

Book Review

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Pier Carlo Palermo and Davide Ponzini

Spatial Planning and Urban Development: Critical Perspectives. New York: Springer, 2010. 159 pp. \$129.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-90-481-8869-7 (hardcover)

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In this timely book, Italian urban scholars Pier Carlo Palermo and Davide Ponzini call for no less than a broad reconsidering of the links between urban planning and urban development. In their view, a general misunderstanding of urban design and its exclusion from scholarly debates of urban planning has created a “disciplinary void,” leaving “both fields impoverished” (p. 204). In their view, planning has become too self-referential, confusing actual planning problems with decision-making issues. They remind us that, in the end, planning is more than mediation, negotiation, and collaboration; ultimately it “gives shape to the world” (p. 39). They argue for a shift from visions—evocations of harmonious scenarios as obvious destinations, to paying concrete, design-oriented attention to the difficulties of achieving these visions. They remind us that visions are often short-lived ideas removed from context. Planners’ tasks are, after all, not limited to the plan but also its implementation in social and physical milieus.

Along the way, the authors note that architecture and corporate marketing-driven urban design is often self-referential too. In biting critiques of the self-assured Rem Koolhaas—whom they accuse of basing his architecture on unfalsifiable rhetoric and a self-contained performative logic that eludes value judgment—and architecture-for-art’s-sake architects like Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid—whose work they see fit for a society of spectacle—the authors urge a shift to design-based experiential knowledge garnered through historical and anthropological methods. Toward this end, they propose and develop four interrelated fundamental perspectives: political realism—utilizing policy analysis to ground the planning first in the actual power relationships that guide development; reformist culture of the possible—a repositioning of planning theory in urban development and urban history; critical pragmatism—critical scholarship that roots real-world change in real-world social and physical realities; and finally, urban spatial design—the central emplacement of design orientation in planning theory.

Overall, the text is grounded in a broad understanding of European planning traditions and conditions, augmented with an awareness of those on the other side of the Atlantic.

A good portion of the book is devoted to a historical review of planning theory that acknowledges multiple overlaps in theory and practice in time and space. They begin by focusing on midcentury planning paradigms, rooted in decision theories based on now-debunked behavioralism. Moving to what they term the social roots of planning, they discuss the ultimately toothless Marxist critiques of the rise of the neo-liberal city. The failures of grand change efforts, either through the modernist project or urban emancipation through proletarian revolution grounds a discussion of the conterminous fragmentation of planning theory along the lines of the postmodern fragmentation of society. A good portion of the book is devoted to the core of their polemic: a heavy-handed critique of the communicative turn in planning. They point to the fallacy of the planner as pure facilitator, correctly reminding us that planners do have something besides mediation skills to contribute. Curiously, in the chapter titled “Escaping to Irrationality,” instead of bolstering their argument with theorists such as Bent Flyvbjerg who also call for a turn to political realism and a shift to policy inquiry, the authors reject them out of hand.

Throughout their wide-ranging critique of the status quo in planning theory and praxis, Ponzini and Palermo use Italian planning as their starting point. Fundamental to their argument is the reduction of planning processes to decisions made by individual actors, and what the authors see as an oversimplification of the social and physical roots of planning. Ponzini and Palermo point out that Italian planning is rooted in a tradition of a dialogue between architecture and planning. This intermeshing has led to political honesty in facing the challenges and postmodern malaise of the contemporary period.

The authors see planning as more than deliberation; it is in their terms a *crossroads*. That is, planning is a convergence of numerous fields of knowledge and is nested firmly in the political economy. They maintain that planning is more than collaborative decision making, which, without empirical grounding, often produce evidence that reduces to mere fallacies. Further, they contend that planning has lost sight of its object—urban development—and without

investigation of underlying policy and design issues, it lacks a grounding in the empirical world. Two essential conditions are called for to return sense and practical value to the field. First, returning to the object of planning: effective physical modification—not necessarily urban growth, but the development of freedoms (Sen 1999). Second, paying critical attention to special interests and relations of power in the urban and urban policy environments.

The proposed way forward is a general reframing of planning within reflective, critical, and design-oriented pragmatism, moving away from the fallacy of a “single-author city” and acknowledging that change is always framed by history and power relations—what they term “evolutionary possibility.” They propose reestablishing links between design culture and policy inquiry and, importantly, focusing on the project not as a final act but a method of investigation, a tool of inquiry. Following the authors, urban design, like any creative endeavor, relies on the experiential knowledge of its numerous interests as well as critical analyses of the efficacy of the plan in the real world.

The authors weave urban process into their argument in two important ways. First, relying on their readers’ familiarity with Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, they incorporate his theory into their claim of the importance of experiential knowledge. They remind us that according to Lefebvre, planning is neither a science nor a decision-making technique, but an institution charged with the continual flow of the production of space over time. Secondly, by extending Kevin Lynch’s argument that urban form is never an ideology, but rather a collaborative creation of interlaced structures designed by many hands, the authors remove the false notion of grand city design from their reorientation toward design-oriented planning. Instead, they argue that if design is an incremental process, we must investigate the reasons people create. However, while Lynch’s primary interest was in how people inhabit and come to understand their city, Ponzini and Palermo remain in what Lefebvre terms *representations of space* (Lefebvre 1991). By insisting on design orientation and a policy studies approach to planning, they concentrate on designed form and the politics of development while ignoring the lived space of the city.

The authors preempt one obvious critique of their call for design-oriented planning by distancing their views from the new urbanism, claiming that it essentially ducks ideals and reformist practice in favor of economic gain and a fixation on growth. Whereas Ponzini and Palermo’s critical pragmatism calls neoliberal ideals into question, they argue that new urbanism attends to the needs of a homogenous society with a middle-class culture. Instead of celebrating or even

recognizing urban differences in lifestyle and divisions in culture, new urbanism masks difference behind formalism and is thus, in their terms, a grand city project that diverges from the reformist design culture for which they advocate.

Although they describe planning as a crossroads, the authors jettison the collaborative planning process even though it provides a link to the social context of the city—a link they seem unwilling to acknowledge aside from allusions like: “without heritage, public space and common goods, the city disappears” (p. 117). While much of their critique of the communicative turn in planning is spot on, contextualized, participatory planning deliberation and decision making are critical tools in the effort to plan the just city. Furthermore, the authors’ argument is impoverished by their failure to augment their political realism argument with the many other planning theorists—including Bent Flyvbjerg, Margo Huxley and Oren Yiftachel—who criticize the communicative turn, planning as mediation, and the ill-consideration of power relations in deliberative processes. Additionally, Ponzini and Palermo seem overly confident in the efficacy of design orientation to plumb the anthropological, historical, and cultural depths of urban reality. In fact, in their planning as a crossroads model, they make no mention of the related fields of human and urban geography, urban history, urban sociology, or urban anthropology as cornerstones in the experiential knowledge for which they advocate. Like deliberation, design, no matter how interpretive, cannot stand alone in answering questions of urban reality and urban processes.

In the end, *Spatial Planning and Urban Development* makes a significant contribution to planning scholarship. Its authors remind us that the city is complex but not incomprehensible. Their central question: how do we understand the relationship between the urban project and its spatial framework?—instead of: how do we construct and maintain an un-coerced planning meeting?—broadens our attention from planning procedures to the object of planning—the city. Their insistent focus on policy and design offers a refreshing shift in perspective with which to comprehend and ameliorate structural physical and social imbalances in urban contexts. Recognizing that design theory, like all theories, is limited in scope, Ponzini and Palermo have opened many avenues for constructive debate and progress in planning praxis and scholarship.

References

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