Beyond master planning? New approaches to spatial planning in Ekurhuleni, South Africa

Alison Todes*, Aly Karam, Neil Klug, Nqobile Malaza

School of Architecture and Planning, University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Traditional master planning has been criticised, but continues in various forms. This paper critically assesses an initiative by a South Africa metropolitan municipality to develop 'local spatial development frameworks': comprehensive integrated plans, dealing with 22 sectors, for some 103 areas, to guide land use decisions and to provide a framework for development. The paper concludes that despite some innovative aspects, several elements of traditional master planning were evident. New approaches to spatial planning were being shaped by older thinking, but also by the impact of a traditional land use management system. The findings point to the need for greater attention to debating alternative forms of spatial planning and their appropriateness in various contexts.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in urban planning in developing countries among some international development agencies, organisations and countries (Farmer et al., 2006; UN-Habitat, 2009). This revival is centred both on the roles planning could play in promoting sustainable urbanisation, and on new approaches to planning that go beyond the critiques of old style master planning. The broad outlines of current thinking are expressed in the Global Planner's Network document on 'Reinventing Planning' (Farmer et al., 2006), which sees planning as promoting integrated, inclusive and participatory development, in contrast to past technocratic and narrowly physical planning approaches. New approaches to spatial planning have also been emerging for some time (Healey, Khakee, Motte, & Needham, 1997), and there have been initiatives to develop more appropriate approaches for developing countries (Clarke, 1992; Singh & Steinberg, 1996). Traditional master planning nevertheless continues in several contexts (UN-Habitat, 2009), and in some cases there is a reversion to older forms of planning which have been criticised in the past (Berrisford, 2009; Mattingly & Winarso, 2000). Further, new forms of planning sometimes exist alongside traditional forms of planning (UN-Habitat, 2009).

Reasons for the persistence of or reversion to master planning are contextual and remain to be fully explored. Some explanations focus on political dimensions (Roy, 2009) or the dominance of modernist ideas amongst political elites and technocrats (Watson, 2009). Others argue that planning is still being shaped by perspectives and discourses linked to traditional approaches (Devas, 1993). New languages are sometimes in use, but are not always meaningful in practice. There has been insufficient discussion and debate about alternative approaches to spatial planning for developing countries of different types. While there are many manuals to assist governments and practitioners to incorporate elements of the new approaches into planning (such as gender, diversity, environment, participation etc), and the broad outlines of current thinking are clearly available, there has been less work on appropriate forms of spatial planning.

This paper considers an initiative by the Ekurhuleni metropolitan municipality, South Africa, to develop local spatial development frameworks (LSDFs), a third layer below the level of its broad indicative metropolitan and regional spatial frameworks. Comprehensive integrated plans were to be developed both to guide land use decisions and to provide a framework for development. Since the municipality did not have the capacity to undertake this planning on its own, it developed a detailed generic 'Scope of Work' document which would serve as a brief for consultants. Before commissioning plans, the municipality requested an 'academic critique' of the Scope of Work document. In the process of assessment, it became apparent that while some emphases and elements of the plan were consistent with current thinking, in other respects, the approach adopted represented a return to more traditional forms of spatial planning. This paper draws from that assessment. It was based on analysis of documents, five interviews with officials in the housing, environmental, transport and economic development departments, two sets of discussions with councillors, and a further three with officials in the spatial planning department. The paper provides a critique of the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +27 11 7177702; fax: +27 11 7177739.
E-mail addresses: Alison.Todes@wits.ac.za (A. Todes), Aly.Karam@wits.ac.za (A. Karam), Neil.Klug@wits.ac.za (N. Klug), Nqobile.Malaza2@wits.ac.za (N. Malaza).

LSDF approach, considering the extent to which it moves beyond master planning. Although it is a particular case, it does exemplify one tendency in spatial planning, and provides a platform for continuing debate over appropriate forms of spatial planning in developing countries.

The paper is structured as follows. The first two sections provide an overview of the evolution of approaches to spatial planning internationally and in South Africa, focusing particularly on the critique of master planning in the case of the former, and contemporary approaches in the case of the latter. The third section provides an assessment of the LSDF approach. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the case study, and possible alternatives.

From master planning to contemporary approaches

In many parts of the world master planning became the dominant form of spatial planning after World War II. According to Watson (2008: 19), master plans are 'spatial or physical plans which depict on a map the state and form of an urban area at a future point in time when the plan is 'realized''. Planning was viewed as a technical activity, developing comprehensive plans showing the projected density and intensity of various land uses and their spatial distribution. From the late 1970s, however a wide-ranging critique of master planning developed.

Several critics have argued that master plans were static and rigid. They emerged in part as a method of long-term planning for infrastructure, services and public investment in the relatively slow growing cities of developed countries (Clarke, 1992), but proved to be inappropriate in the context of rapid urbanisation and change in developing countries. In countries where data sources were poor, they took years to produce and were soon out of date. Even in developed countries, unexpected changes in the economy and in the size and type of households in the 1970s undermined this type of planning (Healey et al., 1997).

Further, master planning centred on the production of plans on paper, with little attention to implementation (Njoh, 2008). The plan thus became an end in itself. It was not linked to sectoral departments or to budgets, and the institutional organisation and negotiations necessary to make it operable was seen as outside of its scope. Master planning was also often separate from development control and did not necessarily impact on these activities. Frequently planning was in a department which was not in a position to effect change after the plan was in place (Clarke, 1992; Devas, 1993). In addition, both funds and institutional capacity to give effect to the plans were lacking (Clarke, 1992).

Planning was largely a technocratic process, with little attention to social diversity and little interest in public participation. As Njoh (2008: 20) argues:

'master or comprehensive planning makes a number of assumptions of which the following are noteworthy. The first is that there is a 'one best way' for addressing any given planning problem and that trained planners—the experts—are capable of finding this 'best way.' The second is that the planning context can be controlled with modern scientific knowledge and technology. The third is that there is a common identifiable public interest. Finally, there is the belief that planning of the top-down variety—that is, centralized planning—is capable of effectuating socio-economic change.'

The social, political and economic dynamics shaping the city and driving change were typically neglected, as were the many actors and interests involved, and the probability of conflicting interests. Too much power was accorded to the plan. The anti-urban and modernist strand of master planning has also been widely critiqued, particularly its failure to accept and accommodate urban growth and informality, and the repressive actions taken against informal dweller and traders in the name of planning (Harris, 1983; UN-Habitat, 2009). The master plan was also difficult to enforce due to its inability to manage informal growth and the lack of capacity to implement regulations. Estimates of future urban growth were typically low, and soon outstripped by actual growth, exacerbating these problems (Devas, 1993).

Other criticisms were that plans attempted to be 'too comprehensive, covering all possible aspects, like a mini national development plan, rather than focusing on key issues (Ahmed, 1989: 8)' (Devas, 1993: 72). Nevertheless, land use and physical planning remained the central concern, with little attention to environmental, economic and social dimensions (Devas, 1993; McNeil, 1983).

In response to these critiques, new approaches to planning have emerged. New forms of planning are encapsulated in the Global Planner's Network document on 'Reinventing Planning', which defines principles for planning (Farmer et al., 2006). These include, inter alia:

- a focus on sustainability;
- integration between sectors and with budgets;
- participatory planning, bringing in a wide range of stakeholders;
- understanding markets and producing credible plans, backed by public investment where appropriate;
- recognition of the reality of informal settlements and slums;
- development of contextually appropriate, affordable, strategic and effective forms of planning and land use management; and
- pro-poor and inclusive planning, recognising diversity.

In the European context, spatial planning has shifted from focusing purely on land use towards an emphasis on the spatial integration of sectors and policies. Strategic spatial planning has become significant over the past decade as a way of shaping urban growth. In contrast to master planning, there is a strong emphasis on inclusive stakeholder participation processes, and planning focuses only on key strategic elements (Healey, 2006; Watson, 2008). Nevertheless, new forms of master planning focused on urban design have emerged since the 1980s in the context of large property led urban regeneration initiatives in the United Kingdom. Critics argue that these approaches are also inappropriate due to their static nature and their marginalisation of social questions (Giddings & Hopwood, 2006).

In developing country contexts, strategic structure planning, drawing from an action planning base, has been used by UN-Habitat in post-conflict situations (UN-Habitat, 2009). Integrated Urban Infrastructure Development Planning (IUIDP) attempted to provide an alternative form of planning, linking infrastructure development to planning (Singh & Steinberg, 1996). IUIDP involved the development of a city level strategic plan, linking infrastructure development and budgets, and included a broad Physical and Environmental Development Plan (PEDP). Similar initiatives have occurred in Tanzania, with its Strategic Urban Development Plan. There has however been some debate over the efficacy of this type of planning. In India, Indonesia and Nepal, planning of this sort was in some cases displaced by master planning or was marginalised as a consequence of political and institutional processes (Mattingly, 2001; Mattingly & Winarso, 2000). In Tanzania, there are debates over whether the Strategic Urban Development Plan is adequate to guide land development, and there are pressures to return to master planning (Kasala, 2008). While there are often political reasons for the return to master planning, these tensions are also indicative of the persistence of old ideas and approaches persist, and the need for exploration of alternatives. The following section considers the evolution of spatial planning in South Africa, and debates around these issues.