

The Perfect Plan

By Henrik Valeur and Claus Peder Pedersen, 2005

Imagine a perfectly planned, organized and controlled environment. A world of order, beauty and harmony. Welcome to the Öresund region!

A region in which planning has been used as an instrumental tool for the egalitarian ideals of the welfare state, which have evolved through the latter half of the 20th century. An approach which has been tremendously successful in managing and regulating nearly every physical aspect of the environment, creating a thoroughly planned society.

Now, imagine that this society no longer exists, and that all we are left with is its omnipresent (physical) mould.

This region, with no “real” problems, is suddenly confronted with the immense challenge of letting go of old ideals in the face of a new reality.

A reality based on the destabilizing factors of globalization, migration and communication in the broadest sense. The exchange of people, knowledge, goods, lifestyles, etc. poses a challenge to societies everywhere, but not in least to the quite homogeneous Scandinavian countries. In light of these developments it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a unifying planning concept.

The Paradox

Critique of this unifying planning concept is far from new. In 1966 Johan Fjord Jensen wrote the following about Albertslund, one of the most carefully planned suburbs of Copenhagen, in the Book *Homo Manipulatus*: “An urban harmony has arisen as the result, spanning from the reasonable placement of social institutions, to the equally well considered traffic measures, down to the smallest design. Even the door signs are kept within the same purist cubistic style as the houses, even the playgrounds are constructed

according to architectonic considerations whereby the swings correspond with each other like the lines in a Mondrian painting... Is nothing then at all wrong? Well, yes, the paradox is that nothing is wrong in all of this functional artfulness.”

A New Reality

For decades, urban planning has been using regulations and restrictions in an effort to separate nature from urbanity, public from private, living from working - good from bad.

Since 1948 the famous “Finger Plan” has been the overall guiding principle for urban development of the metropolitan area of Copenhagen.

Basically, the “Finger Plan” prescribes urban growth along the main infrastructures around Copenhagen. These infrastructures emanate radially from the historic center of Copenhagen creating urban “fingers” separated by cohesive green areas. The image of the hand imposed on the map is probably nothing more than an easily recognizable description of this plan. But it is also tempting to see it as an image of the planner keeping a firm grip on the city.

Today, the grip has loosened. Nature flourishes in the city and communication (an essential feature of the city) is now possible almost everywhere throughout nature. Meanwhile, public spaces are being invaded and transformed by cell phones, surveillance kits and private bodyguards, the town square is a 28” screen at home and Big Brother captures the most intimate details of your private life. And everywhere utter ugliness and sublime beauty are mixed in intricate new combinations.

In addition to this hybridization of our physical environments, the notion of common interest and long-term perspectives - the backbone of planning - are now rapidly vanishing in a gulf of individual interests. Neighboring towns are competing with each other for the same lucrative taxpayers; politicians are allowing random opinion polls dictate hard decisions and commitments; people settle (voluntarily or involuntarily) in

ghettoes or gated communities of like-minded people, avoiding direct contact with other people; and local citizens team up to protest against any new municipal intervention that might affect the value of their private real estate.

This, combined with the economic uncertainties of globalization and increased mobility powered by expanded infrastructures, creates a completely new set of challenges for the profession of planning. But maybe it also creates a completely new set of opportunities. Maybe the planning of the 21st century does not (only) have to be about regulations and restrictions. Maybe the loss of power of the traditional planner isn't such a bad thing after all.

Maybe it is the beginning of a new future for planning.

The New Generation

A new generation of young architects from the Öresund region is responding to the changing conditions of planning with a great deal of optimism.

Among them are the groups presented here: BLANKSPACE · COPENHAGENOFFICE · EFFEKT · FORCE4 · MUTOPIA · NORD · TESTBEDSTUDIO and UiD. They see the changes as an opportunity to define a different type of planner. They have no problems abandoning the idea of the master planner and the pursuit of creating a unifying vision of the city. To them it is not a loss of power or influence, but an opportunity to work with a multiplicitous city.

It could be argued that these offices work catalytically rather than synthetically. They are creating new effects and performances by maintaining and mixing disciplinary differences and viewpoints, rather than by unifying them. They seek a multidisciplinary approach in close collaborations with other fields of knowledge. Most of the offices have extended networks including other disciplines; some of them even incorporate the multidisciplinary in their office structure.

The offices share a common understanding of the challenges and potentials of contemporary planning, but use this understanding to create different niches, different

interests, which is reflected in the eight products, or tools, presented by the offices in this publication: IMAGINEERING URBANISM · ACTION PLANNING · VISIONEERING · GREEN SPOTTING · PARTICIPATORY PLANNING · HANDS UP! · BOOK OF IDEAS and PROCESS PLANNING.

One of the challenges they face is large scale planning. How is it possible to create alternatives to the traditional master plan that fixates future development in a singular image of a specific architectural design? How is it possible to develop a more dynamic, open-ended and process oriented planning? What level of overall coherence should this planning maintain?

The young architects meet this question with both an analytic and practical approach. They create analytic tools capable of processing information from a broad range of fields and of visualizing the overall impact of local interventions, to form an open-ended discussion of possibilities. And they create practical tools capable of adapting a wide variety of typologies, densities and designs without losing an overall character, to form a more open-ended planning.

Another challenge is the ever-expanding range of interest, bureaucracies and technical issues that constantly increases the complexity of planning. Some of the offices create new tools to negotiate this complexity. They develop strategies for involving and activating various users and interests in the planning through scenario games, role-plays and workshops. Others engage specific planning issues like ecology, suburbia or infrastructure to create professional niches in order to explore the potentials of these challenges.

The pragmatic acceptance of the complex mechanisms and structures of the existing world is a common starting point for these offices. A lot of energy and potential is lost in the attempts to circumvent different power structures. Why not enter them pragmatically exploring and exploiting local possibilities? That's one of the reasons why these offices do not shy away from engaging "the market", developers, users or bureaucratic structures of planning.

But don't mistake the pragmatic approach for lack of ideals or cynical opportunism. It is driven by a fascination of the possibilities and potentials of a pluralistic globalized world. A world in which planning and architecture still play an important role. But also a world that leaves space for the unplanned, the unorganized and the uncontrolled. And for new ways of planning, organizing and controlling!

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