



As NYC (Again) Considers Comprehensive Planning, History Offers Insight

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Comprehensive planning can be a progressive governance tool, helping leaders keep broad principles like equity and resilience in mind as they consider infrastructure systems and neighborhood-level interventions. But as New York City's experience shows, balancing a citywide vision with flexibility and activism at the community scale has proven to be a challenge. Moreover, for some interests, comprehensive public planning—whether community-responsive or not—poses a threat.

In the context of controversial rezonings in communities of color under Mayor Bill de Blasio, debate is re-emerging in New York City about the value of comprehensive planning (Angotti and Morse 2016, p. 162). There are calls to have comprehensive planning paired with bottom-up, community-based planning, along with calls to update the City Charter to reform land use processes (Angotti and Morse 2016, p. 145). The city council recently released a report to the 2019 Charter Revision Commission¹ that directly takes up comprehensive planning; in the report, published on February 1 (New York City Council 2019), the council recommends² requiring the creation of a comprehensive plan, which would establish a “... strategic framework and vision for growth and development” in New York City. In addition, the report proposes “extensive community-level participation” with a series of public input sessions at different phases in the creation of a comprehensive plan, and final approval by city council (New York City Council 2019, p. 26). The council’s recommendation seems to reflect the efforts of a coalition of over 40 advocacy groups and elected officials that contributed to the Regional Plan Association’s 2018 *Inclusive City* report,³ which called for a comprehensive plan⁴ to serve as an overarching, equitable framework for community-based planning efforts. However, questions remain about how to blend comprehensive, citywide planning with planning at the neighborhood level.

This is not a new debate. Past attempts to create a comprehensive plan for New York City generated critical discussion about the scale of planning. Controversy over how comprehensive (versus project-based) planning in the city should be extends back to 1940, when Rexford Tugwell, as the head of the City Planning Commission, created a master plan that called for sweeping reorganization of land use. Tugwell broadly interpreted the mandate of planners and asserted that the government should play a central role in leading development projects. Later, under Mayor John Lindsay in the late 1960s, another comprehensive plan was proposed, this time one that attempted to engage communities while simultaneously thinking across neighborhoods and articulating citywide priorities. While the 1969 *Plan for New York City* sought to incorporate community input and provide resources to community boards for local planning, many viewed the effort with

¹ See: www.gothamgazette.com/city/7795-city-council-charter-revision-commission.

² See: www.gothamgazette.com/city/8249-city-council-seeks-expanded-power-sweeping-change-in-recommendations-to-charter-revision-commission.

³ See: <http://library.rpa.org/pdf/Inclusive-City-NYC.pdf>.

⁴ See: <https://citylimits.org/2018/02/02/panel-citys-community-planning-process-in-need-of-major-overhaul>.

skepticism. In both cases, comprehensive citywide planning met with opposition and ultimately failed.

A look at past experience can help urbanists and advocates anticipate the conflicts that are likely to arise this time around. The ways that scale has been framed at different points in New York City's history have varied based on planners' ideological and political context. The current discussion about the scale of planning in New York City raises key questions related to community participation, racial and economic equity, and the role of government in planning and development.

The 1940 plan: Tugwell vs Moses

In 1938, the City Planning Commission attempted to create a comprehensive plan for New York City, as mandated by the recently rewritten City Charter (Nelson 2018). Appointed Chair of the newly formed Commission by Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia in 1937, Rexford Guy Tugwell drafted a master plan for New York City. Tugwell's goal was to create a city with the best elements of both the countryside and the city, and his plan articulated the vision of well-designed, master-planned residential neighborhoods throughout New York City, which would each be complete with their own public parks, public buildings, and commercial buildings. Tugwell proposed dramatic changes to the built environment and the reorganization of land use within the city. The plan called for replacing smaller, old tenement-style buildings with medium-density housing, which he viewed as a more efficient use of land. It also proposed relocating and decentralizing commercial areas to be in closer proximity to new transit lines. It called for a series of "greenbelts" and more parkland throughout the city, which would separate the clusters of residential-commercial neighborhoods.

As a left-leaning economist and planner who had served in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Brain Trust" as the head of the Resettlement Administration from 1935 to 1937, Tugwell believed that the government should actively regulate economic activity, and his comprehensive plan for the city reflected this viewpoint. His vision was in keeping with contemporary views among utopian, left-leaning planners of his day. Tugwell argued that "the economic and social forces that shape cities far exceed the spatial limits of the block or neighborhood" and, therefore, powerful government institutions were needed to challenge the power of the market (Nelson 2018). Tugwell also advocated for "some sort of unified supervision" through citywide, comprehensive planning as a way to limit "... local communities' ability to jealously guard their own unfair advantages" (Nelson 2018).

Tugwell's grand visions were met with fierce opposition from those who viewed his efforts as the "overreach of utopian bureaucrats" (Nelson 2018). In particular, Robert Moses, then the Parks Commissioner, publicly criticized Tugwell's plan. Moses was resistant to the concept of a government-sponsored master plan, and "... just pursued projects according to funding sources, the needs of private developers, and his own political requirements" (Chronopoulos 2012). Moses successfully framed Tugwell's plan for large-scale urban development as an attack on individual liberty—which is ironic, given that Moses is remembered as an advocate for large-scale, city-changing development.

The 1969 plan: master plans and mini-plans

Several decades later, as mayor from 1966 to 1973, John V. Lindsay sought to address the crises that overwhelmed the city, including widespread poverty, white flight, and racial inequality. At a time when the value of cities was being called into question, Mayor Lindsay's administration led an ambitious undertaking to create a comprehensive plan and improve the planning process. Published in 1969, the *Plan for New York City* outlined the major challenges facing New York City, but also sought to communicate an overall optimism about the city's future. The authors of the Plan clarified that it was "... not a conventional master plan," acknowledging that urban renewal had bred

skepticism about top-down planning (NYCPC 1969, p. 6). Rather than attempting to create an overarching design for physical development, it primarily focused on social and economic issues, as well as processes for the city's growth and governance. The Plan also advocated for increased density and development in Manhattan, strengthening the city's downtown as a vibrant, "national center" of business and finance, communications, arts and theater, and diverse cultures (NYCPC 1969, p. 3).

After the Plan's release in 1969, the City Planning Commission held public hearings in all 62 of the city's community boards (Center for New York City Law 2013). The Plan faced significant criticism from the public and became a "lightning rod for protest" (Nolan 1972). Critiques were wide-ranging: some supported a comprehensive plan for New York City, but had concerns about specific elements; others were suspicious of a citywide plan altogether and felt that it "... had been presented to the community as a *fait accompli*" (Gupte 1973). With public hearings held *after* the Plan's release, many critics viewed it as another example of a top-down planning effort that had not adequately included community input. As a result of disastrous urban-renewal projects directed by Robert Moses in the era that preceded the Plan's release, there was significant public backlash against sweeping urban redevelopment plans by the city.

Following public outcry over the Plan's release, the City Planning Commission underwent a transition of leadership in 1973 from Donald Elliott to John Zuccotti, and a subsequent change of focus. Zuccotti was publicly critical of citywide comprehensive planning and stated that the Plan had been "put aside" in 1974 (Goldberger 1974). Referring to master plans as "glossy brochures," Zuccotti stated, "I simply don't think that the concept of a master plan, and the vision and controls it assumes, makes any sense in a free and pluralistic society" (Goldberger 1974). Within a few short years, the Plan had been dramatically scaled back and by 1974 there was a shift to create a series of "miniplans" at the neighborhood level.

The Plan had never formally been rejected, but it lost its political steam. During this time, there was a broader ideological shift towards anti-statism from both the left and business interests. These interests converged to reject government-backed, top-down planning efforts, such as the 1969 Plan. Writing at the height of the urban-renewal era, Jane Jacobs critiqued the detached approach of planners, architects, and developers, and defended the "human scale" of cities (Klemek 2009, p. 79). Taking advantage of the anti-"Big Planning" fervor, developers began to adopt the rhetoric articulated by progressive voices such as Jacobs to call for smaller-scale planning. As John Zuccotti, who went on to become a major real-estate developer, said, "[t]o a large extent, we are neo-Jacobins. We have adjusted our sensitivities to the pulse and scale of the neighborhoods..." (Goldberger 1974). The irony is that this anti-statism emerged at the moment when there was an opportunity to advance "more humane versions of redevelopment" (Chronopoulos 2012).

While the 1969 Plan advocated for community participation in planning, incremental redevelopment, and considerations beyond the physical urban form, it ultimately failed to gain the public support needed for implementation. With pressure from the real-estate industry and criticism from civic groups, the City Planning Commission abandoned its attempts at comprehensive planning for New York City. The rapidly changing political and economic context in New York City also quickly rendered the Plan obsolete. New York City's fiscal crisis ushered in a new era of neoliberalism and austerity starting in 1975 (Hackworth 2007). The failure of the 1969 Plan reflected a turning point in the history of planning in New York City, as planners retreated to more piecemeal planning at the neighborhood scale.

Enduring tensions

New York remains the only major city in the United States without a comprehensive plan (Angotti and Morse 2016, p. 19). Proponents of comprehensive planning rightly argue that there are issues that cannot be solved by "littleness" (Nelson 2018). Urban regions face challenges that

require planning across different scales of government, such as climate change, the affordable housing crisis, and declining public infrastructure.

The city council's recent recommendation to the 2019 Charter Revision Commission to require a comprehensive plan for New York City provides planners and advocates an opportunity to shape—or contest—what this planning process might look like. Increased calls for both comprehensive and community-based planning raise critical questions about scale, equity, and ideology. What are mechanisms to ensure meaningful community participation, particularly if public proposals challenge the interests of capital? As the Charter Revision Commission holds public hearings and formulates proposals for updates to the City Charter this year, planners and advocates will have a new chance to wrestle with the inherent complexities of blending comprehensive, citywide planning with community-based planning at the neighborhood level.

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