

Planning and the public interest in the modern world

Sir Patrick Geddes Commemorative Lecture 2006

Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland and the Saltire Society

**Royal Society of Edinburgh
June 9, 2006**

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Introduction

Good evening. My sincere thanks to the Minister, Malcolm Chisholm, who now has a very *'well kent'* face in the planning community. I am grateful for your time when I guess that the last thing you really want is yet another rant about (what you should be doing about) the future of land use planning and (of course) the new world order.

My deep felt thanks to the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland and to the Saltire Society for the kind invitation to present the Third Sir Patrick Geddes Commemorative Lecture. It is a daunting task to be associated with the name of Geddes; and, even more, to do so in the long shadow thrown by his ideas which still brim with considerable relevance and freshness today.

It is also daunting to follow in the footsteps of Jonathon Porritt and Raymond Young. In their commemorative lectures, both gave enormously refreshing insights into how land use planning, property development and environmental management still have substantive roles to play in enhancing the wellbeing of Scotland, and of our diverse communities of interest, place and identity. That role is clearly about reconciling competing economic, social and environmental priorities, and in the oft quoted words of Sam Galbraith of *'addressing the wicked issues'*.

That is essentially the remit of what I would like to touch on with respect to the public interest both as a concept and its content for land use planning. I believe that the public interest is the forgotten dimension to

the modernisation of land use planning – and it goes much further than simply stating and re-stating the purpose of land use planning in a modern world. As Geddes stated:

As in all true progress, we must not only comprehend and transform the environment without but develop our life within.

Jonathon Porritt's recently published book – Capitalism as if the world really mattered – asserts an optimism about the state of nature, the relationship between the business world and the environment, and the perceptions and willingness of societies, communities and individuals to engage with current agendas. This evening I will present a rather more contrary view – one that is much more pessimistic, declinist and even dismal in nature. My fear is that we now live in an ever more dynamic, dangerous and uncertain world. I fear that without an unambiguous re-assertion of the public interest (in general) and for land use planning (in particular) we will not get to grips that that uncertain world.

In his book - The Great Unravelling: Losing Our Way in the New Century, the US economist Professor Paul Krugman states

A lot has happened these past times.....-stock market decline and business scandal, energy crisis and environmental backsliding, budget deficits and recession, terrorism and troubled communities.

To which I would be tempted to add climate change, sectarianism, racism, community violence, ill health, political complacency, personal greed, conspicuous consumption, collective myopia and the disenfranchisement of individuals and neighbourhoods.

Paul Ormerod in his recent book (Why Most Things Fail) questions why government designs interventions, measures and policy initiatives which seek to mimic the perceived (and artificial) business economic model. This itself is flawed, and does not work perfectly, as indeed it is assumed to do. If the model does not work, why try to replicate it?. It is clearly time for land use planning to be seen to be different, and to deal with the intricate and complex land use planning and development issues and relationships in a more realistic manner.

In populist terms we could call these prevailing conditions as indicative of the 'post-modern', and yet with the land use planning system as we have it today (and even with land use planning modernisation) we are attempting to manage change and conflict using a model which was forged in the age of modernity. This would suggest a very fundamental tension in practice.

Whilst the land use planning reforms are an exciting re-configuration of what was already in the land use planning system – the National Planning Framework, development hierarchy, development management and the opportunities for greater civil engagement – these mimic the apparatus which was already in place. The invocation of a needed culture change is new, and needed but is it enough? I would argue that we need to re-invent a much deeper thinking around the public interest concept and shopping list to guide the new land use planning system.

The importance of context

My presentation is based on a personal celebration of 30 years of being fortunate enough to live and work in Scotland, engaging with ideas associated with land use planning and development, of observing and having the privilege of meeting and working with a vast array of challenging people – across and within very different communities, in professional practice and policy communities, and in the planning academy – and I will draw on these diverse influences in my presentation.

Indeed, I should declare that notwithstanding my very pessimistic outlook, I would point to many examples of innovation in land use planning practice in the last 30 years in Scotland: the introduction of National Planning Guidelines, which represent a considerable innovation in devising a strategic approach to land use planning practice and priority setting, joined up strategic spatial planning in areas as diverse as the Highlands and Islands, the North East of Scotland and the West Central belt, and the reliance on robust forecasting led land use planning in areas of growth. Indeed as Urran Wannop showed in his learned discussion of regionalism in west central Scotland, the lessons learned here have been of international significance, and have travelled far afield.

Early in my career, I was fortunate enough to work alongside Professor JB McLoughlin – an Olympian in terms of developing ideas and thinking around land use planning – and his early death robbed us of a philosopher par excellence about the changing spirit and purpose of land use planning in contemporary society. Brian taught me never ‘not to contextualise’. He argued that we always need to position land use planning in the bigger picture, and that will enable us to understand the individual ‘episodes’ that take place.

This position is confirmed by the work of others. Professor Sir Peter Hall (in his magisterial book *Cities in Civilisation*) demonstrates there is always a need to maintain cognisance of the bigger picture, particularly with respect to the very pressing shifts in technology, economic structures, ideas and governance arrangements. All these dynamic changes impact

on our attempts as a society at large to devise a land use planning system which is, in the words of Jim McKinnon, 'fit for purpose'.

Criticisms of land use planning

There can be little doubt that the land use planning apparatus, processes, outcomes and operation are criticised from all quarters – from within government, by government agencies, by the private sector, by the business community, by think tanks (often in very graphic language), by academics, by community groups, and by the public at large.

What are the grounds for this criticism? Essentially it rests on the perceived under-performance of the land use planning in practice. The critiques rest on a shifting composite of deficits around efficiency, effectiveness, equity and performance. Yet these are very different perspectives about land use planning practice, and may well be missing the point. Is a delay in getting development onto the ground the result of a procedural delay, of political interference or a lack of an available infrastructure resource? Or is it a failure to ensure that land use planning is in a position to 'join up' key decisions? These are very different things and have to be addressed in very different ways.

This confusion about the role of land use planning is not new of course. As JK Galbraith observed wryly:

For a public official to be called a planner was less serious than to be charged with communism or imaginative perversion, but reflected adversely nonetheless

In light of this barrage of criticism, frustration and exasperation with land use planning I would like to examine the changing role of the public interest. This is the hidden dimension of land use planning practice. My argument is a simple one. The villain of the piece is not the land use planning system itself although that does not negate the need for modernisation, it is the lack of a clear understanding and articulation of the public interest to which it is working.

The erosion, dilution and labile nature of the public interest has isolated land use planning from its principal economic and social purpose. To regain a sense of what land use planning is trying to do, we need to re-assert the public interest, and arguably only once we have achieved this can we then engage in a meaningful modernisation of land use planning.

Today, I will argue that our overly focussed concern with the mechanics of land use planning is in danger of missing that big canvas. Land use planning cannot be disentangled from the wider forces of change. nor can

land use planning and its modern idiom, spatial planning, operate effectively in a vacuum where there should be a public interest.

We must beware then of making instrumental changes and responses and seek the opportunity for a more transformative outcome. We should also be cautious about 'reinventing the wheel' and perhaps take the time to critically reflect on insights from the past. Action is imperative in deciding on the role of the public interest, and what is really is. Only then can land use planning do its job for the wellbeing of us all.

Towards a new public interest?

My colleague and friend Professor Mark Tewdwr Jones, in a recent paper discussing the planning films of John Betjeman, referred to the term 'planning wizards'. As Welshmen we are both drawn to the imagery. He has assured me that he did not invent the term, but we both agree that it is an appropriately evocative term to inform the current debates about the future of land use planning, and the real purpose that we would wish it to serve.

In order to consider the nature of the new public interest, I will draw on some selected ideas of 3 very special planning wizards. They offer some sobering and reflective ideas about the nature of the public interest and land use planning today – Patrick Geddes, Jane Jacobs and JK Galbraith.

Helen Meller, a biographer of Geddes, suggested that he was someone who

"pioneered a sociological approach to the study of urbanisation; discovered that the city should be studied in the context of the region; predicted that the process of urbanisation could be analysed and understood; [and] believed that the application of such knowledge could shape future developments towards life enhancement for all citizens'.

What can we learn from this? Essentially, Geddes had a sense of the public interest even though he may have expressed it a rather more individualistic way. Furthermore he was operating in very particular economic and social circumstances, and specific political conditions. Individualism was the dominant ideology in society at that time, and it permeated all facets of economic, community and political debate. His influence was profound, across a range of fields that are relevant today – such as the close reciprocal relationship between social and spatial structures and processes, the potential of city regionalism and the need for evidence based land use planning (the regional survey).

In the context of city-regionalism, for example, he stated in 1904:

What is the vital element which must complement our provincialism? In a single word, it is regionalism – an idea and movement which is already producing in other countries great and valuable effects.

This is a salutary insight for those engaging with devising a city regional canvas for a modern Scotland. But Geddes went further. His idea of the public interest extended to the natural world. Graham Purves, for example, has documented his influence on the development of the John Muir Trust. Today we would call such thinking rather more simplistically in terms of sustainable development agendas. .

JK Galbraith (who died recently) also offers insights into contemporary land use planning practice. In perhaps his most famous work, *The Affluent Society*, he demonstrated the importance of investment in infrastructure to support development in the public interest, and the development of the public interest. He argued that private business "creates" consumer wants (through advertising) and artificial affluence through the production of commercial goods and services. As a consequence leading to the "private wealth – public squalor" duality. Systematic attention to the infrastructure resource then becomes important for the public interest at large. Again lessons for today.

Jane Jacobs (who also died earlier this year) celebrated the need to encourage individualism within a planning framework. She advocated organic development of cities and neighbourhoods, and the nurturing of community based social capital. For her, land use planning was an essential pre-requisite for the assertion of individualism, diversity and plurality in a modern society.

These individuals were critical analysts, deep thinkers, brilliant communicators, creative dramatists and active popularisers who sought to bring the issues alive to what was (at different times) probably a disinterested and even hostile self satisfied society and polity. A strong resonance with the challenges and issues today. Their ideas did not go uncontested. Jacobs was held to be impractical, and not reflect the reality of urban politics, which are controlled by real estate developers and suburban politicians. Galbraith was held to be anti-business, and it was suggested that he sought to restrict consumer choice. Geddes is criticised for being apolitical, and for not recognising the power relations then prevailing in his specific life world.

I would suggest that all are of real relevance to present day debates about the future of land use planning in a post modern and fragile world.

Ideas are important. As John Maynard Keynes declared in his very famous book, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*:

"sooner or later, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous"

Planning and the concept of the public interest

In practice, the public interest refers to the "common well-being" or "general welfare". The concept and its content is central to policy debates, politics, democracy and the nature of government itself. While nearly everyone claims that aiding the common well-being or general welfare is positive, there is little, if any, consensus on what exactly constitutes the public interest. Indeed, the concept and articulation of the public interest is not only crucial, it is a poorly defined concept in political thinking. The public interest involves a range of issues around political thinking, legal theory, welfare economics and mediation. I will not be able to do all these justice this evening – and I apologise for my blatant reductionism.

John Dunn in his history of democracy traces the development of democracy through the maturing of political thinking and argument, the evolving forms of political organisation and the associated struggles. He notes the sophisticated articulation of our form of democracy and its relationship with free market capitalism, the articulation of private property rights, and its expression in representative and participative forms. What we mean by the public interest was and is forged in this cauldron of societal and individual change, power and influence.

There are different views on how many members of the public must benefit from an action before it can be declared to be in the public interest. Does an action have to benefit every single member of society in order to be in the public interest? Can an action benefit some and harm none and be considered to be in the public interest? Welfare economics, for example, allows for a compensation test to be applied to demonstrate a 'net' gain to society. In practice, this compensation test has only to be demonstrated to exist, it does not necessarily follow that it will be.

The public interest is often contrasted with the private or individual interest, under the assumption that what is good for society may not be good for a given individual and vice versa. The public interest is bound up with the prevailing and inherited culture in society, with the mediation and expression of power, of the construction of knowledge, of ideology and political thinking, of property rights, an rules of law – all of which make it difficult to pin down exact definitions of the concept. Indeed some observers have suggested that other issues like gender, class, race have rendered the very notion of the public interest untenable.

How do we articulate the public interest in practice? There are a number of different options here (Here I follow Campbell & Marshall, 2002). First, the virtual representation approach that the public interest can be distilled through political processes and rational deliberation. This demands a robust set of procedures, and assumptions about vested interests and ideologies. Second, the liberalism approach to the public interest is associated more with the US, and involves a greater sensitivity to pluralist societies and the need for open and transparent checks and balances. This is what Galbraith called 'a countervailing power'. The utilitarian interpretation to the public interest rests on the idea of individual happiness and reflecting that in aggregate terms as the public interest through a majority vote. Government then assumes a synoptic view, and articulates a disinterested view. This is the very essence of what we call the public interest.

The content of the public interest for land use planning

If the concept has changed then what of its content? How has the public interest fared in the transition from land use planning as part of the modernist agenda to the post modern context.

First, in 1947, for example, land use planning was tangible, recognised and able to be articulated. It was a formidable part of the welfare state. It was intended to serve the concept of the public interest as then understood and to define it in practical terms. What was its content? These were pressing matters. Slum clearance, new housing at higher standards, rebuilding of towns and cities, construction of industrial estates, council housing and community facilities, full employment, regional industrial policy – carrots and sticks – roads and infrastructure, community health and education provision, new towns, national parks (in England and Wales), environmental designations.

It was put into place in that period where social democratic ideas were paramount. Government was characterised by rationalism, bureaucratic processes and hierarchical arrangements (Weber's iron cage). These which were top down, and have been described as dirigiste and assertive. It was driven by the activities of Mark Tewdwr Jones' wizards with:

"vision, rationality and the desire to bring about change for the good of society".

It was also driven by a public interest concept that acknowledged that markets alone would not secure full employment, nor achieve that across national economic space. It also recognised that public expenditure was required to lead the market, and to provide key facilities such as infrastructure. Regulation was also accepted as the means of controlling

business where it imposed wider social costs which were not absorbed in market prices.

It was enabled too by the relatively limited rights of the citizen. Yet these were very particular times and the public interest could be set out in such practical terms. There was a confidence in asserting that form of social construction of the public interest. The citizenry was relatively passive, and the results were evident.

Arguably, by the 1960s, this very tangible, and visible concrete action agendas was well on the way to completion. This and the particular economic conditions (the long post war boom) now created very different conditions. The land use planning system and its processes of change were now being criticised. Perhaps land use planning had been too successful in that particular form.

A number of observers were critical of the way in which land use planning acted, and which appeared not always to be in the public interest. Commentators included John Rex and Robert Moore – 1967 – “Race, Community and Conflict”; Norman Dennis -1970 - 'People and Planning"; Jon Gower Davies – 1972 – “The Evangelistic Bureaucrat”; Norman Dennis - 1972, “Public Participation and Planners”; and Robert Goodman – 1972- “After the Planners”. Heady stuff!

Perhaps the most famous study of them all – by Michael Young and Peter Wilmott observed that:

Yet even when the town planners have set themselves to create communities anew as well as houses, they have still put their faith in buildings, sometimes speaking as though all that was necessary for neighbourliness was a neighbourhood unit, for community spirit a community centre. If this were so, then there would be no harm in shifting people around the country, for what is lost could soon be regained by skillful architecture and design. But there is surely more to a community than that.

This was an international experience. In North America, Jane Jacobs argued:

But look what we have built . . . low-income projects that become worse centers of delinquency, vandalism and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace. . . . Cultural centers that are unable to support a good bookstore. Civic centers that are avoided by everyone but bums. . . . Promenades that go from no place to nowhere and have no promenaders. Expressways that

*eviscerate great cities. This is not the rebuilding of cities.
This is the sacking of cities.*

We must not forget the wider changes taking place – in economic conditions, in changing political and policy ideas about planning at large and for regions and cities, the social shifts and the rise of an articulate environmental lobby. Here, the public interest became less concrete as a concept, and indeed its content began to be questioned. Indeed the state itself has been described as over-crowded. How this came about is important.

The rise of public participation, the powerful surge of neo-liberal thinking, the commodification of land and property and its associated values, the lack of interference with that landed windfall, economic growth and a very dysfunctional spatial economy have all contributed to the demise of the very concept of the public interest, and a very blurred understanding (as a result of competition over the public interest) of what it should be in practice.

My thanks to John Watchman at this juncture for reminding me of Patrick McAuslan's study of the ideologies of planning law. This identifies the competing ideas around the competing ideologies underpinning land use planning practice. The traditional common law approach to protect private property; the orthodox public administration approach to advance the public interest; and a relatively more 'populist' approach which seeks to advance public participation as a countervailing force against the other ideologies. The latter has also matured from process to more substantive concerns. At the time of writing (1981) the public interest was clearly acknowledged a role in land use planning practice.

Along the way there have been important shifts in emphasis. On the one hand, public participation as an ideological practice has become much more complex. It has matured from a simple opportunity to participate in the decision making for the future land use planning context for a locality. We can see this by looking at the intellectual threads in public participation. These ideas are set out by Heather Campbell and Robert Marshall (2000), and I paraphrase here.

Participation can be based on instrumental participation (to secure individual self interest); communitarian participation (to secure a collective well being, and based on rights and responsibilities); consumer politics (to exercise rights as a consumer and the facilitate choice); politics of presence (for social exclusion); and deliberative democracy (open dialogue and shared solutions).

I would argue that the instrumental participation and the concern with consumption have asserted themselves. Over time, however, changing

political ideas, the remorseless rise of individualism, commercialism, materialism and expectations at large have transformed the concept of the public interest.

I am reminded of a Vivienne Westwood T-shirt slogan "Be Reasonable – Demand the Impossible"!! Changing times!

On the other hand, the public interest has been subject to capture. Greater competition between private property and public participation has taken place for the public interest, along with the sublimation of the public interest in general. Arguably then, public participation in land use planning has made the concept of the public interest even more complex and layered. It has also rendered the content of the public interest more difficult as new agendas are asserted in a competitive manner.

What is the result? Sir Donald Mackay has helpfully drawn attention to the shouting loudly syndrome, which extends not only to the private sector but to the fragmented and congested elements of the public sector as well. Essentially the public interest is now invisible. It has been desiccated and filleted and to all intents and purposes does not now exist.

Essentially the public interest is now invisible. It has been desiccated and filleted and to all intents and purposes does not now exist. As Mr. David Blunkett recently asserted:

Too often people demand rights, without understanding the corollary of developing a sense of duty, a way of thinking which takes them beyond the satisfaction of their immediate personal needs into supporting their family and the broader community.

What of its content?

In a recently published and very perceptive essay, for example, Jill Grant very usefully explored the changing basis of the public interest for land use planning. She argues that, at the present time, land use planners view the public interest as an abstraction. It is now a concept that is necessarily fluid, tenuous and very context sensitive.

Land use planning has been divorced from economic policy for regional and urban regeneration. There is a lack of a spatial redistribution policy so land use planning does not have a role to play in preparing the way for new patterns of economic activity. The recent introduction of community planning completely separate from land use planning simply served to destroy the vast experience that the land use planning system had developed with respect to community engagement.

Land use planning has been made the conduit for wider social goals, but this is done in an ad hoc manner – witness the ongoing debates for the provision of affordable housing. Infrastructure, especially water and sewerage is a separate matter.

Land use planning is saddled with very complex ideas which only serve to pander to the smokescreen of democracy, and only serve to raise expectations, and the interest in Good Neighbour Agreements, Mediation and Third Party Rights Of Appeal all suggest an abject failure of the public interest to be articulated.

Society sits on a cleft stick – it has blurred consumption with politics, or choice. Richard Sennett points to the creation of the new economy, which is based on short termism, expediency, potential ability rather than achievement, a willingness to discount or abandon past experience. No critical reflection. He suggests this is indicative of 'enfeebled culture'.

Thus society wants its cake and wants to eat it - to be technologically connected but not to have to live with mobile telephony masts; to be comfortable but to contest pylons, or being to travel but not to have to tolerate motorway extensions; to be able to fly but no extra runways, thank you; to have cheap energy, but not wind-farms; to enjoy a high environmental premium but leave our green belt alone, and we are not minded to have marine national parks; to be assured of a quality of life but not to locate water and sewerage facilities.

Thus planning is not able to look forwards as we are confused about the concept of a public interest, and we cannot devise what it should be in practice. Thus land use planning is always looking over its shoulder, or glancing furtively sideways and it is certainly always moving backwards.

Indeed even in the utilitarian strand of thinking, Richard Layard in his recent book dealing with happiness argues that measuring happiness is the new science as notwithstanding our material wellbeing, we are less happy. Layard argues that we have lost that measure of happiness and that as a result people are calling out for a new articulation of the common good:

"the greatest happiness of all.....to care for others as well as ourselves"

This is a metaphor for devising a new sense of the public interest to guide society at large, and activities such as land use planning. Maybe there is a wider awareness of the need to articulate a new agenda for change.

Conclusions

The public interest is essentially the common good, or the common weal, or the community stake in a well ordered society. Thus, the intended outcomes of land use planning centre on guiding and regulating land and property developments in order to serve all our best interests. Importantly, it is acknowledged that the public interest is greater than the sum total of all the individual interests in society. This is not an easy task, but it does sit at the core of contemporary state-market-civil relations.

Today, a very real concern with devising appropriate arrangements for a land use planning for the modern world is in danger of being an instrumental response to the criticisms of planning. There is a need to re-assert, to re-discover the public interest, to define what we want for society at large and how land use planning can go out and achieve it. What is needed?

Will Hutton (2005) in an elegant essay about land use planning stated:

that, in turn, requires a richer national conversation in which all the phenomena that connect - insecurity, inequality, distrust of the new, disbelief that private ambitions can have public benefits and scepticism about the effectiveness of any public action - are openly talked about and resolutions sought. That requires politicians prepared to dare and citizens prepared to respond.

Richard Layard in his study of Happiness adds:

Human beings have largely conquered nature but they still have to conquer themselves.

We still have a long way to go, particularly if we recall JK Galbraith who observed

Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everybody gets busy on the proof.

Today the public interest is much more layered, atomistic, contested and is something competed over by various different interests. In short, the public interest is difficult to define and assert, and this is where the problems for land use planning begin.

Thank you for your patience – you have been very kind.

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