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## PLANNING AS A COMMUNITY LEARNING PROCESS

A Paper delivered at the 12th Royal Australian Planning Institute Congress, Brisbane, August, 1972, by George Clarke, MCP (MIT), Dip TP (London), FRAPI, FR~~TP~~, of Clarke Gazzard Planners, a Division of Urban Systems Corporation



Mr Chairman, Ed Bacon, Ladies and Gentlemen :

We are now at the beginning of the third day of a Congress which Allan Brown yesterday said was intended to be an unfolding drama, or as I understood him in less poetic and more pedantic terms, a carefully structured series of discussions upon the theme of "Governments and Planning". I have enjoyed the carefully programmed scenario of seven speakers staged for us over the past two days, culminating last night in Ed Bacon's tour de force review of the achievements of almost three decades of his planning rebuilding of Philadelphia; so much so that I now must pay tribute to what can only be described as the truly professional planning, programming and time-budgeting skills of the Congress Organising Committee of the Queensland Division of the Institute.

In his Opening Address, Sir Colin Hannah laid a solid intellectual foundation for our discussions by reminding us that "planning" in some form or another is an activity and a process which underlies all self-conscious human endeavour. He frankly admitted that he had no experience in urban or regional planning but nevertheless, and correctly in my view, felt that his experience in military strategic and tactical planning, combined with his peacetime experience in the processes of management planning, enabled him to understand the essence of what the Royal Australian Planning Institute and this Congress are concerned with.

The founders of the Royal Australian Planning Institute in 1951 laboured considerably, I understand, over the question of whether it was better to follow the example of the British parent body which was then called The Town Planning Institute, or the example of the American Institute of Planners which omits any reference



in its title to the specific nature of the things that planners plan. I believe that the Australian founding fathers judged wisely in omitting any such reference from the title of the Royal Australian Planning Institute. Although the objectives of the Australian Institute as set out in its Constitution do refer specifically to the art and science of town and regional planning, and although a majority of the membership of the Institute is made up of physical planners - basically architects, engineers and surveyors - the way is open for us to regard planning as a more fundamental and all pervasive activity and process in the way it was seen by Sir Colin Hannah. The very word "planning" implies merely that professional planners are concerned with the situation or nature of whatever it is they are planning, at some future time. It also implies a concern with the dialectic of, or the action and reaction between stability and change. How much change do we want to induce in the system we are planning for? How much stability do we want to preserve? Thus, planning is intellectually and intuitively the same sort of activity and the same sort of process whether it is as Sir Colin experienced it, military strategic and tactical planning; corporate business planning; governmental social and economic planning; urban physical planning; or the personal planning by individuals of their own private lives or careers.

Sir Colin Hannah's remarks prompted in my mind the hypothesis that both military and urban planning share the characteristics of being concerned with very large numbers of people, and with very complex systems of inter-dependent variables. In this sense, they are concerned with larger scales, more people, and longer periods that are the planning processes of architects, engineers or surveyors for particular buildings, structures or residential estates. To be effective, each must take into account the part that frail individuals play in the making and un-making of plans while, at the same time, requiring close attention at the highest



executive level. The conclusion I draw from his remarks is that the planning of urban and regional systems, to be effective and successful, requires the participation and involvement not only of the military footslogger or the urban man in the street but also of the chief executive officer of the organisation or government responsible for the system, be he Commander-in-Chief, Prime Minister, Premier, Mayor or Shire President. The latter part, at least, of this hypothesis may be tested by contrasting, say, Prime Minister Menzies' close involvement in the planning and development of Canberra from 1958 until his retirement, with the lack of participation and involvement to date of Prime Minister McMahon in the planning and development of Urban Australia.

Sir Colin Hannah went on to refer to the Queensland Government's Environmental Control Act of 1971. This establishes procedures through the office and the person of the Queensland Co-ordinator General for the making, integrating and implementing of state, regional and local/physical, economic and social development plans. I have believed for many years that "planning is the key function of modern government". The Queensland Environmental Control Act of 1971 is perhaps the boldest, most ambitious and potentially far-reaching attempt in the history of Australian government to give effect to this dictum. I regret that we have not so far heard more about it at this Congress.

Lewis Keeble, in his own inimitable and delightful manner, then thrust us into the Congress theme. I was struck by the fact that he stuck very much to words of one syllable. I now want for once, and once only for the rest of my paper, to try to match him in this. He gave us a short, sharp talk with much wit and point to it. Lewis told us that the object of this Congress is "to help make things so hot for politicians that they will not dare to refrain



from thinking about, talking about and effectively legislating about, planning". He said, "it is an interesting fact that only a very small proportion of politicians, anywhere, seem to understand how important a subject this is for modern governments." He concluded by saying that "this Congress is intended to spur men to spur governments to govern wisely."

The Congress organisers have conscripted me for the job of trying to say something reasonably true and hopefully useful, under the heading "The Professional Planner in Australia". I want first to play counterpoint to Lewis' theme by pointing out that the converse, of some of the things he said, is equally true. My object at this Congress is to help make things so hot for planners that they will not dare to refrain from thinking about, talking about and effectively doing something about, politics. It is an interesting fact that only a very small proportion of planners, anywhere, seem to understand how important a subject politics is for the modern planning profession. I would like to think that this is a Congress which is intended to spur people to spur planners to plan wisely.

Lewis brought the Congress theme right down to earth, and in so doing, deftly changed it from "Governments and Planning" to politics and planning. Now let me try to define these terms. I have listened to people talk about politics for more than twenty years. I have read much of what people from the planning profession, from a number of academic disciplines and from a number of fields of government, have written about politics. My listening and reading has led me to conclude that the problem with this word is that it can mean at least three completely different things. It seems to me that the normally automatic mental response to the word "politics", of many sincere and serious professionals, is that it has to do with policies. However, the normally automatic



response in the minds of most politicians is that "politics" is about power. However, our attitude research and survey analysts tell us that the majority of the electorate is most likely to think of the word "politics" as being about personalities.

This is one possible explanation of why the great majority of professional planners have so much difficulty in communicating with politicians. The planners usually insist on talking about seemingly non-political, technocratic policies while the politician is entirely preoccupied with thinking about power - either how to win it or how to maintain it, in the party room, in Parliament, in the Council Chamber or in the electorate. Worse still, the planner is usually talking about long-term policies, while the politician is preoccupied with worrying about short-term projects. Politicians who win power may be regarded as professionally qualified in their ability to manipulate political groups. They normally have an intuitive, often an emotional, but also a highly practical way of thinking, which helps them in handling crowds and committees. It is a pre-requisite for their success that they must be, to a considerable degree, pragmatic and creative opportunists. Planners, on the other hand, are usually professionally qualified in some intellectual or professional discipline which has given them at least a superficially rational, systematic and quantitative cast of mind. Prerequisites for the success of a professional planner usually include great patience and perseverance in what is only too often a "one step forward, two steps back" kind of intellectual pursuit of constantly evolving long-term, large scale analyses and syntheses of complex systems problems.

Little wonder then that such very different animals rarely mate. When they do, their couplings rarely result in the conception, birth and growth to maturity of effectively implemented and also truly successful plans.



I vividly remember a discussion twelve years ago with a man who was then a Minister in an Australian Labor Party State Government but who, I hasten to add, was subsequently obliged to resign from the Labor Party. For several hours we had discussed the application of what I, as a professional planner, believed to be proper metropolitan planning and public housing objectives, policies and priorities. Throughout the discussion, whenever a particular place or project was mentioned, the politician had difficulty in establishing its location in his mind. His way of understanding a geographical location was to say to himself every now and then, "oh yes, that's in so-and-so's electorate". From that experience I learned even more than I had learnt from Kevin Lynch at MIT about the many different ways of perceiving, or perceptually structuring in the mind, visual images of a city or of an urban or sub-urban environment. I also learnt that metropolitan planning and housing objectives, policies and priorities could be applied by professional politicians differently in different electorates, or in different wards. Over the twelve years since then, I have learnt several other things - first, to accept that this is a conventional part of real life complexity that a professional planner has to accept and work with as well as he is able, and second that the life of a professional planner should be a continuing learning process.

In this context of the widely differing perceptions of the physical environment normally held by professional politicians and professional planners, it was a brilliant stroke by the Congress organisers to bring to us first a professional politician who gives every indication that he is also a professional urban and regional social planner, namely Don Dunstan; and secondly a professional architect-planner who has proved over three decades of effective achievement, that he must have some of the attributes of a highly skilled politician and diplomat. Such combinations of talents, within such finely integrated personalities are rare indeed. We in Australia are fortunate that one of them lives and practices here among us.



To the best of my knowledge and belief, Premier Dunstan did not shape the structure of his paper to fit in with the maxims of City Planner Bacon. Yet he gave us a number of excellent examples of what Bacon calls "the generating power of the image of an idea". Premier Dunstan painted a prose picture of the Australian "vision" of sub-urban utopia which he said had settled upon Australia like a hen upon an egg. He stressed the power of this "vision", "idea" or "image" to impress into service and marshall real resources of men, money and materials into the physical realisation of the dream. He concluded by stressing that "this vision is with and within us all".

Premier Dunstan went on to question the future validity of this sub-urban vision, and to remind us of the most essential characteristic of social or community planning, of which physical planning is only a part. He implied that once one embarks upon urban planning in a society which is not completely authoritarian or simplistic, where there is any semblance of real competition between conflicting value systems, then one should, or will soon be forced to, call all basic assumptions about social values into question.

This is precisely what the younger generations, which Gerald France referred to, are doing to-day. The younger generations of the United States and of many parts of Australia, even if not yet apparently so in Queensland, are asking what human purposes and social purposes are served by the kind of city, and the kinds of development projects, that their elders are currently planning and building.

It is this calling into question of all previous assumptions, and the conventional attitudes and value systems of older generations, which might make it far more difficult for us in the next three decades to rebuild whole sections of existing urban fabric as has





been done over the last three decades in Philadelphia. For example, it seems far more likely in the 'seventies than in the 'fifties or 'sixties that a run-down area such as the site for the magnificent Market Street East project that Ed Bacon showed us last night would attract the kind of virulent opposition from anti-'economic' growth, anti-big-government, pro-people resistance campaigns which so frustrate the logic of both planners and politicians, in ways such as were so graphically described on Monday by Premier Dunstan in his account of the non-progress of the Hackney redevelopment scheme in Adelaide.

No professional planner can any longer afford to subscribe to the belief once so common, particularly among traditional physical and economic planners, that planning in a social context can be envisaged as a rational, scheduled progress towards a pre-determined objective. The planner is an active participant, or an actor, in the essentially social and political processes he is trying to guide and sometimes imagines he is directing. By the drawing-up of a precise plan for any significant changes in an existing urban system or sub-system we cannot now, as the great planning bureaucracies of the past and of the present have often seemed to do, simply proceed through a series of carefully engineered stages to the complete implementation of the scheme as we first conceived it. This is perhaps why so many professional physical planners would welcome opportunities to work on new towns and cities on virgin sites, rather than break their hearts or mentally crack up, trying to reshape and revitalise the central areas of existing cities. As politician Dunstan and planner Bacon have tended to indicate, events manipulate us as much as we manipulate them. It is only when we begin directly to intervene in an urban system in an attempt to pursue our objectives by implementing our policies and priorities that we discover for the first time, and could not discover in any other way, some facet of social or political reality that obliges us, or prompts us if we are wise, to review our objectives and to revise our policies our priorities and our project plans in consequence.



This brings me to put to you the twin hypotheses of planning as a continuous "feedback" and "learning" process, the understanding of which, my own experience convinces me, is essential to the practical usefulness and effectiveness of the contemporary professional planner, in Australia or elsewhere. The word "feedback" is said to have been invented during World War II to describe the cybernetic process by which anti-aircraft guns were designed to sight and assess the speed and path of aeroplanes, and to "feed-back" information as to the probable future position of the objective by the time an ack-ack shell could reach that position.

The understanding and comprehension of urban community planning as a continuing, cyclic or spiral process has been pioneered and successfully demonstrated in Australia over the past few years. It begins with strategic or policy planning, leading to detailed action planning, leading to combined political and professional attempts to the implementation of first stage priorities, which yields a "feedback" of new information based on experience gained in the first stages of practical implementation, leading to a review and revision of the original strategic plan together with its objectives and policies, leading on to a selection of new priorities for continuing action. It is this process as a whole which I call a community "learning" process.

This community learning or educative process seems to proceed at about the same pace and may take the same ten to twenty year process that the primary, secondary and tertiary education of young people takes. Thus a Council or a Government which is in the fourth or fifth year of continuing community participative planning may be thought of as being in the fourth or fifth class of the primary school of community planning.

Over the past twelve years, my own group of researchers, planners and designers have been slowly but, we feel, surely learning that

that this is the only view of the community planning process which today can yield any practical success and real achievement in urban and regional planning.

We began in the early 'sixties by gradually evolving practical techniques for gaining the active participation and involvement of particular citizen and interest groups in the making of plans. A notable early example was our development, for Western Australian Government planning authorities, of comprehensive residential development control codes and performance standards to guide and govern multi-unit residential development in that State. We found that although our seeking to learn from the active participation of all state and local governmental, as well as professional and citizen organisations, tended to require patience, and time, the results were worth it. Our plans and recommendations evolved in this way have all been adopted and implemented far quicker and more effectively than have been the results of "backroom" planning done by professional planners entirely unaided.

The next significantly educative exercise for us was the preparation of a detailed environmental improvement plan and statutory development control plan for the historic Battery Point Precinct for the Hobart City Council. This may have been, in the mid 'sixties, the first application in Australia of planning as a participative learning process. We spent months not merely compiling the conventionally exhaustive physical, social and economic surveys, but also, and far more importantly, walking around Battery Point talking to the residents and property owners, as well as to the governmental and other organisations with special interests in, or impinging on, Battery Point. We met regularly with the Battery Point Progress Association Committee in the home of the President, and with all the members at public meetings in the local Community Hall. We brought maps, plans, statistics, sketches,



pictures and ideas to stimulate and spark their interest and reaction. They joined in enthusiastically, did their own sketch plans, and spoke up with gradually increasing self confidence of their own likes and dislikes, fears and demands, ideas and proposals.

I remember our first meeting with the President and Committee of the Battery Point Progress Association. We were gathered in the President's living room and he introduced us to his Committee as the planning experts appointed by the City Council who were here to tell the Committee what the future plan for Battery Point was going to be. I said "There has been some misunderstanding, Mr President. We haven't come here tonight to tell you anything for we, at this stage, know infinitely less than you and your Committee about Battery Point. We are here to learn from you how you see the planning problems and opportunities of your own neighbourhood". The Progress Association Committee members soon recovered from their initial astonishment at this approach and settled down to a series of meetings with us at which a great deal of valuable work was done.

At one of these meetings a Committee member produced a rough sketch map and in explaining it, gave a very sensitive analysis of the problems and planning opportunities of Battery Point based on her local knowledge and intimate acquaintance of her own neighbourhood. It immediately struck me that she had come up with the basic "image of an idea" which would prove to be the powerful generating force of the detailed plan for conservation and development of Battery Point. We took it up and developed it with the enthusiastic participation and active assistance of the local people.

Whenever we came to present the plan at each stage to the City Council, we found that the Aldermen were happy, because they knew they could



adopt the plan without risk of incurring any adverse political reaction. The residents and local people were there in the public gallery to applaud the Council vote. Town Planning in Hobart had, prior to this, been represented by a "backroom" plan suddenly sprung upon the people of Sandy Bay, who took long drawn out political action and eventually forced the Council to withdraw that particular plan. The participative, learning process plan based on the feedback of local knowledge and ideas, was begun much later, but completed much earlier, than the secret, bureaucratically prepared, "backroom" plan. When we arrived, planning was the Council's most unpopular activity. When we left, planning was Council's most popular activity. The Chairman of the Planning Committee won election as Mayor, even though his opponents strove mightily to stir up opposition among the residents of Battery Point.

That experiment proved that we were on the right track which led to effective and successful planning. But unfortunately the Council appeared to rest on their laurels, and to feel that with the adoption of a plan, the work was finished. Planning in Hobart at that time was not understood as a continuing process, and so the positive ideas and proposals of the plan have not been followed through in a continuing spiral of action, feedback and review and revision, leading to further action.

In 1968, we began here in Queensland what has since become a continuing exercise in community planning as a learning process. The Gold Coast City Council and the Gold Coast community are now in their fourth successive year of a continuing planning process. They are in what we may think of as the third class of the community planning primary school, having spent their first year in the kindergarten of a very simple strategic plan.



The Gold Coast is widely regarded by planners as being an environmental disaster area. The Gold Coast City Council is also widely known as a battleground of clashing, conflicting personalities. Yet no professional planner charged with the responsibility of working in and for a particular urban area should ever believe that nothing can be done to begin to improve it. The community learning process of environmental planning must start somewhere. Usually it proceeds slowly and gradually. Patience and persistence are perhaps the two major virtues demanded of community planners.

We first of all tried to identify, in relatively simple terms, the major environmental and developmental problems of the Gold Coast, not only by carrying out our own surveys but also by listening carefully to what all of the interest groups and warring factions had to say.

We produced, for a very few thousand dollars, a slim booklet which explained, by means of the simplest possible language and the simplest sketches and diagrams we could achieve, what we called a "Gold Coast Urban Region Strategic Plan". The Council adopted and distributed this booklet and thus widened the circle of government departments, local organisations and individuals whose active participation and assistance was absolutely essential for the success of any continuing planning programme. The strategic principles we suggested were accepted by the Aldermen and staff of the Council who said of the Strategic Plan, "Yes, this is good, we subscribe to it and want to follow it through".

In close collaboration with Council's staff we hopped in and prepared what we called "Action Plans" for the precincts of the City with the most critical and urgent developmental problems. We went on to begin to carry out more detailed research into longer term problems of particular difficulty and prepared a whole series of special



reports to help Council in its decision making on important issues. It was only then that we turned our attention to the preparation of a completely new Statutory Plan. This was completed and submitted to the Department of Local Government.

The next step is to go back to the beginning again and to review and revise the 1968 Gold Coast Strategic Plan, incorporating the knowledge and experience gained in the first three-year cycle of action. The Gold Coast City Council is also now moving on to the preparation of more sophisticated longer term action plans for each of the existing commercial centres on the Gold Coast.

The philosophy of urban planning is a community learning process involving the active participation of politicians, citizens and interest groups. This was, in 1970, initiated by the Council of the City of Sydney. The Sydney City Council is only now in the second phase of the planning cycle. It has prepared and adopted an overall Strategic Plan which establishes major objectives, policies and the most urgent priorities for action in overcoming the critical planning and development control problems which had been allowed to accumulate in the City of Sydney over the 25 years since the end of World War II.

Following the Council's production of the Strategic Plan, it has adopted completely new Floor Space Ratio and Parking Policies and Codes and has commissioned the preparation, during 1972, of more than twenty individual Action Plans for particular problem areas within the City. It has also commissioned, during 1973, the complete review and revision of the 1971 Strategic Plan, in the light of the feedback of criticisms, comments and new statistics and concepts which have become available for study since the 1971 Plan was published. In this way, the City of Sydney recognised that the problems caused by 25 years of planning neglect cannot be overcome quickly, but that they will yield to the patient application of the philosophy of planning as a community learning process.

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