Review


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This book covers the recent South African development of a profession highly relevant to the social sciences: urban and regional planning. The three authors follow the history of planning through the apartheid years and give us a critical interpretation of planning policy as well as the further orientation of the profession since 1994. It is an ideal introduction for planning students who wish a fairly systematic introduction to their field. Its interest also could lie amongst those who wish to explore a particular profession and its development in conditions of transformation; there is really no equivalent in architecture, medicine or law, for instance.

From an historic point of view, planning under the old regime was a fascinating and at times significantly despicable, exercise. Trying to benefit business whilst forcing capital into channels that it sometimes resisted heavily was quite a balancing act. This was a government internationally notorious for ‘social engineering’ along unacceptable lines, even when that process was in some respects denounced in overly crude terms. One set of planners, trained generally in Afrikaans medium universities, laid out the spatial blueprints for the state. Another, trained in English medium universities, worked for municipalities (and the province, in the case of Natal) and the private sector, which had itself complex relations with the state. While the authors of this volume lay this situation out, they explore it far too little in order to assess its footprint today. Modernism, the other bugbear of the past, to which apartheid planning in some respects deferred but which is not entirely to be condemned, also needs more unpacking than is provided.
All three authors were products of the English language planning education system where, by the 1980s, there were to be found critical planners, anxious to expose the plans of the state and interested in innovative experiments tolerated in the interstices of a system in decline. For this reason, the experience and viewpoint of this small community of intellectuals – the ‘alternative planning movement’ – which in turn was well-integrated with other opposition intellectuals and gradually tied in to the political resistance, gets a lion’s share of attention. Much of the focus of the book really works around evaluating the fate of this group and their ideas.

There is much that is negative in the balance sheet and it is questionable that we are experiencing a ‘complete transformation of a country’s planning system’ (3). Planners in the new regime have faced a variety of difficult problems, of which the first was political weakness. They were almost entirely white and lacked powerful representation at the top in the ANC political or administrative elite. Thus they had to sell ideas, often indirectly, to politicians who were often more attuned to international best practice salespeople. Politicians in the ANC being politicians, for instance, became convinced that they stood or fell by the sheer number of houses, whatever their condition or location, which they could provide free of charge to their constituents. Inevitable early delays meant that ‘throughput’ became the name of the game for years.

A strong conviction amongst the alternative planners was the idea of working in a democratic spirit with communities. On the one hand, this proved impossible to sustain within the ANC governance ambit. On the other, there was little preparation for planning on an entirely different scale with inevitably different challenges compared to community based consultation. What does one do when poor, recently arrived, city-dwellers call for solutions that are clearly not ideal for longer-term urban planning as a whole? This dilemma is forcefully laid out on the basis of a study of Crossroads in the Cape Flats.

Second, planners had to overcome the general and comprehensible prejudice against wholesale social engineering through physical planning, a natural reaction to the forceful side of apartheid policy which could profit from international trends to the right and against regulation in general. Their hopes that the RDP of 1994 could become the basis of a powerful integrated planning policy instrument were dashed pretty rapidly.

Third, they could not rest easy in the assurance that their professional credentials trumped ideas from outside. Planning, especially in South Africa,
has not succeeded in forging the links between training and certification on the one hand and the ability to practice professionally on the other in the way that architecture, for instance, has. Moreover today planners are forced to consider from the outset aspects of construction and preservation that do not lie narrowly within the planning of space so that training along the lines of housing or environmental management courses competes with their own. The integrated nature of development means that actual planning is often or even largely done by non-planners and less and less confined to spatial form as the defining element. Harrison et al take the view that the stagnation of the profession represents a phase which is now coming to an end with better times at hand; it is not entirely clear that this is yet the case. However, the embrace by the Mbeki government of a developmental state idea would seem to give this optimism some credibility.

The record on the ground is a decidedly mixed one. The state continues to be obsessed with mega-projects such as the Coega harbour industrial scheme near Port Elizabeth and the questionable sums being lavished on the ephemeral world football championships to be held in South Africa in 2010 without any larger sense of urban transformation connected to new infrastructure suggest an obsession with status and show. Cities remain, if not segregated, highly fragmented. Massive amounts of new housing have been delivered but the quality and location are usually very debatable and they have failed to contribute to the desirable compaction which radicals considered the most important planning policy thrust in the 1990s. The extensive spread of electrification and pure water supply has engendered intense and sometimes bloody conflicts which so-called local government has failed to resolve very effectively. High-minded developmental policies are belied by the dearth of capacity in most municipalities outside the big cities. Above all, the dominance of the private sector, whose legitimate role in planning has been greatly enhanced, has meant a continuation of the road, automobile and shopping centre led growth, characterised now by ever greater attention to middle class security concerns, that has marked South Africa especially since the 1970s and is rarely if ever challenged. The rise of a black run taxi industry, for instance, has added a new barrier to the evolution of a desirable public transport policy while many special interests go against experimentation and advanced planning along environmentally progressive lines. On the other side of the balance sheet lie some interesting particular departures and experiments, such as those given a thoughtful treatment for the reconstruction of Cato Manor Farm in Durban, area-based
management in some of the big metropoles, the determined efforts to rehabilitate parts of the Johannesburg CBD and other city centres and the resuscitation of some experimental efforts such as the Sustainability Institute at Stellenbosch. There is no question that the centre cities have been opened up to the masses and that established black townships enjoy far more amenities than before with Soweto, as the authors indicate, a remarkable special example.

Phil Harrison elsewhere has emphasized the new international philosophy of decentralisation through central power: giving a range of tasks to local governments at various levels while always maintaining the grasp of centralised national power on policy. Thus, for all the fine talk about getting rid of the nanny state, Thatcherite Britain was very hostile to local initiative and authoritarian in setting the limits for it and has been a potent model. This is also how the ANC works, together with significant elements of patrimonial viscose liquid to grease the palms of the needy below. Inseparable from this philosophy as applied locally are the integrated development plans, or IDPs, the cornerstone of local planning today. In reality these plans are inevitably narrowly structured to fit formulae from the centre; they are mostly effective as impediments against the emergence of any kind of local developmental trajectory that might transgress the plans of the ministries. In one place, it is admitted that they are primarily a means of preventing any kind of real urban strategic thinking or initiatives from below. Planning, according to this text, is being fairly effectively re-harnessed to the needs of the transformed ANC dominated state but not along lines close to those that radical critics of the system once proposed.

Perhaps because of differences between the authors, this kind of critical vision is present but not always foregrounded in Planning and Transformation. There is perhaps too much print spent dilating on vacuous and potentially reactionary ideas like the trendy post-modern so-called theory of Leonie Sandercock, a British author who thinks planners need to ‘accommodate diversity’ without much awareness that colonial and apartheid systems were very good at exactly that and not enough on a social critique of whether our cities and regions are being planned in the interest of a better life for the majority of the population. The presence of louder, more dissident voices would not hurt. The text is somewhat repetitious; perhaps for students especially, this is not a bad thing. However, it would be better laid out were it more closely articulated with the developing history of contemporary South African capitalism rather than the planners’ own vision of profession.