

Planning Africa Conference 2016
3-6 July, 2016 | Sandton Convention Centre (SCC)
Johannesburg | Gauteng | South Africa

Is planning paying attention to the 'future'?

Experiences in eight South African municipalities

4 July 2016

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Background

- Planning is inherently about looking ahead. Any discourse on planning inevitably concerns time (Mandelbaum, 1985; Freestone, 2012)
- Definitions of planning almost always refer to the future orientation of planning

*“to prepare for **future** activity”*

(Myers & Kitsuse, 2000)

*“persuasive storytelling about the **future**”*

(Throgmorton, 1992)

*“focus on the **future** and pathways of change over time”* (ACSP, 1997)

*“the exercise of deliberate **forethought** by people”* (Alexander, 1992)

- A future orientation is further implied in terms such as ‘goals’, ‘growth’, ‘improvement’, ‘progress’, ‘development’, ‘vision’, ‘forward’, ‘forecast’, etc.



Background

This future-orientation is linked to the following traits of our profession:

Ability to inspire and lead

- Planning was first a calling, then a profession
- Bring hope of a better future (Blum in Forester, 1989)
- History of visionaries
- Planning ultimately stands for qualities and values in the future, lacking or deficient in the present (Freestone, 2012)

“Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized”

- Daniel Burnham

Means to address uncertainty

- *“Planning means, essentially, controlling uncertainty – either by taking action now to secure the future, or by preparing actions to be taken in case an event occurs”* (Marris in Abbott, 2005)
- The function of planning is to link the future to the present
- Planning’s central claim is that change will be better for its intervention (Gilg & Kelly, 2000)

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Introducing the study: Planning reality

- Among planners this future-orientation of planning is sometimes taken for granted.
- Although not all practices of professional planners are aimed at the future, the function of planning should always be.
- Over the past two to three decades there have been repeated calls for planning to be more deliberate and explicit in its engagement with the future. Criticism include:
 - Plans ‘predict and provide’ instead of ‘explore and envision’ (Ratcliffe and Krawczyk, 2011)
 - Not pro-active, merely ‘abandoning the past’ (Tewdwr-Jones, 2003)
 - Strong focus on spatial analysis, neglect of time aspect (Myers and Kitsuse, 2000)
 - Planning has become procedural, planners apply a plan-as-you-go approach - planning has become short-term and project-based.
 - Planning marginalised and low-key, merely there to “reduce inconveniences” for developers (Tewdwr-Jones, 2003)

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Why is planning not engaging with the future?

1 The urgency of the present

- Plan making, while critical, is not the dominant function of most practising planners (Dalton, 2001)
- Relentless pressure on planning systems to address immediate issues (Couclelis, 2005)
- Resources available for long-range work are limited
- Effort goes into negotiating complex governance frameworks
- Human concerns are typically concentrated
 - temporally on now and next week rather than across lifetimes and generations and
 - spatially on home and neighbourhood rather than region and globe

2 Short electoral cycles

- Focus on ‘quick wins’

“As a planner, my client is my councillors. I have a brand new market every four years”
(Hurley & Taylor, 2015)

“For politicians involved in urban governance, the greatest risk of all is to think beyond the short-term – yet that is precisely what’s necessary when the sustainability of cities is at stake” (Sandercock, 2003)



Why is planning not engaging with the future?

3 Uncomfortable with uncertainty

- Two main types of uncertainty (Abbott, 2005)
 - the contextual social, economic and physical 'environment' and
 - the 'process' complications of planning intervention itself
- An increasingly complex society goes hand-in-hand with an increasingly unknowable future (Connell, 2009)
- Planners lose their confidence in knowing the future

4 Lack of technical and theoretical tools

- Traditionally spatial mapping and evaluation tools overshadowed the analysis of temporal relationships (Myers, 2001)
- Contemporary planning theory function within a largely atemporal framework (Freestone, 2012)
- Collaborative planning emphasises the micro-politics of negotiation and conflict resolution with consensus becoming the desirable end-state (Huxley, 2000)
- Postmodern time horizons are shortening to the point "*where the present is all there is*" (Harvey, 1989)



Why is planning not engaging with the future?

5 The legacy of planning

- Planning disasters of the past and near-present
- The legacy which Jane Jacobs famously decried as the 'radiant garden city beautiful'
- Susan Fainstein in *The Just City* documents how planning has steadily retracted its visionary dimension as a consequence of bad outcomes.
- The manifestations of poor planning are manifold: social displacement, break-up of communities, inefficiency, corruption, waste, and just plain failures which seemed like good ideas at the time.
- This undistinguished legacy cumulatively contributes to a loss of public trust in planning. So when planners start talking up the future, who wants to believe them?
- Planners must now reconstruct the future for a reluctant public (Connell, 2009)

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Planning South African futures

- European and British town planning has been influenced by the idealism of the modernist movement in architecture.
- Planning in South Africa was dictated by the need for control and regulation and not by the idealism of creating settlements where people can thrive (Oranje, 2014)
- 1994 saw the publication of South Africa's Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP), setting the scene for undoing the impacts of apartheid on South African settlements and taking a decidedly future-orientation.
- Both the Municipal Systems Act (MSA) (2000) and the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) (2013) oblige municipalities to make declarations about the future, by making the formulation of vision statements a statutory requirement.
- The National Development Plan 2030 contains a lengthy vision statement and it calls for *“a national discussion on the future of towns, cities and rural settlements”*.

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Approach & Methodology

- During 2014 and 2015
- Eight students at the University of Pretoria's Department of Town and Regional Planning completed research towards their Bachelor and Master degrees in Town and Regional Planning.
- Their respective studies were all aimed at answering the following questions: Is planning engaging with the future, and if so, how?
- Semi-structured interviews with key roleplayers in the IDP process, including municipal council officials, provincial department officials, national department officials, private consultants, planning academics, councillors and a variety of community members.
- The interview questions focused on
 - (1) timeframes of plans
 - (2) plans' focus on the future as opposed to the present and the past respectively
 - (3) tools/techniques used to engage with the future

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Approach & Methodology

Year of study	Type of municipality	Province	No of respondents
2014	Category A: Metropolitan	Gauteng	11
2014	Category C: District	KwaZulu-Natal	15
2014	Category A: Metropolitan	Western Cape	11
2015	Category B: Local	Eastern Cape	5
2015	Category B: Local	Mpumalanga	15
2015	Category B: Local	North West	8
2015	Category B: Local	North West	21
2015	Category B: Local	Northern Cape	15

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Research Analysis & Findings

Timeframes of plans

- According to section 25 of the MSA an IDP that is adopted by a municipal council remain in force until an IDP is adopted by the next elected council
- Timeframe for implementation is a period of five years.
- The SPLUMA determines that the SDF should include a longer term spatial development vision statement for the municipal area which indicates desired spatial growth and development patterns for the next 10 to 20 years.

The respondents were overwhelmingly convinced that the five year period for implementing the IDP is not realistic for achieving the desired long term vision, citing the following reasons:

- Timeframe is not sufficient for implementation

“From experience I can tell you that with municipal plans generally three years are for planning, two years for proposals and funding and another two to three years are for implementation.”



Research Analysis & Findings

Timeframes of plans

- It takes substantial effort to negotiate the complex governance system

“Five years is purely not feasible, remember implementation of the IDP comes with financial implications, our municipality in particular doesn’t generate enough revenue if any at all and as such we are reliant on grants. What happen if we can’t get grants for a particular year? The projects should be rolled over to the following year and as such, five years are not adequate”

- Spatial restructuring does not happen overnight

“For instance, the long term vision of the municipality currently speaks about achieving a developmental state and a prosperous life for all. I personally don’t think the two are achievable in five years”

- Some respondents were pragmatic and acknowledged that even though short electoral cycles constrain planners in foresight, a five-year timeframe will not be changed easily as *“politics and administration can’t really be separated”*



Research Analysis & Findings

Timeframes of plans

Some respondents argued that the short timeframe might speed up delivery.

“Communities cannot be expected to wait for a period longer than five years for service delivery”

“If the period is elongated it would delay service delivery, there would be no sense of urgency”

Most of the respondents acknowledged that a combination of different timeframes for different plans could be appropriate.

“It’s got to be short term action towards the long term plan”

“I think the lower the order plan the shorter the timeframe should be. It also has to be strategic - if you’re colouring every property, it can only last six months and it’s outdated”



Research Analysis & Findings

Planning present versus planning future

- Do IDPs address the 'now' or the long term future?

The majority of respondents responded that IDPs and sector plans are focused on the present. One respondent called it “fire-fighting” as the municipality creates short-term fixes and solutions to put out fires that are arising on a daily basis.

“Our council unfortunately addresses the now, because they use that for the elections”

“I don't think decision-makers/politicians are interested in the future; they are interested in immediate political gains. Why should they be engaging with the future if they are not going to be in power”

Another issue is that the future implications of planning proposals are not properly considered.

“Planners draw corridors and nodes, but they don't always understand the implications of it. We calculated the amount of funding the municipality would've had to put in to achieve the SDF and just infrastructure will take 300 years of their budget. So, it's unachievable. The solutions were just words”

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Research Analysis & Findings

Planning past versus planning future

- Are planning interventions informed by ‘fixing the past’ ?

The majority responded that planning interventions are focused on ‘fixing the past’.

The reality within South African municipalities is that projects are generally focused on addressing backlogs and the provision of basic services such as water, electricity, housing and sanitation. Little resources are left for strategic interventions that might facilitate desirable futures.

“Over the past 14 years all of our IDPs were dominated by projects that request better access to basic services”



Research Analysis & Findings

Tools/techniques used to engage with the future

- All of the respondents were familiar with the tool of visioning and confirmed that it was used in the formulation of their municipal plans
- Some respondents replied that forecasting/projections and scenario development were also used
- Even though definitions were provided, it became clear that not all of the participants understood the somewhat foreign concepts

Visioning

Most of the respondents expressed negative sentiments about the vision statement and the visioning process. The criticism included the following:

- The vision statement seems to be removed from the plan

“The vision does not really speak to the plan. It is just there”

- Merely a response to the legislative requirement to formulate a vision statement.

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Research Analysis & Findings

Visioning

- Visions are generic and do not add to the plan.

“I am not a fan of visioning. We do it because we have to. We had this experience in Limpopo province, we did the analysis, went back to the area, we had a very difficult client. The municipality was very difficult. So I said, “now can we discuss the vision? We have to go through the process”, and they said they were very insulted because the consultant should’ve set up the vision. So I pulled out my laptop, quickly typed a sentence and said well actually yes I did but I thought we should first discuss it. And that was the vision that ended up being selected, because the vision says nothing. Show me a vision in a municipality that really means something”

There were some positive responses arguing that the vision assists with the review of plans and provides essential guidance.

“It is fundamental because without vision, it means we will be operating in a dark house and with high risk of failing to execute our own projects. Every project here is done to make this municipality competitive and a leading municipality”



Research Analysis & Findings

Other techniques

Respondents in general were keen to use forecasting and/or projections as well as trend analysis in planning.

“As a municipality we have been preparing IDPs for some time and very little change can be notable, maybe we need to change our ways of doing thing, analyse trends to tell us the needs”

There were mixed views on the use of scenarios.

- One respondent argued that scenario development is *“over-rated”*
- Another regarded it as a *“marketing trick and not very useful”*

Although scenarios were used by some, the implementation did not have the desired effect of opening up new ways of perceiving the future and challenging planners to think what this would mean, whether it should be welcomed or how it might be avoided

“There is seldom the luxury of planning for different scenarios. You often take the likely scenario and you do planning for that”



Research Analysis & Findings

Other techniques

Some respondents were critical about the practicalities of using “new” techniques.

“Those techniques, by and large, are very academic. We are forced by local government to be more pragmatic. So you really try to keep it simple, partly for the reason you are forced to produce these plans over a short period of time. There is no real time for fancy tricks. Secondly, and it also relates back to public participation, if you go with that terminology to public participation, you will go nowhere. Frankly they don’t care about those techniques”



Concluding Remarks

- Planners at municipal level fight an uphill battle to meet the minimum requirements as determined by legislation.
- Engaging deliberately and sensibly with the future is mostly viewed as a luxury.
- If planning does not fix this state of affairs, the combined challenges of climate change, demographic pressures, fiscal stress, technological and managerial advances will overpower us and diminish our chances to ever transform our fragmented settlements and provide South Africans with decent livelihoods.
- Planners' deliberate engagement with the future is not only a necessity for the profession, it can also be regarded as a beckoning prospect.
- Our endeavours to come up with appropriate solutions can be greatly enhanced through active analytical and intuitive engagement with the future.
- Planning could potentially tell stories about our settlements as places for belonging, sites for development, platforms for growth and arenas for political redistribution (Robinson, 2008)

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Acknowledgements

The following students' fieldwork formed part of the research for this paper:

- Mr Zongezile Bango
- Mr Jodi Fullard
- Ms Bianca Galego
- Ms Queneth Mlambo
- Ms Makhumo Mothoa
- Ms Brenna-Leigh Robertson
- Mr Ntshakang Sekane
- Ms Nosisa Soldati

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