ROBERT RIDDELL - SUSTAINABLE URBAN PLANNING:
TIPPING THE BALANCE

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Reviewed by Renata Cabral1

The focal point of this book, written by the Professor Emeritus from Auckland University, New Zealand, Robert Riddell, is that of the societies defined by him as “Anglo settler societies”: The United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The writer puts forward his ideas in a very pragmatic way, steering clear of abstractions and generalisations and tackling the real questions which involve the carrying out of planning in the context of these societies. Riddell’s main theme is, above all, the proposal of a practice, and the gaining of allies, strengthening them with ideas and knowledge of Anglo New World problems, giving orientation and finally finding ways to reach their objectives, thus preparing them to contribute to the carrying out of sustainable urban planning.

The main theme of the book already appears in the title: how to achieve a “balance” - between sustainability and consumerism, between conservation and development in these societies. The title also reveals the author’s option to identify useful and satisfactory styles of development which include a socially acceptable component of conservation instead of ordaining total harmony.

To help develop his theories, Riddell divides the book into two parts: the first dealing with ideas and the second with practices.

The first part, comprising two chapters, looks at some general ideas and some theories concerning planning practices.

In the area of principles, the author gives his definitions of “development”, “planning”, “sustainability” and questions the ideas of “property”, “interests” and “neomodernity”. All of these themes are looked at in a way that takes into account the manner in which they should be of significance in the new era. In this way, the “development” referred to in the text is that which is sustainable; “planning” is that which balances socio-economic-environmental outcomes, engages in a participatory style of decision-making, works for diversity and variety of outcomes, honours cycles, links knowledge and action, improves the humanized and natural environments and holds out for useful interconnections. “Sustainability” is related to the evaluation of loss and gain. Riddell notes that a certain idealisation is common in narratives about sustainability, with a persistent emphasis on unimpaired environmental quality over time, with no loss of material wellbeing, yet exhibiting some social gain. In contrast, he sees it as the challenge to maintain an ethical focus and to evaluate risks.

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When speaking about “property” he notes the reluctance to endorse collective rights which may prejudice private rights, and highlights man’s present day relationship with land – a relationship based on exploitation – hoping that the future will see a relationship of greater responsibility, constructed with an holistic vision. He makes it clear that “interests” must be negotiated and mediated. Finally, he says that a “neomodern” lifestyle is interpreted as one where the acknowledged excesses of an unsustainable modern lifestyle is exchanged for one which is economically, socially, and enviromentally balanced. This idea of neomodernity appears throughout the book. Another central question in the book is that of ethics, which includes the planner’s education, his day-to-day work and understanding of planning and who he is planning for, and, finally, the need for this to be assimilated by the practitioners.

After this formulating and questioning, the author examines the principles and constructional theories of planning practice. The way he views the tradicional planning procedure and radical-multiplex approach are extremely elucidative. Generally speaking, “traditional-lineal planning” is a way of planning that uses an excess of technicality, which does not work towards resolving political conflicts and which many times excludes conservation and social outcomes as well as ignoring spiritual, cultural and ecological values. Besides this, it doesn’t identify settlement roles and community needs. The radical-multiplex approach recognises that the preparation and use of a plan is inherently an arena of political struggle; to encourage, inform and increase debate; is open to negotiation and above all is directed toward community-enhancing outcomes. Additionally it is aligned with the neomodern ideals of sustainability and empowerment and suggests working to endorse a framework for the municipalization of community ethics and values.

Having the first two chapters as a base, the reader is then invited to explore the section dedicated to “the practise”. This section has four chapters (the third to sixth).

The objective of the third chapter is to set out a rationale for conservation with development. To do this, the author gives a retrospective view of man’s relationship with nature, questioning the current reality and points to some ways of that can be followed to achieve an attitude that is ecologically clever. The principle theme is that of resource “exploitation and discard”. He shows how the dynamics of “exploitation and discard” work; how finite, renewable, heritage and free-flow resources are and should be treated (to conserve, to sustain, to preserve and to exploit, respectively); which factors (such as behaviour) could explain the current situation; and what should be done to achieve a sustainable level of development with conservation. Once again, the theme of “balance” seems to be the correct path to follow.

Chapter four, entitled “Growth Pattern Management”, is about beneficially proactive sustainable development with conservation for non-metropolitan regions. It mostly addresses regional multiplier policy in macro growth pattern context. The first part of the chapter has an interesting sequence. First it studies the most significant information-processing components for macro patterned development planning and conservancy practice and goes on to look at three closely related topics: project propagation, risk assessment and project implementation. The section dealing with project implementation sets out some of the technical parameters which, in Riddell’s own words, ‘enable development and conservancy specialists to operate with integrity’.

The second half of this chapter attends to development planning and conservancy practice in seven macro growth pattern contexts: 1) ownership and rights; 2) Urban-rural growth patterning; 3) Coastal zone management; 4) Agriculture and forestry; 5) Tourism; 6) Unemployment alleviation; 7)Waste disposal management. Each of the seven topics are
presented in non-generalised manner showing the problems present in the Anglo settler societies. The author goes on to present data concerning the problems and consequences of these problems, the policies concerning these sectors, giving examples of existing advances, options and challenges. The objective is to signpost new directions for management in the style of sustainable planning practice. Riddell introduces questions such as open-area resource utilization, urban sprawl, indigenous people’s rights of use and access to the foreshore and the water beyond in the coastal marine zone, the obstacles to agriculture, the effects of tourism, etc. In terms of policy directions, he proposes that the macro pattern agencies – state, provincial, regional – should be appropriately empowered and that the central governments restrict themselves to ‘central’ policy and assistance.

Chapter five deals specifically with urban and suburban questions and quotes the main challenge as being that of choosing strategic ways for the suburbs. Riddell contextualises the question of suburbanisation, describing how suburbs were formed, the influence of the motor car and immigration on the process and characteristics that have proved problematic in the formation of suburbs: problematic urban design (absence of a defined centre, wide streets without pavements etc.), problematic lifestyles (measured by passive experiences such as watching television), high costs (fiscal-costs, time-costs, stress-costs, institucional costs, separation-of-function costs, energy-costs, environmental costs and physiological costs).

He goes on to give some recommendations for improving upon the general economic substance, the social wellbeing and the urban environments which comprise community living places. To do this, he identifies social elements in urban residential design, looks at the question of suburban growth pointing to the use of more intelligent ideas and layouts to achieve ideal occupation and density levels without effecting the economy. His recommendations also touch on “small-town conservation with development”, “water’s edge urbanization”, “ECO-village ideals”, “raw land suburbanization”, “urban reprofit compaction and clustering” and “shopping as a leisure activity”. Finally he puts forward instruments - such as transferable development rights - as alternatives available for approaching the achievement and attainment of urban conservancy with development in sustainable style.

The last part of the book points to, amongst other things, a process that is long and continuous, which achieves a “balance”. A challenge not only for this generation, a challenge that needs commitment from all of us.