

Chapter 1

Introduction



How to Design and Build Cities in the Global South?

Abstract Urban planning was implemented in Europe and Northern America during the nineteenth century with the objective of bringing order and coherence to cities that were experiencing a whole revolution: new industries, urban sprawl, migratory flows from rural areas to urban settlements. Without entering into too much detail, it is important to underline that urban planning was essentially conceived as a technical instrument and as a spatial methodology to organize space, without paying much attention to social problems. This approach and accompanying specialization of competences were transferred to developing and emerging countries throughout the twentieth century, oblivious of the problems of another kind and another magnitude faced by cities in the South.

On the basis of these presuppositions, this book intends to examine urban planning as it is practiced today in Southern countries, from a double perspective: (1) how conceptual and methodological precepts can be questioned when applied to different societal contexts than those they were originally intended for, (2) how to re-invent urban planning so that this instrumentation be really useful to the cities of the South in their fight against poverty and segregation while fostering a more sustainable and inclusive urban development. This reflection is very important in any urban context, but it is particularly urgent that it be addressed in small and medium sized cities that lack the human and financial resources to tackle these issues.

Keywords Cities · South · Urban planning · Poverty · Inclusive city

As a human institution, cities are a reflection of the history of humankind whose description, analysis and forecasting have gradually been appropriated and influenced by numerous scientific disciplines, technological advances and humanistic visions, and highlight cities' morphology, land use and the diverse forms of socio-spatial interaction that take place in them.

However, when it comes to cities in emerging or developing countries (especially small and medium-sized cities), our thinking requires an urgent overhaul. In general, these are the areas with the highest population growth rates. And yet, their urban authorities suffer most from the lack of financial and human resources to preempt and address these issues. These societies also face major obstacles in terms

of human and material precarity, the contamination of natural resources, the informalization of economic activities and dysfunctions in decision-making processes and governance at the local and regional levels. It is this urbanization that, in the coming decades, will put these cities under increasing pressure, particularly given that 95% of urban growth in the future will primarily impact emerging and developing countries.

What does sustainable development – and sustainable urban development more specifically – mean in such contexts? And how does it translate into tools and information that allow professionals to develop and apply innovative, socially inclusive and economically productive planning that is respectful and responsible in terms of natural resources and environmental management?

Hence, the question is whether spatial and social planning that is adapted to these contexts and can solve their issues actually exists. Were this the case, would we not be wise to challenge the models on which classic planning is based and substitute logic measures that promote coherence between theories and concepts, and public and private practices (and the many strategies to which they give rise)?

Based on this premise, this book is a conceptual reflection and personal journey through 35 years of scientific and professional projects and activities on four continents. It is also a debate on urban planning and the arguments for redefining both its methods and content to meet the social demands and needs identified of Latin American, African and Asian cities.

During my sociology and political science studies in the 1970s, a young geography and anthropology professor often spoke of “similarities and differences” to impress upon us the idea that reality is never black or white, negative or positive, all or nothing, but rather is always nuanced, sometimes ambiguous and often conflictual.

As a young professional in the public service sector and later as a PhD student in Mexico, I learned that not only was the world made up of such subtleties, but also of intricacies, contradictions, struggles, conflicts, misunderstandings, and even pleasant surprises for those who know how to listen and open their eyes.

Trying to remain subjective throughout different experiences and events, I wanted to develop an analytical approach based on rigorous methods, which included taking into account the many facets of the social and material complexity of cities. It had to combine quantitative and qualitative dimensions and have its roots in the social sciences – of which I was a part – as well as urban planning, environmental science and engineering.

My first boss at EPFL described the city as a natural and built environment. With him and another colleague, we seized the opportunity to reverse this metaphor by making inhabitants our focus: a natural environment, undoubtedly, a material environment, obviously. But also and above all a human environment. We combined analytical rigour with the poetics of language for the title of our collective book on urban alternatives, *Habitat créatif, éloge des faiseurs de ville* (Creative habitat, in praise of city makers) (Pedrazzini et al. 1996).

Our commitment to urban research has endured over time and will serve as a guide for this work. A threefold observation underlies its message. The first is the need for objective recognition of a contemporary phenomenon of major importance, namely the process of continuous demographic and spatial urban growth. The second is a corollary to this globalized urbanization, with a shift of mass poverty from rural areas to urban ones and a billion poor mostly living in South cities – a serious and largely overlooked issue. Finally, urbanity must be recognized as a driver of territorial fragmentation and social disparities, as well as humanity's historical development in terms of its culture and technologies. Nonetheless, it remains a vibrant place of creativity and innovation.

It was in this spirit, which is both scientific as regards analysis as well as committed to improving the lives of all of its inhabitants (especially the poor), that this book was written.

Its purpose is to help redefine the objectives of urban planning in emerging and developing countries, the methods used, the tools and techniques applied to reify them, and the interventions by public, private and collective stakeholders involved in urban development.

The first chapter focuses on the data that characterizes the urbanization phenomenon that taking place across the world, and South countries in particular. It provides an opportunity to discuss some of the different perceptions and theories that underlie the analysis, citing some specific examples of the urban research my colleagues and I have done over the years.

The second chapter focuses more directly on the specificities of urban planning, both in terms of its disciplinary diversity and its sometimes heterogeneous use, particularly when it reproduces methods and tools that are not adapted to the urban contexts of South countries. The idea here is to rethink planning based on the needs and social demands of inhabitants while taking into account the obstacles frequently encountered in South cities, especially smaller ones – namely a lack of financial means and competent human resources.

Three case studies will be presented: one from West Africa, and two from Latin America. Each highlights certain points related to our overarching question and concretely examines their impact in the field for city dwellers, political authorities and professionals working in the sector.

The case of Koudougou, a medium-sized city in Burkina Faso – one of the poorest countries in the world – with a population of 115,000 inhabitants, for instance, provides an opportunity to understand how these issues translate in the African urban context. The reader discovers a regional capital that is struggling with a great many problems and is unable to solve them in a coherent way due to an insufficient municipal budget and total dependence on the federal government and outside donors. Urban development thus depends less on local consultation than on donor projections and decisions taken at the State level. This proves that reinventing planning in Africa is of the utmost urgency so that local actors can have greater autonomy in deciding how to put it to useful ends.

Conversely, the case of Nueve de Julio, an intermediate city of 50,000 inhabitants in the Argentinian pampas, addresses new forms of spatial fragmentation and social exclusion linked to agro-export and crises in international markets. Created in the nineteenth century along with hundreds of other cities as part of a government strategy of territorial conquest, the city is a perfect example of an intermediate city, with respect to its rural region and in terms of the challenges it faces in a globalized, connected world. With no long-term vision, successive municipal governments have allowed things to deteriorate; though aware of the problems, they are obliged instead deal with various emergencies and ongoing crises. As a result, it now faces poorly-controlled, costly territorial sprawl and has a poor, poorly integrated population on its hands. Here, too, sustainability planning is necessary. But leaders are hesitant: how to sell investments that have no visible or immediate impact when re-election looms on the horizon?

In 2015 and 2016, Montes Claros, an agglomeration of some 400,000 inhabitants in the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil, updated its master plan, which dated from the early 2000s. The operation was carried out by the local authorities with support from universities and professional groups, but without any real participation by the population. Somewhere between a total lack of planning (as in Argentina) and exogenous, top-down planning (as in Burkina Faso), the Brazilian case allows us to follow an ongoing process. Faced with continuing demographic growth and political and economic risks, the authorities are concentrating on the city center, thus abandoning its peripheries. Instead of using the opportunity to promote citizen participation, they reduced it to technocratic instrumentation that was biased in its consideration of the inhabited territory and most fragile populations.

In their own way, each of these three case studies highlights the potential and limitations of urban planning. Appropriate spatial planning and a better organization of social and economic activities are indispensable, particularly when resources are scarce. Though extremely different in their histories and geographies, the three cities chosen for our case studies have in common the fact that they are intermediate cities and play a central role in their regions. Though less confronted by problems of extreme poverty than larger metropolises, they face issues as their populations – for whom they must provide essential facilities and services such as schools, hospitals and public transport – increase. This, of course, comes at a cost, as investments made for the benefit of urban and rural inhabitants necessitate defining choices and priorities based on universally comprehensible criteria and taking into account the available means.

In the conclusion, I will again touch upon the similarities and differences between the different cases. This will allow us to develop alternative urban planning models that can better tackle poverty and the negative consequences of the urbanisation process, namely territorial fragmentation, environmental contamination, social disparities and exclusion, informal economy and habitat, urban governance and democracy.

Reference

Pedrazzini Y, Bolay J-C, Bassand M (1996) Habitat créatif, éloge des faiseurs de ville. Habitants et architectes d'Amérique latine et d'Europe. Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le progrès de l'Homme, Paris

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