



Planning, politics, and power

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Who owns land? Who owns the right to develop it? And how do we address the thorny issue of planning, politics and power? The answers to all these questions vary across the world.

Let me start by showcasing four highly distinct places, three of which I have worked in and written about extensively. The first is Cambridge in the UK, and specifically Cambridge University's largest capital project to date, located on the edge of the city. The second is downtown Shenzhen, China's fourth largest city. The third is a large informal settlement located in the heart of Accra, the capital city of Ghana. Drawing on these examples, I will highlight the challenges that city planners face in managing economic, social, and environmental priorities, and how they reconcile competing stakeholder expectations and conflicting interests. The fourth place is Badgerys Creek in Western Sydney, where Sydney's second international airport will be located. My previous work offers salient lessons for Western Sydney as it undergoes extensive urban transformation, which is my new, critical area of research.

The international settings are clearly different. Each of my three case studies (Cambridge, Shenzhen, and Accra) operates within very different historical, cultural and political contexts. The land ownership and regulatory planning systems vary considerably too. Yet a common narrative prevails. Planning policy has been used to accommodate the needs of powerful landowners. Economic imperatives have taken precedence over environmental and social equity issues. The government in each location has overridden local concerns. What also knits together these three case studies is a contention that has exercised my whole career, namely:

Those whose needs are well articulated and reflected in the city's broader policy ambition are likely to be included in future planning policy. The needs of others considered 'less valuable' to the socio-economic sustainability of a locality may, in turn, be forgone' (Morrison, 2013)

So why are certain interests favored over others? And why do planning decisions generate winners and losers? Let me take you back to the basic premise of land use planning. There is an inherent tension that city planners face, namely they need to accommodate economic growth and development needs, yet simultaneously protect the city's heritage and environmental assets. Economic imperatives are clearly high up the political pecking order. Economic growth, jobs and prosperity transform lives. Yet how do we minimise any adverse impact on the environment? And how do we make sure planning decisions and outcomes are socially optimal? How can we create inclusive growth that everyone truly benefits



from? Environmental and social considerations are often considered the soft side of planning, and even called soft infrastructure. Yet it is critical to get liveability and place-making right in order to create long lasting sustainable communities. Moreover, delivering genuinely affordable housing to those with least ability to pay is key to creating socially inclusive, mixed income neighbourhoods. These concerns have not only motivated the direction of my academic career but also my advocacy work on behalf of community groups that have the least voice in planning and housing systems around the world.

So why is it so hard to marry together all these goals? It is clearly a complex task. Planning is not simply a technical exercise. Politics and planning are very much intertwined. Elected members on planning committees invariably focus on short-term quick wins and highly visible projects. Whilst spatial plans may have longer-term horizons, they need to align with private investment decisions in order to support them. City planners can only regulate. They need market players so that their plans come to fruition. Private commercial returns on investment, therefore, drive decision-making, taking precedence over broader consideration of the public good and so-called 'softer' planning goals.

At the same time, planners are neither neutral nor value free. Planning rules embody power relations, privileging certain positions and courses of actions over others. The stroke of a Planning Minister's pen and zoning of land use creates immediate land value uplift, with financial windfalls bestowed on certain stakeholders, whilst others lose out. Speculation over land and real estate opportunities along with rent seeking behavior that uses the political planning processes to seek private gain are rife in all urban land markets. Those with most to gain and most to lose from planning decisions know how to play the planning system. Powerful landowners lobby (even bribe) planning representatives to achieve certain ends. They have the resources and tactical repertoire to exert influence, and often hold the upper hand. Formal planning frameworks in effect blend with informal non-codified rules. Tacit understanding and a culture of the 'way we do things' exist the world over.

So what is the role of academics? We apply with objectivity our theoretical frameworks to different institutional contexts. We track the interplay of different stakeholders at different stages of the planning process. We examine the way formal rules merge with informal growth coalitions in order to maintain place competitiveness. We advance theoretical and empirical knowledge through use of our case studies. Yet our academic independence also allows us to do so much more. We can question planning decisions and outcomes. We can proactively



shape planning and housing debates. We can co-create strategies with city planners on ways to create inclusive growth for all. We have a social responsibility and civic duty to advocate on behalf of those with the least voice.

Each of my three case studies (Cambridge, Shenzhen, Accra) epitomises planning, politics and power. I suggest that opportunities exist to make sure we get it right in Western Sydney by framing its urban transformation around notions of accountability, sustainability, and equity. In doing so, a more inclusive growth vision will be delivered.

Nicky Morrison is Professor of Planning at the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University. This extract was part of her opening remarks at her Professorial Lecture, delivered in October 2019.