

Planning the use of land for the 21st century

By Harvey M. Jacobs

ONE scholar-policy analyst has declared, to much dissent, an end to history (5). The basis for his call is the incredible transformations we have witnessed around the globe in recent years: the end of communism in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and even China; the introduction of market capitalism in these places; the seeming end of the cold war; the balkanization of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; the unification of Germany; and the prospect of a united Europe.

This expression of transformation in the political and social world is mirrored in other fields and goes by another name, postmodernism. Postmodernism arose in architecture as a way to design; it seemed to reflect an eclectic, "anything goes" style. Postmodernism has spread to literary criticism, cultural criticism, and the social sciences as a theoretical framework for examining and commenting upon the world we live in (4, 8, 16, 20). The concern of postmodernism is the whole project of modernism/modernity—that multicentury project we have collectively engaged in to create a modern world.

Postmodernism seeks to observe, critique, and reframe this project. It does this by looking to unearth the project's unspoken

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assumptions, airing them for debate and causing us to pause, on our way to the 21st century, to be certain that where we will arrive is where we wish to be going. Most importantly, postmodernism is a critique of our paradigm for understanding, organizing, and acting upon the world (14).

My assertion here is threefold:

1. That land use planning, as we know it and practice it, is largely a modernist conceptualization.

2. The most salient challenges to land use planning practice and doctrine are postmodern in character.

3. We are thus suspended between modernism and postmodernism in our thinking about how to best engage in land use planning, and this provides us with a unique opportunity to reframe what we do, in what I believe to be a more relevant, though more ambiguous, professional practice (1).

A modernist conceptualization

As we know it and practice it, land use planning was invented at the turn of the century; science, rationalism, and scientific management were prominent. We invented a way to do land use planning that can be summed up in six points. It presumed that:

1. We could perform a complete physical and social analysis of the capacities of and demands on the land.

2. Our analysis would yield information that would lead to better individual and

social decision-making.

3. This process of analysis and information generation would rely heavily on professionals and experts.

4. What would result from this analysis would be a single best pattern of land use (this is best expressed in zoning with its single-use districts).

5. While there was a cultural inclination to local control, there was a professional orientation toward centralization in administrative authority for land at the regional, state, and national levels.

6. Urban society was at the height of the social hierarchy, and other land use concerns needed to be subsumed to it. So we invented and practiced a land use planning that, for the most part, for much of the twentieth century did not challenge the presumed inevitability of rural land abandonment, rural land restructuring, rapid urban growth, and pervasive urban sprawl (11).

The postmodern challenge

So what has been the postmodern challenge to this model? Rather than responding on a point-by-point basis, let me simplify and suggest that it has one main theme—the rise of a diverse, populist citizens' movement in land use planning. This citizens' movement challenges:

- ▶ The presumption of experts' preeminent knowledge.

- ▶ The need for perfect knowledge and information to plan for land.



► The use of rationality and the scientific method as the only means of informing land use planning decisions.

► The inevitable need to centralize resource management to achieve sound resource objectives.

► This movement makes clear that land use is a social and political resource, as well as an ecological one.

Rather than leaving all of this in the abstract, though, let me cite some specific examples. The context for these examples will be the land use issues of the urban fringe in the United States.

One of the things that will be confirmed by the 1990 census is that America's urban fringe, suburbia, finally has become the dominant demographic place of the United States. While America's rural places have not been primary since 1920, in the intervening 70 years we have come to think of ourselves as an urban nation—even though this reflected our population base, rather than our land use pattern. For the immediate future, this will need to change again as we acknowledge that the land use and social pattern that has endeared itself to America's masses and been the subject of long-standing lampoons is now the paramount one.

Readers of the *JSWC* are aware of a number of prominent land use issues that have arisen in the last 20 years as this demographic transformation was taking its present shape. Among these, for example, are agricultural land protection, sustainable agriculture, wetland protection and management, so-called LULU (locally unwanted land uses) or NIMBY (not in my backyard) land uses, and the so-called quiet revolution in land use control. I would assert that in each case the issue came to prominence largely because citizens seeking the good life in the urban fringe challenged the prevailing wisdom of professionals—their paradigms, methods, assumptions, and values.

Let me explore three of the issues in some detail to make my case.

Agricultural land protection. We are all aware of the figures about the rate of conversion of agricultural land to nonagricultural uses in the post-World War II period and the debates about these figures (7, 17, 22). Regardless of the “correct” figure, agricultural land protection continues to be the most prominent urban fringe/rural land use planning issue in the United States (15). It came to prominence by citizens challenging the conventional wisdom of agricultural economics and agricultural economists over the disappearance of prime agricultural land to shopping malls and housing developments. The conventional wisdom of these professionals suggested that there was no

problem with the conversion of this land because land as a resource was being substituted by technological and managerial innovations.

Historically, this analysis is, in fact, correct. The decline in the farm population and the shifting pattern of agricultural land use has not resulted in a decline in farm output—just the opposite. Fewer farmers are producing more food products more “efficiently.” But for many citizens, particularly those in the ex-urban fringe, the protection of agricultural land is not an issue to be assessed solely on the basis of economic theory, through the lens of such concepts as efficiency. Rather, agricultural land protection is an issue to be assessed on its landscape, aesthetic, and quality-of-life attributes. The enduring and wide-ranging existence of agricultural land protection as an urban fringe land use planning issue represents a poignant example of the conflict between the judgments of professionals and citizens.

Sustainable agriculture. A similar story exists with the issue of sustainable agriculture. This is a subject that was largely brought to the public policy agenda by citizens concerned with elements other than classic economic efficiency as the basis for agricultural production. Instead, what was asserted was a set of quality-of-life and hidden-cost issues relative to those who live in rural America, an enduring rural land resource base, and, importantly, the caliber of food produced from the agricultural system. We find that this debate takes particular form around the question of biotechnology and biotechnological innovation. Groups of citizens are asking a postmodern question: Just because we can do it, should we? Within the story of sustainable agriculture, we see citizens challenging the conventional wisdom about what constitutes costs and benefits and what values are important in planning and policy.

The quiet revolution. My last example has to do with the so-called quiet revolution in land use control. The quiet revolution is a movement begun in the 1960s, much supported by land use professionals, to remove land use planning authority from local governments and transfer it to more central regional or state agencies (2, 19). To some extent this can be seen as the next step in what first occurred in the early part of the century when modern land use planning was invented and through policy instruments, such as zoning, land use authority was removed from the individual to the local government.

The classical examples of the quiet revolution include the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency in New York State; similar

kinds of agencies for the California coast and the Lake Tahoe area in California and Nevada; and statewide planning acts in Florida, Vermont, and Oregon. There has been a recent resurgence of activity in Florida and Vermont, with revisions of their previous legislation, as well as substantive explorations of similar activities and agencies in Maine, Georgia, Rhode Island, Maryland, and New Jersey and substate activities in New Jersey, around the New Jersey Pinelands, and in Wisconsin, around the Lower Wisconsin River (3, 6, 21).

In all of these instances, the argument was the same—local people and local governments (where authority initially rested) will always be elitist, discriminatory, parochial, and antiecological in their approach to planning and policy. The presumption of these acts and agencies is that the new central authority will be none of these things—it will act in the greater public interest.

Affected citizens, the public, aren't so sure. Why? Because affected citizens often find themselves concerned with the removal of local control over their land and their neighborhoods to the authority of distant, hard-to-access professional bureaucrats. So, concurrent with the rise of a new regionalism is a new localism, again largely citizen-driven (9, 12).

The upshot

What does all this mean for land use planning? As I suggested, we are suspended between modernism and postmodernism. I see three trends shaping the future of land use planning.

1. Land use planning, particularly on the urban fringe, will become evermore plural. More individuals and more groups will assert more interest in land use planning. And all of them will argue, with evermore sophistication, that their perspective on the public interest is the appropriate one.

2. Land use planning will become evermore conflictual, among these individuals and groups and among the groups and land professionals.

3. Land use planning will become evermore political. The era of land use planning dominated by professionals is over, if it was ever really here.

So what is the function of the land professional in this postmodern world?

The cutting edge of professional practice will be in recognizing the limited perspective that most participants bring to the land use planning debate and working to broaden it to assure that all legitimate concerns and interests are taken into account. Only in this way will we be able to construct and implement an enduring land use planning process.

Let me offer two examples of postmodern land practice. With regard to agricultural land protection, I suggested that much of the citizen interest is in the landscape and the aesthetic qualities of agricultural land. These exist and are legitimate; farmers and farmland owners need to acknowledge this. At the same time, citizens need to understand the real economics of farming and how they fit into a program of farmland protection. An unworked, unproductive, deteriorating farm landscape is in no one's interest; yet, a program of farmland protection that does not deal with the real economics of farming could yield just such a result. Farmland needs farmers who can farm for a living; farmland protection needs to be a part of a larger program directed at the health of the local/regional farm economy. And farmland protection advocates and detractors also need to acknowledge that efforts to protect farmland will have impacts on the long-term economic and social security of family farmland owners, the land use options available for future generations of users, the viability of farming for the next generation of farmers, and, especially at the urban fringe, the availability of moderate-priced housing (13).

The case of wetlands is similar. Wetlands also are lands in which society has developed environmental values; they are no longer regarded as "wastelands." In so doing, society, in the form of protection and management statutes, has begun to assert social rights in these lands (10, 18). But as

Suburbia has become the dominant demographic place in America, and those suburbanites will play evermore important roles in land use planning decisions.

the owners of these lands know, there are real equity issues when social values in land preservation are placed on the shoulders of those for whom the land may represent a "banked" source of economic value. The inequity served upon these landowners needs to be made clear and explicitly addressed in land use planning. Conversely, like with the case of farmlands, the owners of these lands need to recognize the diverse, legitimate social rights of present and future society in "their" land.

What this means for professional practice is that the analysis that gets performed in land use planning needs to change. This analysis needs to reflect not just the ecological characteristics of land but also its social characteristics. As analysts, we need to ask not just "what is the ecological carrying capacity of the land" and "what is the economically efficient use of the land" but "what is a socially equitable way to plan for the land's use."

In general, the mission of the postmodern land use planning professional is to acknowledge that land use planning is not and cannot be a technocratic, scientific exercise. Land is a unique ecological resource, but it is also a unique social resource. Land use planning often acts as the stage for fundamental and complex social debate about individual and social rights and the articulation of ideals about democracy and social justice.

More than 200 years ago, in the late 18th century, Thomas Jefferson enunciated a position about the social component of land in an emerging democratic society. As we begin to plan for the 21st century, the democratic, social, and equity issues in land are

no less and, in fact, are more pronounced.

Land use planning at the urban fringe is an exercise in social planning masked as technical planning. To be truly successful, we must recognize it as such and act accordingly.

At the same time, though, we must remember that the land needs to endure. As we plan, we must be certain that its interests also are accounted for.

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