



REMAKING PLANNING

THE POLITICS
OF URBAN CHANGE
IN THE THATCHER
YEARS

TIM BRINDLEY,
YVONNE RYDIN
& GERRY STOKER



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London
UNWIN HYMAN
Boston Sydney Wellington

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Published by the Academic Division of

Unwin Hyman Ltd

15/17 Broadwick Street, London W1V 3FP, UK

Unwin Hyman Inc.,

8 Winchester Place, Winchester, Mass. 01890, USA

Allen & Unwin (Australia) Ltd

8 Napier Street, North Sydney, NSW 2060, Australia

Allen & Unwin (New Zealand) Ltd in association with the
Port Nicholson Press Ltd

60 Cambridge Terrace, Wellington, New Zealand

First published in 1989

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Brindley, Tim

Remaking planning: the politics of urban
change in the Thatcher years.

1. Great Britain. Urban regions. Economic planning.

I. Title II. Rydin, Yvonne, 1957-

III. Stoker, Gerry

338.941

ISBN 0-04-711021-X

ISBN 0-04-711022-8 Pbk

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brindley, Tim.

Remaking planning.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. City planning—Great Britain. 2. City planning—

Great Britain—Case studies. I. Rydin, Yvonne, 1957-

II. Stoker, Gerry. III. Title.

HT169.G7B75 1988

307.1'2'0941

88-10630

ISBN 0-047-11021-X

ISBN 0-047-11022-8 (pbk.)

Set in 10/11 Bembo

Printed in Great Britain by

Billing & Sons Ltd., London & Worcester

Preface

This book arose out of the three authors' parallel teaching and research interests, while based in three separate Schools at Leicester Polytechnic, as we struggled to come to terms with the fate of planning under the reforming Thatcher governments. We found that we had each started to investigate particular examples of planning policy and practice, in an attempt to understand the newly emerging forms of planning. As a team we had the advantage of complementary disciplinary roots in politics, economics and sociology. Together we gradually developed a common perception of the general direction of planning in the 1980s, starting from the recognition that it had fragmented into a number of distinctive and competing styles. Over lunchtime discussions and doodles on table napkins we worked out a preliminary classification. This led to the selection of the case studies, which enabled us to test and develop our ideas and eventually to formulate a typology. As it turned out, as soon as we started to write the book two of us moved away from Leicester and collaboration became rather more difficult!

Each of the authors worked on two case studies, which were therefore mainly the product of individual research, although they developed within the common framework and through a process of mutual criticism. Yvonne Rydin was mainly responsible for Chapter 3, on Cambridge, and Chapter 4, on Colchester; Tim Brindley was principal author of Chapter 5, on Coin Street, and Chapter 6, on London Docklands; and Gerry Stoker was the main author of Chapter 7, on GEAR, and Chapter 8, on Stockbridge Village. All other chapters were written jointly.

The case study method was chosen because it suited the project that we had set ourselves, namely to provide a relatively detailed account of the varieties of planning practice in the Thatcher years. This should be of interest to all practitioners, critics, students and would-be reformers of planning. We hope, too, that each case study stands on its own as a story or portrait of planning in particular local circumstances, and that this will make the book especially

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useful to students as a complement to more theoretical or abstract planning texts.

Tim Brindley, Leicester Polytechnic

Yvonne Rydin, North East London Polytechnic

Gerry Stoker, University of Birmingham

Acknowledgements

We have benefited from the help and support of many people in writing this book. First, we must acknowledge the time and resources made available within our respective institutions, Leicester Polytechnic, North East London Polytechnic and the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham. We would also like to extend our personal thanks to those people who have been especially helpful in providing information, opinion and advice on particular topics and on the major themes of the book, here listed in alphabetical order:

Douglas Aikenhead, Robin Boyle, Andrew Church, David Clapham, Michael Hebbert, Keith Kintrea, John McHale, Sarah Monk, Peter Mottershead, George Nicholson, Peter Thornton, Louanne Tranchell, Iain Tuckett and Stephen Young.

We have also benefited from the opportunity to present our developing ideas at various seminars and conferences, and we are grateful for the comments and encouragement of those who responded.

We would like, as well, to acknowledge the contribution of employees and representatives of the following organizations who provided valuable assistance and information for our research:

Cambridge City Council, Cambridge Urban Studies Centre, Colchester District Council, Colchester Urban Studies Centre, Coin Street Community Builders, Docklands Forum, Glasgow District Council, Knowsley Metropolitan District Council, London Docklands Development Corporation, Scottish Development Agency, South Cambridgeshire District Council and Stockbridge Village Trust.

Thank you to Alan Sankey for drawing the maps.

And lastly, a very big thank you to Lynne, George, Deborah, Bethany and Robert.

It goes without saying that the three authors alone are responsible for the interpretations, arguments and errors which follow.

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Introduction

This is a book about planning in Britain in the 1980s, something which many think no longer exists. It is said that the Thatcher governments have all but abolished planning since 1979. The relaxation of many controls, the introduction of enterprise zones and simplified planning zones, the transfer of planning powers to urban development corporations, the greater stress on market criteria in development control decisions, all have been taken as lethal attacks on planning itself. Ravetz, for example, observes that:

the Thatcher Administration...is fast dismantling much of the planning system, along with many other parts of the Welfare State. This puts planning on trial, so to speak, for its life. (1986, p. 9)

For Ambrose (1986), who asks *Whatever happened to planning?*, the execution has already been carried out and it is time to write the obituaries.

Yet if we look at what has actually happened to planning in the past decade, we find that reports of its death are greatly exaggerated. Planning is still being practised, there has been no major reform of the Town and Country Planning Acts of 1968 and 1971, and development plans still have a significant role. Most of the changes in planning have been either revisions of policy within the existing system, or additions to the system, often involving both state intervention and public expenditure. While there has been a sustained attack on planning from the New Right, this has been vigorous in its rhetoric but rather less drastic in its actions. Planning has certainly changed, but it has not yet been eliminated.

The 'death of planning' thesis reflects a certain loss of perspective. Commentators from both centre and left political positions, and from within the planning profession, seem to have become imbued with a romantic notion of planning as if it were a uniquely social democratic, or even socialist, idea. They tend to look on planning legislation and policies as essentially idealistic and progressive, favouring the poor and powerless over the rich and powerful.

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Where planned development has fallen short of these ideals, and it often has, this is put down to a 'failure' of planning rather than an intended outcome. Proponents of this thesis appear temporarily to have forgotten that land-use planning has pursued goals of economic efficiency and maximizing land values as much, if not more than, those of social justice and equality. Consequently, they have been unable to recognize the policies of the New Right as 'planning' at all. This leads them to ponder the 'paradox' of a government which simultaneously criticizes planning and creates highly interventionist bodies such as the urban development corporations. But it is our contention that the paradox is a false one and that, despite the rhetoric, the Thatcher government is not anti-planning in the broad sense. Its attack has been on collectivist, 'welfare' or, as we term them, market-critical conceptions of planning, and its demands have been for new forms of planning more oriented to the market and the interests of developers.

It is the central theme of this book that the 1980s have witnessed first the fragmentation and then the remaking of planning, which is emerging from the past decade with its goals and purposes reorientated. Our argument springs from a broad definition of planning, which we take to refer to all activities of the state which are aimed at influencing and directing the development of land and buildings. In this sense, state intervention can be concerned with many different purposes, managed through diverse institutions, and can bring into play a variety of social and economic interests. The policy processes associated with state intervention are complex and conflict-laden, but they are always central to the direction of urban development and renewal. Our book is therefore concerned with the politics of urban change, focusing on the struggle between different forms of state intervention and the restructuring of planning styles that has taken place in the 1980s.

The change in the direction of planning has not happened cleanly or swiftly. While the central government has attempted to change the framework of planning policy and legislation, within this framework local authorities and local communities have continued to pursue their own, often quite different, goals. The result has been a rather confused picture, with a wide variety of approaches to planning being pursued simultaneously in different areas, and sometimes competing for dominance in the same area. Before we try to bring some order to this confusion, we need to consider how such a major change in the direction of planning came about. It emerges that it was not simply the result of the rise to power of a government committed to a particular ideology, but that it was rooted in a 'crisis' in planning and the context in which it was operating in the 1970s.

The crisis in planning

We can begin our examination of planning's crisis with the inside view, looking at how it affected the profession. Ravetz (1980), in a perceptive and wide-ranging history of postwar planning in Britain, gives an account of the state of the profession in the mid-1970s. By then it was hard to find anyone with a good word to say about planning, and the profession was growing increasingly demoralized. She cites in particular the Town and Country Planning Association's 1977 report, *The crisis in planning* (Ash 1977), which recorded a 'public disillusionment with planning so widespread that one does not even feel obliged to document it'. Planning had failed to live up to its own claims and nobody's expectations seemed to have been satisfied. For some, it had failed to achieve the wholesale modernization of the built environment that it had so enthusiastically championed since the 1940s. The 'evangelistic bureaucrats' (Davies 1972) had run out of steam and the country was littered with half-completed urban motorways, unfinished slum clearance projects and partially redeveloped city centres. For others, it was the failure of planning to prevent undesirable development that was its chief weakness, whether in the form of surplus office blocks, industrialized council housing or the destruction of historic buildings. The whole direction of planning was being challenged, by grass-roots community activists and middle-class conservation societies. However much or little of this could be blamed on the statutory planning system, professional planners bore the brunt of the criticism and faced repeated accusations of failure. No wonder the profession began to lose confidence.

In the face of this unrelenting criticism, planners found it hard to know where to turn for their defence. As Ravetz points out, the real weaknesses of planning as a profession were revealed in its exaggerated claims to knowledge and expertise, and in its subordination to direct political control within state bureaucracies. In their claim for professional status, planners had pretended a greater knowledge of the processes of land and property development, and therefore of 'the future', than available disciplines could provide. They had also gone down the self-deluding path of 'affecting a fastidious political neutrality' (Blowers 1986, p. 16). As well as being exposed as a sham by academic criticism and political opposition, this had also left planners vulnerable to political manipulation by powerful interests. Too often they had appeared as charlatans in the pockets of the property development industry. The truth is that planning as a profession had become too closely associated with one set of goals, one approach to the future of the built environment,

an ideology which Ravetz characterizes as the 'clean sweep' style. Planning had come to stand for wholesale change, but in the 1970s it began to emerge that not everyone wanted change on this scale, and that economic circumstances were going to make it much more difficult to achieve.

Opposition to change was opposition to the planners' vision of modernization. In the 1960s the planning profession had taken up the banner of modernization in an evangelistic spirit. Davies (1972) has pointed out how successive leaders of the profession, such as Colin Buchanan and Wilfred Burns, proclaimed an image of planning as the means to a better future. It was the duty of the planner to convince doubting fellow citizens to let go of the past and welcome the future, in all its concrete reality. As the voices of the objectors grew louder, the planning system offered 'participation' as the means to strengthen the consensus behind planning proposals. Instead, participation and protest demonstrated the blatant lack of consensus for change and exposed the political biases of the planners. The protest groups were varied and represented a wide range of interests. Some of the most vociferous were middle-class property owners objecting to motorway routes, but working-class residents also objected to the destruction of their inner-city neighbourhoods for speculative office development. Both professionals and tenants decried high-rise industrialized council housing. Local campaigners opposed the unnecessary destruction of established communities in slum clearance programmes. Middle-class and upper-class supporters of the burgeoning conservation movement helped to save areas such as Covent Garden and Bath from further destruction.

The lack of consensus for change put a major brake on development in the 1970s. Plans for redevelopment were suspended or reversed, slum clearance was replaced by gradual renewal, and the spirit of modernization suffered a major setback. If, as Cullingworth (1985) has argued, the new development plans system of the 1968 Act depended on consensus, then the absence of that consensus left its products – structure and local plans – indeterminate and vague. Where there were strong demands for change it was resisted, and where there was a need for change, it was compromised or neglected.

It was not only the expression of public attitudes which altered the pace and scale of development in the 1970s; it was also a major change in economic circumstances. If the modernization of the built environment, in the forms offered by the planners, was not universally desired, then neither was it any longer achievable. This began to become clear after the financial crises of the late 1960s when the long period of postwar economic growth first seriously faltered. The oil crisis of 1973 and the ensuing recession killed

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off most remaining plans for large-scale development and urban renewal. This exposed another underlying weakness of the planning system, its dependence on economic growth. The development plans system was based essentially on state regulation of private sector development. Where the state undertook development, this was mainly the provision of physical and social infrastructure (roads, schools, hospitals and housing), or else it was in partnership with the private sector. Consequently, when economic crisis pushed the private sector into recession and indirectly produced a major retrenchment in the state's direct role in development, there was little left to plan for.

Planning might have recovered from a temporary setback in growth in something like its old form, even overcoming much of the public resistance to change. But the 1970s quickly turned into a period of deep and prolonged economic decline, and this was something for which planning had few remedies. The gradual decline of northern England, Wales and Scotland had been apparent for some time. Successive governments had used regional aid and state development projects in an attempt to stem this decline, but to little effect. The 1970s saw a rapid rise in the rate of decline, particularly of manufacturing industry, coupled with the recognition that it was seriously affecting all of Britain's old industrial cities (Lawless 1981).

The processes of economic and industrial restructuring had a dramatic effect on particular localities, enormously increasing the disparities between different places. While some cities and towns experienced growth and new patterns of employment, others experienced massive decline and very high levels of unemployment. Areas such as the West Midlands suffered from the collapse of key sectors of manufacturing, including the machine tool, engineering and car industries. During the 1970s the industrial base of Birmingham shrank by a third (Spencer *et al.* 1986). In Sheffield in 1971 there were 139 000 people employed in manufacturing industry. Ten years later the number had declined to 90 000; and by 1987 it had collapsed to 58 000 (Sheffield City Council 1987, p. 7). In contrast to these areas of decline, Boddy *et al.* (1986) describe the experience of Bristol and the surrounding M4 growth corridor. Here, while traditional manufacturing declined, there was a considerable expansion of service sector industries, combined with the rise of newer activities based on electronics and high technology, leading to claims of an economic renaissance. One effect of these changes, which became manifest in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s, was to make 'locality' more significant (cf. Massey 1984). They brought different problems to the fore in different locations, lending

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support to the rise of new styles of state intervention and planning to meet these diverse challenges.

By the end of the 1970s the crisis in planning was deeply rooted and comprehensive in its scope. The two main supports of planning as an enterprise, a broad consensus in favour of change and economic growth to generate change, had both been seriously undermined. Planning was left exposed, vulnerable and confused; but it could not be abandoned. Whatever interests were in control of the various parts of the state, they would demand some sort of planning to ensure that their version of the future prevailed. A search began for new forms and styles of planning, to meet the needs of different localities, to bring about patterns of development desired by various interests and to match the political rhetoric of those interests. It was this process of evolution and experimentation which gave rise to the varied styles of planning which have characterized the 1980s, and of which this book attempts to give an account.

Structure of the book

The argument of this book is that, in response to changed social and economic circumstances, planning fragmented during the 1980s into a range of different forms. Chapter 2 provides a six-fold classification of the planning styles of the decade. Chapters 3–8 present detailed case studies of each of the styles in practice. The case studies show the main features of each planning style, focusing in particular on the institutional arrangements, types of politics, and conflicts and tensions associated with the different forms of state intervention. Chapter 9 sets out to compare the different planning styles in the light of the evidence presented in the case studies, developing the discussion of their effectiveness and outcomes. Chapter 10 concludes by arguing that the election in 1987 of the third Thatcher government confirms the new direction of planning, which is being remade with a predominance of market-oriented styles. We examine the nature of planning as it moves into the 1990s, the likely impact of the new approach, and how an alternative agenda might be established.

The fragmentation of planning

We have argued that the changed circumstances of the late 1960s and early 1970s led to a crisis in planning, a collapse of confidence amongst both the public and professionals. This crisis is now manifested in the fragmentation of planning into a number of distinct approaches. It is our contention that the 1980s mark a turning point in the postwar history of planning. Previously, planning had been diversified in practice, with different local authorities developing their own policy variants and with localized experimentation. However, this diversification occurred within the context of a unified debate about planning, a debate which focused on the development plan system and the decision-making practices of professional planners. There was a general consensus on the role of the planning system, in terms of broad goals and means. Arguments concerned relatively minor procedural matters or rarefied planning theory.

The past decade has seen a heightening of economic and political conflicts within society, and this has been reflected in planning. The debate over planning has splintered as the lines of current economic and ideological cleavages have become more sharply delineated. A variety of new and old approaches to planning now vie with one another. This represents a moment of transition in planning history as one dominant ideology of planning attempts to replace another. In the meantime it is sometimes difficult to see anything other than a confusion of competing ideas, each promoted by a sectional interest. The purpose of this chapter is to inject some clarity into the current confused state of the debate, to identify the competing approaches and relate them to the prevailing economic and ideological cleavages.

We identify six styles of planning. Each style represents a particular stance in the debate on planning and proposes a particular mix of policy goals, working methods and identity for the planner. Some styles are strongly influenced by a radical vision and have the character of blueprints for local experiments. Other styles are not

so new but rather derive from adaptations and modifications of established planning methods. Our central argument is that these various styles together capture the essence of the current state of planning, albeit in a simplified form.

It is important to recognize the limits of this planning debate. By and large, it has not focused on radical alternatives to the present system whether from the Right (Sorenson 1983) or the Left (Ambrose & Colenutt 1975). It accepts the liberal democratic framework of an interventionist state existing alongside a reliance on market operations, and puts forward proposals for dealing with the resulting tensions. In doing so each approach recognizes, at some level, the inevitable interrelation between the state and the market, that the market requires the support of state policies, and that the state relies on the market to produce many policy outcomes. Certain approaches are closer to a radical alternative than others and may even appear to disguise this underlying tension. But, as the case studies reveal, the tension surfaces at the implementation stage even if the rhetoric seeks to avoid it. In clarifying the planning debate of the current decade, we are therefore concerned to chart the plurality of proposals within the political framework of a liberal democracy. Other commentators have noted 'the increasing apparent variety in planning practice' (Healey 1983, p. 271) and the competition between a number of different proposals for the planning system (Nuffield Commission of Inquiry 1986, Ch. 7). One way to organize this plurality is through the use of a typology. Our typology relates the six styles to the prevailing economic and ideological cleavages. These dimensions and the characteristics of the six styles are set out in the rest of this chapter.

A typology of planning styles

The typology is set out in Table 2.1. It is developed along two dimensions, which represent contemporary ideological and economic cleavages. The first dimension reflects the break-up of the ideological consensus on which postwar planning has rested. As the Nuffield Commission noted, there is still within planning circles a great desire to assume a consensus (Nuffield Commission of Inquiry 1986, p. 97) but the reality of planning debate is that there is a sharp distinction between proponents based on their attitude to market processes:

... we have to distinguish between planning that takes a positive view of the market, while attempting to correct inefficiencies, and planning that

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takes a positive role in attempting to redress the inequalities of the market and to make good its omissions by measures to increase the access of the disadvantaged to housing, health, recreation and communal activity. This is one of the most important of the dimensions of disagreement which we shall analyse... (ibid., p. 184)

Table 2.1 A typology of planning styles

Perceived nature of urban problems	Attitude to market processes	
	Market-critical: redressing imbalances and inequalities created by the market	Market-led: correcting inefficiencies while supporting market processes
Buoyant area: minor problems and buoyant market	regulative planning	trend planning
Marginal area: pockets of urban problems and potential market interest	popular planning	leverage planning
Derelict area: comprehensive urban problems and depressed market	public-investment planning	private-management planning

In styles which embody a positive view of the market, demand as measured by the consumer's purse is the main indicator of where and when development should occur. The market mechanism determines who receives what and at what cost. The main actors are in the private sector and profit is the motivation for their actions. Such market actions require a framework of state support, and planning policies are one way of providing this. Occasionally, where market outcomes are judged to be inefficient, additional planning powers will be brought into play. Nevertheless, market processes are considered to be a satisfactory mechanism of allocation in the majority of cases, indeed vastly superior to alternative mechanisms.

By contrast, in styles critical of the market, the outcomes of market processes are considered to be partly or even wholly unacceptable. The inequalities resulting from such processes are stressed, creating a need for planning policies to redress them. Planning is also needed to rectify imbalances, such as that between short- and

long-term perspectives on resource use. This requires an organization which is not simply responding to market indicators but which will take a dominant role in defining the needs to be met and even in meeting those needs. The market mechanism may therefore be replaced in the pursuit of a more generally defined goal of welfare.

The second dimension of our typology reflects the impact of economic change over the past decade or more. As noted in Chapter 1, economic recession and the associated restructuring have had an uneven spatial effect and created increasingly sharp divisions between regions and localities. This is associated with a varying level of private sector interest in land and property between areas. The planning debate has sought to identify what should be the appropriate solutions for different areas facing different problems. Our categorization follows that of the Property Advisory Group report, *The structure and activity of the property development industry* (1980).

First, there are areas where the industry will invest without any public-sector support or subsidy. These might be termed 'buoyant' markets, of which the prime examples currently are sites for suburban housing schemes in the South East and large-scale out-of-town retail development in almost any part of the country. Secondly, there are areas where the industry could be induced to invest with appropriate support and subsidy from the public sector. These we can term 'marginal' areas in which the development industry has less confidence. Often these are areas which have suffered from prolonged periods of neglect but where the immediately surrounding area is such that the potential spread of economic activity may rekindle private-sector interest. Thirdly, there are areas where no subsidies can induce the development industry to invest. These 'derelict' areas have been abandoned by the private sector and are now viewed as 'no-go' areas. The Property Advisory Group described them as 'areas which are either unattractive or where there is little prospect of them becoming attractive' (para. 7.28).

Recognition of the particular impact of economic restructuring in different areas, together with the ideological split between market-led and market-critical approaches, characterizes the fragmentation of planning into distinct styles. So, in more prosperous areas, planning of a negative kind is considered most appropriate. Development interests consider the problems found in such localities to be minor ones, a view that is commonly shared by local middle-class residents. This does not preclude the existence of severe problems in terms of housing and employment opportunities for some of the local working-class population. However, these issues frequently do not find a political voice, and local advantages are seen