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CHANGING URBAN PLANNING PRACTICE

Michael Mattingly
Development Planning Unit, University College London

Urban planning often does not succeed because of:

1. Its heavy dependence on land use regulation. Not only is regulation a passive tool for implementation which depends upon others to initiate actions, it is notoriously ineffective. The standards or rules used in regulations usually give them a rigidity which is in conflict with the steady and substantial change which characterises today's world. Moreover, the poor who make up a growing portion of urban populations often cannot afford the requirements of typical regulations, and, in order to simply survive, they must violate these regulations. At the same time, the rich often are able to use their wealth or political power to brush aside regulations when they wish.

2. Its top-down decision making, which makes this kind of planning insensitive to local priorities and circumstances, and which slows its responsiveness because of the greater bureaucratic distances between those affected and those deciding.

3. Its failure to mobilise the necessary resources. Planners not only fail to identify where resources can be found, but also they do not arrange for these resources to be made available for plan implementation.

4. Its obsession with detail. Data collecting is too comprehensive; analysis is too elaborate; proposals are too specific. In some places in the world, plans are still made for every square metre of land, perhaps for every cubic metre of space. Much of the detail is never used, and while planners are engaged with it, decisions which cannot wait are made without the support of planning guidance. Moreover, decision makers approve plans whose details they do not note and understand, so they withdraw their support later on.

5. Its inability to identify priorities and to focus plans upon them. Long lists of issues and of proposals are produced, all of which must compete for attention and resources. Those matters are not distinguished which are most critical because they are urgent or are the bases of many others, or otherwise considered most important by the institutions who must act if plans are to be implemented. The length of a list is not tailored to fit the time, money or human skills available.

6. Its failure to address the actual concerns of those who are supposed to benefit and of the actors who are to implement plans. Planners too often insist that targets arising from their technical knowledge should orient planning processes. Yet, on the one hand, it has been found that the users and beneficiaries of plans know much about conditions, agendas, and their own preferences which planning studies miss. On the other, the actors who implement plans usually have superior knowledge of their areas of responsibility and they have their own agendas. Planning too often tries to impose new agendas upon these actors, rather than persuading them to drop some current tasks from their schedules in order to make room for new ones.

7. Its failure to effectively co-ordinate actions. Despite its ability to think across the boundaries of government departments, investment sectors, and administrative levels and to be multi-disciplinary, urban planning usually has no means for achieving the co-ordination upon which its proposals rely.

As it has become more aware of these weaknesses, urban planning practice has been changing.

Pro-Active

Urban planning practice has become more pro-active and entrepreneurial. This means it initiates actions, innovates, and takes risks, and it organises actors, motivates them and helps (enables) them to carry out their parts in formulating and implementing plans. Among the tools used by pro-active planning are public investment programming, land development by government (not only to achieve intended land uses, but also to provide profit and revenues), partnerships, incentives, leadership, and negotiation. Negotiation is essential to much of pro-active planning, for it is the key to the effectiveness of most of the other tools. Negotiation among partners is the basis of effective partnerships; it is used by leaders to bring on followers; it is needed to achieve agreement on capital expenditure programming; and it is essential to the efficient and effective use of incentives.

Some 50 years ago in Swindon, a small city in the U K, senior government officers recognised that the basis of the town's economy - a single industry - was beginning a severe decline (Harloe, 1974). With the agreement of their elected local government council, they formulated and implemented successful plans for building a new, diversified economic base which would expand the city's population as well as raise the quality of life in Swindon to a higher standard. The foundation of these plans was the management of urban land. After experimenting with the leasing and profitable sub-leasing of a single site for industry, the local government purchased a substantial quantity of farmland along the edge of the town. During the next 30 years and more, it leased or sold this land, or used it for public purposes, in order to realise its land use plans, as well as to provide a stream of income to the town government with which to finance public facilities and housing construction. Emphasis in land use planning was placed on increasing the quality of the living environment, so as to help the town persuade business firms to locate in Swindon. Planning did not wait for others to develop land; rather the town government build major additions to Swindon, sometimes using private sector partners, and it actively sought new investments in its economy.

Participatory

Urban planning practice has become more participatory. Rather than just get information through surveys from those affected by policies, this kind of planning involves them in identifying and defining priority problems and opportunities, in proposing and evaluating alternative actions, and, sometimes, in deciding what is to be done. Among the more innovative participation techniques is one which uses models of building, streets, land, and other physical features to help those affected by plans to express their problems, preferences, and ideas for solutions (Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, 1995). Particularly in poor communities where people are least familiar with technical terms and maps and where few have been asked in the past to express their views, a degree of understanding and communication never achieved before can result from playing simulation games with these models.

Participation has been extended to include more of those who must act if plans are to be carried out. They are involved when priorities are identified and their participation may continue when proposals are formulated and, sometimes, even when final decisions are made. "Visioning" exercises are conducted in the United States. That for Clifton, New Jersey, asked heads of local government departments to identify the key issues facing them in the future. Their individual views were synthesised into a statement of a small number of the highest priority issues which they were asked to discuss and revise. The final list was used to inform the elected members, and then to guide selected municipal departments in preparing action programs for each issue. Looking back on this exercise, it seemed that its outcome was weakened by its failure to extend participation to include the political leaders and community groups. (Kempe, 1993) When actors take part in formulating proposals, or even in identifying problems and priorities, they become stakeholders in the outcome and they are therefore more determined that plans be implemented. The important actors are not

found just in various government departments and levels of government. They also exist in the business sector and the non-profit organisations (NGOs). Participation of government with business firms and/or NGOs is becoming a common way to prepare and carry out urban plans. For example, private sector companies contracted to carry out waste management have been involved in planning how land will be used for waste disposal.

Strategic

Urban planning practice is becoming more strategic. Strategies provide a context within which to identify priorities and to formulate programs of actions addressing these priorities. This is because they take a longer term view and a broader (or comprehensive) view which encompasses many urban systems and investment sectors. It is because they acknowledge outside forces (such as globalisation), and make connections between systems in separately recognised geographic and administrative areas (such as are needed to link municipal governments in a metropolitan area).

A good strategic framework can allow decentralisation of decision making. Business corporations in the late 1980s were attracted to an approach which allowed them to give a large measure of freedom to every unit within a company to formulate how it would perform its part in an overall strategy. This can make decisions of detail more sensitive to local capabilities, priorities and circumstances, and thus decentralisation can encourage more innovation and local initiative. A strategic framework can provide a structure to which spontaneously generated actions can be related, so that they provide more public benefit. (It was observed earlier that Tucuman today is mostly the result of spontaneously generated actions.) A strategic framework can provide the direction or leadership for local actions to follow, whether these actions are generated by plans or they are self-generated.

Creation of a strategic framework and the maintenance of it can be less time consuming - and consume less of other resources - because a strategic approach does not emphasise working with details. Business corporations rejected their traditional planning efforts for strategic planning because the former seemed to result in the collection of data far in excess of what could be used or could be justified by the accuracy of future projections (Porter, 1987). Traditional plans overwhelmed staff with detail which they could not operationalise.

The Sustainable Cities Program of the UNCHS used a technique which demonstrates how a strategic approach can quickly produce agreement on priorities (UNCHS and UNEP, 1997). Planners organise a "city consultation" which collects political and business leaders, representatives of communities and NGOs, and officers of a wide spectrum of government agencies of various levels to discuss the environmental issues facing their city. Lasting only a day or two, this discussion produces a short list of agreed priority issues. A working group with a similar breadth of representation is then set up to deal with each issue. In a matter of weeks or months, a working group can produce a proposal for a program of actions to deal with its issue, a program which has the agreement in principle of the various actors represented in the working group. The issues selected as priorities are strategic, thereby encompassing and connecting a number of more specific concerns. For example, the first strategic issue agreed and tackled in Accra, Ghana was that of the pollution of the lagoon which borders much of the city (Doe and Tetteh, 1997). This brought together problems of the city's drainage system and waste collection, as well as the living conditions in communities near to the lagoon, the waste disposal behaviour of industries within the lagoon's catchment area, and the municipality's management of the lagoon's shore as a recreation area.

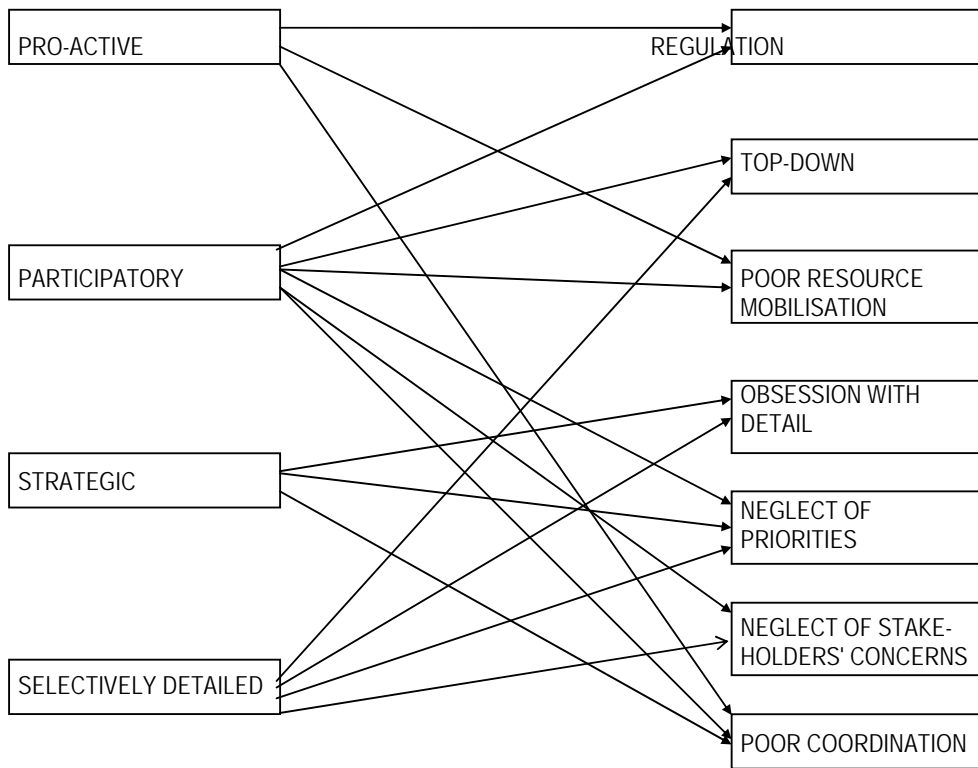
Selectively Detailed

When there are priorities and a general framework within which to consider them, it is possible to be selective about matters of detail. Details become important where there is pressure for action. For some time practice has been changing to a focus on actions. "Action planning" was initially conceived to guide public investments in housing and infrastructure. Recognising the dominance of private sector activity in city building, action planning is now about matters and places where any significant change is underway or about

to occur. This reduces detailed planning - and all the requisite data collection and analysis of details - to selected issues or geographic areas. This trend towards selective attention to detail - greatly supported in development programs by an emphasis upon projects - has fostered much of the interest in a stronger strategic perspective which can identify priorities for reasons other than just because changes are creating pressures for action.

Effects on Weaknesses

These changes to a planning practice which is more pro-active, participatory, strategic, and selectively detailed have been made because of the positive effects which they can have upon the causes of past failures. The more obvious effects can be suggested by the following diagram, in which the lines draw links between these four characteristics of the new practice and the major problems of traditional planning which prompted changes.



Pro-active planning is action oriented, not passive. It does not wait for others to take initiatives and act, which is what land use regulation requires. Instead, it seeks out resources in order to mobilise them, often through negotiation. It takes initiatives to alert actors to what is at stake for them, to bring actors together and to organise, and negotiate their co-ordination.

Greater participation is a means to inform, lead, negotiate and otherwise motivate land development which is in keeping with planning policies. It is the basis of a bottom-up approach to counter or creatively react with top-down planning. It can tap new sources of resources (including skills) in the possession of partners and contracted agents, as well as motivate the use of resources by actors who are normally uncooperative. Participation permits both those affected and those acting to better identify and declare their priorities, and allows views of priorities and conditions to be continually expressed as changes take place. Participation brings actors together and provides the sharing of information and knowledge among them which permits negotiation and fosters co-operation and co-ordination.

A more strategic approach can identify the specific limited areas of concern where detail is needed. A strategic view promotes the identification of basic priorities, and allows room for particular and/or local priorities to be identified and pursued. A strategic overview identifies key connections across sectors, disciplines, and administrative departments and boundaries, so that co-ordination requirements are clearer. Strategic planning offers opportunities for actors to work together on structuring better relationships.

Selecting certain subjects (e.g. transportation or recreation) and certain places for attention (as suggested by a strategic overview) means that the necessary amount of detail is more likely to be manageable. This provides the analyses and choices made from a low-level perspective to be used there or sent upward in the chain of decision making. The detail obtained will allow description of the unique conditions and priorities of the subject or area. At this level of observation and interaction, planning will be more sensitive to the special characteristics of the area, more easily focusing attention on the most real concerns and identifying priorities.

Conclusion

This account of changes occurring to urban planning practice draws generalisations from experience in many cities and towns in countries scattered all over the world. It is intended to encourage those concerned with the future of Tucuman to continue with changes to planning practice already occurring here. Planners in Tucuman can take support from the knowledge that a practice which is more pro-active and entrepreneurial, which involves more participation by business firms, government agencies, and NGOs as well as by communities, and which creates a strategic framework for selectively detailed and localised action programs is gaining favour in many other urban areas, apparently because it improves results. Of course, the specific ways in which such changes are conceived and carried out in Tucuman have been and will be particular to this city, and they will depend upon the circumstances there at this time. The extent to which changes are actually achieved will also depend upon these factors.

References

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