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.

## Curitiba then and now

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