

Dialogues in Urban & Regional Planning 2

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Urban and regional planning continues to experience powerful processes of change, adjustment, modernisation and reform. The dysfunctional and divisive processes of globalisation, the pervasive effects of neo-liberalism and the associated forces of entrenchment on governance, public sector activities in general and planning in particular are relentless. The current articulation of effectiveness around evidence based policy and planning is a consequence of these influences and adds another critical dimension to urban and regional planning practices. Indeed, these convoluted forces for change in the interests of international capital continuously press planning systems for innovation in order to meet perceived efficiency and effectiveness objectives. Thus in practice, urban and regional planning has to address powerful financial and ownership agendas, meet deficits in infrastructure investment and provision (frequently the result of decisions taken elsewhere and not in the gift of planning), mediate the expectations of current land and property development sectors, and anticipate societal conflicts in a complex and uncertain world dominated by fundamental questions around health and obesity, terrorism and geopolitical uncertainty and environment instability and climate change.

Moreover, there are intellectual and practice challenges around the adoption of new ideas, such as 'spatial planning'; integrated working to achieve streamlined public administrative systems; deeper and more 'meaningful' civil engagement and political legitimacy (for whom?); and in becoming more market oriented or being able to operate along a business model of land-use planning. The increasingly pervasive control of the Treasury in the UK over land-use planning agendas and spatial planning practices is but one example. This collection of papers offers a fascinating set of insights into international comparative experiences around these grand narratives.

This volume is second in a series of Dialogues which may be considered equivalent to the vogue for engaging with national conversations. The intention of the series is to bring together a selection of the best urban scholarship from every region of the world, and to bridge gaps in languages and regions amongst the planning research community and academy. The editors provide a compelling advocacy for promoting greater exchange of research, ideas and insights from international planning research practices. The issue of regional isolation is sensitively cast. Evidence is presented which suggests that "there is limited use of prior research cross-regionally and, in particular, literature originating in developing countries is not commonly making its way into use by planning scholars outside the region of origin" (p. 14).

In practical terms, the papers are drawn from the nine international Planning School Groupings. This involves a competitive process at the individual planning schools association level, and then another level of peer review by an International Editorial Board. The first volume of scholarly papers was published in 2004 and was well received. The papers:

draw on local concerns but also reflect international issues, including the relationship between the economy, urban space and planning; concerns over the environment and conservation of heritage; planning processes and the nature of decision making; the development of planning ideas; planning and transport; and the role of gender. (p. xii)

This collection is intended to enable a more meaningful international comparison of research scholarship in a globalised context. Essentially, this process seeks to build a broader understanding of planning thought and practices in very different contexts. Here, there is an attempt to identify and nurture the multi-regional commonalities evident in land-use planning and spatial planning thinking. The papers address a screed of issues relating to multi-scalar planning and governance, rural–urban forms, economic–political relations and formal–informal behaviours.

The collection of papers here reflects the broad themes which suggested themselves in the first volume. These concern the relations between planning and the economy; concerns for the environment and conservation of the built heritage; and the nature of processes around planning and decision making. What is striking here is that this cross-cutting agenda has endured for so long. These are the foundational trade-offs that seem to have characterised land use planning (and now spatial planning) practices in a variety of dynamic and complex settings. Yet, the papers in Volume 2 offer a rich and diverse critical discussion and appropriate reflection in very different international settings.

Papers deal with a conceptual understanding and with practical insights concerning relations between economy, urban space and planning theme in the inner core of Vancouver, with respect to the nature of governance relating to the Athens Olympic Games and the changing relations between urban morphology and social class in French cities. The theme of environment and conservation is addressed through essays exploring rurality in Latin America and identity in Bali. Debates around planning processes and decision making are informed by papers dealing with the dilemmas of democracy in Australia, the nature of urban reform and citizenship in Brazil, and the nature of sustainable development and regionalism in South Africa. Volume 2 includes new thematic explorations around the transfer of planning ideas in the context of Australia and Latin America; planning and traffic congestion in North America; and an essay on planning and gender relations with respect to self-help housing in Africa.

This review has not done justice to the individual papers. Each is well written, theoretically grounded, conceptually alert, competently organised and the evidence systematically presented and considered. There is a freshness here in exploring the complex cognitive and behavioural relations in land-use planning and spatial planning arenas of engagement in what are very difficult times. Notwithstanding the localised contexts there are important threads such as the importance of contractualisation in state-market-civil relations. This is a valuable reference book and deserves critical attention by researchers. There is much here that can stimulate more international comparative planning research and practice and it is highly recommended as a valuable source of ideas.

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