

BOOK REVIEW**The Purpose of Planning: Creating Sustainable Towns and Cities****By Yvonne Rydin
Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011**

Reviewed by Elizabeth Mattiuzzi

Over the past sixty years, the U.K.'s highly centralized system of planning has experienced wartime rebuilding by a Keynesian state and all-powerful modernist architects favoring Corbusian towers and motorways, followed by neoliberal restructuring and the increasing role of finance capital in shaping the urban landscape. (Behold the vast Docklands redevelopment area and the corporate island of Canary Wharf, as well as more recent steel and glass monoliths named for their shapes—"gherkin," "shard"—jutting from London's neoclassical skyline.) The modernist experiment was imprinted on concrete public housing estates such as those found in London's boroughs, now either becoming desirable hipster icons (Kensington's Trellick Towers) or still occupied by the poor but being reconstituted in a less brutalist style (Islington's Packington Estate). As Thatcher was privatizing large swaths of Britain's public housing, a symbol of the social contract as potent as the National Health Service, the fashion for wholesale demolition of Britain's architectural heritage was met with the opposite extreme: Prince Charles and others pushed for the preservation and creation of an imagined past to create bland, theme-park-like English village townscapes, each as indistinguishable from the next as American new urbanist town squares. More recently, U.K. planning has turned towards participation and reclaiming the street network for cyclists and pedestrians, following a European trend to address livability and climate change. Education about the built environment and how to participate in shaping it is provided by a strong NGO sector (a network of "Architecture Centres" serves communities across the country) and by government (that is, until the current Conservative government axed its research and advisory body, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, or CABE). Yvonne Rydin joins Patsy Healey, Neil Brenner, Erik Swyngedouw, and others in an ongoing discussion about who participates in decisions about the built environment in an era of "glocalized" governance and flows of capital.

Rydin's *The Purpose of Planning* is a primer on the democratic planning process. She divides the desired public goods of the "sustainable"

town or city into greenfield housing development, urban regeneration, and “conservation,” a term encompassing both preservation of historic buildings and open space. At a simplified level, the task of the planning process is to provide these goods or make it profitable for the private sector to do so. For example, the state can build housing or it can provide infrastructure and cheap land where it wants housing built. These approaches are mediated and combined through public participation. The “good life” can be had for all under a set of difficult but not impossible circumstances: if care is taken to solicit input from all stakeholders, planners exercise vision but do not become paternalistic, the private sector is a participant but not the dominant voice, and—critically—social and physical infrastructure are planned in tandem over time. This last is a key element of “spatial planning,” which Rydin presents as a starting point.

Spatial planning involves considering long-term “patterns of economic and social activity” over a broad geographic area, rather than waiting to bring the public to the table when a specific development is already in motion. A popular model in the E.U., the idea behind spatial planning is that strategic provision of both social and physical infrastructure will nudge commercially driven development to be more spatially clustered and less carbon (and other resource) intensive. Collaborative governance bodies comprised of citizen groups and business representatives share the responsibilities of planning and development, rather than having them vested solely in the professional planner and traditional regulatory agencies. A main paradox of spatial planning is that, although encouraging early participation reduces NIMBYism, many people find it harder to engage with a wide-ranging, long-term plan than a specific development proposal. Some parties will always participate more and thereby have a greater influence than others, even as planners attempt to engage with as broad a representation of community interests as possible.

With more limited space for development than many countries, the U.K. grapples with strategic growth management. Rydin leaves room for future discussion of how spatial planning works in practice and how its applicability might be altered by different cultural contexts. In particular, more case studies are needed on how early involvement in “spatial planning” addresses politics of difference. Applied in a superficial way, it has the potential to be just another catchall for rubber-stamped development with a sheen of community input. In theory, however, spatial planning could be one tool for transforming community members from simple obstacles or cheerleaders for development into active participants in long-term social and physical resource planning in urban areas. This may be difficult to accomplish, however, in the U.K. and across Europe, as governments roll back education (architectural and otherwise), implement austerity measures, and increasingly cede control of public institutions to the private sector.

References

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