

Planning and Utopianism: Big Plans, Tweaks, or Everyday Utopias?

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In this short note, I propose to reflect on the ways we think about planning and utopianism in shaping the quality of the places we live in. The balance between big plans and tweaks has remained top on the agenda of planning scholars, policymakers, and practitioners worldwide for many decades now. The New Urban Agenda, approved in Quito, Ecuador in 2016, foregrounded the importance of planning in achieving sustainable development (see also Sustainable Development Goal 11).²⁴ The remaining question, however, is what kind of planning we are to undertake, especially when some of the major urban challenges are now in cities of the Global South dealing with fast-paced urbanisation, often understaffed and under-resourced, struggling with extensive inequality and poverty. In many such cities, choosing between big plans and tweaks to the urban fabric does not seem to offer a tangible alternative to the status quo, especially in cities where the legacies of modern colonial planning clash with the resourcefulness of urban dwellers seeking to make do on an everyday basis.²⁵ At present, a certain dose of utopianism may be in order to imagine a planning practice that delivers quality places for all.

To this end, I begin by sketching how planning has dealt with utopianism and the search for making the impossible possible. I then briefly examine how planning scholars have conceptualised a key conundrum in city-making; that of coordination between diverse interests. I identify how different approaches rely on revised versions of big plans or tweaks and discuss their limitations and alternatives. Finally, I suggest that opposing big plans to tweaks is perhaps a false choice we should avoid. I reframe the practice of planning as a process always in the making that requires a focus on everyday utopias – i.e., thinking big and acting small in the spaces of everyday life.

Planning Utopianism

In a 2015 article, planning theorist Louis Albrechts captured an on-going angst among planning scholars and practitioners. As he put it, '[a] lot of traditional planning is about maintaining the existing social order rather than challenging and transforming it'.²⁶ Albrechts further complained about the lacklustre performance of this traditional planning in conjuring quality places and its adherence to market-oriented priorities:

'Traditional spatial planning becomes less focused on the visionary and imagining the "impossible" and more concerned with pragmatic negotiations around the "immediate" in a context of the apparent inevitability of market-based forms of political rationality'.²⁷

Albrechts's criticism may not be wholly fair. After all, masterplans produced by international consultants promise to deliver the 'impossible' in many cities of the Global South, transforming existing landscapes into glitzy versions of Dubai.²⁸ Many authors have denounced, rightfully, these 'neoliberal' forms of urbanisation for promoting market-based rationalities at the expense of more just sustainable cities. Yet, their incisive critiques seldom provide ways of making *that* 'impossible' (just sustainability) possible. With available 'visions' derided, utopianism in planning seems to have been lost and we seem unable (or unwilling) to find more generative ways to engage with it.

Concerns with imagining the 'impossible' for city life are not new. From Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-morrow*²⁹ to Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*,³⁰ we have plenty of works that reference utopianism in planning, in one way or another. However, planning utopianisms are not the same across these works. Russell Jacoby distinguishes between two currents of utopianism.³¹ One current refers to the 'blue-print' utopians, those

who define utopia to its very last detail, to the extent that their plans soon become at best anachronistic, or at worst a force of domination and exclusion. These are the utopians of the likes of Howard and, in many respects, of 'neoliberal' urbanisation. The other current entails a form of utopianism possibly worth considering and recovering, which Jacoby calls the 'iconoclastic' utopians. As Jacoby suggested, in their willingness to visualise (but not predetermine) what the future looked like, these utopians kept alive the possibility of what could be. Similarly, Ruth Levitas, a leading figure of utopian studies, speaks of utopianism as 'visualising, hoping for, and working for a better world'.³² A way to accomplish this is through a focus on everyday, not grand, utopias. Davina Cooper refers to 'everyday utopias' as alternatives to dominant practices, or in her words as 'networks and spaces that perform daily life... in a radically different fashion... by creating the change they wish to encounter'.³³ Arguably, Lefebvre's imagination of the 'urban' aligns well with this latter current of utopianism: 'The urban... is the possible. To reach it – in other words, to realize it – we must overcome or break through obstacles that currently make it impossible'.³⁴

Technocratic planners and their 'big plans' were some of the obstacles that Lefebvre alluded to. Like Jane Jacobs before him, Lefebvre was a keen critic of both planners and big plans, which he perceived to drain the lifeblood of everyday urban life as an embodied, poetic, and sensuous experience of 'habiting'. Lefebvre thought that planning emphasised space over time, and thus neglected the dynamics of differential space (time-space) in creating a diverse urban experience centred on the everyday. He also felt that planning regimented, if not erased, 'habiting', obliterating its inherent poetics, desire and everyday rhythms. I am unsure Lefebvre thought planning could ever be usefully rehabilitated to conceptualise the urban as a condition of possibility. As the utopianism Levitas and Jacoby referred to, Lefebvre offered largely inspiring, yet hazy, imaginations of the urban:

'If the urban is total, it is not total in the way a thing can be, as content that has been amassed, but in the way that thought is, which continues its activity of concentration endlessly but can never hold or maintain that state of concentration, which assembles elements continuously and discovers what it has assembled through a new and different form of concentration. Centrality defines the u-topic (that which has no place and searches for it). The u-topic defines centrality'.³⁵

Here resides the angst some have with planning today: stuck between a utopian tradition that emphasises the certainty of blue-print 'big plans' and the utopian view of the urban as the dreaming up of the impossible without making it sufficiently concrete.

Coordinated Action

This conundrum is not lost on planning scholars or practitioners concerned with the importance of coordinated action to successful planning. With all its imperfections, a 'big plan' is a viable instrument around which to rally people and motivate action. Thinking of planning as process shifted attention from pre-determined urban outcomes to questions about the possibility of collectively devising a 'big plan': who to involve, how, when, and how to sustain this involvement over time to achieve quality places among competing interests, often unequally represented in our societies.³⁶ Some authors have proposed that such coordinated action could be conceived of as part of broad scale initiatives of strategic spatial planning (as proposed by Albrechts, Healey and many others). But others, perhaps disillusioned with the possibilities of coordinated action, suggest we ought to intervene in space through forms of city-making that are 'tactical' or 'Do It Yourself'.³⁷ Arguing for short-term, low-cost, bottom-up interventions in the urban fabric, this form of city-making dispels 'the slow and siloed conventional city building process' in favour of flexible neighbourhood solutions that 'embrace the dynamics of cities'.³⁸ Tactical urbanism thus offers urban 'tweaks' as key to a new life in cities, yet their short-term nature may fall short of the transformative potential of Cooper's everyday utopias.

In fact, despite the hype piled onto these forms of community-based interventions, some scholars argue that tactical/DIY urbanism is nothing short of a US-centric, neoliberal urban fad,³⁹ which imperils the possibility of further integrated, long-term planning that considers more inclusive needs.⁴⁰

Colleagues working in the Global South have cast doubt on the possibilities of such approaches in their terrain. They are particularly weary of trying to consider how such initiatives would work amidst the networks of power and influence dominant in the production of space,⁴¹ or how they would square with the informal lived realities of most urban dwellers.⁴² Their claims are partly contextual (i.e. context matters in planning), and partly epistemological (i.e. knowledge production in planning has remained narrowly based on Euro-American realities and, therefore, is unsuitable to address different contexts).⁴³ Some have proposed that forms of planning co-production, engaging state and society groups across the Global South, can “deepen the pot” from which planning ideas can be drawn.⁴⁴ Co-production is neither grand planning nor small ‘tweaks’, but a set of strategies that poorer communities have drawn upon to satisfy basic urban needs amidst significant power imbalances.⁴⁵ However, its effectiveness should not be romanticised, not least because it still requires coordination among those involved to be sustained over time, especially when co-production efforts challenge established networks of power and influence.

Think Big, Act Small... in Everyday Life

I have no intention of resolving here these various planning conundrums. Discussions about the appropriate scale of planning interventions or the adequate roles for the state, market, and civil society in city-making are some of the most enduring topics over the last several decades among planning scholars.⁴⁶ Instead, I would suggest the choice between big plans and tweaks seems rather unhelpful, if not misplaced. As the example of co-production highlights, it may be more profitable to diversify the strategies available to us when considering how to develop and achieve visions of better, more just places where we can live together. If context and localised knowledge are of essence to planning, then we should probably seek to enlarge the toolset available to planners and policymakers when considering how to tackle the urban challenges they face. Sometimes it may be necessary to undertake a small tweak; other times having a big plan can help rally energies towards action; other times still some other approach may be needed. The balance is not, it seems, between ‘big plans’ or ‘tweaks’, but between a wider diversity of approaches that take place at different times in different arenas, with consideration of the everyday lives of the communities we are planning for.⁴⁷ Nabeel Hamdi perhaps said it well: ‘... in order to do something big – to think globally and act globally – one starts with something small and one starts where it counts’.⁴⁸

Balancing between different approaches to planning seemingly aligns well with Lefebvre’s view of the urban as a process of continuous assemblage in everyday life. In other words, we may have to continuously think big, ‘with open hearts and ears’⁴⁹ about what the future might look like, while at the same time acting small, continuously assembling the elements that make our everyday urban lives possible. Considering the power relations, interests, and resources (or lack thereof) that this involves, planning emerges less as grand design or temporary change, and more as everyday utopia always in the making.

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