



Planning and Interest-Group Politics

THE CASE OF CURITIBA, BRAZIL

Lecture/discussion note

11.201 GATEWAY: Planning Action

10-Oct-07



Discussion outline

- 1. Expert planning without pluralist democracy: Was Lerner right to take the approach he did (in the 1970s)?**
- 2. What are the differences between Curitiba “then” (70s) and “now” (2000s) as contexts for planning?**
- 3. What does Altshuler’s critique of comprehensive rational planning add to our understanding of this (and other) cases?**
- 4. What kind of critique is it, and what are its broader implications?**

Was Lerner right?

- He seemed motivated by broad public interests.
- He had clear talents as an analyst and implementer (e.g. “urban acupuncture” concept).
- There was a limited form of accountability: Influential interest groups (“power blocs”) might complain, have him ousted.
- But do impressive ends justify the means?
- What if he didn’t have a strong “moral compass” and promoted a very different substantive agenda, for example anti-environmental sustainability?

Comparison: Robert Moses, the Master Builder of NYC

- **Never elected to office, yet widely credited with completing many mega-projects, “getting things done” in a famously adversarial political city.**
- **Skilled at political manipulation: worked “under”-- but also manipulated -- elected officials.**
- **Drove infrastructure and other city-shaping projects in the name of the public interest.**
- **Famously indifferent to the opposition of poor and minority communities, others.**

See Robert Caro’s Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1976).

Curitiba then and now

	THEN (1970s)	NOW (2000s)
Scope	City	City-region (metro area or “conurbation”)
Accountability/ Authorization	Autocrats appointed mayor, subject to some interest-group pressure	Electoral politics (truly representative?), interest-group pressure, other (e.g. legal)
Strategic challenge	Establish planning culture and systems	Sustain and renew (a) + (b), engage the public in “co-producing” the livable city-region

Part 2

Altshuler's critique

Critique of premises: Comprehensive rational planning model

- ***Premise 1:*** That an overarching public interest is “knowable.”
- ***Premise 2:*** That planners offer objective, above-politics expertise for determining that interest (thus “rational”).

These are both “untenable,” says Altshuler (How does he support that conclusion? See the text.)

To the contrary (his argument) ...

- **Interest-group conflict “invigorates democracy” (gets more alternatives heard, clarifies the stakes and stakeholders, etc.).**
- **Bargaining among interest groups is the way decisionmaking about public and private interests actually happens. Planners deny this – for example, imaging conflict to be “illusory” -- at their peril (Why exactly? See the text.)**

Broader considerations

- 1. This is not a normative model** (about how the world *should* operate) but rather an effort to describe the politics of planning in practice.
- 2. It's relatively pessimistic about the potential to discover and pursue truly collective, public interests** – as opposed to resolutions among interest groups. Like many pluralists, Altshuler emphasizes the “contest” dimension of democratic politics (there is conflict, there are winners and losers and partial accommodations).
- 3. His “planners” are in very specific roles:** His arguments are about comprehensive planners who work for government. Still, the critique of planners' claims to unique, apolitical knowledge of public interest has a much more universal value ...
- 4. The healthy challenge:** Not only to face political realities squarely but to beware adopting the hubris of the all-knowing planner, “uniquely” knowledgeable about the public interest -- in the face of political response suggesting otherwise.

Epilogue: Food for thought

- **Comprehensive rational planning** of the mid-20th century in America proposed to (a) *supply* apolitical expertise and (b) to *set* policies and practices.
- **Contemporary “regional visioning” efforts** aim to (a) *build constituencies* for ideas (while developing the ideas themselves) so as to (b) *influence* policies and practices. See, for example, “Metro Future” (Greater Boston) or “Envision Utah.”