



Fall 1967

## Altshuler, Alan A., *The City Planning Process: A Political Analysis*

Robert Warren

### Recommended Citation

Robert Warren, *Altshuler, Alan A., The City Planning Process: A Political Analysis*, 7 NAT. RES. J. 666 (1967).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol7/iss4/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *The City Planning Process: A Political Analysis*

By

ALAN A. ALTSHULER

Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1965.

Pp. ix, 466, \$8.50

A current anomaly in the public sector is reflected in an increasing demand for urban planning occurring simultaneously with the accumulation of evidence that planners have had little impact upon the development of cities. This call for more urban planning is growing and is being made a condition for receiving funds in many federal programs. Thus, if planners are to improve their performance serious effort will have to be made to identify what valuable inputs they can make to public decisions and what strategies can be devised to have these inputs utilized. Alan A. Altshuler's *The City Planning Process* contributes to this task.

One goal of the book is to describe political and administrative obstacles that exist for city planning. Another is to judge urban planners in terms of their possession of two attributes which Altshuler posits as necessary if the "ideal of comprehensive planning" is to be achieved: an understanding of the overall public interest, and casual knowledge which enables a gauging of the approximate net effect of proposed actions on the public interest. However, the implications of the inquiry extend beyond planning itself.

Altshuler believes that the study of specific cases of municipal planning may shed light on fundamental characteristics of the American political system and provide insights for making broadly-oriented planning that is acceptable to legislative bodies at all levels of government. Accordingly, the first part of the book contains four detailed studies: the location of a freeway; a hospital site controversy; the development of a land-use plan (all in St. Paul), and a plan for central Minneapolis. The basic field work was done in 1959 and 1960. Later chapters include an outline of an "American theory of city planning" and a critique of its theoretical foundations. Altshuler notes that, while the assumptions of this theory are largely inferred from writings and speeches, they are commonly invoked to guide professional behavior and justify planning.

The case studies find the planner in a political system which is biased against bold action and public intervention in market decisions. Virtually any group in a community can veto proposals affecting it. Conversely, if no other segment objects, most groups can get proposals accepted. Elected officials were unwilling to initiate change without a firm consensus. They perceived comprehensive plan-type goals as not only politically dangerous, but undesirable as well.

Additional constraints existed within city government. Even if the mayor of either city had been a strong advocate of planning, he had little formal or informal power. The limited fiscal resources of the cities also militated against substantial investment of funds in planning activities. Line departments, wielding considerable influence, were virtually immune from any effort by planners to impose centrally developed criteria on their programs. Informal communication and accommodation among line agencies were used to achieve functional coordination.

Lacking the support of elected officials, planners could have sought to build group backing within the community. This was done to some extent in the development of a plan for central Minneapolis. Yet, by providing plans acceptable to dominant business groups, limitations were placed on what could be proposed and, in the end, there was no sustained backing for the plan. St. Paul planners, in more typical fashion, made little effort to involve interest groups in the planning process.

City planners could have attempted to justify proposals by taking the position that they represented or knew the public interest better than others. However, within the logic of comprehensive planning theory, as interpreted by Altshuler, "correct law for society is something to be discovered, rather than willed by public officials." Whether or not this view was subscribed to, no effort was made to ascertain general public feeling and Twin City planners were left with their professional credentials to justify any claims to expertise in interpreting the public interest. These proved inadequate as against elected officials and line departments that could produce hard economic data to support their policies.

Serious attempts to identify the negative social consequences of proposed projects were viewed as dysfunctional by politicians. Any concession to adversely affected groups was seen as an invitation to numberless other demands for modifications. Planners responding to their professional norms could not easily ignore social costs. But in attempting to deal with them, they were highly vulnerable be-

cause of a lack of political backing and the difficulty of quantifying social costs. In this dilemma, planners tended to fall back upon detailed studies which circumvented the issue by noting that the costs of progress were unavoidable and could be best reduced by following technical standards. At times, studies by private real estate consultants and pronouncements of the American Society of Planning Officials were used to support particular plans.

The discussion of planning theory is more detailed, rich and useful than can be indicated here. However, certain problems do exist with the degree of generality that seems to be claimed for some of the book's findings. Altshuler is too ready to accept the Twin Cities and the "pluralistic" literature on community power as descriptive of all municipal political systems. Serious questions have been raised elsewhere about the validity of the findings of the pluralist school, and the case studies, themselves, indicate that the ability to veto plans and public works programs was not equally distributed among groups.

It is also possible that the operational sophistication of municipal planning may qualitatively differ with the scale of the organization in ways that escape detection with the limited sample of cities used. Similarly, the degree to which a city administration is committed to urban renewal may be an important variable in the role of the general planner. Although the book cannot be faulted for this within the framework it sets, any serious evaluation of the inputs that planners can make to the governmental process and methods to implement them will require an analysis of functional planning at all levels, as well as regional and national general planning experience.

Even so, saying that the book directly and indirectly raises far more questions than it can resolve does not detract from its importance as a critique of city planning theory and in laying the groundwork for further necessary research about planning as an inseparable component of the political process. It will be particularly interesting to relate these findings to data that is available about regional and national resource planning and interaction between general planning units and production agencies in the resource area.

ROBERT WARREN\*

---

\* Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Washington, Seattle.