted that, throughout the 20th century, social planning has been carried out by all levels of government, by non-government bodies, by private industry and, not least, by philanthropic bodies. As such it has found its grounding in a range of fields including social policy, social services planning, social welfare, social work, and community organization. This has given social planning a broad and far-reaching institutional history. Within Australia, for example – no less than in a larger country such as the United States – social planning, initiated to implement state and national government social policies, is facilitated through a system of thousands of separate types of agencies and organizations, each dealing with a complex diversity of social issues including social deprivation, families, child welfare, and so on. Yet when we move our focus to the relations between *cities* and planning, we are immediately made aware of the claims and influences of *another* institutional planning history, that of urban planning.

As an institution in Western countries, urban planning, like social planning, has been something more than a mere function of government; it has been both a profession, and a discipline of academic scholarship as well. While distinct, these two institutional forms of planning are not discrete. In 2003 the Planning Institute of Australia established the Social Planning Chapter “to recognize the crucial role that planning plays in the well being and effectiveness of communities” (Planning Institute of Australia 2009). Interestingly, the first objective of the Chapter is identified as “raising the profile of social planning within urban...planning”, an aim that can be read as part of an ongoing relationship that has developed throughout the 20th and early 21st century, in an attempt to elevate the importance of social goals and social planning within processes of urban planning (Planning Institute of Australia 2009). This call to raise the profile of social planning within the urban planning context can be read as a response to the view that urban planning has tended to be focused on and dominated by physical planning

processes, and, as a consequence, has been “socially maladroit and inept” (Jennifer Summers, personal communication, January 14, 2009) and “socially unaware” (Andrew Paul, personal communication, November 28, 2008). Such attempts to elevate the importance of the social in urban planning processes have been marked in a variety of ways: by attempts to temper the “physical environmental determinism” that was seen to dominate it (Webber 1968, p.10); by highlighting the tacit social goals that underscored these doctrines of physical environmental determinism, thus questioning their validity; and by creating urban planning processes that sought to integrate physical planning processes with an equally powerful and explicit set of social planning processes, the aim of which was to create a more comprehensive approach to urban planning. In recent years the latter has been given powerful impetus through a range of doctrines affecting planning, such as ‘the fight against urban poverty’ and ‘sustainability’.

In the later 19th and early 20th centuries modern urban planning – town planning or city planning as it was also then called – developed in response to emerging conditions of ‘urban life’, most usually concerns about overcrowding and squalor in the rapidly expanding industrial cities of Australia and other western countries. Ebenezer Howard and Patrick Geddes amongst others argued that the physical environment was a major determinant of social behavior and a direct contributor to an individual’s social welfare (Howard 1902; Geddes 1904; see also Mumford 1946). On this basis they encouraged physical improvements for cities, and argued that city governments should enact land use legislation to control future construction and segregate different types of urban activities. Yet this early urban planning was dominated by engineers and architects, and the emphasis which was placed on the enforcement of building and zoning legislation diverted attention from the social aspects of urban planning. After the First World War, zoning and the preparation of master plans became common in most western countries, including Australia. During this period faith grew in the practice of urban planning. Researchers

such as Haig, for example, thought it possible that planners could one day specify exactly where things belonged in the vast metropolitan region, utilising a scientific basis for zoning for the good of all (Haig 1926, pp.180-181). Interestingly, within the Australian context, governments took responsibility for urban (then called town) planning within capital cities while so-called 'secondary towns' were left for private enterprise to lay the foundations (Hamer 1994).

The period of postwar prosperity within countries such as Australia and the US launched, as Webber says, "what appears to be a golden age in city planning" (Webber 1968, p.9), although it must be noted that urban planning theory and practice continued to be dominated by physical design (see, e.g., Keeble 1952; Great Britain, Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1953; Gibberd 1955; Gleeson & Low 2000). The conception of urban planning during this period was often referred to as 'architecture large' (James Smith, personal communication, November 1, 2008), and most planners in the post-war years were architects by training, or 'architect-planners' (Ed Southwell, personal communication, November 15, 2008). Yet this period saw growing dismay over the impact of physical urban planning programs, such as urban renewal, suburban sprawl and highway construction, on the poor and on minority groups. As Webber noted:

On the one hand the suburban housing tracts are accused of spawning a generation of deprived children, who are being reared by neurotic, coffee-addicted mothers in a matriarchal society from which traffic-stressed fathers and most other dissimilar people are all but excluded. On the other hand, central city redevelopment is charged with dispossessing lower-income groups of their preferred habitats, inflicting psychic disturbance, and destroying their social communities. In turn, design of the new high-

rise housing is indicted for breeding a new, sterile, culturally disinherited species (Webber 1968, p.10).

This dissatisfaction with the doctrine of physical environmental determinism gave rise to both self-criticism and external criticism, and thence to a reassessment of purposes and methods within urban planning. In this debate contending views were advanced as to whether urban planning should stick with the familiar subject matter of land management and the physical environment, or whether it should focus on a broader- range of social policy issues (Wilson 1966). Gans (1968a) argued more strongly that, because planning was about people, the design, land use and aesthetic aspects of urban planning should be subordinated to social concerns. Other disagreements concerned the main purpose of urban planning: whether it was to manage urban development efficiently, or to redistribute resources to people disadvantaged by present urban arrangements. Broady (1968), who was extremely critical of physical determinism in planning, argued that urban planning should seek instead to strengthen social institutions, promote human potential and foster social integration by improving social relationships between people. What seemed to emerge from these debates was a clear mandate to increase the social sensitivity of urban planning. As Bernard Frieden postulated in 1967 in regard to the changing prospects for social planning:

The next 50 years can be expected to produce increasing pressures on the [urban] planning profession to use its skills for the planning of social policies. Changing definitions of urban problems and new political commitments are likely to emphasize the redistribution of resources to disadvantaged groups as a major policy goal. These pressures will affect both the content and the management of urban planning. They pose two major challenges to the profession: to increase the social sensitivity of

physical planning, and to extend the scope of planning beyond the physical environment (Frieden 1967, p.311).

Thus, rather than maintaining a narrow architectural focus, urban planning began to draw knowledge from fields such as sociology, economics, social policy and political science. This was accompanied by a broader approach to training, Gans (1968b) noting that the prestigious planning school at the University of Chicago was one of the first to put a greater emphasis on social science knowledge than on design skills in the curriculum, with other schools soon following this example. In the 1960s such attempts to advance the social dimensions of urban planning were greatly facilitated in such countries as Australia, Great Britain and the US by a considerable shift from the physical design-based conceptions of urban planning and urban design to the systems and rational process views of planning (Bourne, 1975; Echenique 1969). Whereas the physical design-based tradition saw town planning primarily as an art, the systems and rational process theorists suggested that town planning was a science on the basis that the analysis of environmental systems (regions, cities, etc.) involved systematic empirical – and hence ‘scientific’ – investigation and analysis of interrelationships between activities at different locations.

This shift from urban planning as an art to urban planning as science was experienced as “profoundly unsettling by many planners and planning students reared in the design tradition of urban planning” (Ed Southwell, personal communication, November 15, 2008). Suddenly, within the space of a few years, town planners who had approached their task on the basis of an aesthetic appreciation of urban environments, and who saw themselves as creative, artistic urban designers, were being told that this conception of town planning was inappropriate, and that instead they should see themselves as – and become – “scientific systems planners and

analysts” (James Smith, personal communication, November 1, 2008). While in the past town planners had tended to view and judge towns predominantly in physical and aesthetic terms, they were now to examine the town in terms of its social life and economic activities; in Harvey’s terms, a sociological conception of space was to replace a geographical or morphological conception (Harvey 1973). This in turn meant that urban contexts were no longer seen as ‘end-states’ but as ‘live’ functioning things in dynamic processes. Within this new context urban planners, who had previously been dominated by physical planning doctrine, began to recognize more and more the social components of their work (see, e.g., Harvey 1973; Simmie 1973; 1974; Paris 1982). Analyses of these developments gradually stimulated a greater interest in the social, economic and political dimensions of urban planning and it was “gradually recognised that urban planning involved a variety of tasks such as the creation of jobs through planned investment, the anticipation of the social impact of urban planning” (Andrew Paul, personal communication, November 28, 2008).

Based on these upheavals in doctrines of physical determinism a new *explicit* dimension of social planning, reflecting a new concern for the social facets of urban planning, appeared in Australia and other western countries from the 1960s on. As one recent Australian local government guide to social planning notes: “Social planning is a vital input into environmental planning, particularly in examining the social impacts of possible major changes to the built environment” (Menzies 1993, p.10). This new dimension of urban planning led, for example, to closer links between urban planners and the personnel of community organizations working in poor communities (Duhl 1963; Gans 1968c; Gilbert & Specht 1977). One problem presented by this shift, however, was that, while urban planning professionals increasingly recognized and acted on the social aspects of urban planning, it was often seen as being too specialist a skill set for the typical urban planning practitioner to demonstrate. As a consequence of this – and

notwithstanding the fact that some urban planners did amass a demonstrable and highly developed knowledge within the area – distinct professional responsibilities began to emerge, such as social impact assessments of urban development, which were increasingly taken up throughout the later 20th century by specialist social planning personnel within planning agencies at all levels (Menzies 1993; 1996). Such studies were increasingly undertaken by professionals who had training as sociologists and/or social welfare personnel, and who were brought into the urban planning team for their specific knowledge.

Within the context of Australia (Andrew Paul, personal communication, November 28, 2008), as well as that of the United States of America (Perloff 1963) and the United Kingdom (Broady 1968), this new and explicit dimension of social planning within urban planning was combined with the broader dimensions of social planning – social policy, social welfare, social work, community organization, social services planning, etc – that had existed in various forms for over a century. Accordingly, city planning authorities, local government and other bodies created social planning divisions and/or social development departments which focused on such issues as helping people to move into the community, settle down and establish roots quickly, disseminating information about local facilities, and promoting voluntary activities (Broady 1968). As Perloff (1963) noted, social planners in American city planning agencies were undertaking six tasks: (i) assessing and monitoring the social impact of plans; (ii) preparing long-term social development plans; (iii) undertaking social research; (iv) coordinating community services; (v) helping to locate community facilities; and (vi) enlisting grass roots participation in planning. In parallel with this, through the later decades of the 20th century, specialist tertiary programs emerged within western countries specifically addressing social planning and its widely diverse fields of practice (Hemmens 1978).

Yet, as Bromely (2003) noted, this emergence of social planning specializations and training was given a substantial jolt in the early 1980s as a result of the emergence of Thatcherism which resulted in the paring back of many programs and the down-sizing of social planning divisions, etc. While such paring back undoubtedly affected the ongoing development of social planning, much of the impact was not on the *content* of the social planning that had emerged, but rather on the *delivery mechanisms* which were used for its implementation within such countries as the UK and Australia. Under forces akin to Thatcherism and the related ideology of Neo-liberalism, the private sector within such countries as Australia, from the later 1970s until the early 21st century, took greater control in urban planning projects that aimed to master plan not just the *physical* aspects of communities, but communities *in their entirety* (Prior 2008, p.333).

Throughout the later decades of the 20th century the earlier attempts to further integrate social planning and urban planning discussed above have been supported by the emergence of such doctrines as communicative planning (Healey 1996), integrated planning (Sansom 1993) and sustainability (Prior 2008). In Australia in the 1990s, for example, Integrated Local Area Planning encouraged local governments to take a more holistic approach to the physical, environmental, social, cultural and economic qualities of local areas (Menzies 1993, p.2; 1996, p.159). Similarly the emergence of the notion of sustainability has emphasized that the ongoing wellbeing of a living system such as a city is as much dependent on the sustainability of its social aspects as other aspects such as its economic and physical structures, or its environmental well-being. These doctrines have supported further attempts to develop the social dimensions of planning, to find synergies between social planning and other fields of planning such as urban planning, and to increase our aware of the “broadened conception of city systems” which, as Webber notes, mean that:

we can no longer speak of the physical city versus the social city or the economic city or the political city or the intellectual city. We can no longer dissociate a physical building, for example from the social meanings that it carries for its users and viewers or from the social and economic functions of the activities that it conducted within it. If distinguished at all, the distinction is that of constituent components, as with metals comprising an alloy. With improved understanding of economic and social systems, the idea of 'capital' is being extended beyond 'things' to encompass the human, intellectual and organizational resources as well. The skills and capacities of our populations, the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of our culture, the way in which we organize ourselves for the joint conduct of our affairs, all contribute to our productive capacities and wealth in ways that are inseparable from those of the physical equipment and natural resources we use. (Webber 1968, p.14).

Conclusion

While this paper is necessarily brief and its reportage is restricted to just one of the three themes that form part of a larger research project, it nevertheless seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the political, economic and other forces that have legitimated the practice of social planning throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. That planning at an urban level is most immediately concerned with the physical and the formal, contributing to societal benefit by means of the legislation for and production of built environments, might be taken for granted. Such physical requirements, however, cannot stand alone, and this paper attempts to trace the necessary integration of physical production with social requirements, and

thus to examine the emergence of the social planning dimension of urban planning. Within this theme the paper thus analyzed the development of explicit, and increasingly specialized, socially-informed approaches to urban and regional planning. Such brief analysis highlights the arguments of the 1960s and 1970s that helped planning practice within such countries as Australia take account of the complex and increasingly interactive relation between physical and social development, a relationship involving the necessary interplay of meanings and experiences in relation to physical objects. Realizing this, planning researchers began to pay much more attention to the social processes of how urban development was produced; to how urban planners and designers in turn gave more attention to the relation between physical designs, social meanings and attitudes; and ultimately to how this provided one reason for increasing social planning specialization within such institutions as local government. Such new found beliefs in the necessity for integrating physical production with a fuller understanding of social processes in turn served to legitimate these new practices, and continue to do so, even as society and its requirements inevitably change with the times.

In concluding this paper, then, it is worth asking the question: What key factors in today's societies are impacting on the legitimacy of the relationship between social planning and urban planning? One key factor that is of significance is the emergence of the notion of "sustainable development", with its concern for combining social considerations with environmental and economic ones when articulating a development pathway. Through sustainability, the social dimensions of planning have been drawn into an emerging realignment within urban planning, through an attempt to take a more holistic view of what development involves. Yet despite all the talk about a "balanced" approach to integrating the various dimensions of sustainable development, the "social" part still tends to be given the least attention.

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