

The Urban Book Series

Laxmi Ramasubramanian
Jochen Albrecht

Foreword by Mike Batty

Essential Methods for Planning Practitioners

Skills and Techniques for Data Analysis,
Visualization, and Communication

 Springer

The Urban Book Series

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Foreword

Just over one hundred years ago, the great American architect and city planner, Daniel Burnham, said: “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die . . .” His phrase has been quoted and re-quoted many times throughout the last century but slowly and surely, the idea of big plans has fallen off our agenda. When you examine the kinds of plans that practitioners routinely work with now, you realize that they are much more modest than the grandiose master plans of the last century. There are many, many small plans compared to big ones. Many are individual projects that planners then have to be able to integrate into the wider scene, and they often consist of small-scale changes, sometimes leading to much bigger changes, that have to be anticipated by the planner. To an extent, this has always been the case, but as we have begun to realize the complexity of the planning task before us, we have begun to focus our attention on finer and finer details right down to the most basic elements in the community. This has re-orientated our field to the local, the small scale, and the individual.

This is in my view entirely what the focus of planning should be about. We must work with the small scale, for that is where urban change has the most impact on peoples’ lives and on their quality of life. Moreover, this is where we can engage best with those whose lives are most affected by the pressures for urban change, by the imposition of plans, and by the inevitable conflicts that occur over the use and allocation of scarce resources, particularly land. What Dr. Ramasubramanian and Dr. Albrecht do in this book is to pose questions as to how one might best use and apply the many tools and techniques available for planning preparation and community participation in the planning process that have been developed over the last fifty years. They articulate how we might best embed these in processes of community and citizen engagement that infuse the search for good plans with the most useful ways of researching and communicating these ideas to a wider constituency.

This is not a book that is fashioned as a step-by-step account of how these techniques and tools are structured. It is not a technical book, nor is it a manual for enabling the reader to construct techniques from scratch. It is a book that takes the

planning practitioner to be the heart of the process of planning and to inform those processes with the kinds of methods that will help the professional engage best with his or her wider constituency in the search for the best plan. This is a very brave way of introducing planning methods. For many years, there has been a key schism between those developing methods and those seeking to use them, and it is rare to find good discussions of the perils of such integration. Even rarer are examples that actually demonstrate this. This book advocates a point of view rather than a manifesto for action, and it argues that the best way of integrating methods into planning is through active planning applications that engage the community and imbue the citizenry with the power to use these new tools and develop them for their own specific ends.

The authors provide what they term a “ready-to-use guidebook” based on a “customized and curated compendium of methods and techniques”. This compendium can be used as a handy reference source for a series of tools and techniques that almost act by way of a checklist, a kind of backcloth for a wide range of community planning projects. To tell their story, however, they identify three key issues that most of us, if not all of us, would agree to be the most important issues of the twenty-first century: namely, urbanization, demographic shifts, and climate change. In essence, the world’s population may stabilize this coming century, and certainly overall growth will fall while at the same time the inexorable drift to cities will continue. By the end of this century, the world will be largely urbanized, and the consequences for planning are thus enormous. Demographic change, of course, will be confounded by an aging society with substantial advances in medicine, and life expectancy will be prolonged as much by surgical intervention as by diet, lifestyle, and the elimination of disease using pharmaceuticals. All of this will be set against a background of climate change, and as more than half the world’s cities lie in coastal areas, sea-level rise will be a major issue. The impacts of these key forces on urban sprawl, smart growth, diversity in cities, environmental quality, issues of resilience, and on how communities will participate in the processes designed to tackle these major issues can best be handled using the tools and methods that the authors identify and demonstrate in the various chapters of this book. Again, all this is set against a background of continuing technological change that is foisting a digital revolution on the way we will live in cities during this century and beyond.

As Dr. Ramasubramanian and Dr. Albrecht argue, “planning can only be successful if it is adapted to the situational context”, and they develop this theme early in their exposition using two case studies from New York City. The first is a small area of some 2–3 square kms in the South Bronx at Hunts Point. This is a very mixed low-income and de-industrialized community that shows all the scars of contemporary big city living where poverty is never far away, where the local environment is polluted and dirty, and where access to transportation is not as good as most other places in the metropolis. Their second case study is Roosevelt Island which has quite different problems. It is richer and is being gentrified quite rapidly as well as being a recipient for new high-tech industries and science research centers in the City. These case studies set the context for the introduction of methods that are outlined after the case studies have identified key issues in terms of urban change that

the planning processes assumed here are focused upon. The way the authors continually refer to them in guiding their use of methods in practice is extremely effective.

It is worth making a distinction between the somewhat heavier, more scientific explanatory methods useful for planning and the lighter, more future-based tools that are much more appropriate for planning processes that involve wide and deep dialogues with the affected communities. It is these future-based methods such as Delphi, the Futures Wheel, and Forecasting methods such as those in transportation planning that the authors argue are key to those that practitioners should invoke in their analysis and scenario writing. It is here that the more local focus reasserts itself and the development of a variety of crowdsourcing, sensing, behavioral mapping, participant observation, ethnographic analyses, including GIS, spatial analytical tools and new approaches such as geo-design, are central to these processes.

When these methods are considered collectively, then the focus on planning and civic engagement with such methods being key to this is developed. To an extent, the entire book is orientated to this kind of engagement, which moves beyond public participation per se to processes that “support and inform day-to-day work” of the planning professionals and their involved communities. The rationale for the way the authors develop their thesis becomes apparent as they develop this argument. They argue “... that all planners have a responsibility, an obligation and the skills to support and nurture civic engagement...” and in this, they conclude that planning expertise is as much a part of the local community as it is a part of the training and professional skills of the planner. In this, planners are agents of change, they are part of the transformational process that turns the present into the future, and the logic of this book is that the tools and methods identified are necessary but also subservient to the wider dictates of the community development process. What is worth taking from this book is that these transformational processes must be part of a dialogue between planners and their communities. This, of course, is being massively enhanced by the new digital world of data and participation that is based on the idea of “digital storytelling”, an idea that they discuss throughout their book.

The notions of planning as dialogue, as mediation, as storytelling, as agenda setting, and as turning knowledge into action are all key to the way Dr. Ramasubramanian and Dr. Albrecht develop their argument. This is an innovative and unusual way of introducing methods and it is convincing in that it weaves the notions of a methodologically explicit form of planning into a context which is highly applicable to smaller scale, intensive kinds of projects that now characterize planning in many places around the globe. They provide key messages for how we should develop planning in a future consistent with the digital world we have now entered. The messages in this book are important and relevant to the physical and social development of our cities in the twenty-first century.

Read on and enjoy!

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Michael Batty

Preface

This is a book for planning practitioners – for those aspiring to become planners, new graduates, practitioners changing careers, and anyone who is interested in understanding what planners do. This is also a book about planning methods and techniques. As coauthors, we have expertise and experience in architecture, geography, urban planning, and Geographic Information Science; we set out to write a book that organizes planning methods and techniques within a theoretical context and describe the use of the methods in the context of undertaking conventional planning activities.

Planning practitioners all over the world, particularly those working for local governments, encounter complex challenges in their everyday work. They combat a weary societal cynicism that dismisses planning as ineffective or irrelevant while simultaneously chafing at perceived overreach that undermines self-determination. Planning offices are under-resourced and planners often struggle as they strive to speak truth to power. Nevertheless, they persist!

We have both been fortunate to have worked with talented planning practitioners who demonstrated how to craft powerful and engaging narratives to capture the hearts and minds of different stakeholders, stories that wove a tapestry linking the experiential knowledge of diverse stakeholders with appropriate analysis and data-driven evidence to create transformational change. These successful practitioners have honed their craft over time, learning how to exercise practical judgment to solve complex problems.

For recent graduates and newly employed planners, especially for women and people of color, understanding and practicing the craft is not easy. There is seldom time to reflect about why and how certain actions and decisions were taken and why certain methods were used – much is lost in the everyday urgency to get work completed. At the same time, new planners are more likely to get siloed, working on one aspect of planning, and not get to experience the big picture. Our book provides some guidance to ease some of these anxieties. It also challenges planners to think differently about their work.

We are grateful to our friends and family from around the world who accepted that we were unavailable to them while we worked on this project. They sent support from afar and accepted our strange preoccupation with good grace. We also wish to thank our professional colleagues and our students who have helped to sharpen our thinking about many of the issues we discuss in the book. We are grateful to Judy Colby-George and Anna Slatinsky who read and commented on the draft and provided us with useful feedback.

We were truly lucky to be able to work with a talented architect-planner Mr. Marco Castro in organizing the graphics for this book. What began as a routine task to create maps and drawings transformed into an interesting and engaging collaboration about data visualization, cartography, and information communication. As we develop a digital presence for this book, we are excited to continue our collaboration with him. Look for us online at *allthingsplanning.org*.

As professors engaged in the business of preparing practitioners, we constantly balance our desire to retreat into the wonky and analytical world of academic scholarship with our urge to solve practical problems. This book is our way of achieving that balance – bringing theory to practitioners to encourage a more reflective and politically engaged practice. We wrote this book because we care deeply about the field and the profession. In our view, the field and profession can be strong only when its practitioners feel empowered. We sincerely hope that familiarity with the methods and techniques discussed in the book supports that process.

New York, NY, USA

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