

Is justice in the city a quixotic dream?

Brenman, Marc and Thomas W. Sanchez. *Planning as if people matter : governing for social equity*. Washington, DC : Island Press, 2012.

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There could not be a more turbulent time in the world than the present: global economic stagnation, climate change, stark differences between Liberals and Conservatives, regional shifts, toppling of totalitarian régimes, growing economic inequality, ethnic conflicts, etc. Emerging within this turmoil is social/political movements such as: the Occupy Movement; the Progressive Movement; the Arab Spring; the spontaneous overt and underground protests in China; Latin American participatory democracy; African democracy movements and protests in Europe over austerity programs. In addition, there are an increasing number of Non-Profit Organizations, which operate at various scales and which are often tied either directly or indirectly to these movements. One of the major themes of all these movements and groups is social equity; being played out primarily on the urban scale; directly impacting the arena that planners operate. Such is the 'stuff' that Brenman and Sanchez attempt to tackle in their book, focusing on the U.S. cities/regions. However, many of the issues could be seen in cities in other countries.

Although issues of social equity are inherent in all aspect of urban projects and planning, they are often ignored, or given perfunctory attention. Although minorities and historically unrepresented groups are more vocal in local government, the situation is still woefully unbalanced. Developers, corporations, businesses and well-connected neighborhood groups from middle to high income neighborhoods set the agenda for urban planning and policy. Public participation is often informational, treating plans and projects as *faits accomplis* by public officials and planners. Brenan and Sanchez tackle the issues of social equity head on and continually remind the reader of the centrality of social issues in planning. One classic example of an urban related project with negative social impacts mentioned in the book is the construction of the Interstate Highway and Defense Highway System which destroyed many inner city minority neighborhoods and moved jobs away from the central city. Although the authors recognize there has been progress in confronting issues of participation and equity, they remind us that much of this is superficial; allowing for greater improvement.

The subjects covered in this book are unwieldy, complicated, fuzzy and controversial, but the authors manage to establish the right balance without the discussion becoming too ethereal. Some of the chapters could be books in themselves. One of the aspects that was bold in this book was that inequality in the U.S. was not solved by various legislation to improve the social and economic situation of minorities as many corporations, government boards, and the planning profession are still havens for white men, there are more African-Americans and Hispanics in prison, bank loans are still difficult for minorities, and the upper mobility of those in the lower income rungs have been getting worse. They stress monitoring programs quantitatively to access their progress. Another chapter that was noteworthy was that concerning technology. Social media, the Internet etc. is becoming integral components of society. In the case of both protests related to the Arab Spring and the Occupy

Movement, social media has been a major component for mobilization. However, the problem is also the growing 'haves and have not's' in use of technology. These are lofty topics, but also real ones in urban environments which should be addressed better by urban/regional planners. The authors cajole those involved with the governance of cities to put social equity at the forefront.

This book challenges the reader and touched on many issues that have been overlooked by other urban related books. Most urban planning revolves serving politicians, maintaining regulations, preparing grants, doing studies and helping the local government to comply with Federal and State laws. Planners who take on social equity issues would not be warmly greeted in many cities, where planners are perceived as 'good soldiers' and not mediators in the political process. In the present climate where citizens and politicians are polarized, planners are expendable if they challenge the status quo too vigorously. In an economic atmosphere where professional jobs are scarce, urban planners are naturally constrained to propose innovative solutions. The ability of urban planners to address these social equity issues is dependent on an appropriate political atmosphere where citizens and local politicians are aggressively pushing for change. The authors are very much aware of the political 'landmines' that planners must traverse and suggest pragmatic solutions for introducing social equity into planning.

Overall, I was impressed by this book. I would definitely recommend it for practicing planners, urbanists, within and outside of academia, and to be used in classes on urban planning, urban politics or public administration. Urban/regional planners have a difficult task as mediators and experts. However, planning is innately political within a complex, fractal and chaotic urban environment. Urban planners are charged with assisting the public and public officials to aid in better decision-making. They can also become the scapegoats of the public and politicians. If one is seeking a situation that is calm, predictable, defined and reaching some ultimate state, planning will never approach this. However, an urban planner realizes s/he has the ability to transform urban environments to be places where: social/economic mobility can occur, people can be assured of environmentally safe water and air; there is tolerance/acceptance; and each citizen can participate in local governance regardless of income, minority status or influence.