

Book review

Rethinking masterplanning: creating quality places

H. AlWaer and B. Illsley (eds). ICE Publishing, London, UK, 2017, ISBN 978-0-7277-6071-5, £60, 256 pp.

Motto: '*The legacy of the past is one of hope that we disregard at our peril.*' (Ian Cooper and Husam AlWaer: p. 212)

In his *Foreword* to this strongly themed collection of papers, the acclaimed British urbanist, Matthew Carmona writes: 'I came to the task of writing this foreword with some trepidation. This is because I have spent the last 20 years trying to avoid the word "Masterplanning" and more particular, as I have often seen it written – particularly on the websites of architects, funnily enough – "Master planning"; the latter evoking the great "master" creating his (note the masculine association) grand vision.' (p. vii) And he continues to explain: '[—] as the editors themselves articulate, masterplanning is still, in many minds, associated with the production of fixed blueprints for places. So while a masterplan might persuasively capture the grand vision of its author, it also suggests something that is rigid and unbendable, not open to discussion or meaningful engagement, and that [—] will quickly become out of date and discredited as society and the market move on.' (p. vii) Along similar lines, this reviewer at first hesitated to accept the invitation to review the book. However, there are several ways in which its chapters raise interesting and most relevant thoughts, even when masterplanning in the last decades has often been called dead – and asking to be killed – as its blueprint designing for end-state visions pretended to be able to predict a desired future, and at that pretending to know what should be desired. The authors are very much aware of this, and together they offer a fundamental critique of the discipline, and in many ways a state of art. In the *Conclusion*, the editors Husam AlWaer and Barbara Illsley write: '[—] the masterplan portrayed in this book is a constantly changing organism rather than a mechanistic one.' (p. 225) The book claimed the masterplan never died, it may be sick, but a series of remedies are presented, of which the most important are to make masterplans flexible and adaptable, and include participation in their preparatory processes. As David Rudlin and Kevin Murray write in the second *Foreword*: '[The book's] main objective is to propose new forms of masterplanning that are less authoritarian, rigid and top down. Many of the authors in this book seek to deconstruct the idea of a masterplan and to rethink it as something that is more inclusive, holistic and sustainable; moving from the blueprint to the systems approach, from the top down to the co-created. [—] create a framework, both physical and regulatory, on which places can grow and evolve.' (p. ix) In the *Introduction*, the editors state: 'The justification for masterplanning [—] is increasingly about seeking to improve the prospects for securing survival in the face of volatile social, economic, technological and environmental conditions.' (p. 1) This is a very serious book, and it is often well illustrated.

Without claiming to be comprehensive, the book combines theoretical knowledge with cases and experience from practices spread around the world (the United Kingdom, the United States, the Middle East and China). Of the two editors, Husam AlWaer is an urbanist and Barbara Illsley a planner-geographer, quite apt for a book on masterplanning. As they state in their encompassing Chapter 2 *Changing approaches to masterplanning*: 'In recent times, academics and practitioners from a range of disciplinary backgrounds have become distrustful of deterministic, physically led masterplans, questioning the authentic nature of the masterplanning process and the value of its outcomes (Ellinn, 2006; Carmona *et al.*, 2010; Bullivant, 2012; Firley and Gron, 2013; AlWaer, 2014). This traditional

approach is no longer seen as appropriate for the open, dynamic and highly unpredictable nature of today's complex societies. As a result, there has been a move away from this view of masterplanning, and particularly the idea of a definitive masterplan, towards a much more complex inclusive and integrated interpretation.' (p. 5) And: 'In the face of increasingly volatile conditions, masterplanning is concerned with the management of change (Heywood, 2011: p. 9).'

Most of the authors are or have been academic researchers and teachers in urbanism, representing universities in Dundee, Manchester and Portsmouth in the United Kingdom, Charlotte, North Carolina and Miami in the United States and Curtin University in Australia. The ideas presented can be seen as circling around the cutting-edge research in the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, including the work of PhD candidates of its Urban Design Studies Unit (UDSU). Of course, the ideas incorporate sustainability in its broadest sense: social, economic, technological and environmental. There are connections to the British Institution of Civil Engineers, also the publisher, to UN Habitat, the Rockefeller Foundation and Breeam, and to Neo-traditionalism in the United Kingdom and The New Urbanism in the United States, but also to the Architectural Association (AA) in London. There is some truly innovative thinking and theorising here, based – important! – on sharp insights in the history of the discipline of urbanism.

As is the case with edited volumes, the list of *Contents* indicates the broadness of it all

- *Changing approaches to masterplanning* (Husam AlWaer and Barbara Illsley)
- *Plot-based masterplanning: theory and practice* (Jonathan Tarbatt)
- *Masterplanning by and for the shared mind: towards a 'neighbourhood 3.0'* (Joe Ravetz)
- *From masterplanning to adaptive planning: conceptual frameworks and social mediatory instruments* (Lucy Bullivant)
- *Collaboration and co-production with communities in masterplanning* (Barbara Illsley and David Walters)
- *The client role in masterplanning* (Joanna Eley)
- *Building the legacy of the London Olympic and Paralympic Games: in pursuit of clarity in masterplanning* (Eric Firley and Steven Tomlinson)
- *Changing the masterplanning paradigm for China's urban future* (Steffen Lehmann and Atiq U. Zaman)
- *Reframing masterplanning in the Middle East* (Samer Bagaeen)
- *Identifying trends in masterplanning: a typological classification process* (Robert Adam and Claire Jamieson)
- *The role of sustainable assessment in the masterplanning process* (Husam AlWaer, David Kirk and Carop Somper)
- *Masterplanning for change: design as a way to create the conditions for time-sensitive placemaking* (Ombretta Romice, Sergio Porta, Alessandra Feliciotti and Gordon Barbour)
- *Built environment professionals and the call for a 'new' professionalism* (Ian Cooper and Husam AlWaer).

In Chapter 2 *Changing approaches to masterplanning*, the editors give a comprehensive overview of the history of masterplanning, from before the Second World War, including the criticism coming up since the 1960s from systems planning, advocacy and equity planning, strategic and incrementalist planning and environmental planning. They sum up what the book stands for: '[—] masterplanning is being challenged in a number of ways: to move beyond the focus on the built environment and to seek quality-of-life improvements; to minimize the impacts of new development and create more sustainable spaces; to make best use of resources in a

time of austerity; to be flexible and adaptable over time; to be open and inclusive towards stakeholders; to facilitate creativity and enterprise; and to take a reflective approach emphasizing evaluation and learning.' (p. 15) All of this leads to 'the six dimensions for moving towards a more integrated approach to masterplanning' that the editors conclude are the prerequisites for effective future-oriented masterplanning: 1. Strategic and holistic integrity; 2. Sustainability; 3. Resilience and adaptability; 4. Collaborative governance; 5. Creativity and enterprise; and 6. Reflection and learning. Do not understand these as mere fashionable terms; they are given solid theoretical backgrounds and good and worthy arguments in the series of chapters. Central to their convictions is the idea of collaborative governance: '[allowing for the effective] combination of 'expert knowledge' and 'local or lay knowledge' (Please see <http://www.odasa.sa.gov.au/pdf/1.1.3%20Guidance%20Note%20Master%20Plans.pdf>).

Two chapters stand out as rather different from the others, and one as comprehensive of the basic message.

Chapter 8 *Building the legacy of the London Olympic and Paralympic Games: in pursuit of clarity in masterplanning* presents a most relevant and very interesting case. It is written by Eric Firley, whose background is in economics, architecture and city design studied in Fribourg, Lausanne, Weimar and London, in practice in Paris and London, and in teaching in the Cooper Union in New York, and the AA and the Bartlett in London; and Steven Tomlinson, who studied civil engineering and architecture in universities in the United Kingdom, worked for some time in Japan and Russia, and is principal designer for the London Legacy Development Corporation. In describing the case of the Olympic legacy they explain: 'Clarity in masterplanning operates by definition – somewhat paradoxically – in the realm of approximation and instability.' (p. 119). Within the one large area of the legacy in the Lee river valley, they have chosen three developments covering all scales: the Olympic park itself; a large urban area to the west with established housing areas and transforming industrial sites linking to the city; and a newly developed high-density neighbourhood incorporating existing but dilapidated industrial buildings. Striking is how physical and social aspects are brought together in the masterplanning processes, attracting new functions resulting in a mixed environment that holds promises for long-term sustainability – through future change.

Chapter 11 *Identifying trends in masterplanning: a typological classification process* is maybe on first sight a strange one amidst the other contributions, this one written by the Neo-traditionalist architect, Robert Adam and Claire Jamieson, theoretician in architectural culture. They present the approach they developed in trying to create a typology of

masterplans. Their – broad – selection of examples is not limited to Neo-traditionalist or New Urbanism designs, although many of such are included. It is a fascinating endeavour in that it claims to strive for an 'objective' classification, even quantifiable as much as possible, but at the same time shows the need for 'subjective' judgements, both for making the distinctions and for creating the listings. It shows the dilemmas between scientific and designerly ways of thinking. The classifications are certainly dealing with important aspects of the chosen plans, and make one think over one's own judgements, if not prejudices. And this is exactly where the chapter becomes intricately linked to the theme of the book.

Chapter 13 *Masterplanning for change: design as a way to create the conditions for time-sensitive placemaking* is written by Ombretta Romice, Sergio Porta, Alessandra Feliciotti and Gordon Barbour of the Urban Design Studies Unit (UDSU) of the University of Strathclyde. Feliciotti and Barbour are PhD candidates, both with a background in practice and teaching. They are 'interested in the ways in which cities evolve and adapt over time, conceptualizing cities as dynamic, interconnected systems. Rather than designing and masterplanning to create idealized visions of the future, they argue that change should be acknowledged as inevitable and, if we are to create sustainable, resilient places, it is important to learn how to design and guide the possibility of change. This will require a change in professional culture and the development of new skills and expertise.' (Husam AlWaer and Barbara Illsley: p. 3) They – not afraid to be blunt – state that '[—] a good city form does not exist. [—] the quality that makes a city good does not come by design (as conventionally intended). [—] We argue that what prevents urban designers from understanding, and therefore tackling, the challenges of our times, is the lack of an adequate theory of change.' (p. 195) Stressing the importance of the evolution of urban systems and forms, they replace the old organic analogy by a new one: systems ecology as can be seen in Holling and Goldberg's paper on 'Ecology and planning' in *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 1971. '[—] 'ecological resilience' focuses on the dynamic relationship between adaptability, transformability and stability, acknowledging that systems are constantly undergoing change and that there is no one final state, no one single trajectory to follow.' (p. 197) These enlightening thoughts lead to new and basic insights. It might actually work. It seems an additional interesting opportunity would come of combining such a theory with the recently newly coming up interest in complexity theory for urbanism, as exemplified by (the proceedings of) the conferences on complexity, cognition urban planning and design at the Department of Urbanism of Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands, staged by Juval Portugali from Tel Aviv, Israel and Egbert Stolk from Delft.

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