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The Imaginative Institution: Planning and Governance in Madrid

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Book Review

The Imaginative Institution: Planning and Governance in Madrid

Michael Neuman

Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2010, xiii + 238 pp., (hardback), ISBN 978-1-409-40541-2

As the title suggests the focus of the book is the role of imagination in the planning of Madrid. The early chapters set this scene through references to questions such as “how to make coherent plans in an incoherent institutional setting?” (p. 4) and the intriguing remark that “[a]t times governing growth resembles a metropolitan medusa” (p. 5). This in turn leads to a discussion of the use of images in planning and the notion that “[p]olitics is at its base symbolic” (p. 6) and the way in which there has been “a shift in planning from government acting *on* cities to government acting *on* government *through* cities” (p. 6).

I find such discussions fascinating. Coming from a first discipline (Law) which is very textually based, for me the study of urban planning was the liberation of the mind through the use of image in planning. Michael Neuman maps out this use of image in planning in the first chapter and provides a framework for understanding how powerful such images will be in planning. Thus, change occurs through the intermediary of the symbol (p. 6), the image of the city plan for Madrid “was the cohering logic which kept the budding institution of metropolitan planning together” (p. 7) and images and symbols are used by political actors “to appeal to the values of society” (p. 10). Perhaps, not altogether novel concepts, but affirming nevertheless.

What makes Madrid such an interesting case study, according to Neuman, is that planners in Madrid and Spain are architects by training (p. 16). As a consequence, “Spanish plans and strategies are loaded with images” (p. 17). This is further explained in terms of the concept of “memes” which is explained as a “unit of cultural transmission” (such as tunes, ideas and catchphrases) (p. 27) and of which images are clearly a part. They link the external and the internal worlds, they “describe what is and imagine what could or should be” (p. 28). Images can also link “the individual and the institution” (p. 30). Stories, narratives, myths and legends fulfill similar roles (p. 31).

Images are a concentrated form of knowledge and content. An image fuses content, context, and meaning into a high impact, wide-spread, and widely spreadable source of power in institutions. It also is a ready resource for those who want to fight, change, or topple one. (p. 33)

On the other hand “[r]ule based theories paint clear and simple yet ultimately unsatisfying portraits of the dynamic of institutional change” (p. 36). A point that is often lost on my legal colleagues who fail to understand why a well-argued case for reform often fails!

Neuman then discusses the manner in which planning “re-discovered the plan” in the latter decades of the twentieth century. “The new urbanism put the image of the new image/suburb/town back into the plan and put design back into planning” (p. 46). This link between images of place and urban planning becomes embedded in the discourse (p. 54). Neuman cites Aldo Rossi on the point “that the politics of the city cannot be separated from the planning and architecture that constructs it” (p. 56).

What then follows from these contextual chapters is the story of the planning of Madrid. At this point, it is clear that Neuman has a respect for this story and a deep understanding of the history of Madrid’s planning. The power of the image is ever present as is the tensions between various institutions of government and the competing images of the city held by various political actors and the citizenry. Chapter 6 attempts to bridge the case study with the theoretical insights it provides. To be fair to Neuman at this stage, I had become so overwhelmed with the historical detail he provides in the planning history of the Madrid that his analysis seemed to me to have strayed somewhat from his opening chapters’ emphasis on image and imagination. He introduces a discussion on the role of informality in this chapter which is clearly relevant, but at this point, I did wonder if the book’s ambition was becoming too grand. He does, however, summarize in this chapter, the role of images in Madrid and in that sense returns to the central theme of the work. By the end of the work, he also summarizes the peculiar nature of Madrid’s planning which renders the example not readily transferable to other countries: “highly interventionist, technical-political, and architect dominated” (p. 177). I would have liked to have seen a little more discussion of the role of architects in the process—but that is more for my own curiosity rather than any criticism of the work.

This work places planning in an important context and provides an in depth study of Madrid which demonstrates many aspects of the role of image. It is a work that immediately reminded me of Paul Carter’s *Dark Writing* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2009) and will appeal to those who think about planning in a similar way.

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