

## VIEWPOINT

### Not Another Heresy Wittgenstein, Urban Games and Planning Ideology

Dedicated to the memory of J. Brian McLoughlin 1932–94  
A planning heretic, sorely missed.<sup>1</sup>

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A topic seldom discussed within the field of Urban Planning is the question of language and how our search for solutions to urban problems is locked into and limited by words and ideas that may have outlived their usefulness. Professions as a whole deploy specialized languages which embody concepts appropriate to the symbolic representation of their particular field of engagement. Languages in general are not static formulae but dynamic social events, which change with changing circumstances. Because of the innate conservatism of professions as a whole, their conceptual apparatus is frequently out of date—more aligned to past problems than future circumstances. In this respect, I suggest that the most neglected region in updating our activities is *our professional vocabulary*. For too long we have ignored that in continuing to use the same terminology, we inhibit our capacity to conceptualize problems in new ways. This in turn encourages the reproduction of old problems in new forms, rather than providing important answers to society's key questions.

Needless to say the problems of language and meaning are not unique to planning. In this regard I was recently encouraged to draw some analogies between the problems of planning and the problems of philosophy when I saw the preview of a film about the life of the Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the movie he becomes annoyed at several of his colleagues who adopted an essentialist position, insisting that philosophy had its own intrinsic logic and problems. Wittgenstein's response was that *there are no problems which are fundamental to philosophy*, and that in fact it exists as a discipline *only to the extent that it can exploit the confusions of language*. These he referred to as *language games*.

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## PHILOSOPHICAL INTERVENTIONS

Wittgenstein's basic premise was simple. The idea of *philosophical questions* comes about as a method of describing the confusions between language games, where meanings are distorted or unresolved. His argument was that if these confusions were removed, *language would necessarily continue but philosophy would cease to exist*. Moreover, he also suggested that as long as philosophy remained as a mode of investigation, it should concern itself with *linguistic* problems rather than so called *philosophical* questions.

These observations prompted me to think, by analogy, about the nature of urban planning, its relation to society and to the tasks we are asked to resolve. I was therefore encouraged to consider a parallel proposition, namely *that there are no problems that are fundamental to urban planning, and that for example, its central concepts of land use and density serve no practical purpose in analysis*. Considering such ideas however, involves considerable intellectual risk, professional autonomy and even material rewards. Nonetheless I feel that it is our responsibility to do so. We use these terms indiscriminately as part and parcel of our philosophical position. They structure our own arcane language without which our profession could not be identified. As Wittgenstein suggests, we then deploy this language to resolve confusions which exist *among the various urban games* which should in fact be the center of our concerns. Following Wittgenstein's prompting then, we may continue his line of reasoning and ask 'what in fact constitute our (false) philosophical problems, or alternatively, our (real) language games?'

While these remarks may be considered outrageous by 'born again' land use planners and the fundamentalist right, I consider that they will be accepted rather rapidly and in spite of the risk, as perfectly conservative statements, given the correct kind of explanation. The basic idea here, is that all substantive *planning problems* are in fact *social problems* in disguise. To push his idea even further I would suggest that there are no problems intrinsic to planning *other than the technical*.

So called *planning* problems come about because of a particular *philosophical* intervention—a professional orientation and ideology which is confined by convention to see problems in its own terms. Such interventions become enshrined as praxis in vocabulary, communicative competence and concepts in use, such as land use, density, zoning and other terms. These operational ideas have tended to combine with a perceived mandate by professions as a whole to unilaterally define social problems outside of any consultative process with civil society, in order to discover whether or not the identified problems are perceived or real. This situation has neatly bypassed the fact that historically the state and the professions were part and parcel of problems they were trying to solve. Indeed in many cases the 'planning' problems of the present are a direct outcome of the planning decisions of the past. Let us therefore briefly consider some key relationships between our philosophical problems and related language games.

## WHAT IS URBAN?

Twenty years ago Manuel Castells threw the entire profession of urban planning into a collective nervous breakdown when he asked what *urban* meant. In retrospect this seemed quite a reasonable thing to do since many professions, government departments and university faculties were profoundly influenced by this concept, however ill defined it was. Castells proposed that the urban system should be conceived on three levels, the economic, the political and the ideological. The economic level breaks down into its three primary elements of the production, consumption and exchange of commodities, each having its own spatial logic. Secondly the political level is represented by agencies of the state, whose primary task is to orchestrate relations between the three levels. The third level Castells denotes as 'the urban symbolic' which we can translate as *the meanings emitted by socially produced spatial forms*.

If we adopt Castells' basic ideas, spatial articulation occurs round the production, consumption, circulation and exchange of commodities, round the administrative controls governing specified activities, and in accordance with ideological 'sub' and super—structures. The main object of these processes is the extraction of surplus value from the general labor process, and from its transmuted forms, administered prices, rent, interest and profit. Harvey reflects this view when he says that *cities are built forms created out of the mobilization, extraction and geographic concentration of significant quantities of the socially designated surplus product* (Harvey, 1973:238–239).

While Castells recognized that knowledge of production activities was essential to the understanding of cities, he maintained that the term 'urban' should only be applied in relation to processes of collective consumption—processes whose size was such that they could not be organized on an individual basis. Such services were seen to be invariably, but not always managed by the state, whose function was to a large degree defined by this responsibility. These included the provision of public housing, transportation, schools, health facilities and other items essential to the reproduction of a skilled labor force. His argument was that only processes of collective consumption were localized within cities and therefore defined the urban element.

The corollary of course was obvious. Since production processes ranged from the international to the local, there was nothing necessarily *urban* about them. In addition, the distinction between *urban* and *rural* also collapsed, since certain processes which had previously been defined as urban were now seen to exist in a vertical rather than a horizontal relation to each other. To a degree this distinction also reflected the progressive *urbanization* of the countryside through industrial agriculture, power generation, mining and tourism to name but a few, and the *ruralization* of the city through suburban development. In the course of savaging the concept *urban* in order to extract its meaning, the discipline of urban planning was stripped of its ideological facade and redefined as the state's agent in managing socialised reproduction.

The implication was clear. The capitalist state had three primary economic goals in the production of social space. The first was to reproduce and regulate a land market for the purposes of speculation. The second through transportation to assist in the production and circulation of commodities and third, in support of this, to reproduce and circulate labor power. The resolution of these social problems remains a fundamentally political process and the constitution of society by such means forms the real substance of our *language games*. For these reasons I have argued above that there are no groundrules fundamental to urban planning, since by definition they change as the language games shift in form and content. To do otherwise would be to perpetuate the idea that the *philosophical intervention* and the *language game* are the same thing. This distinction is fundamental if we are to proceed effectively in solving *real* as opposed to *imaginary* problems.

## LAND USE AND DENSITY

My argument can also be extended into the basic phenomena which have lent credibility to the planning and transport processes. I refer to the terms *land use* and *density* (among others) which are frequently seen as being homologous with planning as a whole and in fact frequently define it, for example in the case of *land use planning*, or even more confusing, *urban land use planning*. Both of these terms are analytically treacherous. But more importantly their continued use as *philosophical interventions* is ideological and serves only to support the unreality of urban planning as an independent factor in urbanization. The *language games* behind this term are concerned firstly with the private ownership of land as the foundation for the economy, and secondly with human experience as product of that system. Let us look in greater detail at these two terms.

The phrase *land use* is both treacherous and analytically indistinct. To a lawyer it means ownership and lease agreements, to an architect it means buildings, to an engineer it means infrastructure, to a surveyor it means value, and to a planner it means zoning. These are all static concepts. If we then look at activities and processes we must consider that to environmentalists the concept implies pollution, to transport engineers, trip generation, to demographers population movement and so on. We may ask, what is wrong with this? Each profession can command a particular meaning and use it explicitly. But this is precisely how our philosophical interventions constantly deny the reality of the *language* or in our case the *urban game*. Complex social problems become compressed into specific linguistic forms to suit professional needs for intellectual territory, academic rigor, easy measurement, self preservation and political support. In urban planning for example, the practice of zoning human relationships created as many problems as it solved. It was and remains, much easier to draw lines on a map than to think of real people living real lives.

Concepts of density are similarly fraught with problems yet continue to be used as if they had some religious significance. Density has little to do with units per hectare or persons per room, and a lot to do with cultural values, individual experience, social contact, security, gender issues, education income and the rest. In a recent paper I reinforced this view by saying ‘*The word density is a crucible for a vast range of considerations, from ecological sustainability, human pathology, crowding, individual rights, criminality, rent, taxation, and the role of the state in the form of urban planning*’ (Cuthbert, 1994:18, my italics).

In the ongoing debates on urban consolidation, arguments on both sides of the intellectual battleground are equally persuasive and convincing. Renowned experts of impeccable intellectual credentials may be found in either camp, alternatively reifying the suburbs or promoting higher residential densities throughout the city. I see this as a false conflict. For it is not their ability to rationalize the situation, but rationality itself which is the problem. At the moment there is a massive ideological component which has not even surfaced in the debates. This has several levels to it, not the least being the issues raised above. These include but are not limited to professional ideology, the question of gender, the relationship between culture and the market, national identity and urban politics.

## IMPLICATIONS

So far my commentary has been limited largely to abstractions, and I think that a few brief words are now required to contextualise the above observations. Here the most important consideration is that Post-industrialism in the economic realm and Post—modernism in the cultural realm are creating new relations between society and space (flexible specialization, networking production etc.) that redefine communication *as a whole*. Today *The Informational City* demands altogether different ways of thinking about urban form and content, where transport planning for example, should consider the transport of information concomitant with the transport of materials and individuals.

The fact that this has not happened has weakened planning, further reducing the demands made for example by The Royal Town Planning Institute some six years ago, when it forcefully stated that in order to be effective, planning would have to become involved *in the central decision ground* of politics and economics, and not merely directed by them. Some of the justification for this is that the current technological and informational revolution follows a connection closer than ever, between the culture of the society (composed of information) and the productive forces of the economy (composed of information processing) (Castells, 1990).

While culture is fundamentally affected by the informational revolution this in turn is being qualified by other equally important issues which work to reduce the hegemonic nature of technology. For example the *feminist* and the *green*

revolutions, as well as the rise of nationalism and ethnicity on the international political stage, all hold great significance for cultural and spatial change, as well as for the design of built form. Postmodern planning cannot therefore be reduced to a routine of zoning and statistical modeling even if we wish it. Our educational and professional practices, along with their tools and vocabularies are not up to the task of planning modern towns and cities. This has wide ranging implications for communicating and teaching the processes by which our environment becomes spatially organized, a subject I have discussed in great detail elsewhere (Cuthbert, 1995a,b).

Urban planning is fundamentally a political process *mediated through* technology, although some technologies may in the future mediate the political process (Cuthbert, 1995c). The power shift of the third millennium currently underway requires new professional relations, education and sources of power. In greater detail this would involve the redefinition of the nature and scope of the environmental professions—are the categories created as a consequence of the industrial revolution sufficient for an entirely new structure of production?

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have used an analogy from philosophy to highlight what I consider to be a critical issue in problem definition and resolution within the field of urban planning. I have tried to draw relationships between our philosophical questions and some of the language games which lie below the surface. Here the most important conclusion I can come to is *that the answers to ongoing urban problems are to a degree predicated on the extinction of many closely held beliefs, concepts and practices which we hold collectively as the defining characteristics of our professional existence.*

## NOTE

1. This paper was written as an epitaph for Brian McLaughlin and was presented at The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Conference on Transport Planning 1995. It has recently been revised for this journal. When the paper was written my intention was not to produce yet another academic work complete with summary, footnotes and bibliography, but a short and precise essay which would take a single idea and present it uncompromisingly in the style of my old mentor and friend. The idea of language and the distortions it creates in society is not new, and like all 'original ideas' has a long and chequered history, though few of these have been seriously examined within the field of urban planning. So behind the surface

of this paper lies a tradition which goes back at least to Saussure and Pierce, from them to Piaget, Chomsky, Bernstein, Eco and Barthes, but particularly to Habermas and his ideas on communicative competence and the fundamental distortions of language games. Within planning itself, two figures are prominent—Gordon Clarke and Michael Dear, and of course the person to whom this paper is dedicated. Brian well understood the ideological foundations of professional life, and his life's work was in one reading, an attempt to overcome the limitations of language in our approach to the analysis of urban space.

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