

11.123 BIG PLANS

Spring 2003

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Department of Urban Studies and Planning

Twice a week

Instructor: John de Monchaux

COURSE OUTLINE

The making of plans calls for thought, debate and commitment in advance of action. Plans describe a path of actions, often undertaken by many different parties, intended to achieve a certain purpose. Ideally they are an amalgam of the commitments by the parties responsible for the proposed actions and the will of the parties likely to be affected by those same actions. The field of urban studies and planning is about the making of plans for the physical, economic and social development of places and regions, and it is about the implementation of those plans.

Large projects call for large and complex plans. The stories of how large projects are conceived and built is the core subject. We will bring together issues of technology, politics, economics and culture. Big projects and their large and complex plans magnify the obstacles confronting their realization, and they sometimes make the benefits and dis-benefits easier to see. The stories about big plans will speak to the questions of leadership and personalities; to the knowledge base that underpins a big plan; to the new technologies that big plans invent and test; to the opposition they raise and the threats they face. And, inevitably, the stories about big plans raise the question of alternative approaches to the conceptualization and realization of urban and rural change. The classes in this subject will tell and discuss all these stories.

Skillful leadership is often an essential ingredient of a big plan. The course shall examine the roles played by the main actors in formulating and carrying out a plan. Similarly, we shall take note of people who raised doubts about the plan, worked against it, or delayed action. Big plans also tend to involve many organizations; we shall look into the operations of those that were important to each story.

We are concerned with the knowledge base underlying big plans; that is, what did the planners have to know in order to set a course of action, and how did they find the answers to their questions? We are interested as well in the technologies associated with plans. We shall take note of technological solutions that were formulated and ask what made them more or less feasible, and what steps were necessary to put a technological solution into effect.

Big projects often face serious threats before they are completed. Sometimes these take the form of an unanticipated crisis resulting from changes in the politics or economics of a situation; sometimes they result from difficult technical problems that demand innovative solutions. We want to understand the close calls and narrow escapes that threatened to stop projects midstream.

These plans and projects raise many issues for consideration: authoritarian and participatory styles of planning, ways of generating public support, staging strategies for projects that take many years to complete, environmental impacts, political accountability, health and safety factors, and social equity.

Progression of the Course

At the beginning, we will set the stage for understanding big plans by looking at the notion of planning. We then look at contrasting organizational structures and the changing attitudes and cultural biases toward “top down” and “ground-up” planning and implementation. The class will then study ten or so large-scale urban projects in depth—studying the making of plans and their implementation through an examination of the thinking, politics, economics and commitment that has led to these large-scale urban projects. Field trips are scheduled on three Friday afternoons to visit each of the Boston projects.

The projects that will be discussed are recent. They will typically be presented by a person who played a key role in the project. Slides and videos will be used to make the presentations vivid. In most cases, two successive class meetings will be devoted to each project: in the first, the lecturer will present the story of the planning and realization of the project; in the second, the class will discuss the project, with the lecturer as a resource to the discussion.

For the final paper, students, in teams, will develop their own big plan strategy for a contemporary local issue.

Course Requirements and Grading

Readings

Readings for each week are provided in a reader. There are two readers on reserve at Rotch Library.

In preparation for the presentation and discussion of each major project, each student will be expected to answer — on one page only — a few questions on the project. Unless otherwise stated, this one page paper will be handed in at the beginning of the first class on that project.

Midterm Discussion

Rather than holding a midterm examination, we will have a review session on March 19 where we will talk about the commonalities and differences between the projects presented thus far. You will be asked to come to class with your own construct or framework for how you see the projects relating to each other, and to the Big Plan planning and implementation processes.

Final Project

There will be a final paper, prepared by a small team of students, on North Allston due on Wednesday, May 7. These papers will be presented and conclusions drawn in the two class meetings on May 7 and 12. We will invite special guests to the final presentations.

There is no Final Exam.

In this course you are expected to learn from the readings, to listen to the presentations, to enter into the debate of the class, and to develop your own thinking on the subject of planning strategies. This course will not present a number of facts to memorize, and there are few absolute truths. The presentations and readings will, however, have distinct points of view, and from these divergent vantage points you should develop your own understanding—to guide you in thinking about planning and to inform your role as urban citizens.

The thoughtfulness of the ideas presented by you is of greatest importance, but quality of presentation should not be overlooked. The weekly one-page papers, class participation, and the final paper and presentation, will each contribute about equally to the grade awarded in Big Plans.