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# *Contemporary Urban Planning*

FIFTH EDITION

*John M. Levy*



**Fifth Edition**

# **Contemporary Urban Planning**

**JOHN M. LEVY**

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# Preface

The term *planning* is a very general one. There are city and town planners and also corporate planners. The Pentagon employs numerous military planners. The launching of a space shuttle is the culmination of a tremendously complex and sophisticated planning process. Wealthy individuals who prefer to leave as much as possible of their wealth to their heirs and as little as possible to the Internal Revenue Service employ the services of estate planners. And so on.

Planning in its generic meaning, then, is a ubiquitous activity. Cutting across all types of planning is a certain common denominator. All have in common a conscious effort to define systematically and think through a problem to improve the quality of decision making. The planning discussed in this book represents a very small part of the total planning activity in the United States. Specifically, this book focuses on public planning at the substate level, that which is done by and for cities, counties, towns, and other units of local governments. We will also examine, much more briefly, planning for metropolitan regions, the states, and the question of national planning. This edition also contains a chapter which surveys planning in a number of other nations.

The reader who has at least sampled other books on planning will notice that this book has some particular emphases, specifically on politics, economics, ideology, law, and the question of who benefits and who loses by particular decisions. These emphases stem from my experience as a working planner. I entered planning in 1969 with a background in economics and journalism but with no specific training in planning. In my ignorance of the field, I assumed that if engineers planned bridges and architects planned buildings, then city and town planners planned cities and towns in an essentially similar way. In effect, I thought of planning as engineering or architecture writ large.

It did not take me long to learn that planning is a highly political activity. Not only is it immersed in politics, but also it is inseparable from the law. The ultimate arbiter of many a planning dispute is the court. And for every case that comes to court, some dozens of planning decisions have been conditioned by what the participants in the process think would be the decision if the matter were to come to court.



Planning decisions often involve large sums of money. In some cases large sums of public money are involved in the form of capital investments. But even when little in the way of public expenditure is involved, planning decisions can deliver large benefits to some and large losses to others. Thus to understand planning, one must understand something of the economic and financial issues at stake.

The study of planning quickly takes one into ideology. Planning issues and controversy inevitably raise questions about the proper role of government and the line between public needs and private rights. What properly is to be a matter of political decision, and what properly should be left to the market? Planning can raise issues that are not easily resolved. Planners are a fairly idealistic lot and often enter the field to serve the public interest. After immersion in a few public controversies, the beginning planner may wonder if there *is* such a thing as the public interest. For if there is, there ought to be some general agreement among the public on what it is. But one can spend a long time in some areas of planning without seeing a single instance of this agreement.

In this book I have tried to convey something of the reality of planning practice and something of what goes on under the surface of events. I hope that the reader will not find this reality disillusioning, for planning in an open and democratic society cannot be smooth and simple. Planning as it is—involved in political controversy, hedged about by the trends of judicial decisions, inextricably tied to economic questions, and connected to issues of ideology—is far more interesting than it would be if it were simply architecture or engineering writ large.

The book contains a certain amount of material on history and technology because the issues that planning focuses on are largely ones that political, social, and economic change bring to the forefront. For example, it can be argued that one of the biggest influences on American cities in the 1960s and 1970s was the massive acceleration in the mechanization of agriculture that began after the end of World War II. That event, the result of both economic and technological forces, set in motion a huge migration of population. The effects of this migration are still being felt in America's cities. I hope the book will help readers make some connections of that sort and develop the habit of looking for other such connections on their own.

Though the book is about planning, it is assumed that most of its readers will not become planners. Therefore I have tried to write a book that would be of some value in the course of a liberal education, quite apart from imparting information on planning. I have gone somewhat more lightly over matters like the enumeration of federal programs (information that tends to age rapidly in any case) and placed an emphasis on connecting planning with ideas and with the main currents of events in the larger society.

The best and most effective planners are those with good peripheral vision—those who not only have mastered the technical side of planning but also understand the relationships between planning issues and the major forces in the society around them. I have endeavored to write a text consistent with that view. The basic structure of this volume is the same as that of the fourth edition, but considerable new material has been added. The chapter on Planning for Metro-



politan Regions has been completely redone, and new material added on authorities and on Councils of Government (COGs). To broaden the scope of the book and to furnish a basis for comparison for U.S. planning practices, a chapter on Planning in Other Nations has also been added. As with previous editions, the book has been updated for court cases, changes in legislation, and the like.

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For ten years before I became an academic, I was employed in various capacities by the Westchester County, New York, Department of Planning, where I had a fine opportunity to learn some of the realities of planning. I am thus indebted to a number of my former colleagues there, in particular Commissioner Peter Q. Eschweiler and Planning Board Chairman Dr. William Cassella. When all is said and done, however, the viewpoints expressed here and any mistakes made are my own.

John M. Levy



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# An Overview

## THE NEED FOR PLANNING

Perhaps the first question that has to be answered in a book about planning is simply “why do we need planning?” The need for planning comes down to two words, *interconnectedness* and *complexity*. If there were few of us and the technologies by which we lived were relatively simple, there would be little need for planning as described in this book. We could each go our own way and would gain little from common planning efforts. However, the fact is that we are numerous enough and our technologies complicated enough that this is not the case.

Consider a simple illustration of interconnectedness, the use of a few acres of urban land. The amount and character of development on that land will determine the amount of traffic it generates. Developing it with single-family houses will produce a different traffic flow than developing it with apartments, which will generate a different traffic flow than developing it with a neighborhood shopping center. Thus a land development decision is a traffic decision as well. That, potentially, affects everyone in the area. How much of the site is paved, and even what material is used for paving, affects how fast rainwater runs off from the property. Runoff may affect flooding and stream flow conditions miles downstream from the property. The types and quantities of commercial or residential activity on the property may affect air quality, noise levels, water quality, and the visual and social qualities of the area.



Decisions about the residential uses of land will affect housing prices, rents, and vacancies—in short, who can live in the community. Those decisions, in turn, will have effects on the economy of the community and the demands that are placed on the community for educational, social, and other services.

The land-use decisions made by a community shape its very character—what it is like to walk through, what it is like to drive through, who lives in it, what kinds of jobs and businesses exist in it, how well the natural environment survives, and whether the community is an attractive one or an ugly one. In some cases such decisions may directly affect human life and health, for example, whether traffic patterns are safe or hazardous.

Land-use decisions affect the fiscal health of the community. Every property that is developed burdens the community with obligations such as education, police and fire protection, recreational services, and social services. Conversely, every development contributes, directly or indirectly, to municipal revenues through property taxes, sales taxes, or charges and fees. Thus the pattern of land development will affect how heavily the community must tax its residents and the level of public services the community can provide.

The land in question may be privately owned, in which case public control is exercised through a regulatory process. It may be owned publicly, in which case direct public investment will determine its use. But in either case there is a distinct public interest in what happens on the land. To generalize, it is the fact of interconnectedness, whether we are discussing land use or other questions, which helps to justify public planning efforts.

*Complexity* is the condition that justifies planning as a separate profession and as a separate activity of government. If all of the sorts of relationships suggested were simple, they could be dealt with simply and informally. If the community were tiny, perhaps direct negotiations between private parties would suffice. If the community were somewhat larger, perhaps the relationships could be easily dealt with along with the general flow of municipal business. But the complexity of a modern community renders such simple and direct approaches inadequate.

The complexity of the community also means that many things that in a simpler place could be done privately must be done publicly. In an agricultural area with a population of perhaps a few dozen people per square mile, water supply and waste disposal are handled on site by the individual household. No common decision making or investment is necessary. In a large metropolitan area, these functions are likely to involve systems that span many communities and may involve billions of dollars of capital investment. Comparable comments could be made about transportation, education, public safety, recreation, and the like.

Thus in the thousands of communities in the United States, planning is a formalized and distinct process of government. In relatively small communities, the planning function may be lodged in an unpaid part-time planning board with the technical work done by a planning consultant. In larger communities, the planning function is generally located within a planning department. Depending



on community size, that department may have a staff ranging from one person to several hundred individuals. In a very small department, the planner(s) may be a jack-of-all-trades handling land-use questions one day, capital budgeting another day, and economic development a third day. In a larger agency, there may be considerable specialization of labor. One section of the agency may specialize in zoning issues, another in master planning, a third in planning-related research, another in environmental issues, and so on.

## THE SPECIFIC CONCERNS OF PLANNING

What might a community seek to achieve through planning? In a growing community, planners might be concerned with shaping the pattern of growth to achieve a sensible and attractive land-use pattern. That concern means avoiding both oppressively dense development or overly scattered and fragmentary development. It means encouraging a pattern of development that gives residents ready access to recreational, cultural, school, shopping, and other facilities. It means having a street pattern that is convenient to use and through which traffic flows without excessive congestion. It means separating incompatible land uses and activities, for example, high-intensity commercial activity from residential areas. In a modern planned community, it might mean providing a system of pathways so that pedestrian and bicycle traffic is separated from automobile traffic.

The community's planners will also be concerned with the location of public facilities like schools and social service centers, both for the convenience of the people served and for reinforcing the development of a desirable land-use pattern. If the community anticipates or desires significant industrial or commercial development, its planners will be concerned with seeing that sufficient conveniently located blocks of land are available and that they are served with adequate roads, water, and sewer facilities.

In an older community that is not growing and that does not anticipate growth, planners may be concerned primarily with preserving or improving that which now exists. Thus planners may focus on measures to preserve the quality of the housing stock. In many communities planners will also be concerned with housing cost questions, specifically, how to provide housing for the community's lower-income residents. In many older communities planners devote much effort to preserving historic buildings and other landmarks. If the community is concerned (as many are) about the health of its downtown, planners may be involved in implementing street improvements and other changes designed to help downtown businesses compete successfully with establishments in outlying areas.

In a community that faces a serious unemployment problem, economic development may be a major task of the planners. Much of their effort may be devoted to creating conditions that encourage existing industry to remain and expand and new firms to locate within the community.



In recent years much planning effort has focused on environmental issues: how to guide and manage development to minimize environmental damage. For example, a planner might be concerned with evaluating the relative environmental merits and financial costs of landfill disposal versus incineration for a municipality's solid wastes and then with helping to select the best site.

Planners employed by regional planning organizations may be concerned with improving the regionwide road network, with acquiring or developing land for a regionwide park and open space system, or with improving regionwide sewage disposal and water systems. They will also be concerned with encouraging coordination between the planning efforts of the various municipalities in the region to avoid duplication of capital facilities and interference effects (for example, community A siting its landfill operation at a point where it borders a residential area in community B).

This is far from a complete listing. It is simply meant to give some feeling for the range of planning issues.

## WHO ARE THE PLANNERS?

Planners come from a variety of backgrounds. The single most common educational background is formal training in planning, most often a master's degree. But the field, and particularly larger agencies and consultants, absorb people with many other backgrounds. Agencies that are large enough to have a separate research operation are likely to hire people with training in economics or statistics. Agencies that do transportation planning are likely to hire people with training in civil engineering and, particularly, transportation engineering. Large agencies often do a substantial amount of data handling and are likely to have on staff a few people with backgrounds in programming and data processing. Agencies that do significant amounts of environmental planning are likely to hire people with backgrounds in biology, chemistry, environmental science, and remote sensing. Planning inevitably involves mapping and spatially organized data, so that a certain number of geographers and cartographers find their way into the profession. Planning involves many issues of law, particularly in regard to land use and environmental considerations. Thus many attorneys and people with joint training in law and planning have entered the field. In fact, several universities have joint law and planning degree programs.

The majority of planners are employed by government. Of these, the larger share are employed by local governments, that is, by cities, towns, counties, and other substate jurisdictions. Smaller numbers are employed by state governments, by intergovernment organizations like councils of governments (COGs), and by a variety of authorities and special-purpose agencies. Some planners are employed by the federal government, particularly in departments like Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which fund and regulate planning-related activities of local governments. Most planners employed by government are civil servants, but a certain number are political appointees chosen outside the civil ser-