

Principles and Methods in British Urban Planning: Separate Views of Shared Concerns

Larry R. G. Martin

Volume 14, Number 3, February 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018085ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018085ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Martin, L. R. G. (1986). Principles and Methods in British Urban Planning: Separate Views of Shared Concerns. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 14(3), 271–273. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018085ar>

Principles and Methods in British Urban Planning: Separate Views of Shared Concerns

Larry R.G. Martin

Cullen, Ian. *Applied Urban Analysis: A Critique and Synthesis*. London: Methuen, 1984. Pp. vii, 216. Illustrations. £12.95 cloth; £6.50 paper.

Keeble, Lewis. *Town Planning Made Plain*. London: Construction Press, 1983. Pp. x, 194. Figures. \$23.85.

Cities of the western world are the product of government and the private sector efforts to shape and structure the environment to serve their specific needs. As agents of government, urban planners assume a major responsibility for the nature of this product. It is important, then, that students of cities take notice when planners attempt to explain the “what,” “why” and “how” of their profession. This essay examines the thoughts of two British planners who seek to make sense of current theory and practice. That they approach their task from very different directions provokes a level of interest that might otherwise be missing were these books to be read apart.

These two books by Cullen and Keeble do not stand alone in their treatment of subject matter. They are simply recent representations of two decades of vigorous, critical thinking on the subject of British urban planning. In that period, planners in a nation of 55 million people have produced an increasing flood of books and articles on the subject of planning that seemingly dwarfs the efforts of their counterparts in North America with its population five times as large.

At the beginning of this century the Scottish biologist-planner, Patrick Geddes, uttered his memorable dictum — “survey, analysis, plan.” For 65 years thereafter, British planners have toiled to perfect their craft. In that “golden age” of modern planning, British planners produced a cascade of concepts and methods that have since enriched urban planning around the world.

The writings of British planners during the past twenty years can be separated conveniently into two groups to underscore the separate approaches taken by Keeble and Cullen. Books by Roberts, Ratcliffe, Hall and Bracken seek to reflect on progress to date, consolidate the knowledge base and reaffirm the avowed spirit and purpose of planning.¹

Keeble's *Town Planning Made Simple* follows in that genre. Other books by Friend *et al.*, McLoughlin, Litchfield *et al.*, and Hague offer innovative perspectives and critical evaluation.² Cullen's *Applied Urban Analysis* is very much of that tradition.

A first glance at the two books might suggest that Keeble and Cullen are writing in different disciplines. Actually, they are merely coming at a common subject from different directions. While both authors have had academic and professional experience, Keeble is fundamentally a practitioner and pragmatist with an unstated but evident unease in the realm of theory. Cullen, on the other hand, exhibits great facility and excitement in the realm of theory and methodology. Both would argue for the importance of linking theory and practice through applied research, but to different degrees.

Having suggested that important distinctions between the two texts and the place of each in the recent literature we may now briefly survey their separate contents, identify important parallels and contrasts, and draw out the major contributions.

Keeble's book is organized into ten chapters dealing with six broad topics. First he introduces the reader to planning concepts used later in the text. The first sentence defines planning as “. . . making up one's mind what to do before doing it,” and coincidentally sets the tempo for the remainder of the book. Other concepts deal with human territoriality, accessibility, space standards and incompatible uses. The chapter ends with a disruptive commentary on regional planning.

Several chapters deal with the preparation and content of town plans while another two chapters discuss the legislative support for carrying out planning. His treatment of the components of a town plan and two subsidiary areas — residential neighbourhoods and town centres — draws upon a strong orientation to the urban design/physical planning tradition so well represented in his standard textbook, *Principles and Practice of Town and Country Planning*, published between 1951 and 1969.³ His summary of British town planning legislation focuses upon the Town and Country Planning Act, the legal foundation for planning, and development control, the vehicle for implementing the plan.

The author devotes an entire chapter to planning graphics revealing his predilection for the visual element of planning. To a great extent graphics support two important tasks for the author; analysis and communication. It seems a pity that graphics should be required to support such a burden of responsibility at a time when analytical techniques and technology have converged to offer greater choice to the planner. But more on that subject later.

Another two chapters examine the planner in relation to other interest groups and his own profession in terms of contemporary and evolving power relationships. Keeble's concern for centrifugal forces operating within the planning field and having potentially damaging effects upon the profession will touch a responsive chord among North American planners.

The final chapter examines the future from the perspective of the author's forty years of professional experience. To the extent that he addresses himself to planning considerations his views will be favourably received.

Shifting to an overview of Cullen's *Applied Urban Analysis* we must be prepared to exercise substantial intellectual "muscle." He sets for himself a formidable task: to contribute to the advancement of research practice in planning by going right to the epistemological core of the discipline and relating it to analytical practice. This difficult book is blessed with a very sound structure and organization that is beneficially reviewed in the first chapter. Wherever possible a common simplifying format is adopted for each chapter. Treatment of similar sets of research techniques involve 1) a brief methodological description, 2) an outline of criticisms and limitations, and 3) a synthesis.

The second chapter examines the scientific method in planning and sets the context for the more specific discussions of techniques of analysis which follow.⁴ It critiques traditional research strategies that by and large argue for the complete separation of the investigation and intervention stages of planning. In its place it argues for a humanist approach that, lacking neither in sympathy nor political awareness, rejects all models that treat planning as a control process or as an instrument of some dominant political philosophy or ideology.

Chapter three examines statistically and structurally based economic and demographic methods employed for purposes of aggregate description and projection. Input-output and cohort survival techniques are viewed as offering maximum analytical value for the planner. The former provides valuable insight into urban economic structure while the latter offers a quick and convenient means of examining population profiles and estimating net migration. However, these techniques present a paradox. On the one hand they provide structural insights yet they are hardly better than simplistic statistical techniques when used for predictive purposes. He suggests that both techniques can be improved

if they are linked via unpredictable human actions such as population movements and public sector initiatives.

The next chapter examines map pattern analysis and interaction analysis as families of techniques for describing and predicting spatial form. Because practicing planners have usually considered boundaries to be a given they have ignored map pattern analysis in favour of the gravity and entropy maximizing techniques that make up interaction analysis. As in the preceding chapter, all of these techniques are found wanting if one attempts to use them for predictive purposes. They are limited to extrapolating existing structural patterns. Semi-formal integration procedures that bring economic, demographic and spatial techniques together will still not address the ultimate uncertainty that such strategies are designed to avoid, that being the dynamics of human behaviour.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift from techniques of aggregate analysis to those that analyze individual actions. The so-called quantitative revolution in aggregate analysis led to the behaviouralist realism of the 1970s in which techniques were developed for analyzing perceptions (activity patterns analysis), values (revealed preference studies) and lifestyles or uses (time-geography studies). But the very effort to get at individual attitudes has met with analytical problems due to our inability to unscramble the long-term relationship between choice and circumstances reflected in the daily events of our lives.

The next chapter evaluates the use of neoclassical micro-economic, systems and materialistic techniques used to explain industrial and residential location in urban areas. Because the first two sets of techniques are familiar to many students of urban affairs, we will confine our remarks to the recent appearance of historical materialism in the planning literature. This approach to the study of urban process derives ultimately from Marx but has been interpreted by Castells and Harvey for the urban scene.⁵ Spatial relationships and urban institutions, it is argued, are simply manifestations of the basic production relationships of ownership and exploitation. While the materialist analysis is of practical relevance it eschews policy manipulation for political change and thus has limited value in a discussion of integrative techniques.

If social science research techniques for urban analysis are to be useful to planners they must be able to provide insights into the dynamics of urban systems. Cullen discusses the relative merits of two approaches to understanding urban dynamics. One method, comparative statics, focuses upon the attributes of social, economic or spatial phenomena at one or more discrete points — like observing a series of snapshots. The other method, relational dynamics, focuses upon the process or processes which transform phenomena between moments in time. The author argues that it is only by adopting this latter less popular method of analysis are we likely to achieve social explanation and interpretation.

Cullen concludes his discussion by presenting an approach to planning and urban policy formulation that renders policy formation consistent with analysis while acknowledging the need to relate everyday practice to political principles.

We can gain important insights into the state of planning by comparing the views of the authors with respect to theory and practice. Keeble, as a practitioner, dislikes the broad generic view of planning. He considers it a threat to the stability of the profession. The concept of planning can be simply grasped and as easily executed once one has mastered an array of largely qualitative techniques. His techniques are accepted at face value and are judged on the basis of the answers produced. His skepticism of theory stands in the background. He worries about citizen involvement in the planning process and regrets the dissipation of centralized decision making. Above all, he inflicts a candidness and good humour on his readers.

Cullen, as theorist, views planning as consisting of a set of procedures quite independent of context. Planning activity is complex and made more difficult to understand as a result of our tendency to apply reductionist methods to its analysis. He discusses the application of quite sophisticated quantitative techniques to planning but judges the suitability of these techniques on the basis of their compatibility with theory and the appropriateness of their underlying assumptions. The acknowledged gap between theory and practice remains to be closed. But this closure must acknowledge the relativity of everyday practice to ethical principles.

Criticisms can be directed to both texts. The organization of sections and subsections in Keeble's book defies taxinomial logic and does not speak well for the editing. Keeble is also to be chided for criticizing older versions of analytical techniques as if they were currently in use. His opinions with respect to computing in planning both overstate and understate the reality.

Cullen's text has been very carefully edited, indeed. Its very tight conceptual structure and full referencing together

with its demanding subject matter make it less amenable to criticism. However, it can be faulted for overlooking important North American literature related to shift-share analysis, applied mental mapping and recent ground-breaking work in contingent valuation methods by resource economists. His habit of introducing a subject then disclaiming to say more about it due to space limitations is justifiable perhaps but none-the-less annoying.

Town Planning Made Plain and *Applied Urban Analysis* are an interesting and provocative duo not only for what they state about planning theory and practice today but for what they represent in cumulative understanding gained for a remarkable two decades of growth in the discipline.

NOTES

1. As representative examples see: Margaret Roberts, *An Introduction to Town Planning Techniques* (London: Hutchinson, 1974); John Ratcliffe, *An Introduction to Town and Country Planning* (London: Hutchinson, 1974); Peter Hall, *Urban and Regional Planning* (London: Harmondsworth, 1975); and Ian Bracken, *Urban Planning Methods: Research and Policy Analysis* (London: Methuen, 1981).
2. See: J. K. Friend and W. N. Jessop, *Local Government and Strategic Choice* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969); J. Brian McLoughlin, *Urban and Regional Planning: A Systems Approach* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1969); N. Litchfield, P. Kettle and M. Witbread, *Evaluation in the Planning Process* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1975); and Cliff Hague, *The Development of Planning Thought: A Critical Perspective* (London: Hutchinson, 1984).
3. For an example of the practicing town planner's conventional bookshelf reference see Lewis Keeble, *Principles and Practice of Town and Country Planning*, (London: The Estates Gazette Ltd., 1951).
4. As used in this context "planning" is considered "part of the process whereby public sector agencies intervene in the affairs of human society." Planning process is viewed broadly to consist of investigation and intervention phases.
5. See: M. Castells "Theoretical Propositions for an Experimental Study of Urban Social Movements," in *Urban Sociology*, ed. C. G. Pickavance (London: Tavistock, 1976); and D. Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973).