Shaping peripheral growth? Strategic spatial planning in a South African city-region

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1. Introduction

There has been a widespread critique of the relevance of traditional forms of spatial planning for African cities, and a search for alternative approaches (UN-Habitat, 2009; Watson, 2009). Strategic spatial planning has been put forward as a potentially useful approach (UN-Habitat, 2009), and forms of it have been introduced in some countries, such as Tanzania and South Africa. These approaches are influenced by the revival in interest in strategic spatial planning as a way of responding to rapid change and uncertainty (Healey, Khankee, Motte, & Needham, 1997), and explorations of new conceptions of this sort of planning (Albrechts, 2013, 2015; Healey, 2007; Hillier, 2011) emphasising more flexible, inclusionary and collaborative approaches. Although shifts towards strategic spatial planning are fairly recent, questions have been raised as to its effectiveness (Newman, 2008). Further, Oelsen (2014) reflecting on the literature on north-west Europe, argues that it is difficult to find examples of successful strategic spatial planning that live up to expectations, and that neo-liberal discourses pervade many instances of strategic spatial planning. However, as Albrechts (2006) notes, approaches in practice are often hybrid, mixing older and newer forms of planning. This is the case in African cities too, and shifts and reversals in approach are also evident (e.g. see Kasala (2015) on Tanzania).

In the light of these debates, this paper explores how strategic spatial planning has influenced growth on the urban periphery of one South African city-region: the northern corridor of eThekwini metropolitan municipality centred on the city of Durban,1 and the adjacent KwaDukuza municipality. Forms of strategic spatial planning have been underway there for close to 30 years, enabling a relatively long-term view of its influence. Drawing on this discussion, it considers the usefulness of this form of planning to managing urban growth in African contexts. In contrast to assumptions that planning is able to direct growth in ways assumed by master planning approaches, or that it is entirely ineffective, the paper shows the complex and varying ways in which planning has shaped growth, intersecting with other drivers of development, and processes of change.

Strategic spatial planning in the area began in the late 1980s, the private initiative of a major landowner and a powerful actor in the region, which sought to shape future development as apartheid collapsed. This planning had powerful discursive influences on how development in the area was seen, which shaped public-sector local and provincial planning as well as development outcomes. In this sense, strategic spatial planning might be seen as a form of neo-liberal planning. However processes have been more complex, and development has not just been the outcome of private sector visions. Agencies outside of local government have driven major new forms of development, which have in turn required new rounds of public-sector planning. Public-sector planning has at times directed development, more often it has been reactive to it, or has been initiated to manage forms of growth already occurring. Both planning and development have been negotiated and contested – between different parts of the state, and between major landowners and the local state. Relationships have changed over time, with new governance arrangements. The differing approaches and attitudes of the two municipalities, and of the planning authorities operating in these areas have also resulted in varying patterns of development in the two areas. While large profits have been made by the private sector (Robbins, 2015), and major developments have occurred, new patterns of urban growth have been associated with local infrastructural and fiscal crises, and have not necessarily been inclusive, raising questions about the appropriateness of forms of planning used in the area.

1 Durban is the core city of the city-region, much of which is now governed by eThekwini.
The paper draws from a study of the dynamics of growth in this area conducted over the 2011–13 period, which included an analysis of documents and some 20 interviews with key actors and informants in the development of the area. A detailed discussion of these dynamics is contained in a long paper published elsewhere. The focus here is on drawing on out how strategic spatial planning has shaped development. The paper also makes reference to recently published work on parts of the area, which sheds light on these questions (Robbins, 2015; Sim, Oelfose, & Scott, 2016; Sutherland, Sim, & Scott, 2015), as well as to an earlier literature (e.g. Freund and Padayachee, 2002; Todes, 2000).

The paper is organised as follows. The next section explores literature that speaks to the ways in which planning, and particularly strategic spatial planning, shapes urban growth, and how we might understand this influence. The following section summarises the case study, and then moves on to an exploration of how planning shaped growth in this context. The final section assesses the value of strategic spatial planning and how it might be reconsidered, at least in the South African context.

2. Planning and spatial change

Traditional master planning was intended to shape the spatial organisation of cities through mapping desired future growth and projecting associated land use requirements. Comprehensive plans were to be implemented through site specific land use regulation and systems of development permissions, while engineering calculations for required infrastructure would be informed by planning projections. However this kind of planning has been criticised for its static nature and its failure to respond to the social and economic dynamics of cities. Master planning also assumed institutional capacities and political commitment which were frequently absent, particularly in developing countries. In addition, in many developing countries, infrastructure development frequently occurred without reference to master plans (UN-Habitat, 2009). Hence spatial change has often bypassed plans.

Strategic spatial planning emerged as a more flexible and strategic alternative from the 1970s as cities attempted to respond to rapidly changing conditions (Healey et al., 1997). Early versions of strategic planning drew from business practice, but newer approaches to strategic spatial planning have been put forward by a number of authors (e.g. Albrechts, Balducci, & Hillier, 2017; Healey, 2007) drawing on collaborative planning approaches, ideas around co-production, and a focus on inclusion. These forms of planning are seen as a way of envisioning and debating different futures, but also as discursive approaches mobilising sufficient support and power to give effect to change. For Albrechts (2015, p 520), radical forms are political processes “mobilising the power of citizens to engage in counter-hegemonic struggles to establish other policies … broadening the scope of possible futures and giving voice to certain groups”. Plans are seen as broad, directional and flexible, subject to review. Practices however vary, combining older and newer approaches, and strategic planning together with forms of traditional planning (Albrechts, 2006).

Strategic spatial planning of some sort has been implemented in several developing countries, particularly in Latin America (UN-Habitat, 2009), but also in places such as Kenya, Hong Kong and China (UN-Habitat, 2016), sometimes in combination with master planning (Xu & Yeh, 2017). In some cases master planning has been reshaped to take account of criticisms, such as Brazil’s participatory bottom-up plans, and China’s inclusion of sustainability, social and economic dimensions, and attention to implementation (UN-Habitat, 2016).

In South Africa, arguments for strategic spatial development frameworks for municipalities and regions emerged as a critique of modernist master planning dominant under apartheid. Strategic metropolitan plans emerged in cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, in the context of local negotiations between stakeholder groups about future orientations and priorities in the transitional period between apartheid and democracy in the early 1990s. In Durban, these processes were preceded by a private sector led initiative in 1989, which proved to be highly influential. In the post-Apartheid era, strategic planning was institutionalised through requirements that each municipality produce a participatory integrated development plan including a spatial development framework to guide and frame municipal development (Harrison, Todes, & Watson, 2008). In some cases, such as Johannesburg, indicative long-term strategic City Development Strategies have also been formulated.

Although strategic spatial planning has become common, there are concerns about its usefulness and effectiveness in the face of powerful political and economic interests, and where institutional capacities are limited (UN-Habitat, 2009). These concerns have also been raised in South Africa (Breetzke, 2008; Harrison et al., 2008). Breetzke (2008) for instance argues that the breadth of spatial frameworks, and the often weak links to implementation (particularly land use and infrastructure planning) have limited the ability of spatial frameworks to guide spatial change. There are also concerns that the desired spatial transformations towards a more racially and socially integrated city are not being enabled by this form of planning, which has been too weak to address property, policy and institutional interests moving in contrary directions (Oranje, 2014; Todes, 2012). Amongst politicians, there is sometimes a desire for more definite plans, closer to conceptions of master planning, which seem to enable greater change.

These assessments raise questions about how such plans are expected to influence spatial change and development in cities. While early approaches to long-range spatial planning, such as master planning, might have assumed that planning could ‘command and control’ development, more recent perspectives suggest more complex and messy outcomes.

Within planning and urban theory, there are extensive literatures exploring the way planning processes and outcomes are shaped by various forces, in particular by landowners, property developers, finance capital (e.g. Ekers, Hamel, & Keil, 2012; Fainstein, 1994; Harris, 2013), and the role of power in planning processes (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 1998). Recent literature on ‘governmentality’ views planning as a technology of rule, but recognises that outcomes are contested and uncertain (Huxley, 2007). Planning influences spatial change not just through plans on paper, but also through communicative and political processes.

Literature on evaluation in planning recognises that planning objectives are often complex, requiring action by a variety of agencies and institutions in different policy arenas, so making it difficult to establish planning outcomes and impacts in definitive ways (Wong & Watkins, 2009). Faludi (2000) contrasts ‘project planning’, where plans can be evaluated on their conformance with relatively fixed outcomes, and strategic planning, where ‘the performance of plans in facilitating decision-making’ (p.305) is key:

“how a plan fares during negotiations, whether people use it, whether it helps clarifying choices, whether …. [it] …. forms part of the definition of subsequent decision situations. So what happens with the plan becomes the key to evaluation. Whether or not it is followed is not the issue” (Faludi, 2000, p. 306).

The power and influence of strategic plans lies in the way it ‘frames’ policy and thinking, the way it changes mindsets. It can influence change through its doctrines, i.e. its principles and
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