MAKE NO BIG PLANS: TWO CAUTIONARY TALES FROM SOUTH AFRICAN URBAN PLANNING PRAXIS

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ABSTRACT: *At the turn of this century, the American urban planner, Daniel Burnham, advised planners, "to make big plans." While, this advice may have been pertinent at the end of the gilded age, research and my experience of planning practice in South Africa shows that it often has little resonance in an age of diminished civic and fiscal expectations and a highly fragmented policy environment. My paper, drawing on two planning case studies in South Africa, demonstrates that a fragmented policy and political environment does not lend itself to the development of large comprehensive plans. The case studies also highlight the difficulties in achieving real community participation within a divided political landscape. In such circumstances, progressive planners often have to sacrifice idealized notions of participatory planning in favor of getting things done. It is argued that while such an outcome is not ideal, for desperately poor communities incremental remedial planning that provides basic improvements to their everyday lives, may be preferable to drawn out strategic planning exercises.*

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of this century, the architect and urban planner, Daniel Burnham, reflecting the exuberance of the City Beautiful movement, advised planners, "to make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood, and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans: aim high in hope and work." (Hall, 1988:174) True to his word, Burnham's *Plan of Chicago* (1909) paid attention to the whole metropolitan region, which he defined as a 60-mile radius from downtown (Wilson, 1996:68). Large-scale strategic planning later found expression in the rational comprehensive or synoptic approach to planning, which was arguably the twentieth century's dominant planning paradigm. The rational comprehensive approach evolved out of two distinct strands of planning. The first flows out of the Geddesian tradition (synoptic planning), which stressed the idea of comprehensive planning (see Hall, 1988). The second strand comes out of the explicit amalgamation of the concept of rationality onto the comprehensive model (Meyerson and Banfield, 1955). For Geddes the planning process consisted of - survey, analysis, and plan. In order to do this a synoptic or overall view of the city was

needed, hence the birth of comprehensive planning. This view of planning often found its expression in long-range comprehensive or master plans (see Faludi, 1973:114; Branch, 1969). Meyerson and Banfield (1955) explicitly tagged the idea of rationality onto comprehensive planning. This idea of planners seeking rational objective choices chosen by dispassionate (value neutral) logic has become integral to the rational comprehensive model. In essence this means that good planning is identified as being based on rational decision making as part of a comprehensive planning process. Healey et al. (1982) comment that the synoptic approach rests upon,

> a consensus view of society where major conflicts over values and interests and consequently over social distribution are absent. Its operating values are technicist and conservative and deny the political nature of planning practice.

Urban planning is, however, by its nature a political activity (see Fainstein and Fainstein, 1971). This does not mean that all plans are simply political documents, but rather that they are always formulated within a specific political context. When this context is relatively harmonious, planning can usually proceed in a non-controversial and routinized way.

Such a context is conducive to optimum community participation and the development of strategic plans along the lines envisaged within the rational comprehensive school of planning. Unfortunately, as almost every planner has discovered, society is seldom harmonious and the political context for planning is usually both conflictual and fragmented. Within this reality, planners concerned with "getting things done" therefore have to adjust their planning praxis (defined as the interrelationship between planning practice and theory) accordingly. In this context, the idealized notions of participatory strategic planning often come into conflict with political and economic realities. Such circumstances mean that planners often have to accept the possible rather than the optimum, thus turning Burnham's advice on it's head; "make no big plans."

This paper aims to illustrate the above by examining the role that urban planners played in two South African urban areas during the political transition away from apartheid, 1989-1994. These two case studies illustrate the different responses of the planning profession to political and urban change and provide lessons that are universally applicable to planners working in similarly fragmented urban and policy environments. To contextualize the two case studies, I will begin by briefly making mention of the nature of the political transition in South Africa and the role of urban planning in that country.

THE POLITICAL TRANSITION AND THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING

During political transitions political rules and the application of law remain in constant flux and are contested by all sections of society. This process of contestation often blunts the power of the state, especially its coercive mechanisms, thereby opening up political, social, economic and territorial spaces that what were not present prior to the transition (Di Palma, 1990). In South Africa, one of the over-riding features of the transition period was the central state's fragmentation and its virtual paralysis with regards to the implementation of new (and existing) urban policy. The central state also failed to provide effective guidance to the provincial and local governments on how they should direct urban and

regional policy, thereby extending political uncertainty and paralysis down to these levels of government. In many respects the bureaucracy was essentially marking time, waiting for a political settlement that would determine both its future and it policies (see Saff, 1998). As will be shown later, this policy paralysis opened up new opportunities for participatory planning in South Africa.

Urban Planning in South Africa

From its infancy the planning profession in South Africa was driven by efficiency concerns and came to be dominated by engineers and architects rather than planners. During the apartheid era, the urban planning profession became an important actor in the implementation of territorial apartheid, especially that associated with the *Group Areas Act* that divided South Africa's cities along racial lines. In this endeavor, the planning profession offered little resistance to either the implementation of racial legislation or its role in giving this policy a physical form. Indeed some authors have argued that the planning profession itself, concerned with slum clearance and a more uniform ordering of space, provided much of the impetus behind the development of segregationist urban legislation (see Mabin, 1992).

In South Africa most planners worked within various local authority structures (such as municipalities) where most of their work was confined to decisions over land use control, the implementation of zoning and the setting and maintenance of physical standards. Turok (1994:249) comments that:

> officials viewed planning as an uncontroversial technical activity, indifferent to the consequences for the black population. In fact planners in the major cities spent most of their time protecting white privileges by safeguarding affluent suburbs from intrusions on their amenity. Their zoning schemes insisted on large plot sizes to maintain 'high standards' and to exclude lower income groups.

The result of the planners indifference to either economic rationality or overall strategic planning was that South African cities came to be characterized by extreme urban sprawl, an over-reliance on private transportation, and the siting of the poorest members

of the population on the urban periphery. The latter being perhaps the central difference with the structure of US cities.

The political turmoil of the 1980s, particularly within the Black townships and squatter camps, provided the catalyst for the rise of a number of non-governmental planning organizations setup to serve the needs of the black township based civic associations. Many staff members of these organizations were recent planning graduates aware of the political nature of planning, sympathetic to the needs of the poor and well versed in the role that planners could play in facilitating urban equity (see Beauregard, 1994). As a result, for the first time establishment urban planners in both the state and the private sector confronted progressive planners who not only pushed an explicit political agenda, but also had the technical expertise to effectively challenge their urban master plans. Simultaneously, the gradual liberalization of the state afforded opportunities for progressive urban planning graduates to find a niche within government and parastatel institutions, such as the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA). The DBSA was established in June 1983 by the South African government in an attempt to promote development mainly within the boundaries of the so-called black homelands (see Development Bank of Southern Africa, 1990/91). Initially the DBSA was seen as an apartheid institution, however, as the political environment shifted, the DBSA increasingly became involved in promoting economic development in black urban areas outside of the homelands. By the early 1990s the organization had begun looking at ways to economically and politically reintegrate South Africa's fragmented urban environment. This shift in strategy allowed the DBSA to gradually shed its apartheid past and the organization has continued to play a leading development role in the post-1994 period.

Using the above as a guide, I will look at the role that planners played in two different settings during this period. In the first case, Kimberley, I was directly involved as a planner. In the second, Milnerton, a suburb of Cape Town, I have been conducting research on urban change since the late 1980s.

THE CASE OF KIMBERLEY/GALESHEWE

Between 1989 and 1991 I worked as a project leader in the Urban Planning Unit of the DBSA. One of the Planning Unit's key policy tools was the drafting of Urban Development Plans (UDPs) which were designed as a strategic planning tool to plan a rational urban development strategy for disadvantaged black urban areas. At the time, what was radical about the UDP was that the planning process treated white areas and their adjacent Black areas as a united functional urban area. This approach was a radical departure from the past, which had eschewed such planning approaches.

In most cases the initiative for these plans came from a Black local authority seeking loans for infrastructure projects. A precondition for the UDP was the establishment of a representative steering committee that would drive the specifics of the plan. The steering committee was charged with selecting consultants who would develop a comprehensive plan, subject to monitoring and approval by the steering committee. The end product was meant to be a comprehensive action oriented plan that identified the urban area's urban needs, and matched these with both the communities priorities and their ability and willingness to pay for any upgraded services and infrastructure. Once the plan was accepted by the steering committee, it was envisaged the various upgrading projects would ensue. These projects could be as diverse as providing new basic infrastructure, such as water, roads and sewerage, to providing new recreation and education facilities.

The UDP was thus a multi-faceted planning mechanism; it was a way to reintegrate the planning of adjacent white and Black areas, introduce public participation into the planning process, impose fiscal discipline on the unrepresentative Black local authorities, set affordable and accountable service charges, and set up a system of revenue cross-subsidization between the white and Black areas. While the UDPs attempt at metropolitan planning and the "scientific" identification of rational development projects was emblematic of the rational comprehensive approach, its attempt at community driven priorities was much closer to the advocacy tradition (see Davidoff and Reiner, 1962). This

melding of two, sometimes-contradictory approaches, was perhaps one of the key reasons why the UDP planning process encountered serious problems.

This can be illustrated by recounting my experiences in Kimberley, a city of 167,000 people situated in the Northern part of the Cape Province. In late 1989 the Town Council of the adjacent Black township, Galeshewe, applied for DBSA funding for infrastructure. The DBSA insisted that any new infrastructure funding would only be forthcoming if it was part of a broader UDP. Faced with this position and needing new funding, the Galeshewe Council reluctantly agreed to this in the beginning of 1990. Surprisingly, the Kimberley Town Clerk (who headed the white Municipality), sensing the winds of political change, agreed to undertake a joint UDP with Galeshewe. This was a major coup for the UDP process, as up to that time, no other "white" areas had agreed to partake in this process.

My first task as project leader of the UDP was to facilitate the setting up of a representative steering committee. After much negotiating the white, Black and coloured local authorities agreed to sit on this body. Getting these local authorities to agree on the need for representatives from non-governmental opposition parties to partake in this process was much harder. The white local authority was the most agreeable, with the others slowly coming round. In a second major coup for the project, the local African National Congress aligned Galeshewe Civic Association agreed to take part in the UDP. During the 1980s community based Civic Associations had developed in most Black urban areas, and were at the forefront in opposing the repressive Black local authorities. For any planning structure to have any legitimacy within the Black community it was thus vital that the local Civic Association participate. The Galeshewe Civic Association was, however, unwilling to sit on the Steering Committee if it contained representatives from the often repressive Galeshewe Town Council. After one and a half years of negotiation, all parties in Kimberley, including the Civic, had accepted the principle of a UDP and the need for a representative steering committee. However, by the time I left the DBSA (August 1991), nothing concrete had occurred and a full steering committee had yet to meet, and it took until after the 1994 elections for the township and the city to be formally amalgamated, by which time the role of the UDP had become moot. This situation was unfortunately not unique to Kimberley, and thus despite the rationality of the UDP process, little practical was achieved prior to 1994.

Lessons Learned

My experiences in Kimberley provide three important lessons about planning within a highly fragmented political environment.

First, the hope that local development issues could get solved at a local level proved impossible to achieve. This was primarily due to the highly charged political environment that made local participatory planning virtually impossible to achieve. Without either a national urban policy or one political jurisdiction that could plan for the entire urban area, there was a policy and power vacuum that prevented even basic projects from going ahead. As the UDP process developed it became clear that no real participation was going to occur until a government, that was both willing and able to formulate and carry out a national urban policy, came into being. The above lesson has some currency in the US context, where a myriad of overlapping and competing jurisdictions often results in destructive and expensive cross-border duplication and waste. Witness the way that corporations are able to leverage tax concessions from various cities in the Tri-State area by threatening to move across state lines. Like the case in South Africa, it remains virtually impossible to develop successful regional or metropolitan plans without coherent cross-jurisdictional planning structures.

Second, one should not automatically assume (as I tended to do) that the leadership of local community organizations necessarily had an interest in delivering improvements to their communities. In the Kimberley case, while these organizations were no doubt more popular and representative than the Black town councils, they often derived their power due to a rhetorically radical stance that would have been threatened had it been seen that a joint planning body was actually delivering services. In many ways their motto seemed to be the more living conditions in the area deteriorated, the more support they world draw from the community in their struggle to topple the town councils. This situation occurred in towns and cities throughout South Africa, proving that local politics was far more important to community groups than rational planning, and further that local political

struggles could only be solved once a democratically elected central government was in place.

Third, it became apparent that long term strategic planning is a difficult concept to sell to people desperate for immediate measures to alleviate their dire living conditions. The UDP failed to excite those who wanted immediate physical improvements to their lives. It is much more difficult to sell a development planning process, no matter how rational, to desperately poor people than it is to promise them a house, or road, or electricity. This points to the ideas highlighted by Throgmorten (1996) who argues that planners have to be able to adopt the appropriate rhetoric in order to sell our plans. In the case of the UDP the rhetoric was pegged at a level beyond the sophistication of our target community.

I learned some very important lessons from my experiences in Kimberley and other similar areas. As an idealistic young planner, I had assumed that it was best that all projects that came out of an undemocratic non-participatory planning process should be delayed until a representative planning body could be established, which would then highlight the communities actual needs and priorities. In theory this is the way it should be. However, what that meant in practice was first, that nothing got done and second, as the local politicians continued to delay the setting up of the steering committee, conditions in the township continued to worsen. During the time I worked at the DBSA I ended up measuring success in negative terms. The more undemocratic projects I prevented, the better I was doing my job. In hindsight this position makes little sense. It could be that those urban planners and civil engineers untroubled by both participatory planning concerns and the need for strategic planning might have had the right idea all along. They went about providing infrastructure untroubled by the need for either strategic or regional planning or for the establishment of community planning structures. This was neither good nor rational planning, but it delivered real inputs to people in need. As a planner, I should thus have been more astute in pushing projects ahead, rather than delaying them. This does not mean favoring either disjointed incrementalism or non-participatory planning, but that when confronted by immediate needs and a desperate populace, it is better to do ameliorative planning rather than providing nothing. The overriding lesson that I drew from my

experiences in Kimberley was that during a time of political transition doing something that provides a socially useful tangible output (such as a road), even if there is no real community participation in the planning process, is perhaps better than trying to be politically correct and ending up helping no one.

THE CASE OF MILNERTON/MARCONI BEAM

Milnerton/Marconi Beam represents an interesting case study in progressive planning during a time of political flux. Milnerton is a predominantly 'white' middle to upper-middle-class suburb situated approximately 8 kilometers from the Cape Town CBD. In 1990 a squatter settlement called Marconi Beam was established within its boundaries (see Saff, 1998). By 1994 Marconi Beam had grown into a community of 2,835 people and the area contained a makeshift school, childcare facilities and numerous informal shops and taverns. Paralleling events in similar areas in South Africa, the Marconi Beam community was represented by (an unelected) Civic Association. In 1995, after lengthy negotiations, the Municipality and the Civic Association agreed on an upgrading project that would provide formal subsidized housing to Marconi Beam residents who could afford the mortgage repayments with the remainder of the residents moving to a new site five miles away.

Urban planners were integrally involved in the negotiations around Marconi Beam. The two main protagonists, the Milnerton Municipality and the Marconi Beam Civic Association, were both represented by planning consultants throughout the process. These consultants, however, performed very different roles. In December 1990 the Municipality hired a firm of private planning consultants, the Planning Partnership, to identify possible sites within the Municipal area for new low-income housing. The Planning Partnership accepted this brief from the Municipality despite the fact that the Marconi Beam Civic Association had from the outset indicated their opposition to this process as it made no provision for the community's wish to remain on their present site. Seeing their role as neutral technocrats, rationally evaluating planning problems and alternatives for

their client, they came up with a set of proposed new sites for the settlement. The way that they saw their role is illustrated by the conclusion to their report on site selection that commented:

> This report is orientated towards providing a logical, factual basis for decision making regarding an issue that has become polarised and emotional... It is trusted that the impartial reporting of facts will assist all parties to come to terms with the realities of the situation, and work together towards decisions that will contribute to the long-term welfare of the total community (Planning Partnership, 1991).

While the Planning Partnership recognized that any site that they chose should be acceptable to the community concerned, they made no effort to consult with this community when proposing their various alternatives. It is perhaps not coincidental then, that on their list of ten criteria for site selection, acceptability of the site to the community concerned was listed ninth. The Planning Partnership thus saw themselves as simply providing an impartial analysis of which site was best for the Marconi Beam squatters, despite the fact that they had not sought any community input, were being paid by the Milnerton Municipality and had, in accordance with the wishes of the Milnerton Council, explicitly excluded Marconi Beam from consideration as one of the possible alternatives. Despite the Marconi Beam community's complete rejection of the above proposals, the Planning Partnership remained the Municipalities consultants of choice.

The Marconi Beam Civic's consultants on the other hand acted in an opposite manor. These consultants, the Development Advisory Group (DAG) defined themselves as:

> An organization composed of people with interests in the planning and design of the physical environment, and who share the desire for the transformation of South Africa into an non-racial, undivided and democratic society, free of economic and social exploitation, DAG believes that it has a role to play contributing towards: an equitable and efficient distribution of resources...the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on race, class or gender. (Development Action Group, 1990/91:3)

DAG thus rejected the rational comprehensive view of planning within consensual society. Modeling themselves within the advocacy tradition they saw planning as an inherently political activity. They therefore worked on behalf disadvantaged communities, usually as planning consultants to the local Civic Association (although their funding came mainly from international aid and advocacy organizations and foreign governments). DAG thus clearly had a political agenda (a more equitable South Africa) that was sympathetic to the aims of the African National Congress and by implication in opposition to the existing Municipal authorities in Cape Town.

That DAG worked through the Civic Associations meant that they often accepted the legitimacy of these bodies and their leadership at face value. The problem of representativeness of their client had a major bearing on negotiations in the case of Milnerton/Marconi Beam where the degree that the Marconi Beam Civic had community support was always unclear. DAG themselves conceded that this Civic was organizationally weak and had no prominent or widely respected community leaders. A consequence of the Civic's understandable lack of technical knowledge and administrative capacity was that DAG increasingly acted as a secretariat on their behalf. This led Milnerton negotiators to make the frequent charge that DAG rather than the Civic had been formulating negotiating strategies and policies on behalf of the community. It is clear that DAG was aware that such a situation could arise, commenting that, "Working with these communities presents DAG with the challenge of building real community capacity and ensuring that DAG's presence is empowering and creates interdependency rather than dependency." (Development Action Group, 1994)

It is in this context that the plans for the upgrading of Marconi Beam should be judged. Prior to the upgrading proposals an impartial 1993 survey of Marconi Beam residents showed that formal housing was only their third choice after improved sewerage and infrastructure - something consistent with trends in other developing countries (Urban Foundation/Chittenden, 1993). Ignoring the results of this survey DAG chose to assume that Marconi Beam residents' top priority was to obtain formal housing. Further, when the binding legal documents to embark on the chosen upgrading strategy were signed by the Civic and DAG, there had been minimal (at best)

consultation with Marconi Beam residents, most of whom had little knowledge of this strategy (Saff, 1998). One thing that is fundamentally clear from the redevelopment proposals was that DAG departed radically from their original role, having moved from consultants working for the Civic to basically becoming private property developers. This seems to be a far cry from either the original aims of the organization or their original mission in Marconi Beam. It is not clear when DAG felt that they had a mandate to become an independent actor in the Marconi Beam planning and development process and my research has failed to uncover any documents that indicate the Civic or the Marconi Beam community giving DAG permission to make decisions on their behalf. To their credit, DAG nevertheless succeeded in gaining important concessions from the Municipality and getting formal housing built for many of the Marconi Beam shack dwellers. The substantial downside of this was that the poorest residents of Marconi Beam were moved out of this area and most of the recipients of the formal housing were saddled with extremely onerous mortgage repayments. In the latter instance, most of these new homeowners have resorted to renting space to new shack dwellers on their property to make their monthly repayments.

Lessons for Equity Planning

Marconi Beam provides universal lessons about trying to promote equity planning. First, planners should always assess to what degree the organization that they represent is in fact representative of the community. In the Milnerton case, it is not clear that the Civic organization ever had the support of the bulk of the Marconi Beam community. It is clear, however, that DAG paid no attention to the views of the Milnerton residents. While this is in keeping with a desire for social equity, it does, however, raise a concern about how planners can on the one hand push unpopular choices and at the same time maintain a participatory planning structure. In the case of Milnerton/Marconi Beam if truly representative community planning structures were created (based on the existing Municipal area), then Marconi Beam would have been summarily removed from the area. This introduces the thorny question of at what stage moral considerations with equity give planners the right to

ignore the wishes of the majority of residents in a given locality and subvert the dynamics of the capitalist land market? This is as much an issue in the US, which likewise faces the question of NIMBYism, and is something that gets to one of the core problems facing urban planners concerned with promoting a more equitable sharing of negative externalities (see Lake, 1992).

Second, the struggle for urban equity is always long and hard fought. Urban planners can play an important role in this struggle, but in doing so they should be careful to ensure that their involvement with poor communities leads to the building of real community capacity and that their presence is empowering rather than creating a dependency relationship. This is no small challenge, which as the case study of Marconi Beam illustrates, is easier said than done.

Third, planners irrespective of whether they act as advocates or equity planners, need to maintain a critical distance from both their own clients and their adversaries. Planners do not always know what's best for communities, nor are people's needs and wants self-evident or often the same thing. If planners believe that their role is to protect poor communities and promote distributional equity, then they should not cross the line from acting as a consultant giving advice to a community, to a consultant formulating policy in place of the community. In other words planners should always maintain a critical distance from their clients and should never surrender their professional competence or ethics to the altar of political expediency.

CONCLUSION

A period of extreme political fragmentation is thus both the best and worst of times for promoting equity planning. The opening up of a political system clearly represents the possibility for developing more participatory planning structures and for the promotion of equity planning. On the other hand, the political flux that accompanies the process of change often frustrates long term strategic planning and prevents community leaders from making unpopular choices. This highlights that during a time of political change, establishing legitimate and functioning

structures at a national level are a necessary (although perhaps not sufficient) condition before strategic planning at a local level can occur. In such circumstances remedial planning, focussing on immediate service delivery to deprived communities would seem to be a better option than trying to establish ideal, but elusive, participatory planning structures so that strategic planning can occur.

While the dangers of adopting an incrementalist approach (even if part of a larger vision), particularly when driven by a non-participatory planning structure are real, when communities are in dire need, a planner, must sometimes be willing to sacrifice comprehensive rationality for pragmatic ameliorative planning. This does not mean that planners should resort to situational ethics, which should remain rooted in the desire for a better society, but rather that planners should embrace a situational praxis that provides a short-term basis for achieving ones long-term goals.

In this context, DAG's approach in Milnerton, while being far from perfect, delivered some real improvements to many of the residents of a community in need, while my approach in Kimberley delivered nothing. In times of political paralysis and fragmentation, the question that planners should thus perhaps be asking themselves is not whether it is better to make big rather than small plans, but rather if small, but achievable plans, are a better alternative to no plans at all.

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