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Planning for the Future?

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The American-Canadian author of speculative fiction William Gibson famously argues that *"the future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed"[1].* As attention in some parts of the world continues to turn towards prospects for post-pandemic recovery (however uncertain and faltering that may yet prove) the idea of unequal access to the future seems one way of making sense of the current moment.

For a start, the very prospect of a post-pandemic future is certainly not evenly distributed. This is shockingly evident in global access to vaccines. Oxfam (2021) reported in March that whilst wealthy countries were vaccinating one citizen per second, the majority of low and middle-income countries had yet to administer a single dose. Roll-out of the vaccination programme for adults here in the UK seems on schedule to be complete by Autumn 2021. Without a major international effort, for most of the majority world this isn't likely before 2023. COVID-19 has also tragically exposed the life-limiting impacts of structural inequalities too. In a world where social determinants, including class, ethnicity and gender, strongly influence health outcomes (Paremoer et al, 2021), fragilities in foundational infrastructures of care disproportionately impact already vulnerable groups.

Although a pandemic was always more likely than many of us realised, the ways our everyday lives have been disrupted show the difficulty of ever predicting the future. Following Gibson, we cannot know with any certainty which aspects of an uneven present will emerge to shape our worlds most decisively. At the same time, however, many commentators see (or want to

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[1] The precise source for the quote is obscure but it has apparently been repeated and is very widely attributed to Gibson, see https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/

see) more hopeful signs in the midst of so much loss and suffering, identifying the desire for a different future emerging unevenly from experiences of the past eighteen months.

Events have certainly shown people that different ways of living and relating to one another are possible (and perhaps necessary). Many will feel there can be no return to a pre-pandemic normal. A key political stake in the post-pandemic period is therefore likely to surround what it means to 'build back better'. How this comes to be defined will play a significant role not just in preparing societies for future public health emergencies but also in determining approaches to address existing inequalities. Above all else, it will also play a huge role in shaping responses to the climate emergency which is not just a looming future threat but a crisis that is all too present here and now. The scale of the latter challenge is probably unprecedented, requiring rapid and far-reaching transformations of societies and economies. The political importance of defining the change that is needed cannot therefore be overestimated. The future role of planning in many societies will be decisively shaped by the outcome of this struggle too.

Although we cannot predict the future with any certainty, planning is rooted in the belief that we can and should care for it; anticipating and preparing for coming challenges and exercising agency to purposively steer change for the common good. Planners are attuned to identifying seeds of more socially just and environmentally sustainable worlds around them. 'Best practice' examples, exemplar projects, and images of inspirational places circulate continuously, fuelling enthusiasm for the latest big idea. Growing calls for healthier, more energy efficient homes, infrastructure that supports active travel, or access to services and green space within 15/20-minute neighbourhoods all reflect ways COVID-19 has renewed interest in seemingly win-win-win 'solutions', capable of improving health and well-being, addressing inequalities and tackling the climate emergency.

It is crucial, however, to question how likely these outcomes are to be evenly distributed in the future without fundamental change to the forces that drive the uneven development of towns, cities and regions. Can we realise the futures we want and need without remaking market-led models of urban development, historically unjust structures of land-ownership or how flows of financial investment are reshaping the built environment? If we do not, the best

intentions of planners and designers risk becoming little more than glossy marketing material for further rounds of extractive accumulation that exacerbate rather than ameliorate existing inequalities and environmental harms.

Over recent decades, the drivers of uneven development have been intensified by neoliberalising reforms. Faith in a planned future has been persistently undermined by an associated common-sense that sees any collective control of development as a dangerous distortion of market freedoms. Recent editorials in this journal have tentatively considered whether the pandemic may be a 'fork in the road moment', the kind of systemic shock capable of overturning ruling ideas (Campbell, 2021; Grant, 2020). The ways states have mobilised resources in response to the Covid-19 crisis has made it clear how much societies rely on public institutions to protect lives and underwrite livelihoods; the growing disjunct between economic orthodoxies and actually existing practices is intensifying long-standing questions about the dominance and efficacy of neoliberalism (e.g. Crouch, 2011). Renewed interest in mutual aid during the pandemic may also offer people a glimpse of alternative ways of organising social relations.

Is it possible to imagine a post-neoliberal state that nourishes and sustains relations of care and solidarity rather than policing populations in the interests of capital? A stronger public sector, steering development in partnership with communities rather than profit-seeking private corporations, could offer a multitude of promising pathways for just transitions out of the pandemic. And those pathways could be carefully planned too. Such imagined futures can play a part in shaping change when they inspire concerted political action. However, the forces against such transformations remain formidable and have very different ideas.

Here in the UK, despite the ways state power and public money have underpinned responses to the pandemic, ideological opposition to the idea that we can intentionally plan for the future remains strong. The town and country planning system in England is not a site where many radical political hopes are invested, however, it is also clear that the Conservative government led by Boris Johnson continue to view it as a barrier to the market-led recovery they believe the country needs.

At the time of writing, they are preparing legislation to:

> Create a simpler, faster and more modern planning system to replace the current one that dates back to 1947, and ensuring we no longer remain tied to procedures designed for the last century. (HM Government, 2021)

This follows a 'white paper', *Planning for the Future*, published for consultation in August 2020. Johnson's foreword there noted:

> I never cease to be amazed by the incredible potential of this country…But as we approach the second decade of the 21st century that potential is being artificially constrained by a relic from the middle of the 20th – our outdated and ineffective planning system… (MHCLG, 2020, 6)

If history plays out first as tragedy, then as farce, planning reform in England has now gone well beyond satire. Strikingly similar rhetoric of a 'broken' planning system has become all too familiar as successive governments have introduced reforms promising to simplify, streamline and modernise an institution they seem to permanently view as an anachronism. Even committed observers would therefore be forgiven for having given up on this long running, national psychodrama some time ago.

Given how often we have been here before, we know that much will depend on the details of what finally emerges rather than the rhetoric surrounding the reforms. In interviews with professional planners during a recent research project it was notable how inured to change many have become following years of near constant legislative and policy churn and its accompanying chorus of 'planning bashing'. They seemed content to just get on with the day job, reasoning things never seemed to change all that much. Anxious to maintain some influence, meanwhile, most advocacy organisations have long since acquiesced to the culture of the 'cautious welcome' – advertising their willingness to work with governments rather than speaking out against reform proposals, however, extreme.

Over time, this has all contributed to a narrowing of the scope and purposes of planning. Questions of principle have been ceded in favour of working at the details of successive changes. With the existing planning system suffering from years of resource cuts and unsympathetic, market-orientated tinkering, it is increasingly hard to either defend the status quo or generate political enthusiasm for any more progressive conception of planning. However, the government has offered little substantive evidence that the planning system is the barrier they claim, particularly to new housebuilding. Nor, therefore, is it clear that their proposed changes, including an emphasis on data and technology driven efficiency, will address these perceived shortcomings. Overall, it is hard not to conclude that the white paper is less about planning for the future than it is about planning less for the future. And the futures created by more permissive planning and market-led development will make it harder to address the pressing conjunction of crises the country now faces in any coordinated way.

At a political level, therefore, the rhetoric of reform does matter. Not least because it illustrates a continuing strategy of blaming state rather than market failure for poor outcomes which, in turn, frames how reforms are conceived and received. The 'broken planning system' has become a potent symbol of a particular set of attitudes towards the roles of the state and the market in distributing futures. Its widespread acceptance reflects the corrosion of political support for any wider idea of planning in England, reinforcing the perception that it is little more than a bureaucratic barrier preventing a more affluent future from emerging. Following the late and much missed Michael Gunder (2016), this 'scapegoating' needs to be contested before the case can be made for planning as part of a progressive recovery.

In This Issue

The current issue of *Planning Theory and Practice* offers considerable scope for reflecting further on the complexities of shaping and distributing futures.

Given the focus in the English reform proposals on a technology and data-driven future for planning, I was interested to read Rob Kitchin, Gareth W Young and Oliver Dawkins' paper

exploring prospects for the adoption of 3-D spatial media into public planning in Ireland. Long touted as part of a potential wave of disruptive innovations that could fundamentally reshape planning practice, their study finds that there has been only limited uptake of technologies like virtual and augmented reality to date. They identify some continuing scepticism about the value and benefits tech can bring, particularly when set against costs and barriers to their use. To some extent, mirroring earlier debates about the diffusion of technological innovations in local government, they conclude that there is still considerable scope to develop their potential if these barriers can be addressed.

The governance of any such developments needs to be carefully considered too. Particularly when both the provision and use of technologies is currently dominated by the private sector and could lead to an inequality of arms between developers, public planning authorities and communities. Whilst a failure to adapt to new approaches could further weaken the regulatory powers of the state, any drive to adopt them also carries risks, including the further commodification and privatisation of public services or the dangers of 'locking' information systems into particular technologies.

The governance of technologically-driven change is also the core concern of the paper by Clare Field and Ihnji Jon that examines attempts to regulate another disruptive innovation currently shaping mobility transitions in many cities, the arrival of e-scooter services. Widely presented as smart sustainability 'solutions', the sudden arrival of privately operated e-scooter services has raised significant challenges for city authorities required to manage the disruption they generate whilst protecting public safety and amenity. Field and Jon's analysis of Brisbane, drawing on approaches in a range of other international cities, shows how such developments require governments to muddle through as they adapt to emerging circumstances. However, more hopefully, they also point to the continued power of public authorities to negotiate the terms of social regulation in ways that can promote public values rather than accepting market dominance of the means of disruption.

Our third paper takes us to Gothenburg in Sweden where Hannah Saldert changes the focus from the ways public authorities react to the futures others are creating, to the work that goes into implementing their own strategic urban plans. Her analysis of a case study at

RiverCity shows how practitioners navigate the boundaries and tensions that emerge between the political and the professional, the strategic and the statutory as they seek to implement (and interpret) high-level agreements about sustainability goals. Ultimately the paper provides a useful reminder of the micro-political and organisational skills involved in policy implementation.

 Nadine Kiessling and Marco Pütz then develop a qualitative analytical framework to evaluate the implementation of spatial plans and policies. In doing so they confront one of the enduring challenges of planning scholarship: how to measure outcomes whilst taking account of the kinds of complexity and messiness Saldert describes which mean that "conformance [with plans] does not necessarily equate spatial planning success". Their analysis of six Swiss and German municipalities, shows how a qualitative approach might contribute to the development of more effective assessment methods with the potential to enhance understanding of the governance capacities required to steer spatial change.

In the final paper, Biyue Wang, Martin de Jong, Ellen van Bueren, Aksel Ersoy and Yawei Chen examine decision-making processes for the location of high-speed rail stations in China. Given the huge significance of infrastructural investments, such decisions have lasting significance for the futures of cities and regions. However, the processes through which they are made have remained underexamined despite growing criticism of station developments in China. Focusing on case studies of Shenzhen, Lanzhou and Jingmen, the authors show how decisions proceed through multiple rounds of negotiation between transport and urban planners, central agencies and local political leaders. Political bargaining over the potential costs, risks and benefits of different sites all combine to generate often sub-optimal outcomes, with potentially better solutions overlooked at times, due to the impossibility of finding agreement between competing interests.

The Interface in this issue, edited by Mark Scott features contributions from Rose Gilroy, Rebecca Chiu, Tony Matthews, Claudia Baldwin, Chris Boulton and Silvia Tavares, Deepti Adlakha, Olga Sarmiento and Sharon Sánchez Franco, and Louisa-May Khoo who all set out to address the hugely important question "*how age-friendly are cities?*". Despite the gradual and fairly predictable nature of population ageing, it is striking how unprepared many cities

are to cope with age-related challenges they are now facing, which will only grow more acute in the years to come. Drawing on perspectives from the UK, Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore and the global south, collectively the authors explore a fascinating range of challenges of planning for an ageing population. At the same time, however, they also illustrate how many of the changes that can be made to promote more age-friendly environments can also contribute to the shaping of better environments for people of all ages.

The Debates and Reflections section features three pieces. The first two consider the role of politicians in planning from different perspectives. First of all, James Throgmorton, in an edited extract from his forthcoming book, considers what planning scholars might learn from his time as Mayor of Iowa City. Confronting the difficult choices that often face elected officials seeking to realise change, Throgmorton skilfully teases out the qualities he found were required to, in his words, "*co-craft the step-by-step unfolding of the city*".

Federico Savini's book review of Louis Albrechts' edited volume *Planners in Politics: Do They Make a Difference?* is in some sense a companion to Throgmorton's reflections, not least since he is one of the ten planners whose ventures into formal political arenas are explored in the book. Savini enjoys reading the detailed accounts of these efforts to influence change but wonders whether the biographical focus on 'reflective practitioners' precludes a wider and perhaps more critical perspective on the politics they served.

In the final piece Susan Fainstein reviews Conor Dougherty's book *The Golden Gates: Fighting for Housing in America*, a journalistic take on the intractable politics of housing in the San Francisco Bay Area. Fainstein finds it offers a readable and balanced assessment that confronts many of the contradictions generated by a market-driven housing system. In conclusion, she wonders whether the solutions may lie in reviving Henry George's criticism of private land (and home) ownership.

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