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Back to basics in planning

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1. INTRODUCTION

> "Sometime during the 1970s, the city planning movement began to turn upside down and inside out…" (Hall, 2002: 379).

Hall's observation is not simply a historical note; it is a warning. Planning did not merely adapt to new realities; it abandoned its foundational purpose. A discipline once concerned with ordering space and guiding development in the public interest increasingly became an instrument for enabling growth, often irrespective of social consequences. The planner, traditionally positioned between competing interests as regulator and mediator, increasingly became an accomplice to short-term economic interests. In Hall's metaphor, the gamekeeper became the poacher.

This commentary argues that the crisis in planning cannot be understood purely as a professional or technical failure. It is rooted in a deeper intellectual and cultural transformation: the erosion of responsibility in modern society. Planning reflects that erosion in its theories, practices, and outcomes. To move forward, planning must return to basic principles, to a clearer understanding of human behaviour, and to a renewed commitment to responsibility. Nowhere is this more urgent than in South Africa, where planning failures intersect with broader political and economic instability.

2. HOW THE WORLD CHANGED

The broader intellectual transformation shaping modern society and that contributed to 'planning's predicament' can be understood through the work of the Dutch psychiatrist J.H. van den Berg's (1974) first work in this field *Metabletica: Of leer der veranderingen*,[1] a systematic study of the changing nature of human existence. His *metabletic* method demonstrates that human experience is not static; it changes alongside cultural and historical conditions, even when scientific knowledge appears stable (Mook, 2009: 26). In *Gedane zaken: Twee omwentelings in de Westerse geestesgeschiedenis*, Van den Berg (1977: 150) identifies two major intellectual revolutions that divide Western history into three distinct periods of thinking.

- Prior to 1700, world views were grounded in divine authority (belief in God). It was generally accepted that all power was granted by God, with theocracy as the mode of government.
- From 1700 to 1900, humanity increasingly approached the natural sciences through rational inquiry and sought to apply the same rational methods to the humanities. During this period, parliamentary democracy was regarded as the ideal form of government.
- From 1900, certainties produced by the Enlightenment were undermined. The belief in reason as the ultimate source of truth gave way to scepticism and relativism. Van den Berg characterises this condition as 'psythocracy' – rule by endless talking, debating, and opinion where decision-making is dominated by opinion rather than grounded judgment (Steÿn, 2005: 17). This concept strongly resonates with contemporary planning practice, where public processes are increasingly formed by consultation, negotiation, and compromise, often without clear direction or accountability. Everyone participates; no one is accountable.

Contemporary societies contain elements of all three eras: theological certainty, rational modernism, and postmodern relativism, because people adhere to different truths.

3. HOW PLANNING CHANGED

Planning has continually evolved alongside broader social transformations. Prior to 1700, settlement design was a craft grounded in technical knowledge and practical experience. Classical works

1 *Metabletica* appeared in 1956 and was reprinted at least 30 times in Dutch, while also being translated into English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish. His phenomenological psychotherapy and metabletics, the "psychology or doctrine of historical change", continue to be practiced worldwide, with some works also published in Japanese.

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such as those of Hippodamus and Vitruvius provided guiding principles for the organisation of space (Mumford, 1966: 202; Morgan, 1960: 17). The planner was viewed as a creator, planning cities according to order, function, and aesthetics.

Between 1700 and 1900, industrialisation disrupted this tradition. Rapid urbanisation produced new challenges, prompting both rational approaches that applied scientific methods and reformist efforts to improve living conditions (Klosterman, 1978: 37). Utopian thinkers such as Owen and Fourier offered alternative models of social organisation (Benevolo, 1978: 39). Planning thus shifted from artistry to social engineering where people would live and work together, while sharing resources and responsibilities equally.

By the 20th century, planning became institutionalised and politicised. Technologies such as the private car enabled megacity expansion. However, it also widened divides between wealthy suburbs and poorer urban cores. After the upheavals of the late 1960s, neo-Marxist perspectives reframed cities as sites of conflict between capital and labour (Steÿn, 2005: 86). Concepts such as 'citizen participation' (Arnstein, 1969) and 'social justice' (Fainstein, 2011) redirected planning attention toward 'fairness', although often at the cost of practical problem-solving. Some scholars explicitly acknowledged Marxist influence (Hall, 2002: 5; Healey, 2006:10, 27, 35), while others embedded similar assumptions more subtly. Valuable critiques sometimes replaced one dogma with another, leaving planning caught in ideological contestation.

The result is a fragmented discipline, divided between technocratic rationalism, participatory pluralism, and ideological critique. Each reflects a historical legacy, but together they leave planners uncertain of their role – expert, facilitator, activist, or bureaucrat – undermining both authority and accountability.

4. HOW PLANNING CHANGED IN SOUTH AFRICA

South African planning evolved through phases shaped by colonial control, mining, provincial governance, and post-apartheid centralisation. Floyd (1960: 37) notes that early towns under the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and later the British were laid out by government or church authorities, with simple conditions and low land values. The discovery of diamonds and gold disrupted this order. Kimberley grew chaotically, and the Witwatersrand gold rush led to the Transvaal Gold Law of 1871 (Floyd, 1960: 39). After the Anglo-Boer War, speculative township development flourished, prompting the Transvaal Ordinance No. 57 of 1903 to regulate urban growth (Floyd, 1960: 40).

South Africa's spatial challenges cannot be understood without reference to its deeper settlement history. The Khoi and San followed migratory patterns tied to grazing and game (SAHRC, 2018: 38). Later, Bantu-speaking groups,[2] originating from central West Africa, introduced settled agriculture in roughly 1000 BC (Diamond, 2006: 388; Bruwer, 1970: 49), with kinship-based social orders varying between patrilineal and matrilineal structures.

European settlement, beginning with the VOC in 1652, brought new economic and spatial systems. British colonial expansion consolidated political control, changing governance across the Cape, Free Burgher republics, independent states such as Natalia, the Orange Free State, and the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, African kingdoms, and even the Mier Republic ("*Land de Kalahari Woestyn*") founded by Dirk Vilander in 1865 (Erasmus, 1997: 115).

With the Union state in 1910, town planning became a provincial matter. Provinces introduced ordinances and schemes, learning from one another's successes and failures. Before zoning, land use was controlled through title deed restrictions, but zoning soon became dominant, protecting property values and stabilising markets ('zoning and plat[3] control') (Floyd, 1971:18; Hall, 2002: 62). Floyd (1971: 80) shows how planners predicted land-use percentages by town size and income levels, influencing residential lots, commercial areas, and shopfronts. This system faltered after the 1973 oil crisis, which triggered stagflation and widespread job losses. The Union[4] also institutionalised racial segregation in land allocation (Steÿn, 2005: 95), embedding inequality into planning practice.

Democracy in 1994 brought centralisation. The Development Facilitation Act (DFA) of 1995 required municipalities to set Land Development Objectives (LDOs), later repeated after amalgamation, intended to strengthen financial and technical capacity (Steÿn, 2004: 57). In practice, costs rose and inefficiencies multiplied, as noted in Mangaung, where council salaries nearly doubled (Gericke, 2011). SPLUMA (Republic of South Africa, 2013),[5] further consolidated municipal authority, requiring annual reviews of Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and five-year revisions of Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs). Municipal Planning Tribunals were mandated, but many municipalities lack the capacity to manage even basic budgets, undermining implementation. These historical processes produced spatial inequalities that persist at present (Terreblanche, 2014: 58). Post-1994 planning has attempted to address them, but often without adequately considering economic realities or institutional capacity. It is all about money and not about the people of the country. Afrikaners and other

2 Bruwer (1970: 49-52) found that the 'Bantu' are "distinguished from the Negroes" of Western Africa.

3 Plat control (subdivision regulation) is the process of mapping a piece of land to divide it into smaller, defined parcels (lots) for sale or development.

4 Union of South Africa Act was established by a 1909 law of both Houses of the British parliament, with blacks excluded from political power.

5 Under SPLUMA, each of the nine provinces must adopt its own planning law and each municipality its own bylaws. Yet some provinces, such as the Free State, have not done so, leaving open the question of how many have complied

peoples (*volke*) find themselves in the midst of neo-colonialism and a third British occupation through the ANC government[6] (Steÿn, 2025: 10). George Soros confirmed this sentiment at Davos in 2001, stating: "Today South Africa is very much in the hands of the international capital" (Bond, 2003: vii).

5. RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most visible outcomes of the fragmented planning discipline is the imbalance between rights and responsibility. Contemporary discourse emphasises human rights, labour rights, and environmental rights, while often neglecting the corresponding responsibilities.

In planning, this imbalance manifests in the elevation of participation as an unquestioned good. Public input can enrich decision-making, but it cannot substitute for expertise, judgment or accountability. As Steÿn (2004) argued, participation without insight leads to decisions without direction and produces outcomes without future prospects.

At the same time, economic and political systems fail to provide adequate alternatives. The dominant ideologies of modern governance – capitalism and socialism – both exhibit structural weaknesses. Capitalism, in its ideal form, relies on dispersed power and competitive markets. In practice, market mechanisms fail when power is concentrated among a small number of actors, undermining the assumptions underlying market efficiency. Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' (when no player is big enough to influence the market) no longer operates effectively in such conditions (Skinner, 1981). Socialist and state-centred approaches, on the other hand, concentrate authority within government institutions. While intended to promote fairness, they often produce inefficiency, corruption, and lack of responsiveness. Centralised systems struggle to adapt to local conditions and complex realities.

Spier's (1972: 93) observation remains relevant. A state requires both law and power.[7] When power is exercised without law, governance becomes authoritarian; when law exists without power, the state loses its ability to function. Modern states frequently shift between these extremes.

A more balanced approach is found in theories such as Kuyper's 'sphere sovereignty', which recognises the autonomy of different social institutions (Kalsbeek, 1970: 89; Van Riessen, 1973: 85). It recognises that society consists of multiple autonomous spheres – economic, political, cultural, and familial – each with its own responsibilities. This perspective suggests that neither the market nor the state should dominate all aspects of life. Instead, planning should create conditions in which individuals and communities can act responsibly within their own spheres (Steÿn, 1997: 62).

6. SOUTH AFRICAN PLANNING UNDER STRAIN

South Africa provides a stark illustration of the tensions in planning. Despite political transformation, economic power remains concentrated within the Mineral-Energy Complex (Terreblanche, 2014: 58). Planning systems have changed, but the underlying structures of inequality and centralisation persist.

These weaknesses are visible in the performance of the state. Justice is undermined when the vast majority of the accused in the Zondo Commission[8] have not been charged, and only a fraction of the 26,323 murders recorded in 2024 (an average of 71 per day) result in arrests and convictions (Van der Watt, 2025). Such failures in law enforcement and the justice system cast doubt on the state's ability to uphold its governing responsibilities.

At the municipal level, the picture is equally troubling. In 2023-2024, only 16% of the municipalities (41 of 256) achieved clean audits (SA Law Commission, 2025: 6; SA Auditor-General, 2025), while 151 were deemed 'bankrupt and insolvent', unable to meet obligations to creditors, the South African Revenue Service, or pension funds (UKESA, 2022). These financial crises translate directly into service delivery failures, from water supply to waste management, eroding public trust.

Planning instruments such as the Development Facilitation Act (1995), SPLUMA (Republic of South Africa, 2013), and Integrated Development Plans were intended to rationalise spatial governance. Yet, in practice, they have added bureaucratic complexity without improving implementation (Steÿn, 2004: 57). Centralisation has ignored vast differences in local capacity, particularly in rural municipalities, compounding the strain already evident in state and municipal performance.

Housing policy illustrates the contradiction most clearly. Large numbers of houses have been built, but often far from employment opportunities. Blumenfeld's (1979: 197) observation remains relevant. People need jobs, not houses. Without economic integration, housing provision alone cannot sustain communities. These examples show how concentrated economic power, weak governance, and misaligned planning instruments reinforce one another, leaving South African planning under severe strain.

7. GLOBAL PLANNING DISRUPTIONS

Currently, planning operates within an environment of unprecedented complexity. Globalisation,

6 'Engels! Engels! Alles Engels! Engels wat jy sien en hoor…' (English! English! Everything English! English that you see and hear…) a historic 'struggle poem' and that under a constitution that promise 12 official languages!

7 'Reg en mag' in Afrikaans. The founding function of the state is that it is a legal entity while the destination function makes the exercise of law possible through the power of the sword.

8 The Zondo Commission (2018–2022), led by Justice Raymond Zondo, was a South African judicial inquiry into state capture, corruption, and fraud during Jacob Zuma's presidency, costing taxpayers about ZAR 1 billion.

technological change, and geopolitical instability are influencing the context in which cities develop. Three major transformations identified by Steÿn (2004: 55) – systems thinking, public participation, and globalisation – have been joined by a fourth, namely digital transformation. Artificial intelligence represents a particularly significant challenge as it is already embedded in everyday systems (Hall, 2026), and influencing labour markets and economic structures (Graham, 2025). Predictions that automation could replace large numbers of jobs (Mancini, 2025) raise fundamental questions about the future of work and urban economies. If employment patterns change dramatically, the spatial organisation of cities will inevitably follow.

At the same time, geopolitical tensions threaten economic stability. Rising energy costs, potential food shortages, and military conflicts (Werz, 2026; Terreblanche, 2026) create additional pressures on already fragile urban systems. These developments highlight the vulnerability of interconnected global systems. Planning cannot ignore these forces. Planning frameworks, however, often assume stability and predictability, and continuous growth. However, in practice, they are poorly equipped to deal with rapid and systemic change. This mismatch further undermines their effectiveness.

8. BACK TO BASICS: JANE JACOBS' FUNDAMENTALS

In the face of this complexity, Jacobs' work offers a remarkably grounded perspective. A Google search on the best books in planning places Jacobs' *The death and life of great American cities* (1961) at number one. Based on her experiences in New York, the book examines the inner city, conditions for diversity, forces of decline and regeneration, and tactics for renewal. While this work revealed her genius, Jacobs' deeper relevance for South Africa lies in *Cities and the wealth of nations* (1985) and *Dark age ahead* (2004). Yet planning nowadays is often dominated by power, neglecting Jacobs' emphasis on the basic rules for cities and regions.

For Jacobs (1985: 39), economic life depends on innovation and import replacement. Cities prosper when they develop their own productive capacities rather than relying on external inputs. Growth is driven by the expansion of local capabilities. She identifies five major economic forces essential for growth, namely urban markets; expansion through urban work; technology to increase productivity; transfer of urban jobs, and urban-generated capital (Jacobs, 1985: 47). Expansion, she argues, derives from city import replacement (Jacobs, 1985: 42), not from population influx. Cities, regions, or countries that fail to reach this stage remain supply regions, exporting raw products such as minerals, timber, or basic foods.

In *Dark age ahead*, Jacobs (2004: 24) warns that cultures collapse when stabilising forces themselves are undermined. These include families, rigged to fail as nuclear family and community structures collapse; education, rigged to fail when credentials are pursued over genuine learning; free thought in science; representational government and responsible taxation, as well as corporate and professional accountability.

Jacobs (2004: 103) stresses that "government and public institutions works best – most responsibly and responsively – when it is transparent and accountable". Institutional collection and distribution of taxes function most responsibly when citizens can perceive and understand how their money is used. She further cautions that "greed becomes, culturally admired as competence, and false or unrealistic promises as cleverness" (Jacobs, 2004: 114).

9. BACK TO BASICS FOR SOUTH AFRICA

If planning is to recover its relevance, it must confront uncomfortable realities. Neither centralised state planning nor unregulated market forces can address current challenges. Both models have failed in practice. After 32 years in power, the ANC government is failing to ensure safety or economic well-being. President Cyril Ramaphosa admitted that "more than 29 million poor, unemployed and vulnerable South Africans" receive grants (Willemse, 2026). This reflects dependency rather than success, especially as nearly 20% of the 2024-2025 budget is spent on interest (Horne, 2024). Corruption and the lack of accountability have led to collapsing health services, municipalities, infrastructure, utilities, and semi-state companies. Once largely self-sufficient, South Africa now imports even basic materials such as steel.

The alternative is not a new grand theory, but a return to basic principles, combined with a willingness to embrace diversity. Steÿn (2019: 110) proposes that South Africa consider differentiated regional approaches, allowing communities to pursue development paths aligned with their values and capacities. Watson (2019: 26) similarly emphasises the importance of recognising difference in the Global South.

Democracy has become a contest of promises rather than delivery. Colonialism united diverse peoples into one state, but with few import-replacement cities and many supply regions. Historical examples reinforce this argument. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia illustrates the limits of imposed uniformity (Britannica Editors, 2026; Lampe, 2026). While such processes can be disruptive, they highlight the importance of aligning governance structures with social realities. South Africa faces growing divisions. The ANC's unity, once rooted in the anti-apartheid struggle, is now weakened by corruption, ideological rifts, and tensions between globalists and traditionalists (Steÿn, 2005: 179). The Zulu king opposed land expropriation, demanded removal of "Natal" from KwaZulu-Natal, and declared that foreign nationals must leave: "we will just tell them

to leave, no one can claim that he does not have his own homeland" (Mavuso, 2026). Afrikaners and others may also demand self-determination under Article 235 of the Constitution (Steÿn, 2019: 110).

South Africa must confront both Marxist ideology, which supports poverty, and neo-colonial free-market globalism, which also deepens misery. Progress requires independent control of resources and the courage to expose harmful policies. Van Zyl (2026) cites Auron MacIntyre's *The total state* (2024): "Our next phase of civilization will focus on a very different set of characteristics, and those who make it through will be those who deny themselves comfort and luxury while actively choosing duty and responsibility."

Planning stands at a crossroad. It can continue on its current path – fragmented, reactive, and politically constrained – or it can return to its foundational purpose: guiding development in a way that balances freedom, order, and responsibility. Planning must reclaim its focus on responsibility. This requires a shift in mindset. From rights without obligations to responsible citizenship; from centralisation to institutional balance; from redistribution to productive capacity, and from ideological rigidity to practical reasoning.

Ultimately, planning cannot solve societal problems in isolation. It reflects broader cultural and political conditions. But it can provide a framework for responsible action. Hayek's warning in *The road to serfdom* remains relevant. Freedom entails responsibility, and attempts to eliminate inequality through coercion, risk destroying both. The challenge is not to choose between equality and freedom, but to recognise their tension and manage it wisely.

The uncomfortable truth is that no system, whether capitalist, socialist, or technocratic, can compensate for a society that abandons responsibility. Those communities that embrace responsibility will shape their futures. Those that do not will be shaped by forces beyond their control.

Planning must decide which side of that divide it will stand on. If it fails to do so, it risks becoming irrelevant – an administrative exercise detached from the realities it seeks to influence.

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