

Possibilities, probabilities and prospects: some ideas on finding the future in planning.

Engela Meyer

Department of Town and Regional Planning
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Tel: +27 12 420 4181 Fax: +27 12 420 3537
e-mail: emeyer@postino.up.ac.za

“Planning is, if anything, about linking anticipation of the future to present-day action...” (Ravetz 2000: 72).

The impact of globalization, the advent of postmodernity (or post-postmodernity?), the incredible incidence of the halflife of knowledge and other similar phenomena inform the claim that is often made that we live in times of rapid change. Planning/planners/plans are also subject to change. Global forces dictate trends and the public sector lost its claim on representing the will of the people. The end of ideology is advocated and so is the demise of an expert system. Planning is acknowledging the challenging circumstances it finds itself in and even ponders on the origins and reasons for this - be that the identity of planning, its history, the roleplayers involved or the process and method employed. But according to Indovena (in Cecchini 1999: 164) *“(a) reason for concern and a sign of crisis may be the fact that the discipline of a fundamentally practical orientation, such as town and regional planning, should devote such excessive attention to epistemological questions”*. How does planning respond to these challenges? Is planning only accommodating change or is it choosing to effect it?

Isserman (1985: 484) is of the opinion that planners willingly relinquish one of their most important claims for/of legitimacy - that they can tell about the future and impact on how change takes place. Planners should, through their management of change over time (Strategic Marketing Committee of the ACSP 1997: 223), provide a bridge between the present and the future (Isserman 1985: 484).

Courage, pragmatism, knowledge and skill (Hyde 2000: 19) must complement idealism.

Planning and the future

According to Mandelbaum (1985: 185) any discourse on planning inevitably concerns time. Being focused on the future and the tracking of change over time is regarded as one of the anchoring characteristics of planning (Strategic Marketing Committee of the ACSP 1997: 223). Planning shares its concern with time with other fields of research as H. Stuart Hughes (Strenski 1987: 196) has argued that twentieth-century European social thought is distinguished from earlier trends by an interest in the unconscious, the foundations of knowledge, the bases of social order and the meaning of time.

Planning *“...is governed by practical reason, in that it always has to confront effective problems of choice and action that require the abilities of judgement, orientation, the formation of consensus and implementation. Sound principles are not enough, and neither is purely methodological competence”* (Palermo in Cecchini 1999: 165). Idealism must be complemented by courage, pragmatism, knowledge and skill (Hyde 2000: 19). Planners can learn from historians who are experienced in combining many pieces of information with broad contextual knowledge in order to understand change and its determinants. *“The successful development of forecasting skills may involve a more fundamental change: a willingness to embrace artistic as well as scientific values, to think creatively as well as analytically”* (Isserman 1985: 487). Apart from our tools for studying the future being not adequate, we may have lost sight of the future altogether.

Futures studies

The field of futures studies has a great deal to offer planning as there is an essential symbiosis between planning and futures studies as fields of scientific research. The areas of interface and shared traits of these two fields of scholarly research as well as a possible complementary relationship will be explored.

The elusive concept of and our speculations over the meaning of "the future" is relevant to all human beings and therefore to all fields of scientific inquiry. However, during the 1960s a number of scholars from different backgrounds started to do research on "the future" as a concept. The movement gained momentum and today there are a number of scholars that claim that "the future" is their field of expertise while a large number of scientists from different backgrounds also operate in the field of futures studies as they are experts on the relationship between their specific field and the future.

There are various ways in which to refer to this field of research. Interchangeable terms include futurology, futures studies, futurism and forecasting. Flechtheim (as quoted by McHale 1978: 9) introduced the term futurology as the history of the future, the science of the future as parallel to history, the science of the past. For the purposes of this discussion it was decided to use the phrase *futures studies* as this is the theme used in journals that to a certain extent have relevance to the field of planning. McHale (1978: 10) defines futures studies as "*an activity which embraces many elements – prediction, conjecture, imaginative extrapolation and normative projections*". Futures studies provides other research fields with observations and findings of the/a future, but the multi-disciplinary nature and origins of the field also imply that some theories, techniques and sources of information are borrowed from other disciplines.

We often assume that the past is unalterable and the future is unknown (McHale 1978: 5), but according to Wendell Bell (2001: 64), the aim of futures studies is to determine "*what can or could be (the possible), what is likely to be (the probable), and what ought to be (the preferable)*". The method to achieve these outcomes might include actions such as inventing, examining and evaluating. Futures studies are therefore not only about predicting possible outcomes, but also about intervention so as to ensure certain preferable outcomes. But both prediction and intervention require a

certain type of mindset and way of thinking. Futures studies also entail a system looking for equilibrium between the input of "*dominant and traditional mindsets*" (Stevenson 2000: 96) and creative and limitless views of the future as output. The past and the present and change that occur over time remain the only tangible sources that could inform our views of the future. The way of thinking that is promoted by current futures studies entail the challenging of paradigms and modern universal truths by "*...constantly calling into question the assumptions of the status quo and thus creating the spaces for alternative futures*" (Inayatullah 1996: 511). Futures studies are therefore closely related to our current reality and in some cases it is not a case of extreme and radical prediction, but more a situation where today's words and worlds are revisioned.

Current-day challenges

The present, the past and the future are all features of our understanding of time. The postmodern, through its tendency to overinterpret and its unwillingness to accept a final and/or definite answer lost its drive towards the future. This could partially be ascribed to a fear of closure and finality. As a result there is a focus on the present and because of this perception that nothing of significance is being created and progress is absent (refer to Oranje 1997) the reaction of people is to seek immediate gratification.

Even in futures studies the idea of a universal truth or meta-narrative of the future is contested in the postmodern vein. Increasingly the idea of multiple possible futures is supported. Futures studies even proclaim that one of the aims of the field is to empower individuals to discover their own visions of the future, "*...to make the future an intimate and possible place*" (Inayatullah 1996: 511).

As mentioned, planning was always a field concerned with the future. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the height of modernism, there was elaborate development of mathematical models to be used in town and regional planning. Scientific and

technological developments provided the field of spatial modelling with new techniques and measurement tools. But since the late 1970s through the 1980s emerging paradigms based on phenomena such as complexity and chaos proclaimed that that accurate prediction in complex socioeconomic or socioenvironmental systems is not possible (Engelen et al 1997: 125). The intrinsic detail of such systems matters and their success resides precisely in their level of complexity. Since then planning is to a large extent disillusioned with the usefulness of mathematical models. Some argue that a new breed of models have been developed that treats socioeconomic systems as integrated systems, and treats them with true care for their rich and complex behaviour. But increasingly planners came to realise that *"the main purpose of these models should be to serve as thinking tools, to help the user learn about the nature and dynamic behaviour of the real-world system and to find out how it is critically bounded, rather than to make definite statements about the future state of the system modelled"* (Engelen et al 1997: 125).

Myers and Kitsuse (2000: 222) argues that although planners might not have lost sight of the future altogether, their efforts seem ineffective. *"The overall result is that the planning profession operates with very simply constructed, hollow futures - often short-range and unidimensional, sometimes long-range but disconnected from either historical trends or implementation, and always devoid of impassioned political advocacy"* (Myers and Kitsuse 2000: 222). The suggestion is made that we should look towards futures studies for concepts, theories and tools useful for strengthening the future focus in planning (refer to Cole 2001: 373).

Planning and Futures Studies

The first interface that exists between planning and futures studies is that they share some original defining traits. Both fields obviously have a strong relation to time. Planning has a relation to both time and space, but as was discussed earlier, the relation between time and space is close. In addition to

the concern with change over time planning and future studies share the origin of the belief in a "better" future. Planning originated as an exercise that might be viewed as epitomising the modern approach of the possibility of good intervention that is to the benefit of all. While futures studies do not necessarily have such a naïve origin the basic premise of most studies on the future is one of the possibility of change and most of the time the possibility of improvement.

A second interface shared by planning and futures studies is the so-called exploration of the "unknown". Exploration of the unknown can and should require the researcher to consult a wide variety of resources. Every planner/futurist make her or his own subjective choice as to where information is obtained. Useful information could be found in the natural as well as the social scientific fields, in the applied as well as the pure sciences and even in traditionally non-scientific fields. The latter has reference to another interface namely the multi-disciplinary and cross-cutting nature of both planning and future studies. These fields have a number of focus areas and as a result have strong overlapping with other fields of scholarly research. But it also has the result that there are many approaches and methods that are used.

Being such multi-disciplinary fields and not fitting into a specific niche, both planning and futures studies have a continuous quest for recognition and justification. This ongoing identity crisis had the effect that the field and the people working in the field have a strong tendency towards self-reflection. But as the future is in essence contested territory, the existential questions are actually expected and even appropriate.

A further place of interface is the perception of the impact that these fields have on the world around us. As the outcomes and products of these fields often depend on a wide variety of role-players and other variables for implementation, it often remains theoretical excursions. Therefore the extent

and field of impact can sometimes be regarded as limited.

The existence of various levels of investigation and application is another interface that is shared by planning and futures studies. Both planning and futures studies can be done at a very modest and human level, but it is also something that governments and multi-nationals are involved in and could be done at a grand and global scale.

Both planning and futures studies make use of a mixed bag of techniques and methodologies that is often borrowed from other fields. Both fields of study are also sometimes accused of lacking appropriate technique.

Interest in futures studies and planning has not been constant over the past decades. Global ideological, economic and political changes influenced both the public and private interest in these endeavours and resulted in often cyclical and sporadic popular attention given to the outcomes of these fields. The fields are therefore very much related to and even dependent on cycles.

As mentioned, the fields of planning and futures studies do not only share interfaces, but can and have a complementary relationship as well. The field of futures studies can benefit from a closer relationship with planning. According to Cole (2001: 374) planning can serve as futures studies' window on the world. *"In this view, planning is that part of futures studies that deals with real issues that will have real outcomes"* (Cole 2001: 374).

The juncture of the two fields might benefit the field of planning as well: Planning is sometimes criticised for not giving enough and appropriate attention to the future. By using the outcomes and the techniques/methodology of futures studies, planning can take a step towards addressing the shortcoming. By bringing back the future into planning, planners can [yet again] bring hope of a better tomorrow.

"(A) map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth watching at, for it leaves out the country where humanity is always landing" (Oscar Wilde as quoted in Cherry 1970: 10).

References

- Bell, W. 2001. Futures studies comes of age: twenty five years after The Limits to growth. *Futures*. 33: 63-76.
- Cecchini *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*
- Cherry, G.E. 1970. *Town planning in its social context*. London: Leonard Hill.
- Cole, S. 2001. Bringing Futures into Planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Autumn, 67(4): 372.
- Engelen, G. White, R. & I Uljee in Timmermans, H. (ed). 1997. *Decision Support Systems in Urban Planning*. London: E & FN Spon.
- Hyde, D. 2000. Idealism should be at the heart of planning. *Planning*.
- Inayatullah, S. 1996. What futurists think-stories, methods and visions of the future. *Futures*. 28(6/7) 509-516.
- Isserman, A. 1985. Dare to Plan. *Town Planning Review*. 483-491.
- McHale, J. The Emergence of Futures Research in Fowles, J. (ed). 1978. *Handbook of Futures Research*:5-15. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Mandelbaum, S.J. 1985. Historians and planners: the construction of pasts and futures. *JAPA*. 51:185-188.
- Myers, D. and Kitsuse, A. 2000. Constructing the Future in Planning: A Survey of Theories and Tools. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol, 19, pp221-231.
- Oranje, M.C. 1997. *The language game of South African urban and regional planning: A cognitive mapping from the past into the future*. PhD-thesis. University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Ravetz, J. 2000. Predict and provide, or imagine and invent? *Town and City Planning*, March 2000:72-75.
- Stevenson, T. 2000. Will our futures look different, now? *Futures*. 32: 91-102
- Strategic Marketing Committee, ACSP. 1997. Anchor Points for Planning's Identification. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. Spring 1997. Volume 16 no 3.
- Strenski, I. 1987. *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.