

URBAN PLANNING METHODS

Research and Policy Analysis

Ian Bracken

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□ URBAN PLANNING
METHODS:
RESEARCH AND
POLICY ANALYSIS

IAN BRACKEN

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□ **URBAN PLANNING METHODS:
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There is a proverb that 'nothing is certain but the unforeseen', and in fact few things turn out as we expect them.

Froude (1886), *Oceana* vii

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□ INTRODUCTION

The objective of this book is to set out a range of established and developing methods relevant to the practice of urban planning.¹ The treatment adopted, at an introductory level, explains the principles which underlie these methods and hence seeks to promote their useful application. A detailed discussion of the theory of more general social research and policy making cannot be attempted, but it is intended that the reader will acquire a sound understanding of the application of methods in rigorous and comparative urban study and socially sensitive urban policy making. However, urban planning methods reflect the diversity of the subject and there is continued debate about their relevance and application within the statutory urban planning processes. This book does not seek primarily to justify a particular approach to urban plan and policy making, but rather to explain a useful range of concepts which will provide the reader with a firm foundation from which to select and apply appropriate methods according to need. However, we suggest that two requirements are general. The first of these relates to the need for the planner to be able to conduct good quality, relevant research into the substantive world with which he must deal, and the second is for him to understand and be able to assess the impacts and effects on the world of the policy-making processes of which he is a part.

The recent history of urban planning shows that the development of these two areas of methodology has not been equal. The importance of analysis and understanding of substantive matters – population change, migration, housing needs, employment trends, transportation and land-use relationships, as ‘inputs’ to the planning process – has long been widely acknowledged. In contrast, attention to policy – its relevance and effectiveness, the ‘instruments’ by which it is effected and so on, that is, the ‘outputs’ of the process – is a much more recent phenomenon among planners, indeed one that is only now generally taking place.

The text is structured in three parts. In the first part, Chapter 1 draws attention to the emergence of strategic urban plan and policy making over the past fifteen years or so and the conceptual and methodological developments. It also reminds readers of the political, administrative, professional *and* technical contexts within which urban planning is set. Chapters 2 and 3 explain and comment upon the ways in which planners have sought to develop more systematized approaches to strategic plan and policy making, in such tasks as plan design and generation, the

evaluation of alternative courses of action, the need to monitor ongoing change and adapt plans and policies to changing circumstances.

Against this background, Parts 2 and 3 focus upon urban research and policy study respectively. Part 2 concentrates upon how urban affairs may be efficiently and validly studied, so that planners can maximize the quality of their data and information in order that, through analysis, they may obtain explanations about urban phenomena. In this part, Chapter 4 deals with the underlying theory of appropriate research designs; Chapter 5 with aspects of the operationalization of these designs in the urban context, and Chapter 6 discusses established ways in which the particular spatial and aspatial matters of concern to urban planners can be explored, predicted and understood.

In contrast, Part 3 focuses upon urban policy-making processes and outcomes, but as with Part 2, the approach adopted makes clear the developing role of methods available to the planner and their application in systematic analysis. Chapter 7 sets out the basic organization theory and concepts for the study of urban policy and the more important problems to be faced. Chapter 8 deals with the methods by which planners may analyse and obtain insights into the process of policy formulation and its outcomes. Finally, Chapter 9 examines some of the implications of the wider use of policy analytic methods within the urban planning process.

As will now be clear, this text covers a wide field, so that not only has selectivity of material been necessary, but the depth of treatment must also be limited. There is inevitably the danger of 'a little knowledge'. It is intended that the contents will explain and illustrate principles, thereby bringing the reader to an operational threshold in a frame of mind which is, at the same time, both eager to develop a deeper understanding of the methods discussed and critical in their use. To assist further reading, each part of the text concludes with a guide to selected case study material drawn from recent urban planning practice as well as the more usual guide to selected theoretical and applied literature. Although these guides cannot be exhaustive they will provide the reader with a number of 'links' into the more specialized areas of literature. In all cases, the works cited contain bibliographies and, where these are judged to be particularly helpful, additional comment is made.

The merit of this book is derived from the foundation of knowledge upon which it stands and the citations and the bibliography record this indebtedness. It is a recurrent concern of any writer that some acknowledgement to the work of others may have been overlooked or that some viewpoint is misrepresented. Hopefully, this will not be so, but in the event, your author accepts the responsibility. Many persons, too numerous to thank individually, have contributed over the past four years, directly and indirectly, to the writing of this text. It would be, however, quite wrong not to acknowledge more personally the help of valued colleagues who have contributed much to the environment within which the text has been written – notably Michael Batty, Philip Cooke, Clifford Guy, David Hume,

Gareth Rees and Richard Spooner. The numerous drafts of the text were admirably typed by Terry Davies, and Gareth Jones was responsible for the illustrations and helpful ideas on layout.

The remainder of this introduction summarizes some of the basic thinking which guided the preparation of this text. A starting point is to suggest that the reader of urban planning literature will note that the subject not only covers a wide field, but that it reflects a long history of practical concerns and attempted remedies for urban problems. The literature is both descriptive and normative, that is, it describes real-world situations according to particular perspectives *and* offers mainly idealistic remedies as to how a better urban future might be achieved. Urban planning is indeed largely practised in terms of a repertory of conventional wisdom, much of which has been established through these practical and intuitive approaches rather than through theoretical development.

It is also important to note at the outset the influence of the extensive statutory powers granted to urban planners² and the extent and effect of the professionalization of the activity. Whilst this has been effective in serving rather rigid interests and pursuits, a consequence has been the strong tendency for the practice of urban planning to be regarded as an activity 'apart' from discussions as to its purposes and from its emerging theories.

We subscribe to the view that the most important general debate should be about the *purposes* of urban planning, thereby identifying the various modes in which it is possible to conceive and operate an urban planning system. A chosen mode, in turn, will constitute a paradigm, that is, a conceptual framework which, for the time being, can be used to justify the processes and actions by which the planning is undertaken. For it is only within such a framework that a satisfactory choice can be made over the use of the heterogeneous collection of methods which the activity will inevitably comprise. It is not the purpose of this text, however, to argue a detailed ideology for urban planning, for that is well beyond its scope.³ Rather, it is to discuss a limited, though fundamental, range of methods by which urban planning may be enhanced when seen, broadly, as a problem-solving process. This is recognized as a necessarily pragmatic approach and acknowledges the inevitability of disagreement about the purposes of urban planning and hence that there will be periods of popularity for different modes and methods. The approach rests upon assumptions that in some reasonably satisfactory way society wishes, and is able, to identify *relevant* problems of concern, and can choose a mode of planning (that is a set of procedures) within which to seek their amelioration.

It is fundamental to our approach to suggest that answers to problems are more likely to be found, even though they will be partial, by as systematic an attempt as possible to understand their nature *and* the nature of the processes we choose to employ in seeking their solution. As will now be clear, this will involve distinct, but *related*, areas of methodology. First, there are methods through which an understanding of the nature of urban phenomena and problems can be achieved, and these broadly, will involve

adherence to accepted rules of social scientific investigation. Second, there is methodology by which such understanding may be synthesized to lead to plan generation and policy formulation designed to bring about some desirable change through the planning system. Third, there is methodology which addresses the need to analyse policy, and which in turn will 'feed back' learning and understanding as to the relevance and effectiveness of the other areas. As we discuss in Part 1, it is the second area of methodology which has received the fullest treatment in urban planning literature. That being so, we choose to reflect upon it rather than offer detailed explanation in the first part of the text. However, if urban planning is to develop a more balanced structure as a process of urban understanding, i.e. the seeking of effective policies and learning,⁴ then a fuller development of a research and a policy analytic capability are fundamental.

Such development has been implicit in the reforms that have taken place in urban planning practice since the mid-1960s – the need for a more flexible, management-like approach to urban planning, the need clearly to define the strategic, policy-based level of plan making (Structure Planning), and the widely recognized need for a more effective dissemination of data and information.⁵ But, further, we will suggest that there is an urgent need in urban planning for explicit, critical and well-conducted research *both* into substantive, procedural and policy aspects of the subject. Research cannot dictate policy, but makes a fundamental contribution through enhanced knowledge of the realities with which policy must deal. Research into substantive matters can make policy more relevant and more efficient. Research can reveal the dynamic nature of important urban phenomena, ignorance of which can preclude the adoption of effective policy measures. Research, through policy analysis, can suggest new alternatives and can reveal conflict and incompatibilities. It can reveal appropriate and inappropriate policy instruments and furthermore, by serving understanding, it can help to ensure that solving one problem will not give rise to a more serious one. Yet urban research and analysis of policy are not neutral activities for, in their turn, they will be founded upon assumptions and choice about relevant issues worthy of study. It is important to recall that the use of methods can never be an end in itself.

At the outset, the meaning of certain terms should be made clear. We must distinguish first 'designing' and 'planning'. The former is used in the general, non-aesthetic sense,⁶ meaning a set of procedures which set out how some particular situation may be achieved. Both terms refer, then, broadly to the same process and are distinguished only in degree. Planning and 'planning decisions' relate to situations in which the level of uncertainty,⁷ or uncontrolled influence, is relatively low. In contrast, the term designing is used for situations in which the level of uncertainty is relatively high. Similarly, a distinction must be made between the use of the term 'policy' and 'plan'. Generally we use the former to refer to 'a deliberate intention', most usually expressed verbally. In contrast, a 'plan' will be more spatially specific and will usually involve a diagrammatic treatment.

Though not definitive, the distinction will avoid ambiguity arising in the course of the text.

Finally, a distinction must be made between methodology and technique. It is a feature of the growing maturity of any subject that both methods and techniques become increasingly precisely defined. In general, techniques develop first and refer to the human actions and the instruments (that is, the design of procedures) by which specific tasks are performed. Methodology on the other hand, refers to the concepts and processes by which selection is made of appropriate techniques, including an explicit justification of purpose. These concepts provide a framework within which techniques can be properly developed, selectively applied and critically evaluated.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the text, this term is used to refer generally to the field of study. Variants such as 'regional planning', 'town planning' or 'rural planning' are subsumed as appropriate without further comment.
- 2 We are, of course, referring to professional planners, elected members of local councils and government here.
- 3 A guide to selected literature is given at the end of Part 1.
- 4 So as in turn, to make revised policies more relevant and effective. Indeed, the whole planning process may readily be conceptualized as a 'learning' process.
- 5 These points relate to only some of the reasons for the reform of the planning system. See later discussions.
- 6 Where necessary, the field of study explicitly concerned with urban aesthetics is referred to as 'urban design'.
- 7 It may also be helpful to consider this in terms of information. A design involves relatively less information than a plan, that is, it will generally have a higher intuitive content.

□ PART ONE

**URBAN PLANNING AND
POLICY MAKING**