

Book Review

Dialogues in Urban and Regional Planning
Edited by Bruce Stiftel and Vanessa Watson
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Dialogues in Urban and Regional Planning, edited by Bruce Stiftel and Vanessa Watson is a groundbreaking contribution to planning education. The rationale for the development of this edited collection is located in the fact that urban planning scholarship has been constrained by limited communication across national and language boundaries. Efforts to promote international exchange in planning scholarship, which has accelerated in the past decade, suggest that the potential value of comparative work is quite high. At the same time, language and library budgets limit access to planning scholarship worldwide. This collection is the first instalment of a series of “Dialogues” that seek to offer a sampling of the best urban planning scholarship from each of the world’s planning scholarship communities to scholars in the other communities. The project as a whole must be commended, and one can only hope that other learned societies will aim to emulate this most useful endeavour.

The chapters that comprise this volume indicate some key themes in current international planning scholarship and pertinent to urban studies and planning issues in urban Africa—the focus scholarly community of *Urban Forum*. While these contributions come from very different parts of the world, and there is certainly attention drawn to the particularity of context in planning debates, it is apparent that certain planning issues and concerns are common across a wide range of countries. These emerging communities, argue Stiftel and Watson, make the task of bringing together these regional contributions both an interesting and a necessary one. The editors have arranged the material around three central themes.

The first theme relates to the relationship between planning and economy. Chapter 2 provides insight into a common and contemporary planning strategy: the promotion of mixed urban land use in order to achieve more accessible, efficient and sustainable cities. Drawing on Canadian urban experiences, this contribution demonstrates that whilst the policy and legal environment has been changed to facilitate mixed land use, important cultural and economic barriers continue to promote the separation of land uses and social groupings. Chapter 3 also explores an attempt by planning to intervene in an urban economy, through the construction of

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two large stadiums for the Sydney Olympics. This contribution brings into question the development of these types of prestige projects in the name of generating broader economic benefits for a city. Chapter 4, which echoes conclusions drawn in the preceding contributions, analyses the shaping of urban land use by forces of capital in Buenos Aires. This chapter demonstrates how urban space is being (re)shaped by market forces, causing a fragmentation of the city and isolation of lower income people. The crux of this investigation is that private capital, rather than government or planning, has become the main organiser of city-space.

The second cluster of chapters focus on aspects of environment and conservation. Chapter 5 describes a “whole-landscape” approach to rural management in Britain that ensures conservation and the enhancement of biodiversity in farmed landscapes. Chapter 6 is concerned with the rapidly changing urban setting of Chinese cities and provides a fresh look at the common problem, pertinent to so many cities across the globe, of balancing needs for conservation with the management of urban regeneration. Chapter 7 focuses on the process of ecological-economic zoning in the Brazilian Amazon region to explore the theoretical issue of the use of planning as a means of surveillance and control of people and territory. Drawing on Foucaultian analysis it is shown that planning in this case forms a mechanism through which power can be exercised, and its effectiveness in protecting environment and livelihoods has been minimal.

The third theme of the collection gathers together contributions that are concerned with the nature of planning processes and decision-making. An important focal point in these contributions is that of how to manage, or how to understand, consensus-seeking decision-making processes in contexts characterised by multiple stakeholders and interest groups, and increasingly, by cultural diversity. Chapters 8 and 9 address a common concern: the problem of participation in situations of cultural diversity, and communication across cultural-based epistemologies. Chapter 10 provides planning practitioners and theorists a way around multi-stakeholder and multicultural dilemmas. This chapter considers how neopragmatic approaches to collaborative planning, in a situation involving nature-based tourism in a remote region of Canada, could have avoided conflict between stakeholders.

Chapter 11 inquires into the appropriateness of current normative theories of planning which deal with communication and multiculturalism, and with equitable city forms, in the very different context of Africa. This chapter argues that while these theories have value, they are all based on assumptions about culture, economy and place that do not hold in these very different contexts. Chapter 12 and 13 make important theoretical contributions to the planning themes of difference, communication and consensus. Chapter 12 suggests that “stories” can form the basis of both an epistemology and a methodology that is particularly appropriate to planning in

the contemporary urban world. Chapter 13 aims to criticise the currently hegemonic position in planning theory—critical planning theory—which draws heavily on Habermas for its theoretical base and which has informed communicative and collaborative planning action. This chapter argues that this theoretical approach fails to acknowledge the presence of power in all planning actions and fails to inform the organising, problem-sharing and problem-solving aspects that are central to any planning process.

On the whole, *Dialogues in Urban and Regional Planning* is extremely informative, clearly written and will be a key resource for both undergraduate and post-graduate students engaging in a range of urban studies programmes. In addition, this book can be a valuable source for those working at the coal-face of urban (re)development. I therefore highly recommend this text to students studying sociology, cultural studies, human geography, urban and regional planning, as well as local government practitioners. For anyone who teaches urban geography, or planning studies, I consider this book as compulsory reading.

Gustav Visser
Department of Geography
University of the Free State