



URBAN RENEWAL, NEW TOWNS AND REGIONAL PLANNING

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Abstract

The 1980s and most of the 1990s saw widespread recognition of many of the problems of the cities and the burgeoning suburbs. Many Initiatives were undertaken at local regional and national levels to alleviate these through a variety of urban planning and public policy effort. Although many of the programs and proposals were controversial, urban planners and public officials were optimistic that urban problems could be minimized or alleviated through the concerted and cooperative efforts of various levels of government, civic groups, and private economy.

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In the early 1970s, many efforts were made to solve the problems of the cities and the suburbs were abandoned as apparent failures, set aside for some vague future considerations, cut short before they were given sufficient opportunity to demonstrate their effectiveness, or blocked from implementation as too controversial by public opinion or organized interest groups. At this time, the possibility of massive public intervention in the affairs of cities seems too cloudy to predict for the immediate future. Since the possibility does exist for a renewal of interest in efforts to improve the urban environment, it is useful to examine some of insights they might provide for the near future.

Urban Renewal in Cities

Urban renewal has become in recent years one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of planned urban redevelopment. Technically speaking, urban renewal is not necessarily an integral part of long range comprehensive community master plans do not contain specific provisions for urban renewal and because some local urban renewal projects have been undertaken without reference to the guiding framework of a comprehensive community plan. In many communities, planning agencies and urban renewal agencies are independent, autonomous and sometimes competing department of local governments.

The political, legal, and financial impetus for urban renewal in cities was the Housing Act of 1949, as amended in 1954 (Green, 2005). Under this legislation, local communities were empowered to condemn, buy, clear, and redevelop inner city land that was considered substandard or was underused with respect to its potential values. The program was aimed



at the clearance of areas designated as slums or likely to become slums in the near future Barr, 1992}. A major goal was the redevelopment by private of such land for new residential or industrial uses that would be expected to enhance the value and desirability of the land, presumably for the benefit of the entire community. Financing of the program involved matching funds from the local community and the federal government, with two-thirds of the costs to be borne by the federal government. Control of the urban renewal projects was to remain in local hands, provided that certain federal criteria were met.

The most relevant criticisms of those urban renewal projects that have actually been undertaken and completed have to do with their impact on low-income housing (Caputo, 1996). Contrary to the original goals of the federally sponsored urban renewal program, many critics maintain that urban renewal to date has materially reduced the supply of housing available to low-income groups in the cities by replacing bulldozed slum housing with new luxury housing for higher income groups or replacing housing with more economically profitable nonresidential commercial development, from which the investors and other commercially oriented groups have profited. Much criticism (Gans, 1988; Greer, 2005) points out that not only have emotionally burdens been imposed on low-income groups by involuntarily relocating them from their established neighborhoods but also that urban renewal has not always adequately compensated the relocated groups for their losses--it has not necessarily provided them with better housing or neighborhood facilities than those from which they have been evicted. Of course, this is not so much a criticism of the general concept of urban renewal itself as it is of the particular uses to which urban renewal has been put. Many such critics would probably support urban renewal if it were used to provide more and better low-cost housing for low-income groups, and if relocation problems could be minimized or handled in more helpful and humane ways than they have been in the past.

At the same time, efforts to improve the economic vitality of cities through the redevelopment of commercial and industrial areas remain legitimate goals of the urban renewal process if cities are expected to provide adequate commercial opportunities for their residents or to provide an adequate level of public services.

That urban renewal programs have had some notable successes {Perloff, 1977; Butler, 1966; Downs, 2006) in visibly improving some local areas in the inner cities does suggest that urban renewal does continue as a valuable approach for redeveloping economically and socially declining areas in many cities. Therefore, to understand its potential as well as its past mistakes becomes increasingly important so that future urban renewal undertakings are better understood and planned than heretofore.



New Towns

The original conception of the new town or garden city movement called for the creation of new self-sufficient and self-contained cities decentralized from existing urban centers. The new towns were to differ sharply from the more conventional patterns of urban sprawl in that they were to provide much more in the way of city amenities than commonly associated with 'bedroom' or 'commuting' suburbs. The new towns were envisaged by their advocates as providing a balanced mix of economic, commercial, civic, educational, and leisure-oriented functions adequate to meet the daily needs of their residents (Hubbard and Mehinnick,1982).

The new towns would provide a heterogeneous variety of housing type to accommodate people of various socioeconomic levels or at various stages of their life cycle, and they would decrease the pressures on the burgeoning cities by absorbing some of their surplus populations.

After World War II, interest in the new-town movement revived, this time most of them financed and sponsored by private investors. To many architects and planners, they were a blueprint for easing the ills of the inner city and the sprawl of suburbia. New towns would be carefully planned to meet the housing, recreational, and commercial needs of millions of people, rich and poor. There would be lakes and parks, townhouses and high rises. Shoppers would be able to walk to malls in town centers, while workers would walk to job in landscaped industrial parks.

But while tens of thousands of people now live happily in new towns from coast to coast, and while several of these have drawn praise for their beauty and amenities, nearly all of them are financial flops. The new towns were an inherently risky financial venture for their backers from the start (Leggitt.2014).To plan and develop a town completely can easily take twenty years or more .But before they can attract paying residents, the developers must spend heavily on 'from end cost' to assemble the land and install the facilities, while paying taxes and interest at the same time.

In addition, not all observers agree that new towns should be a top priority, with some, such as Downs(2006), arguing that any policies supporting them should be part of a balanced program that also recognizes the need to improve older core areas and to upgrade traditional forms of urban growth that are still likely to dominate the future.

Clearly, the new towns are no panacea for solving all existing urban problems, although they do afford opportunities for improving the quality of urban life some segments of the population.



Regional Planning and Regional Government

Large metropolitan regions are characterized by their extreme fragmentation into many separate and autonomous local political units(Perloff.1997;Webster.2008).

This political fragmentation seems to occur because technological advances in transportation and communications, which have permitted and encouraged the physical and economic integration of increasingly larger geographic areas, have not been accompanied by any real increase in government integration. The populations moving outward from the central cities have resisted annexation and have incorporated themselves into small residential enclaves, variously called cities, townships, or villages.(Mairet,2007;Wilson,2016).The lack of fit between ecological and political boundaries has important consequences for the decision- making structure metropolitan regions. It means that no local government decisions applying to all parts of the metropolitan areas are possible. Yet many of the social problems of urban areas can only be effectively controlled by an area wide political system. Air or water pollution does not recognize existing political boundaries, nor does crime, urban blights, epidemics, poverty, or traffic congestion. Government fragmentations, if it has not actually caused these problems, has nevertheless served to make their solutions more difficult. Perhaps this helps to explain the growing interest in the need for regional planning in the last few decades.

Regional planning is a term general applied to area wide or metropolitan planning efforts that are set up on a multijurisdictional basis. Such regional planning commissions have been multiplying in recent years. These have been set up to serve units of two or more counties, several municipalities, a combination of counties and municipalities, or a city and county jointly.

In most metropolitan communities, the regional planning commission is not an integral part of any of the local political entities, but serves instead an extra governmental educational, promotional, or advisory function. An alternative form of intraregional cooperation among adjacent political units is a

Council of Governments (Webster,2008).This is a voluntary association of local governments that can provide an indirect means of integrating the planning an 'adjunctive' role in which they would serve as brokers among interdependent decision-making organizations, act as a regional lobby or a catalyst for action, and mobilize resources to achieve the appropriate regional goals. This view assumes that harmony will be achieved by bringing the realities of urban development and its accompanying problems into proper focus and by producing a framework within which local governments can cooperate with their neighbors while at the same time pursuing their own individual goals.

But many critics are skeptical of these approaches, arguing that nothing short of the complete integration of regional planning into the framework of a strong areawide or regional government will make such planning an effective force for sound regional



development (Hubbard and Mehinnick,1982).According to them, too much detachment is a serious weakness because it divorces planning from the program and decision-making processes of an ongoing public body with implementing powers.

There is no clear evidence that metropolitan communities are making the governmental and planning adjustments necessary to come face to face with the realities of metropolitan growth and dispersion. It is fair to conclude that the full potentials of regional planning and governments cannot be adequately evaluated until they have been more widely implemented than they have been so far.

Conclusion

How can urban policies be part of a comprehensive plan, and yet be so constituted that they may be changed with relative speed and ease when it is prudent to make these changes? In summary, how can there be the desirable combination of order and flexibility; long-range visions and short-range strategies; freedom and social control, elaborately designed futures and open-ended tomorrows?

These largely unanswered questions illustrate just a few of the fundamental difficulties faced by policy makers and urban planners as a prelude to the pursuit of any given policy or particular issue. The obvious difficulty of the task, however, does not mean that it is impossible.

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