

WHOSE SCARCITY? WHOSE ABUNDANCE? ISSUES IN MOTIVATING (RE-)MAKING THE CITY

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This essay, a reworking of the presentation made at the Third European Urban Summer School in September, 2012, addresses the policy and planning pitfalls associated with imposing externally-derived standards of scarcity (in the case of this example, scarcity of space). Whatever the recorded conditions of 'objective' scarcity existent in Bromley-upon-Bow or any other neighbourhood, it is necessary to address the issues associated with applying society-wide standards on a neighbourhood or community. The problems in such attribution of nominally objective standards arise on several levels, including:

- * The 'need' to address scarcity in meeting minimum physical standards for well-being, possibly most importantly with respect to conditions contributing to health conditions.
- * The dangers in terms of exploitation of 'scarce' urban land of imposing external standards to define blight and thus provide entry for nonlocal investors to gentrify an area and displace its residents. (Another US case is illustrative here: the 'scarcity' – actually absence - of closet space in an Italian-American neighbourhood in Boston once created the legal basis for razing the homes, though the residents were all using large wardrobes, many imported by their families, for their clothing, rather than the closets required under more modern building codes.)
- * The economic imperatives associated with the minimum qualifications requirements for some employment outside the neighbourhood and the implications the scarcity of such qualifications for local economic well-being.
- * The barriers to cooperation and collaboration with community residents in making a more supportive neighbourhood that are raised by outsiders' articulation of standards of scarcity that they do not share. (A highly likely scenario in Bromley-upon-Bow given Bangladeshis' view of their needs for space and the UK standards for overcrowded housing.)

My objective here is two-fold: (a) to sensitize readers to the difference between planning with a community and planning for residents, and (b) to highlight the risks that any forms of planning 'for' may result in an excess emphasis on planning for places rather than people. To achieve these ends, this essay addresses the question of the bases for judgment used by analysts – and in turn policy-makers – in defining urban problems and thus responses. The argument proceeds through four steps, comprising my major sections:

- * Personal Context – Sources of Bias
- * Standards – Good or Bad Bases for Planning?

- * Looking at Some Examples
- * Concluding Remarks on Method and Process

There are no firm conclusions, simply recommended methodological and logical processes intended to assist outsiders in understanding the perceived and experienced problems and proposed solutions of communities of which they are not members. The objective of the exercise here is to assist policy-makers in their efforts to work with, rather than for or on members of communities experiencing urban ills. In a subsequent essay, I turn to some issues of method, mostly focusing on the processes and pitfalls of data collection and interpretation in ‘alien’ environments.

PERSONAL CONTEXT – SOURCES OF BIAS

Bias is inevitable. There is no such thing as an objective analysis. While some comparisons and measurements may be recorded and the numbers used for decision-making, the fact that there is reliance on such measures does not produce objectivity since the process of deciding what to measure and how to do so is itself biased.

Most bias emerges first from the characteristics and perspectives of the analyst. For illustrative purposes, let us look at me as an example of a bundle of sources of bias. I am:

Male – No matter how hard I try, I am not capable of fully reflecting – or perhaps even absorbing and reflecting, a woman’s view of problems, scarcities or other issues.

American – My cultural background includes a set of values and an analytical perspective that leads me to both a set of expectations about social processes and a tendency to value different phenomena and outcomes in ways that are consistent with my nation’s societal norms.

‘Elderly’ – I am over 65. Depending on their cultural backgrounds, residents of neighbourhoods in which I attempt to work may want to please me and thus give answers that they think I expect, or they may dismiss me as irrelevant and not bother to provide me with data that require some thought or effort to generate. Either way, my understanding of others’ perceived needs and concerns would be distorted.

Economist – My disciplinary training induces me to adopt a methodology that leads to measuring certain phenomena and not bothering with others. That is certainly a biasing tendency, especially when combined with the socio-cultural biases of my nationality.

Multi-Disciplinarian – To the extent that I spent my academic career among faculty from different academic disciplines, this source of bias has been weakened. This broadening of perspective has come not merely from exposure to other disciplines, but from participation in interdisciplinary research. (For a different personality, however, the reaction to challenges to one’s methods from other disciplines could take the form of a hardening one’s posture as an economist.)

Experienced in diverse cultures – I am a rarity among Americans in this regard. Europeans by and large are more broadly exposed to other cultures than citizens of the United States since they live with much narrower national boundaries. But ‘other cultures’ does not necessarily reflect experience in cultures steeped in different religious and social traditions, such as those of Latin America, Africa or Asia. I have spent time in depth in all three areas.

Relatively affluent – Globally, this label applies to all residents of the ‘developed world’ – including those perceived as ‘poor’. More important to an outsider’s ability to work with a neighbourhood in his/her own country is the prospect that the individual is of a higher socio-economic status than local residents. This difference produces barriers, raised on both sides, to acquisition of an understanding of the locals’ actual conditions and their attitudes towards them.

Politically left of centre – Labels on such perspectives do not work well, with the majority of Democrats, the left side of the national political array in the US, arguably to the right of the Conservatives in the UK and other EU member states on social issues. Personally, I am so are to the left relative to US political norms that I find much of the Labour posture in the UK to be conservative. I am biased toward pursuit of community and minority empowerment and poverty alleviation.

Religious or moral perspective of a non-practicing Jew – Religious beliefs may form the basis for a perspective on the world, the importance of different ‘social problems’ and the role of different institutions in addressing those issues. The stronger the adherence to a religion-based moral perspective, the more that grounding may overcome any political leanings. My political outlook reflects my morality. But that is because I have no strong religious beliefs.

‘Recovering economist’ – Obviously, this is not a common source of bias. It is a label my wife, a PhD in Sociology, applied to me. I reference it here to highlight the final point to be made in considering bias: the potential errors made in measuring and labelling the sources of biases themselves.

In effect, this is a warning akin to the old adage that ‘you can’t tell a book by its cover.’ The ‘obvious biases’ of an observer of – or participant in – a community or social process may not, in fact, be operational in reality. We should not attribute all differences in observations to the apparent differences in the perspectives of the observers.

STANDARDS - GOOD OR BAD BASES FOR PLANNING?

Arguably, the real issue is not whether reliance on standards is good or bad. There is no potential for planning without some objectives and intents, and these ends can only be expressed in terms of some sort of standards. The important question, then, is the quality of the bases for planning, that is, the nature of the standards themselves, not the reliance on them. We thus need to consider the typical origins of standards and then some issues associated with any reliance on them.

Some Origins of Standards

Cultural Norms – Standards almost inevitably emerge in part from social norms and a culture’s perceptions of reality and what is valued in life. Cultures can be extremely local, as evidenced by language dialects and accents, so standards emerging from such norms can vary from city to city – or neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

Economic Myths – The myth of the marketplace as the ‘accurate’ measure of what anything that can be bought or sold is worth underlies many standards. In the case of property development, there is often reference to ‘highest and best uses’ as a desirable standard for the appropriate use of land, meaning the use that would bring the highest price. But what produces the highest use for a private landowner may not be the appropriate standard to guide decisions on the uses of publicly owned or controlled land.

Political Systems – The role of politics in setting standards is, perhaps, most obvious in the determination of what the standard should be for public participation in a planning process, with democracies valuing high participation and authoritarian regimes rejecting such a process. On a finer scale, however, democracies can differ drastically on their degrees of political centralization, which affects the standards for local control of – or even participation in – planning processes and decisions.

Economic ‘Realities’ – This term is used most frequently to refer to the constraints under

which planning decisions must be made. The standard imposed by constraints is, of course, that they should not be violated. However, nor all perceived constraints are real, and those that are may be subject to modification. If effort is expended, so standards based on assumptions that current limits on alternatives remain in place may be misguided.

Some Issues with Standards

Extent of Acceptance – However rational and appropriate a standard may be for a planning decision, the finding on the course of action to take will be suspect if the standard is not widely accepted as appropriate. Planners who assume that the communities on which they act will share their acceptance of guiding standards for action may be in for a rude shock in the real world of divergent cultures, political perspectives and economic constraints, all of which can undermine acceptance of some standards.

Costs of Compliance – Lip-service to a standard may not constitute adherence to it, if the costs of complying with a set of constraints are too high. Those costs need not be monetary in order to significantly constrain compliance. Standards that challenge local cultural norms can result in community-wide cooperation in noncompliance as an assertion of cultural identity. The failure of nonlocal planners to understand local norms thus can distort the impacts of any plans.

Malleability / Rigidity – The ability of national planning standards to adapt to local norms and perceived economic realities may be the key factor in their effectiveness on the ground. Thus the rigidity of a standard may be a negative, despite the risk that malleability leaves standards subject to the political influence of powerful interest groups. Within a local community, especially one with cultural norms and political traditions that differ from those of a nation, state/region or city imposing externally-driven standards, the most powerful interests may be those of the distinct society. This issue may be especially salient in areas with a single dominant immigrant or other distinctive population.

Potential for Change by Affected Parties – Potential for change is obviously associated with malleability. The issue here is the ability of those at the local level to modify inappropriate standards through their own interventions. A distinct population group may be the most powerful local interest, but it may still not have sufficient influence to be able to act on non-local decision-makers that have been influenced by economic power blocks that have shaped a malleable standard in their self-interest. A standard may stand in the way of responsive planning if, for example, a local low income immigrant group may not be able to modify the standard to preserve preferred uses of space while a national property development association has that power and acts in its own self-interest.

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Aside on an Economist's Language

Demand – This has very special meaning in economics. It is not synonymous to 'need' or 'want' but refers to the monetary expression of perceived needs and wants in a marketplace. Thus a need experienced by a population with little money may never arise as a demand in a market economy, even if the need is for a resource such as food that may be required for survival.

Deprivation – This term refers to the scarcity of access to some resource by a population. That scarcity might be considered relative to the access available to others in a society or relative to some minimum. For our purposes here we shall use the term to refer to 'absolute' deprivation – access at a level below some accepted standard.

Poverty – This is the term we shall use for relative scarcity, to distinguish access to resources

at levels below societal norms but above accepted minimum standards.

Growth – This means what one would expect – and expansion is size or quantity.

Development – By contrast to growth, which can happen in local property values or a community economy, many use this term to refer to those forms of change, sometimes including growth, that increase the power of a community, neighbourhood, or other social unit to influence events and shape a desired future.

Cost and Benefit – These terms, used in policy-makers' cost benefit analyses may include a range of factors beyond those readily measured or exchanged and thus reducible to a monetary measure.

LOOKING AT SOME EXAMPLES OF STANDARDS AND PLANNING

Four examples serve to make my point here, two from the United States and two from London itself. Before offering US examples, it is necessary to provide some perspective on the legal bases – and limits – for action in the country, since public planning has a very different status in the US than elsewhere.

'Urban Renewal' in the US is the process of clearing land and/or buildings in order to, in principle, permit regeneration. Under the laws of most of the US states, this process permits compulsory taking of property for independently determined prices (labelled as 'exercise of eminent domain'). Exercise of this power, however, requires a finding of 'Blight' in the designated setting in order to permit action. The standard may have the effect of promoting displacement and gentrification (and may be intended to do so). Ambiguity and uncertainty – and conflict – arise from the definition of what constitutes a blighted condition.

Blight, arguably, involves the failure to meet some societal standard. But that standard could be: (a) aesthetic ('it is ugly!'), (b) economic ('they are impoverished' or 'the site is underutilized'), (c) 'cultural' ('they don't conform to our norms!'), or (d) some combination of these and other subjective judgments. Not surprisingly, where norms differ, poor planning outcomes may result.

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Boston's old 'South End' is now a major financial centre of high rise office buildings. But it was once a thriving Italian-American working class neighbourhood. The city has garnered increased property values (and thus revenues from taxation of that property) and, arguably, attracted more financial sector jobs as the result of displacing the residents who once lived in the South End. Whether the social costs imposed are worth the economic gain was certainly an issue when the planning decision to acquire and raze the neighbourhood was made.

The process was a perfect example of the undemocratic application of a rigid societal standard. The South End was not impoverished: as working class it had below median incomes on average, but that does not mean 'poor.' It was not immigrant: it was ethnically almost completely Italian-American, but most of the residents were second or third generation native-born. It was only marginally 'crowded' by then current standards of appropriate area per person in dwelling units, reflecting the somewhat lower than average household incomes. The area became visibly dirty, but only after Boston reduced its frequency of waste collection in the neighbourhood. The dirt could not hide the fact that the buildings themselves were structurally sound and well maintained, with owner occupied or used for apartment rental.

So the city was hard pressed to find any sort of 'blight.' It turned to the letter of the current standards for residential occupancy. Those requirements, mandatory for new construction but

rarely applied to existing occupied buildings, specified the number and size of closets relative to bedrooms and intended occupants.

The South End had old buildings and a paucity of closets. The residents used the huge wardrobes that their immigrant families had brought over with them from Italy and were not inconvenienced by that ‘flaw’ in their housing provision.

Violation of the closet standard, however, was sufficient to produce a finding of blight and resulted in the forced destruction of a fully functional urban neighbourhood. Did that rigid standard contribute to good planning?

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Louisville, home to the Kentucky Derby and the largest city in its region, once built itself an airport just outside of the city limits. The city surrounded the airport as it expanded spatially. Later, United Parcel Service (UPS) began overnight delivery using air transportation – and chose Louisville as its US national air hub. By the 1990s, the airport needed to expand. The three surrounding neighbourhoods had income levels slightly above, but educational attainment slightly below the local medians. They were, unusually for the city, racially integrated, and had dwelling units built in the 1950s that were small, only 65 per cent of the then current norm. They suffered from severe environmental problems, with noise level double that of city median and air quality significantly lower than that of the city (which itself was below US Environmental Protection Agency standards).

Since the time the homes in the area had been built, they had become hedged in on all sides by my noisy, polluting transportation systems: rail along one side, the airport on another, and along all other boundaries wide thoroughfares and motorways carrying diesel truck as well as automobile traffic. The city claimed the area was blighted by its environmental factors and took it by eminent domain.

However, market economic measures of blight were absent. Home owner-occupancy rates in the area exceeded those city-wide. Property generally sold by word of mouth, if homes were not passed down in families. Over a 20-year period leading up to the declaration of blight, local property values in the three neighbourhoods, as measured by sale prices rose significantly more than those in the city as a whole. Obviously, the residents viewed their community and homes by standards that differed from those applied by the city.

In a society that measures value by market prices, how could the neighbourhoods be considered blighted? In fact, the top court of appeals in the State of Kentucky ruled that the finding of blight was unjustified and required the city to pay additional compensation to the residents that they had displaced. That ruling, however, took place after the fact and failed to preserve the neighbourhoods. The reliance on a standard to justify an intended planning action clearly can lead to both distorted application of the standard and to bad planning decisions.

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Bromley-by-Bow, London, UK

Turning from the US to the UK, we can look at the contrasting assessments of Bromley-by-Bow reflected in official statistics and residents’ responses to questions. The local data collection by the Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment (SCIBE) project team underscores the differences in perceptions and reflects vastly different standards applied to the quality of the physical environment by British and London public assessments on the one hand and the residents of the neighbourhood on the other.

By National Standards, Bromley-by-Bow is acutely overcrowded, with five times the

residential population density than the level prescribed by national housing standards. The residents are predominantly low income. Not surprisingly, given their incomes, they are far more state-dependent for the resources needed to survive than most communities in Britain. Culturally, they are overwhelmingly immigrant, with household heads, if not children, born in Bangladesh; they are perceived as ghettoized, especially those that speak little or no English. (Their language barrier reflects the low educational attainment of the immigrants, since English is the language of higher secondary and all tertiary education in Bangladesh; the lack of schooling also implies minimal exposure to the modern economy prior to arrival in the UK.) The area is also seen as a 'food desert' with no large food stores in the community, though access is available just outside the neighbourhood. Green space is not seen as a major issue, given proximity of a major park and small green areas scattered in the neighbourhood.

By the Community, however, life in Bromley-by-Bow is seen very differently. Housing density is actually far lower than the Bangladeshi norm. The housing provision is faulted not on unit size, but on the number of bedrooms for families that are far larger than the UK median. The residents feel they have economic security that was unattainable in their home country, where there was no state provision for the needy. That said: they feel they lack opportunity for economic advancement, which to them often involves the ability to form their own businesses, not to seek employment by others (which would be the expectation of most of the poor in England). They find their setting physically secure (which is not outsiders' perception), but alien and they miss access to more outdoor space despite the parks.

Given these different perceptions of the conditions in Bromley-by-Bow, there is little likelihood that planning decisions based on national and/or London-wide standards will be seen as appropriate by members of the community. The contrasting perspectives virtually assure that what would be 'good' planning from the perspective of even the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the governing local authority which tends to accept the national standards, would be seen as inappropriate by a large fraction of the community residents in Bromley-by-Bow. Planning based on national standards for a setting in which they are not appropriate may well do more local harm than good.

Applying national standards and ignoring local insights can, moreover, result in planning outcomes that may be 'poor' even by national standards. One excellent example of such an outcome exists in another London neighbourhood close to Bromley-by-Bow on which the full force of national planning and economic powers has already acted: the London Docklands.

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The Conservative Government of Mgrs. Thatcher created the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), with a board appointed by the Government and responsible only to Parliament for its decisions and actions. The LDDC was given full planning powers, including exceptional rights of compulsory purchase, along with substantial budgetary resources.

The remit to the LDDC was the economic revitalization and regeneration of the derelict and abandoned enclosed East London docks and the surrounding neighbourhoods. While the docks were no longer international transport centres and many buildings adjacent to them were deteriorating, the area as a whole was not abandoned. Myriad small business enterprises used pockets of space along the docks. They were surrounded by residents living in mostly council housing estates to whom they provided employment and who constituted the customers for their retail marketing.

The rationale for the LDDC, however, was the attainment of the ‘highest and best use’ of the docklands property. They were expected to apply a national standard predicated on economic mythology – the accuracy of market valuations as measures of the social benefit to be gained from use of land. With the financial centre of London (“The City”) adjacent, it was appropriate under this standard for the LDDC to look market its land assets to financial firms rather than the current users and occupants simply because the former could pay more.

This turn to non-local demand to shape decisions on new land uses, however, had the effect of muting the voices of the local community. The loss of input from the locals, in turn, led to decisions about retention and demolition of buildings that ignored many of their current or future potentials. This was especially glaring in the case of large open structures associated with the docks that could have served as recreational centres. Despite the objections of, and detailed documented plans offered by, the London Docklands Consultative Body (LDCB), those structures were demolished ... and later new recreational facilities were built to serve both new residents in riverfront housing and the workers in the new high-rises of the Canary Wharf.

The LDCB was grounded in the docklands communities and had local expertise and knowledge. It offered information from a source that the LDDC, because of its structure and remit, could not tap efficiently: local people and organizations. In ignoring the information available from the LDCB because its interest in neighbourhood preservation, however, the LDDC failed to accurately measure many of the impacts of its actions.

Using national standards for the number of employees per unit area in different businesses, the LDDC underestimated the number of jobs it would affect by displacing local businesses since Dockland employers used more workers in smaller spaces. Applying national data on the number of firm closures associated with relocations, the LDDC failed to recognize the impact of displacement on the very tenuous and fragile Docklands-located firms: the vast majority closed their doors when they lost their premises. Similar errors were made with respect to employability of local residents in the new businesses attracted to the area and with regard to residents’ willingness to relocate or to commute to work when the previously walked to their jobs.

The result was very expensive regeneration with massive displacement and all the social and economic costs that entailed. New premises for the City might, alternatively, have been provided at lower overall costs on some of the underutilized docklands while retaining and refurbishing existing buildings rather than building new and while still providing for revitalization that served people already in the locality.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We first must confront the planning methods and objectives to be brought to bear on a neighbourhood. Is the objective broad strategic or is it narrow community-focused planning? That may determine the appropriate consultative or participatory processes to be employed.

Planners and the planning process brought to bear on a community need to be examined for their ability to address locally-specific factors in any case. That capacity will vary with:

- * Sources of standards (and the dialectics of their creation and modification), including those for (a) Physical elements or (b) Socio-Economic elements of the plans.
- * Sources of the planning body’s power to act – and sources of local organizations’ potentially countervailing powers, which may be derived from (a) Legal, (b) Economic, or (c) Political / Moral / Cultural foundations, or some combination of them
- * The extent to which the powers to act can be exercised by both external and internal

institutions. That is, the extent to which the powers are, or may become, complementary or competing.

Even if community enhancement is the defined objective of the planning process, the organizational context of the planning body involved remains crucial. In the US, there has been a great emphasis on planning through, with or by so-called 'community-Based organizations' but the label of 'CBO' has been found to be a misnomer.

An organization may be located in, that is placed, in a community, but not based in it. Local residents, businesses and property owners (not absentee landlords) may have apparent power in terms of their participation, but that is insufficient. Do the planning staff and those with power to make decisions see their roles as 'doing for' neighbourhood stakeholders rather than 'working with' them? If so, they are not really community-based. Even if planners see themselves as collaborators, not providers, they may still fail to serve specific sub-communities within a larger neighbourhood, such as the ultra-religious, the disabled or other group with special needs or interests.

Immigrants may, as in the case of Bromley-by-bow, constitute such a special group. They may have extensive self-help organizations, but may be reliant on external funding since immigrants typically have limited resources. That dependency, however, may constrain their ability to fully reflect idiosyncratic interests out of fear of alienating their funders. The organizations' capacity to represent the special constituency as a whole may further depend on their inclusivity.

Thus reliance on planning participation by even specialized interest organizations may fail to reflect all relevant interest. The US 'War on Poverty' of the 1960s and 1970s pursued 'maximum feasible participation' of those being served in the management and administration of public programs. A similar logic might be appropriately applied to individual residents' participation in planning processes and decision-making.

Such an approach is not particularly revolutionary for planning practice. The increasing reliance on open-access charrettes in US planning reflects an effort to provide individuals with an opportunity to participate in both problem definition and development of responsive plans. The charrette process is not new, but borrowed from long-standing practice in architecture. It can, of course, provide only limited participation access and may be structured to only make plans to address pre-defined issues. The process can, however, be made open and be employed to define as well as respond to planning problems.

But even an open access problem-defining charrette has to either start from or begin by defining some set of standards participants can agree are appropriate for decision-making. Those structuring and participating in the process need to determine the degree to which planning decisions that have long term consequences for the physical environment can be based on idiosyncratic factors and considerations.

This need then leads inexorably to a requirement that locally-specific judgments about the applicability of nominally objective standards to the problem at hand. Even the UN's Millennial Development Goals, crafted with an eye to global cultural and economic diversity, may be too narrow and prescriptive for individual countries, let alone communities. Private business standards such as those developed by the ISO (International Organization for Standardization) similarly need to have malleability to fit individual enterprises.

Planning to respond to a particular community's scarcities need not distinguish between the 'real' and the 'perceived' since such a judgment imposes a rigid external standard. It does, however, need to derive its own internally consistent definitions of the problem(s) to be addressed

and the bases for assessing the costs and benefits associated with alternative responses to the identified problem issue(s). Global standards are not inherently bad, but the absence of conscious adaptation of those criteria to local issues cannot be good.