From the editors:

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PLANNING UNDER UNCERTAINTIES

In recent years, urban areas have been experiencing a plethora of challenges that range from socio-economic, environmental, and governance issues that are increasingly complicating the urban and regional planning profession. Rapid urbanisation in many countries, especially in the Global South, has been attributed to the increasing demand for urban services. In the vast majority of instances, however, these urban areas fail to cater for the needs of the burgeoning populations, resulting in endemic urban dilemmas. Similarly, the available urban opportunities and services fail to cater for the needs of the urbanites. The demand for many services and opportunities such as housing, healthcare, employment, as well as water and sanitation seems to be compromised, with low-income households bearing much of the brunt of these challenges through limited access to opportunities. Inequalities are magnified in these instances as the distribution and allocation of urban services and opportunities tend to be along income lines. Increasing informality and urban decay are signs of the failure of urban systems to provide adequate opportunities and create habitable spaces for urbanites.

While multiple factors may be attributed to these challenges in urban areas, planning is considered a panacea for addressing many urban dilemmas. This perspective is presented by Alexander (1981: 137) who argues that planning is the "deliberate social or organisational activity of developing an optimal strategy of future action to achieve a desired set of goals, for solving novel

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problems in complex contexts, and attended by the power and intention to commit resources and to act as necessary to implement". For some, planning has been conceived as a state activity and apparatus that seeks to further the interests of the elites (Fainstein & Fainstein, 1979; Harvey, 1973). In such instances, planning has tended to accommodate the needs and aspirations of a few individuals and groups, for example, the apartheid planning system in South Africa, which deliberately segregated individuals and communities along racial lines, thereby limiting the aspirations and opportunities of some urbanites (Berrisford, 2011). The outcomes of such planning processes deviate from the principles of planning that seek to create good places through choices made by individuals and communities.

Effective planning is thus supposed to address the complex and severe problems in society, by placing communities at the centre of the planning process. The rationale is to establish plans that are created "for the people by the people", instead of top-down plans that often contradict the aspirations of the many and lead to disregard of the plan. According to Watson (2002: 28), planning involves "those intentional public actions which impact on the built and natural environment, and which are frequently accompanied by political processes of some kind. Planning is also (and not frequently) initiated by groups other than formal governments, such as non-governmental and community-based organizations, and sometimes business." From this quote, it is evident that planning is an intentional process aimed at addressing specific issues, but it is also an inherently political process, formalised through statutory planning. Statutory planning defines the norms and engage in development control, regularisation, and implementation of development controls to ensure development compliance. However, the formal government at times falls short, and non-governmental institutions and actors take on planning mandates.

In this issue, planning is a central theme that authors engage with, illustrating the central role planning plays in placemaking.

In the commentary “Back to basics in planning”, Das Steÿn begins by reflecting on the quote from Hall (2002: 379) that, “sometime during the 1970s, the city planning movement began to turn upside down and inside out…”. Steyn argues that 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.

The article by Ingwani *et al*. focuses on urban decay in the context of small towns in South Africa. In the article, Thohoyandou Town in Limpopo province as a case study, is used to examine the dynamics of urban decay in the CBD, where the built environment continues to deteriorate despite the adoption of the Thulamela Urban Development and Revitalisation Strategy. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study revealed that decay is geographically clustered

along everyday movement networks and key activity nodes. The three main factors contributing to decay are poor urban management, infrastructure deterioration, and building-related factors, reflecting weaknesses in institutional capacity and policy implementation. The integration of geospatial data with structural-element analysis provides municipalities with a spatially informed diagnostic tool for monitoring and evaluating progress in addressing urban decay. The findings suggest that resource-constrained small towns require targeted, spatially prioritised, and phased urban-regeneration approaches to effectively address urban decay.

Msingaphantsi and Gaayuoni examine the barriers to the implementation of Ghana's spatial planning agenda through an assessment of the Sekondi-Takoradi Urban Network (STUN). Using a qualitative research design, the study integrates GIS-based land-use analysis with structured interviews to assess the implementation of Ghana's polycentric development strategy and to identify barriers to STUN's functional transformation. The findings reveal four interrelated themes that shape the assessment of STUN, namely its conceptualisation as a normative, polycentric urban region; the translation of this vision into a functional, polycentric urban system; the role of urban governance in pursuing polycentricity, and the relationship among spatial planning, transport systems, and polycentric development. Despite policy commitments to balanced regional development through normative polycentric models, the study finds that STUN remains predominantly monocentric in practice. The implementation of the STUN framework is undermined by weak spatial-transport integration, limited inclusion of informal mobility providers, and poor inter-institutional coordination. Therefore, Msingaphantsi and Gaayuoni argue for strengthening regional planning institutions, improving transport-land-use integration, and formally incorporating informal mobility systems to advance polycentric

development beyond symbolic policy intentions.

De Oliveira, Okon and Rezende argue that the digitalisation of public administration and urban management continues to reshape how municipalities plan, operate, and respond to growing urban pressures. In addressing the argument, they employ document analysis to assess the extent to which selected municipal strategic documents from South African cities reflect digital priorities and align with the Strategic Digital City concept. Specifically, four case study areas are used, including Johannesburg, Cape Town, Tshwane and Mangaung. From the document analysis, the findings show that, whil all cities embed digitalisation within their strategic structures, the depth and coherence of this integration vary, with stronger emphasis placed on technological infrastructure than on digital public-service transformation. This study by De Oliveira *et al*. contributes to current urban-digitalisation scholarship, by providing a comparative account of how South African municipalities interpret and operationalise national digitalisation directives. It also highlights areas where digital strategies require further strengthening, offering a foundation for future empirical research on the implementation and impact of municipal digital initiatives.

In their article, Wagistina *et al*. analyse the perceptions of the Pendalungan community in East Java, Indonesia, towards urban sprawl. The case study area for the research is characterised as a cultural zone which is also undergoing spatial transformation. The authors argue that understandin community perceptions in this region is critical for increasing participatory development in the region. Applying a mixed-methods research design in which the Normalised Difference Built-Up Index (NDBI) was used to quantitatively measure the built-up areas density from satellite imagery while qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with community members from Pendalungan. The quantitative result of the study show significant urban sprawl which is unplanned, yet the

community perceive this urban sprawl as positive, due to the emerging socio-spatial and economic benefits. Overall, the findings illustrate a typical case of misalignment between planning policies and community needs. Recommendations proffered by Wagistina *et al*. include inclusive development strategies that strengthen public participation, align planning with local aspirations, and reduce the risk of social conflict associated with industrial and residential development.

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