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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Jennifer Mack and Michael Herzfeld. 2020. *Life Among Urban Planners: Practice, Professionalism, and Expertise in the Making of the City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. ISBN: 9780812252286

Urban planning as a future-oriented activity seeking to organize and regulate land and people is often dated back to fifth century Greece. Only far later, early in the 20th century, did urban planning consolidate as a modern profession through the merge of diverse expertise that used colonial cities as “experimental terrain” to fashion social and spatial engineering (Wright 1987). Analysis of modernist planning endeavours has generated influential anthropological scholarship (see e.g. Holston 1989; Rabinow 1989). Jennifer Mack and Michael Herzfeld’s edited volume *Life Among Urban Planners: Practice, Professionalism, and Expertise in the Making of the city* is a welcomed contribution to the study of the contemporary planning profession in times of questioned legitimacy of techno-scientific expertise as the sole basis for urban interventions, and of plans as blueprints of the future. Its focus on the less spectacular dimensions of planning work across different cities speaks to debates in the planning literature about continuous tendencies to propose universalized theories that fail to account for how context matters (Watson 2016).

The introductory chapter situates the volume in research interested in the production of, and lived experiences of, urban space. It carves out its contribution as inquiries of imaginaries, technologies and ideologies of the present that shape experts’ efforts into making cities, and of the tensions and ambivalences that planners navigate in their encounters with other planning actors. Planning, or “the making of the city,” is approached as “an act of negotiation in a context defined by social and cultural specificities” (p. 3). Consequently, attention is towards planners’ interactions with the many parties – residents, politicians, other experts – through which planning unfolds.

The eleven chapters are organized into three subsections. The first section, “Social and Cultural Contexts of Planning,” begins with Michael Herzfeld’s discussion of how planners in Bangkok

(Thailand) and Rome (Italy) navigate the formal and legal systems they are to enact, while aware of the inconsistencies and complications that these systems produce on the ground. A key argument established here, that figures throughout the following chapters, is that planners are also residents and share social values with the people that their policies affect. Margaret Crawford points, in the following chapter, to the discrepancy between the representations of urban futures through plans, and the political conditions, public support and spatial capacities that the realization of the same plans rely on. This discrepancy, that planners deal with daily, has yet to be critically engaged with by the planning profession, Crawford writes, and suggests that ethnographic insights would be useful in engagements to rework how planning conceives of its role and the urban conditions it impacts. Andrew Newman's chapter, which inquires how republican ideals of citizenship and political control figure historically and presently in the design of public parks in Paris (France), is an example of such insights. It details how the redesign of a public park unfolded through tensions between different actors and ideals: the design features that the park department advances, resident associations' claims of what are important interests to provide for, and tensions between different communities' uses of the park.

The second part, "Grand Plans and Their Discontents," opens with Adèle Esposito Andujar's study of international aid actors as planners that bring standardized zoning technologies to the planning of Siem Reap (Cambodia). Where Esposito observes how local actors renegotiate the foreign planners' zoning proposals during their implementation, Federico Pérez explores planners' work with preparing a development plan in Bogotá (Colombia). The account of how planners strive for better incorporating the social and urban realities the plan is to act on, and the critique that the result receives from politicians, citizen associations and developers, is a telling case of how planning failures tend to lead to demands for more planning "as usual" (p. 116) rather than questioning the profession's rationale. Gabriella Körling broadens the idea of who the planner is when describing how residents in Niamey (Niger) prepare housing developments in the absence of state-led planning. Crucial here is that residents are not merely building houses, but actively seeking to secure documents and prepare plans that aligns with formal planning techniques and law in order to ensure their rights in the eventuality of future disputes. Residents also take up tasks that planners expect to lead in Södertälje, Jennifer Mack demonstrates, in her chapter about Syriac communities' use of flexible building rules to advance architectural styles diverging from the majority design of Swedish single-family housings. Local planners' anxious reaction to these, which are for them, unexpected design proposals, are suggestive of how planners may share social values and norms with (and as) residents, but more

often with majority society, and not necessarily the communities living and shaping the neighbourhoods that their planning efforts regard.

In the third part, “Resituating a ‘Universal’ Praxis,” Bruce O’Neill and Kevin Lewis O’Neill raise questions about the implications that scale has for relations across communities in a city of racial segregation. Based on the motives that planners bring forth in favor of, and that white communities mobilize against, a public transport extension in St. Louis (US) they argue for a “regional responsibility” (p. 176) that acknowledges the relationships and discontinuities that occur when the scale of planning expands from the municipal to the regional. In addition to unsettling the city as a socio-spatial category, their chapter touches on the temporal dimensions of planning in a preface that highlights how this city that until today is heavily characterized by a history of segregating zoning laws, also has been a site for renewed attention to urban structural racism and inequality in response to the police shooting of Michael Brown in St. Louis and the Black Lives Matter movement.

In Barcelona (Spain), contemporary planning ideology is imbued with concerns about achieving quality, Trevor Goldsmith notes in his chapter on how the trope of quality is entangled with a “decline of planners’ power” (p. 182). What stands out here is how planners struggle with combining their self-perceived role as experts on how planning can achieve ‘good,’ when their ‘good’ diverge from residents’ proposals about a neighbourhood, residents that the planners recognize as also entitled to define what quality as a subjective judgement implies. Monika Sznal’s chapter similarly deals with resident involvement within initiatives framed as “participatory planning” in Warsaw (Poland). Based on a study of two participation processes, Sznal suggests that participatory planning holds capacity for bottom-up planning that allows for residents to co-shape plans, but that these same initiatives can also be co-opted in the interest of smoothing over contestation and legitimize politically already settled decisions. The final chapter by Mark Graham and Lissa Nordin, tells about how a brownfield development in Stockholm (Sweden) went from a plan for a local environmentally friendly neighbourhood, to a vehicle for concretizing national ideology on ecological modernization. The development, which ultimately catered to apartment buyers of high-income residents with the initial environmental goals largely written off, is suggestive of how planning as a universal and generalizable activity is presently figuring in “global competitions centered on the marketing of sustainable urban solutions” (p. 231).

Together, the chapters suggest that a generative entry point for anthropology to engage with the social world of planners is between the ‘plan’ as representation, the anticipated and desired, and ‘planning’ as a messy practice inherently imbued with conflict and contradiction across diverse actors and interests. James Holston proposes in the *Afterword* that where anthropology is concerned with contingency as a premise for urban life, planning tries to be “prescriptive of the present” (p. 236). In working towards the idea of planning practice that acknowledge and works with the incompleteness of its control and knowledge, Holston suggests, ethnographic knowledge on the present can contribute to a planning practice that advances possibilities for social change based on “people’s practice” rather than “utopian speculation” (p. 236). This provocation ought to inspire further ethnographic engagements with planners and how these can inform debates on reformed planning for more just and equal cities. This volume, which with advantage can be read together with Simone Abram and Giza Weszkalny’s volume on contemporary planning practices (2013), is an indispensable source for anthropologists interested in bureaucracy, expertise, law, and urban life at large. It will also, I hope, reach the syllabus of planning educations where the insights proposed across the chapters can contribute to debates about planning’s limitations, and to shaping how coming generations of planners view their practice.

References

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