

# REINVENTING URBAN PLANNING AND BUILDING THE CAPACITY FOR IT<sup>1</sup>

by  
Nathaniel von Einsiedel<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Entering the 21st century, the world is undergoing a rapid change in many aspects of life. The emergence of a knowledge-based global economy has undermined old realities throughout the world, creating opportunities as well as problems. Without more effective urban planning, world cities will not be able to fully benefit from these opportunities. More effective urban planning, as an integral component of urban management, is essential to avoid the breakdown of world cities.*

*This article is trying to present the fallacies and limitations of current urban planning practice against current and future conditions, and to provide a recipe for reinventing effective urban planning.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many of our cities are in deep trouble today. This paper is for those who are disturbed by that reality. It is for those who care about cities - because they work in cities, or work with a city government (maybe as a city or urban planner), or study city governments, or train people in urban management, or simply want their city government to be more effective.

The next century is just around the corner, and change is all around us. China has opened its doors; trade barriers between countries are being dismantled; economic growth 'triangles' are being formed; central governments are decentralizing power to local authorities. At the same time, the problems of poverty and environmental deterioration are worsening. And economic and financial limitations, together with widespread over-consumption of natural resources, are making it very difficult to attain the growing list of people's expectations.

The idea of reinventing urban planning may seem audacious to those who see urban

planning as something fixed, something that does not change. But in fact, urban planning constantly change. At one time, urban planners focused almost exclusively on land use. Today, no one would think that urban planning is concerned only with land use. At one time, urban planners had nothing to do with solid waste management. Today, it's a critical component of a city's development programme. At one time, no one expected the city government to take care of the poor; that was the job of welfare agencies. Today, many cities have poverty alleviation programmes. At one time, city governments never bothered with attracting investors to set up business in the city. Today, they have special offices to promote economic development.

Urban planning was 'invented' at least over 8000 years ago, as evidenced by a 'city plan' delineated on a wall in the settlement of Catal Huyuk in Southern Turkey. Since then, it has gone through several 'reinventions', from the mainly physical or spatial focus of the architect-planners of the past, to the 'comprehensive' or multi-disciplinary

---

<sup>1</sup> Sumbangan pemikiran ini juga telah dimuat di UMF Newsletter No. 3 Tahun II

<sup>2</sup> Regional Coordinator, Urban Management Programme Regional Office For Asia and The Pacific, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

orientation and the policy or structure plan approach of recent times.

Today, our world is in great flux. The emergence of a knowledge-based global economy has undermined old realities throughout the world, creating wonderful opportunities and frightening problems. Some governments have begun to respond. But without more effective urban planning, our cities will not be able to fully benefit from these opportunities. More effective urban planning, as an integral component of urban management, is essential if disastrous breakdown of cities is to be avoided.

My purpose in writing this paper is twofold: to present the fallacies and limitations of current urban planning practice against current and future conditions, and to provide a recipe for reinventing effective urban planning. This recipe is based on my work and observations over the past several years. As such, I feel a certain responsibility to explain the underlying beliefs that have prompted me to write this paper.

**First, I believe that cities cannot function effectively without effective urban management.** I believe many of the present-day city management systems with the large, centralized bureaucracies and out-dated systems and procedures are not up to the challenge of a rapidly changing information society and knowledge-based economy.

**Second, I believe in urban planning as an essential component of urban management.** Urban planning is the mechanism to make decisions about what happens in our cities. It is the means in determining the kind of services that benefit all our people. It helps make the most out of limited resources to solve the most critical problems.

**Finally, I believe that people who work as urban planners are not the problem: the systems in which they work are**

**the problem.** There are countless talented, responsible and dedicated urban planners who are trapped in archaic systems that frustrate their creativity and sap their energy. I believe these systems can be, and should be, changed, to liberate the enormous energies of urban planners and to heighten their ability to serve the public.

## 2. THE SITUATION TODAY

Various forms of planning have been around for many years and have helped countries in their national development. Without planning, cities and communities could not have been founded; housing could not have been constructed; municipal utilities and services could not be provided. Whatever the shortcomings are of what has been done, the physical development seen in many countries today is a significant achievement.

As 1993 unfolded, Time magazine ran a special feature 'Megacities' which opened with the following lines:

By the millions they come, the ambitions and the down-trodden of the world drawn by strange magnetism of urban life. For centuries, the progress of civilization has been defined by the inexorable growth of cities. Now the world is about to press a milestone; more people will live in urban areas than in the countryside. Does the growth of megacities portend an apocalypso of global epidemics and pollution? Or will the remarkable stirrings of self-reliance that can be found in some of them point the way to their salvation?

From Time (January 11, 1993)

As we draw closer to this milestone, the question in my mind is how will urban planning address these issues. Can it address these issues? I am convinced it can, but it needs to be reinvented.

These problems facing our cities today are spreading rapidly and getting more

complex. Government's ability to govern in our cities - to develop, fund and implement a coherent strategy is heavily constrained. A formidable array of institutional, technical and administrative problems substantially compromises the effectiveness of the resources put into planning and implementing projects. The resources put into planning are not well reflected by what is implemented, and what is implemented often does not appear to reflect what has been planned.

In the world of cities in which our future generations will live, development prospects will largely rest on the ability of urban areas, large or small, municipal or metropolitan in character, to satisfy the following development goals:

- improving the living and working conditions of the whole population, and in particular, of those who are in a weaker position to articulate their needs and safeguard their rights and interests;
- promoting sustainable social and economic development; and
- enhancing and protecting the physical environment.

This challenge is of unprecedented dimensions and urgency, and meeting it will require a radically new look at the role of cities. Central governments will have to accelerate action in the area of resource allocation, municipal reform, decentralization and empowerment of local authorities if they want to enhance the contribution of cities to national development. But the new paradigms for urban revitalization and rebirth will come from the cities themselves, and will be inspired by the diffusion and wide application of innovative urban management approaches emerging from the cities themselves. It is in these innovative management approaches where effective urban planning can make significant contributions. We need to understand however, that urban planning today is the product of historical forces and

events in our past which account for its fallacies and limitations. The three most serious limitations of current urban planning practice are:

- the tendency towards wishful thinking, idealism, fantasy, utopian thinking;
- the avoidance of the primary, most pressing, and most difficult urban problems; and
- its detachment from politics and needs of operating units of the city government.

**Wishful thinking, idealism, fantasy, utopian thinking.** To wish urgently, to hope excessively, to imagine, to fantasize - these are all necessary if we are to cope with the inevitabilities of our existence. But urban planners are obligated, by the definition of the field and its basic purpose, to minimize unrealistic thinking and to make their analyses and recommendations in terms of optimum reality and objectivity. Present-day urban planners need to curb their inclination to paint a picture of the future which does not represent what the community wants, but what they wish could be. There are still planners who think they can foresee all requirements and anticipate all contingencies, and formulate plans as if government can provide whatever funds are needed and will enact whatever laws are required to achieve the plan.

Cities and their environment always involve indefinite, indeterminable, inconsistent, and irrational human behavior, and unpredictable and catastrophic events. Under such a reality, urban planners need to learn to deal with problems that require rapid analysis and conclusion. The critical requirement today is to optimize the product of the limited time and money available. This calls for a sense of reality; recognizing when a conclusion must be reached; organizing the information available to elucidate the question at hand; selecting techniques of analysis suitable to the situation; working as comfortably with uncertainties and with fancied certainties;

and being willing to act on a best guess when this is indicated.

**Avoidance of the primary, most pressing and most difficult urban problems.** This is so because such problems are usually far beyond the scope and analytical competence of planning. Determining what to do about such primary problems of cities as poverty, unemployment, crime, destructive social behavior, and environmental pollution is extremely difficult. It is much easier to avoid these intensely political and controversial problems than to confront them in city planning. Because of this attitude, planners are not taken seriously by governmental decision-makers who are forced by events or their constituencies to face these difficulties continually and do what they can about them.

For their part, most politicians ignore urban planners because planners do not deal with the crucial and usually controversial problems which are foremost in the minds of constituents and therefore the politician's primary concern. Politicians view traditional city plans as relatively meaningless, and tolerate them if they are not potentially harmful to their political careers. They will use city plans to their political advantage and do not hesitate to revise or reverse them when this is called for by developments in the real world of changing activities, issues, events - and politics. Whether politics in government is the 'art of the possible' or the 'lowest common denominator of compromise', it cannot be ignored in city planning that professes to deal with reality and attain demonstrable results. If urban planning is to be meaningful, political decision-makers must be part of it. And it is the urban planner's job to help politicians make the right decisions.

**Detachment from needs of operating units.** Current urban planning practice largely proceeds independently of and separate from the administrative processes

of the municipality. The urban planning department has little or no relationship to the operating units of the municipality. Effective urban planning must consider the needs of line departments and the realities of municipal finance. It should represent the outcome of a feasible sequence of municipal operations and accomplishments.

Cities are subject to the impact of external events and internal conditions that cannot be anticipated. Thus long-range aspects of the city's development cannot be determined apart from the specifics of short-range activities. What is possible in the long-range is largely dependent on the sequence of feasible accomplishments by the city's operating units in the short-term. The long-range plan will not live and develop if it is the brainchild only of the planning department.

A related problem is the usual practice of urban planners to produce plans as their own inflexible printed publications, revised and republished only at long intervals regardless of changing conditions and events. These kind of plans are outdated even before they are published and their printing cost prevents issuing revised versions as often as they are required.

### **3. A RECIPE FOR EFFECTIVE URBAN PLANNING**

This section presents my recipe for reinventing effective urban planning. I will outline some principles - the 'ingredients' of this recipe - which I believe form the foundation of an urban planning approach that suits requirements of the present as well as the foreseeable future.

Urban planning, just like other intellectual disciplines, cannot establish itself and progress very far without a firm theoretical base. Without theory, sound generalizations cannot be made; experience must be relearned repeatedly; entirely new situations must be approached with general guidelines; and the body of knowledge

comprising the discipline has no continuous of coherent logic and conclusions.

From my own experience as well as observations of practices in several countries, the three groups of theories which seem to form the theoretical base of more effective urban planning are:

- a) **Urban dynamics** - those that relate to why and how cities grow, the form that they take, and the dynamics of their existence. One of the reasons for the long lag between good ideas and their implementation is lack of understanding of urban dynamics, and due to this, the lack of connection between research and policy.
- b) **Systems analysis** - involves general systems theory, systems engineering, operations research, and applied mathematics. Cities are very complex organisms, composed of numerous social, economic and environmental systems and sub-systems. All of these elements and aspects of the city function interdependently, continuously and progressively over time. While it is impossible and unnecessary to correlate all these elements, integrate these with other related elements, and ultimately fuse them into a reliable analytical formulation that explains the city as a whole greater than the sum of its parts.
- c) **Scientific management** - include management science, business and public administration, organizational development, decision, communication, strategic planning, leadership, applied psychology. Cities, like private corporations, are managed by people who have vision, leadership, and management skills. But cities also have limited resources and conflicting interests. Scientific management provides the framework for dealing with organizational arrangements, administrative procedures, and decision

processes, individual and collective human behavior, and other area relating to how planning is carried out as well as how decision are made.

At the operational level of urban planning practice, there are five inter-related principles which I believe are critical to making urban planning more effective.

### **1) Anchoring urban planning on strategic urban management**

Planners should not create strategies - that's the role of managers, But planners can supply data, help managers think strategically, and programme the vision. One critical point is that urban planning is **not** urban decision-making. Planning is the articulation and elaboration of strategies, or visions, that political decision-makers create.

Urban planners should make their contribution **around** the decision-making process rather than **inside** it. They should supply the formal analyses or hard data that decision-making requires, as long as they do it to broaden the consideration of issues rather than to discover the one right answer. They can be programmers of a strategy, helping to specify the series of concrete steps needed to carry out the vision.

### **2) Urban planning is a non-stop process, encompassing a spectrum of considerations extending from the past, through the present, and towards the future.**

These considerations include obligations arising from past actions, immediate needs, and long range commitments. They also include tactics and strategies, certainties and uncertainties. Some elements, such as primary water distribution lines, are projected fifty or more years in the future. Some, such as land use, may not be planned more than a few years ahead.

Others, such as forms of public-private partnerships in urban infrastructure development, are difficult or impossible to forecast. Thus, certain elements of the city are simultaneously projected far into the future, others into the mid-range, some into the near future, and a few are not projected at all but rather subjected to continuing surveys such as public opinion.

In order to be more effective, urban planning need to develop long range objectives that are realizable and determined only after examination of all the necessary resources available to meet present commitments and support future developments. Planners need to accept that long range plans will realistically be intellectually or analytically incomplete.

**3) Urban planning is the mechanism for synthesizing - not formulating - the plans of the different city departments.**

The city's urban planning unit cannot claim sole authorship for the city's development plans. Many planners fail to recognize that the city's development include projects of different departments which go through a cycle wherein initial ideas are translated into feasible plans, funded, implemented, operated and monitored. The planner's role is to synthesize - not formulate - the operations, budget, and functional plans of the different departments with relation to the total city system and its projected future.

Centralizing the planning of too many different components, or even supervising the plans of these units too closely, is self-defeating. As a general rule, the smaller the planning staff, the better, thereby maximizing the participation of the staff of the different departments in the planning process. The mechanism for conducting urban planning must be accepted and used by the municipal officials responsible for directing the affairs of the city: the city council, executive officers of the city, and

municipal department heads. It must reflect their operating needs. Unless this is clearly established, the correlation of plans of different departments so that they are mutually supportive, will not happen.

**4) Effective urban planning incorporates current data, analyses and information concerning a variety of key conditions and relevant events.**

Effective urban planning requires being relevant all of the time, otherwise it is useless. This means being current not only in terms of the plans that are continuously updated but also being able to immediately respond to day-to-day requirements of decision-making for the city. Being able to provide decision-makers with the hard data and information for them to make decisions is vital. Thus, monitoring of key conditions and relevant events in the city is an essential management function.

The urban planning unit can work together with the other departments in establishing an information monitoring system based on the individual operating requirements of each department and utilizing their field personnel to submit regular reports. The planning unit can correlate these reports and see if there are patterns that emerge which require immediate, medium or long range action.

**5) Effective urban planning involves forms of analysis and basis for decisions that are easy to understand**

Responsible decision-makers will not act on the basis of staff analysis that they do not understand. In other words, they will not act mainly on someone else's say-so because they will not want to abrogate their decision-making role to subordinates. Getting the decision-maker to accept the planner's recommendation is of course influenced by various factors, but this can be enhanced by making analysis simple

such that it is easy to comprehend and manipulate mentally.

This suggests that instead of trying to cover everything 'under the sun' for the sake of being comprehensive, urban planning should concentrate on the core or primary elements of the city. No general consensus can be made on the elements most necessary for urban planning since cities differ and conditions change continuously. The priority concerns of one will differ from another. However, a set of primary elements should be identified by the city's top executives to form the core of information for the management of the city. The coverage may be expanded gradually.

Concentrating on such a core of information should make it easier to make it current. However, the basic data for urban analysis will differ in how up-to-date and accurate they should be, whether they should apply to the entire city or only part of it, and how far they should extend into the past to support conclusions concerning trends. It is important, therefore, to establish the type, amount and level of accuracy of the information needed. It is usually preferable to have approximate data on time, rather than exact data too late to be used effectively.

Finally, the method of displaying this core of information is important. It must be readily available to those who make decisions about the city. They will not tolerate the days or weeks it usually takes a traditional planning office to respond to an informational or analytical query. All parts of the core information and analysis should be available in a matter of minutes for immediate decision, contemplation, or staff study, or for the use of any interested individual or group. This core of information should be displayed in a large room that in a sense would resemble a military 'operation centre' which incorporates maps, aerial photographs, and

other forms of data display, including necessary communications equipment. Such an operations centre will be useful not only for urban planning but for the day-to-day management of the city.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Each of the many organizations, groups, and individuals with particular urban concerns has a variety of reasons for criticizing urban planning as it is now practised. But there are also those who say that had urban planning been effectively applied to our cities, we would not have the kind of urban problems we now experience. Whether this is true or not, some people will always be dissatisfied with urban planning because it involves concentrations of people with competing interests and conflicting beliefs about the role of municipal government in directing the affairs of the city.

Nevertheless, I feel that the lack of appreciation and increasing criticism of present day urban planning is the result of fundamental flaws in the concept and the practice of this activity. Unless these flaws are understood and acknowledged and constructive actions are taken towards their elimination in both theory and practice, urban planning cannot and will not contribute significantly to the improvement of urban conditions. Unless it is re-invented, urban planning will be meaningless in the face of the increasing magnitude and complexity of urban problems.

Urban planning will even be less influential than it is today if it persists in what might be called the 'three deadly sins', namely: 1) the tendency towards wishful thinking; 2) the avoidance of primary, most pressing urban problems; and 3) its detachment from politics and needs of operating units of the city government.

Integrating urban planning and municipal administration into urban management is the most important step in the process of

reinvention. The longer-range strategies, policies and planning which are the purpose of urban planning must grow out of the on-going, shorter-range, operational planning which is the concern of public administration. Its sphere of orientation must expand to include management science, business and public administration, systems engineering, applied psychology, organizational development, and other fields of knowledge.

The more effective and thus, meaningful, practice of urban planning is one that is always current, responsive to the needs of the operating departments of the city, and assists decision-makers in making the right decisions. It is able to respond to both long-range as well as immediate objectives; it is a mechanism for synthesizing and correlating - not formulating - the plans of different departments so that these are mutually reinforcing.

Building the capacity of those who will put this reinvented urban planning into practice must take into account some fundamental considerations which are presently taken for granted. Effective urban planning is integral to urban management which, in turn, is part of governance. Effective governance involves several dimensions, but those that I believe the capacity building of planners should place more emphasis on are the:

1) normative; 2) motivational; 3) learning; 4) organizational; and 5) political dimensions. All these concerns change, not only with 'what' but equally important, with 'how'. After all, urban planning is about change.

Finally, there is perhaps a need to re-emphasize the difference between the words 'planning' and 'plans'. **Planning** is the process of continuously formulating what the city is able and intends to carry out with respect to its future. **Plans**, on the other hand, describe the actions to be taken during a prescribed period of time to achieve stated objectives. Planning is like a

continuous moving picture, composed of a succession of time-bound plans analogous to the individual picture frames of a motion picture.

Development plans, no matter how brilliant they may be at any given time, cannot be a substitute for having, as a permanent part of the machinery of government, a planning process that is integral to the city's management system. It is through such a planning process that data on the condition of the city are kept current and through which policies, long-range plans, and specific action programmes are evolved continually in response to current needs.

This is what effective urban planning can, and should, be.