

Planning the Post-Communist City: Experiences from Sofia

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines adjustments of the urban planning process to the post-communist context in the case of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. The main research question is whether master-planning processes have substantially changed from top-down and technocratic (as they certainly were in fascist and then communist Bulgaria) to open and participatory today. The paper tells the story of four master plans—one pre-communist, two communist, and one post-communist. It concludes that despite the increased capacity of the citizenry to both influence and challenge government planning and decision-making, there is little evidence of sharp discontinuity between past and present planning processes.*

Introduction

In comparison to the prolific literature on the socio-economic and political aspects of the post-communist transition, the literature on post-communist urban planning practices remains scarce. Yet the study of changes in planning affords a valuable opportunity for gaining insight into some of the deepest problems of the post-communist metamorphosis.

Centralized, technocratic planning—for many years the poster child of communism—was well fitted to guide urban growth during state socialism, when virtually all decisions were passed down a strict power hierarchy, and virtually all land and real estate development was the product of state initiative. It is, however, clearly less fit to guide urban growth in the dynamic conditions of post-communism, when development decisions have become the terrain of a diverse group of public and private actors—government authorities, private investors, non-profit organizations, property owners, special interest groups, and the broader citizenry. Understanding how planning authorities have adjusted to change thus goes to the very core of the question of how post-communist institutions have adapted from serving an authoritarian regime to serving a pluralist citizenry.

This paper examines the preparation of *Sofia 2020*, the first post-communist master plan for Sofia, Bulgaria. It reviews the stages of the planning process; analyzes the views of the planning professionals on how a plan should be put together; studies the level of citizen participation; and discusses the sources of the plan's legitimacy. In so doing, the paper

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seeks to contribute to a key debate in the literature on post-communist planning: whether the appeal of top-down technocracy has waned and planners seek to increase the level of citizen participation, as some suggest (e.g., Thornley, 1993; Shove & Anderson, 1997), or whether planning remains in a technocratic mode, still largely divorced from direct contact with the public, as others argue (e.g., Maier, 1994, 1998). Data comes from 22 interviews and dozens of informal conversations with planners; a review of several drafts of the plan and related other written materials; and personal observation.

The paper's central claim is that planning processes in post-communist Sofia are not grossly dissimilar from those during communism—there is no “moment of discontinuity” between communist and post-communist processes. Although the interaction between planners and citizens has increased, there is little evidence that direct civic input was instrumental in aiding the plan-writers, or that such input was even deemed necessary. The planning process went through a complex set of stages, through which input was solicited from an exceptionally broad coalition of professional experts. However, this broad professional participation was viewed as an adequate substitute for broad civic participation. Thus following a tradition inherited from communism and pre-communism, Sofia's planners seem to still adhere to the idea that technical knowledge (the terrain of experts) is of a higher order than everyday knowledge (the terrain of common citizens).

The paper first discusses the role of technocratic expertise and citizen participation in the planning process. This is followed by a literature review on communist and post-communist planning. Then the paper provides a history of Sofia's planning, starting with the first master plan from 1938, and covering the two master plans from the communist era. Lastly, it analyzes the process of preparing Sofia's first post-communist master plan.

The Technocratic Tradition

Urban planning came about as a profession in the nineteenth century as a reaction to the chaotic conditions of the industrial city, with the promise of radically reorganizing it along scientific principles (Boyer, 1983). Planning was firmly embedded in Western Enlightenment-modern thought (Healey, 1993). Its intellectual genealogy can be traced back to Enlightenment scholars, such as Comte and Saint-Simon. These scholars believed that human progress is attainable through the systematic application of value-free, technocratic reason—reason which is superior to everyday, intuitive thinking, and is the unique terrain of a scientific avant-garde, destined to lead the unenlightened masses (Bell, 1976; Friedman, 1987; Fischer, 1990; Fainstein & Fainstein, 1996).

The key legitimacy of professional urban planning came from the idea that the true laws of reality (i.e., the laws of city building) objectively exist, and that expert planners are uniquely positioned to understand both how a city works and what is best for its citizens. Good planning was thus a science—a technocratic problem-solving activity (Scott, 1998), of which common folks had no knowledge and thus need not be consulted. “[W]e [planners] are scientists . . . As scientists, or technicians, we work with facts to arrive at truth, using methods and language appropriate to our tasks, and our ways of handling problems are not subject to outsider's criticism” (Reiner, 1967, p. 232 quoted by Fainstein & Fainstein, 1996, p. 267).

Thus, to plan for a park, for example, one needs no advice from its prospective users; one only needs to calculate the park area based on the proper amount of space allotted

to the “average human unit”. After all, as the great French architect Le Corbusier liked to say, the planning of a city is “too important to be left to the citizens” (Hall, 1996, p. 207).

The Case for Citizen Participation

Technocratic approaches dominated the planning profession well into the 1960s and 1970s. Yet with the advent of critical theory, and postmodern and phenomenological thought in the social sciences, technocratic planning became increasingly criticized for being elitist, divorced from reality, and for producing disastrous planning schemes such as Urban Renewal (e.g., Jacobs, 1961). By the end of the twentieth century, it was largely perceived as an unfortunate “hangover” from the modernist, early-to-mid-twentieth-century era (Healey & Williams, 1993, p. 711) and as an “outmoded barrier” to addressing the true concerns of local communities, both in the Western and in the developing world (Hague, 2001, p. 376). Planning scholars proposed various post-technocratic models, such as advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965), equity planning (Krumholz, 1982, 1986), radical planning (Friedman, 1987), and communicative or argumentative planning (Fischer & Forester 1993; Healey, 1993, 1997; Innes, 1996; Forester, 1999). The latter approach, which is perhaps the most popular, is inspired by the theory of communicative reason advanced by Habermas (1983). In that model, technical and non-technical types of knowledge are assumed to be of equal value. Planning decisions are made not on the grounds of expert-led, technical reasoning, but on the grounds of a dynamic interchange of ideas among a wide variety of stakeholders, planners and non-planners alike. The role of the planner shifts from that of an expert who imposes the “right” decisions upon the citizenry to that of a facilitator who aids the citizenry in making informed choices.

Post-technocratic planning models are premised on the need for direct (as opposed to indirect, i.e. through elected representatives) and broad citizen participation. Such participation is necessary for a variety of reasons. Direct input coming from various strata of the citizenry brings a greater variety of constructive ideas. This is especially important in light of the fact that citizens often have better understanding of local conditions than do professional planners, who often come from the outside. Thus, civic participation leads to more creative problem-solving and superior decision-making. In addition, the public interest, which planners traditionally pursue, is defined differently by different social groups. Broad participation is necessary to adapt the planning process to this plurality of views and arrive at a more holistic definition of the public interest. Citizen input also increases the odds of plan implementation, has the capacity of mediating social conflicts and acts as an important venue for promoting public education. Lastly, increasing participation is “the right thing to do”, since it is the basis of strong democracy and a precondition for transparent governance (Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe; Hibbard & Lurie, 2000; Wheeler, 2000; Randolph, 2004).

While the benefits of citizen participation may be well established, the term “citizen participation” has multiple levels and interpretations. After all, who are the citizens who should participate? When and how should participation occur? What is “good” participation? Typically, citizen participation implies the participation of “common” citizens—those outside the ring of government power-holders and expert advisors. For “good” participation to occur, it must include the widest variety of stakeholders at the earliest possible stage of the process. Such a goal is of course harder to achieve when preparing a plan for a large metro-region than when planning for a smaller, single project.

Figure 1 and Table 1 present two typologies of citizen participation. Randolph (2004, p. 63; partially based on Arnstein, 1969) suggests a five-step citizen participation ladder premised on the citizen’s role in planning and the assumptions behind the process. The International Association of Public Participation distinguishes five levels of active (direct) citizen participation based on the goals and techniques used in the process. These typologies will be instrumental in discussing the master-planning processes in Sofia in the later sections of the paper.

Urban Planning under Communism

In communist Bulgaria, as in other communist countries (Enyedi, 1996; Newman & Thornley, 1996; Maier, 1994, 1998; Shove & Anderson, 1997; Nedovic-Budic, 2001; Iyer, 2003), urban planning was centralized, technocratic and subordinated to national economic objectives. It proceeded within the institutional and ideological framework of a single-party system; limited local autonomy, which implied that local governments simply channeled down state decisions to the local level; and almost full state ownership of land, property and means of production. The latter meant that the state, through its agencies, was the sole developer of any land beyond the size of a single residential lot. The unlimited power of the state to develop land as it pleased, on one hand, had the potential to endow planners with powers that greatly exceeded those of their colleagues in

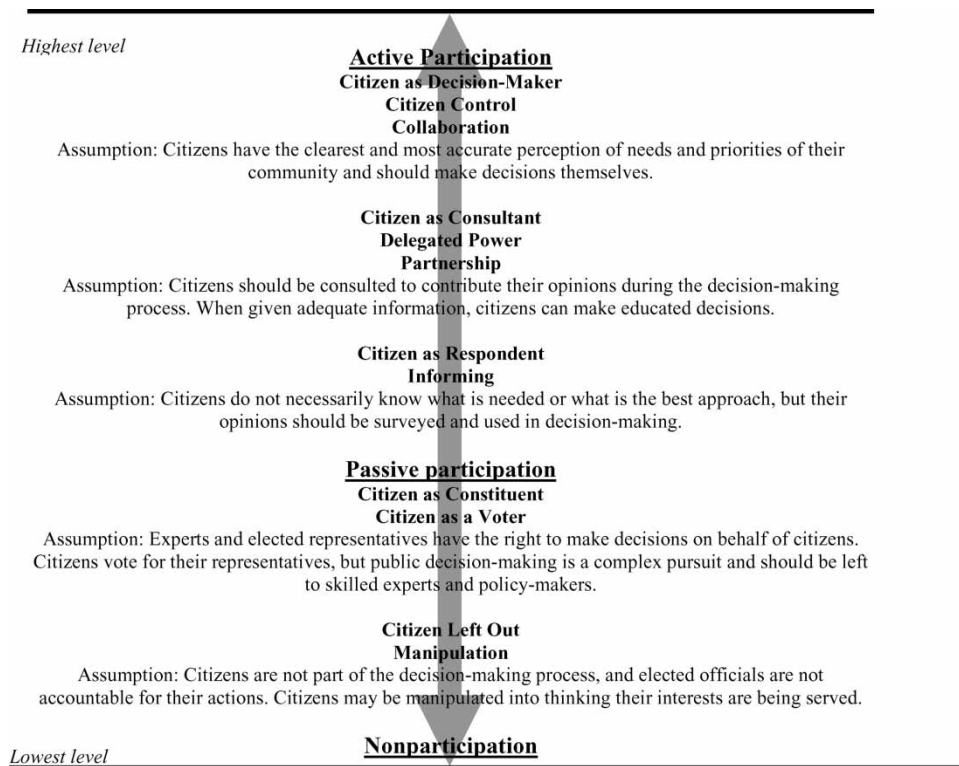


Figure 1. A typology of citizen participation. *Source:* Randolph, 2004.

Table 1. A typology of citizen participation

Level of participation	Goal of participation	Techniques
Empower	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.	Citizen juries Ballots Delegated decisions
Collaborate	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	Citizen advisory committees Consensus-building Participatory decision-making
Involve	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are understood and considered.	Workshops Deliberate polling
Consult	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	Public comment Focus groups Surveys Public meetings
Inform	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	Fact sheets Web-sites Open houses

Source: International Association of Public Participation.

capitalist countries. However, this power was severely restricted by the fact that urban plans were but the local spatial translation of state economic plans. Thus, urban planners were largely the “technical executors” of state goals at the local level (Maier, 1998).

Technocracy was the most defining characteristic of communist urban planning—a point which should come as no surprise when considering the origins of communist ideology. Marxism was indeed one of the greatest “source[s] of technocratic thought” (Bell, 1976, p. 353; also Berman, 1982). The root of its persuasive power lay precisely in the claim that a scientific elite, led by Marx and Engels, had objectively discovered the “true” laws of historic evolution, much like Darwin had discovered the “true” laws of natural evolution (hence the term “*Scientific Communism*”). This claim of scientific objectivity allowed Marxist ideologues to assert the inevitability of communism’s success.

Lenin of course transformed Marx’s intellectual program into a state ideology, which dominated Eastern European governments until 1989. Arguably, he too was a “high modernist” (Scott, 1998). Despite his dedication to the proletarian state, he deeply admired the principles of technocratic management advanced by capitalists such as F.W. Taylor and H. Ford (Scott, 1998), and assumed that running a state could be implemented along the same technocratic principles as running a post office (Bell, 1976). This dedication to technocracy has led some authors to conclude that communist ideology represents the peak of modernist thought (e.g., Murray, 1995; Inglehart, 1997; Scott, 1998).

Planning under communism, both at the national, economic level and at the local, spatial level, was thus inspired by technocratic principles (Maier, 1994, 1998). In master plans (*Genplans* in Bulgarian, as well as Russian), populations were forecast based on idealized notions of labor migration, following national goals of industrial growth for each city passed by the Communist Party. Based on population size, all the

other aspects of urban life were then also “rationally” planned for: e.g., number of housing units, volume of mass transit, or amount of park space (Reiner & Wilson 1979; Iyer, 2003). Planning thus involved a discourse between politicians and experts (the former, of course, having the real power). Once the politicians passed the national economic goals, the planners translated them into physical space with the proper level of detail and in a value-free fashion (Maier, 1998). Citizen input was almost entirely missing (Enyedi, 1996).

Under such conditions, most debates which occurred among planners in the West had no meaning for planners in Eastern Europe. There was no point in debating whether planners should act as advocates for various social groups, as the interests of all groups were in theory well represented. There was no reason for them to act as conflict mediators, since communist society was conflict-free. Nor was there any sense in promoting civic input, since the plans used the proper technical method. The planner’s role thus remained that of a technical forecaster and an executor of rules (Maier, 1998).

Technocratism’s strength was premised on one additional circumstance. In Bulgaria, as in several other countries in the region, such as Russia (Iyer, 2003) and Czechoslovakia (Maier, 1994), urban planning has historically been deemed a sub-field *not* of the social sciences, but of a particular technical discipline—architecture. As such, cities were commonly planned as if they were buildings, through a competition between design teams (as we will further see in the case of Sofia). Although the architecture-planning merger has many benefits, it certainly delayed many of the debates on the planner’s role or on the need for citizen participation, both of which were inspired by the social sciences.

Post-communist Urban Planning

The end of communism brought about radical changes in the context within which urban planning operates. These include: the advent of a multi-party political system and a more pluralist and class-stratified society; the re-introduction of private property rights to land and structures; the end of the communist practice of five-year national economic plans; the loosening of state control over local governments; the reduced role of public institutions and the opening of the development process to a great variety of actors, mostly from the private sector (Nedovic-Budic, 2001). The ideological climate also radically changed. Eastern European governments made a sharp turn to the right. Neo-liberalism became the ideology of choice of new political élites and Eastern European states embraced a version of free-market capitalism with weaker labor laws and fewer social protections than exist in Western Europe (e.g. see Sykora, 1995).

The rise of neo-liberal philosophy favoring unbridled private property rights caused a moral devaluation and a legitimacy crisis of the planning profession. For some post-communist ideologies, planning was but a communist leftover that impedes the proper function of the market (Newman & Thornley, 1996; Nedovic-Budic, 2001). As a result, few theoretical debates on planning’s future were held and planning now remains in “flux”, without a dominant doctrine (Shove & Anderson, 1997; Maier, 1998).

Changed legal and economic circumstances also weakened planning. The re-introduction of the land and real estate market, and the quick emergence of the private development sector, served to dramatically reduce the ability of planners to prescribe and control urban development. It is not clear whether planning practice has adapted to these changes in context. In fact, some of its aspects seem suspended between the past and the present. Consider the level of detail shown on spatial plans.

Under communism, spatial plans did not just indicate land use; they often showed the footprints of future buildings (Nedovic-Budic, 2001). Since the state was the sole builder, the plan acted as a detailed design “statement of [its] construction projects” (Thomas, 1998, p. 329). Although it is clear that this no longer is the case, spatial plans continue to show building footprints, as if the planners had any way of anticipating the shape of a building that a future private builder might propose (as is the case of Bulgarian Detailed Development Plans; also Newman & Thornley, 1996). In this sense, the rate of change in planning practice appears to lag behind changes in the planning context (also Maier, 1998; Thomas, 1998; Iyer, 2003).

It is also unclear to what extent these changes in the planning context have affected the relationship between planners and the citizenry, and the level of citizen input in the planning process. Some authors take a fairly optimistic view by claiming that the interaction between planners and citizens has recently visibly increased (Shove & Anderson, 1997), as a consequence of the overall process of post-communist democratization (Nedovic-Budic, 2001), and that full citizen participation in plan-making has now become the planners’ goal (Thornley, 1993). Others, however, point to the persistent appeal of top-down technocracy, inherited from the communist and pre-communist eras. Maier (1998, p. 357; also 1994), for example, in a rare insider’s account of post-communist planning, argues that despite the fact that the views of the public are becoming increasingly more accepted as a legitimate source of planning information *en par* with technical data, “planning still retains its mostly paternalistic, if not elitist, approach”. Some recent accounts of current planning practice in Bulgaria also indicate that the tradition of expert-led planning has barely been disturbed (Hirt & Slaev, 2002), and citizen input does not seem to make significant, direct impacts on the final decisions reached by municipal authorities (Almer & Koontz, 2004). It is these accounts of the post-communist planning process on which the paper seeks to elaborate further.

Data Collection and Methods

Data comes from (1) interviews with key informants; (2) field observation; (3) current urban planning documents, media and scholarly articles; and (4) historic and archival materials. It was collected during three three-month-long visits, from 2001 to 2003.

In-person interviews served as the first data source. Those included 22 formal and several dozen informal conversations with members of the urban planning guild in Sofia. In order to gain some insight into the general state of urban planning, the author first contacted regular members of the Directorate of Architecture and Urban Design of the Municipality of Sofia, including Sofia’s Chief Architect and the Chief Architects of the some of the largest administrative districts. To study the latest master-planning process, the author then approached the members of a special section of the Directorate of Architecture and Urban Design, which dealt exclusively with the preparation of the *Genplan*. She attempted to talk to every member of this group. Although more than half of them declined to be interviewed, those that agreed included three of the section’s leaders. A third group of interviewees comprised private urban design/planning practitioners and urban design/planning academicians from the University of Architecture and Civil Engineering, and the University of Forestry and Landscape Architecture. The private practitioners and academicians had directly participated in writing parts of the plan. Their names were recommended by the Directorate’s staff. All interviewees listed

above had participated in some capacity in the process of preparing the latest master plan—either as draft authors, as authors of competition entries judged by expert juries at the various stages of the process, as members of the expert juries, as reviewers of proposals, or as consultants hired by the municipality. Most interviewees had participated in more than one way.

The formal interviews were semi-structured, varied in length from half an hour to an hour and a half, were tape-recorded and transcribed. The questions targeted the process of preparation of the new plan, as seen through the eyes of the professionals who participated in the process. In normative terms, the questions focused on how these professionals think a plan *should* be prepared, e.g. what the planner's role should be in the planning process, what the public's role should be, and whether broad civic participation in plan-making is desirable. In substantive terms, the questions addressed the present state of affairs, e.g. what are the specifics of the current master-planning process, what has been the role of professional expertise, and what have been the level and the role of civic input?

Data from the interviews was supplemented with personal observation at three hearings, conducted at different stages of the planning process. It also included five drafts of the *Genplan* and other related documents, available from the Directorate of Architecture and Urban Design. The research also relied on reviews of relevant media and scholarly literature. Lastly, data included archival materials and secondary historic accounts related to the history of master-planning in Sofia. It is to this historic context that we turn next.

History of Planning Processes

Bulgaria gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. Sofia, a sleepy town of 12,000 people and 3,100 houses, was elected state capital on 22 March 1879. Over the next 60 years, it grew exponentially. From 1879 to 1939, its population rose to 400,000 persons and its area increased from 3 to 42 square kilometers (Labov, 1979).

Attempts to provide a plan for the new capital date back to 1878, when the authorities hired several foreign engineers to remake the once Ottoman into a “European” city (Tashev, 1972) by emulating in a modest form the main western urbanist ideas of the time—the Parisian boulevards and the Viennese ring road (Jeleva-Martins, 1991). The first plan, by the French Amadier, came in 1880. Updates for the city center and the new areas followed in 1892, 1897, 1903, 1907, 1910, 1914, 1928 and 1936 (Tashev, 1972; Labov, 1979; Jeleva-Martins, 1991; Kovachev, 2004). Those were, however, plans of the street system. The need for a comprehensive plan was not recognized until the 1930s.

First Master Plan (1938)

The first master plan (Stolichna Goliama Obshtina 1938) was initiated under the brief reign of *Zveno*, a group of military officers who seized power in a coup in 1934 (Lampe, 1984). Its author was the German architect A. Muesmann. Muesmann accepted the job after winning a competition, in which several foreign architects took part including famous names such as H. Prost, author of the plan of Paris (Miteva, 2002). Rumor had it that Muesmann won because his was the lowest bid, but the more likely reason was that he was German and most of the international jurors were German as well (Lampe, 1984).

The planning process was a deeply covert, top-down affair. Muesmann made scant effort to familiarize himself with local conditions. Through the entire process, from 1934 to 1937, he visited Sofia six times; his longest visit was barely a month (Lampe, 1984).

Seeking civic input in planning was, of course, not typical in the 1930s anywhere in the world, but in the case of Sofia the gap between plan-maker and plan constituents was unusually wide. The plan was kept secret until its adoption, for fear that if drafts were released they would spur chaos among the citizenry. Disclosing drafts, in the words of then-Mayor Ivanov, would have been contrary to the “moral integrity” of the authorities (*Protokoli ot Sreshtite na Ingener Ivanov s Grajdanska Delegacia Dokladvashta Opozicia kum Musmanovia Plan*, 1938, pp. 7–8). There was a period of several months when the plan was displayed in public but that period came after the plan was already adopted into law (see Tashev, 1972, p. 28). Even then, citizens complained of having to obtain a police permit, signed by the Mayor, in order to congregate and discuss the plan (Protocoli, 1938).

Local knowledge was excluded in all shapes and forms. Muesmann made a special effort to avoid contact not only with Sofia’s regular folk, but also with Sofia’s planning and architectural guild. This approach caused substantial tension and discontent (see Tonev, 1987, pp. 417–420). A telling story of Muesmann’s position and his relationship with Sofia’s architectural elite is told by Mayor Ivanov in the *Protocols* (1938, p. 8):

In this business [of making the plan], Professor Muesmann felt that he must be an *arbiter*. This is why he did not get to know anyone here and did not make any contacts. One of our architects wanted to visit him in London. He [Muesmann] gave him dinner but then sent him home respectfully, *without* giving him any opportunity to see the plans. [Emphasis added]

The Mayor and the Council apparently believed that Muesmann’s ability to keep a distance from both local citizenry and planners had allowed him to remain neutral and take into account “all the interests of the city and its population” (Stolichna Goliamia Obshtina, 1938, pp. 4–5; *Protocoli*, 1938). Confronted with citizens desperate with concern that their interests were *not* taken into account, the Mayor explained (*Protocoli*, 1938, p. 7): “What the needs of the City are, it’s Council that knows best . . . The planning process took three years. Whatever Railroads demanded, they got it. Whatever the Military demanded, they got it. Whatever the State demanded for sports, it got it. Thus all interests of the state found their resolution in the plan.”

Yet the plan was a failure. It generated such massive opposition, from local citizens and planners alike, that it had to undergo substantial revision in 1939 and 1940, and was never realized. Muesmann’s ideas were grounded into what was the most popular concept of planning at the time—E. Howard’s garden cities—but with a right-wing twist (Jeleva-Martins, 1998). In planning for Sofia, Muesmann made a series of wrong assumptions, e.g., that Sofia had no industry, or that it aspired to build a monumental city center. Most importantly, as a right-winger and a proponent of the sanctity of private property and class separation, Muesmann assumed that Sofia’s elites dreamed of leaving the city and settling into pastoral single-family houses in the city outskirts (a move which in his view would foster nationalist values). Yet none of his assumptions were close to the truth, and the plan was so divorced from local conditions that it was doomed to fail (Lampe, 1984).

Planning Communist Sofia (1945–1989)

In 1944, Bulgaria switched from being a German to a Soviet ally. A communist-led government was formed, a new constitution adopted, and nationalization of land and real estate was carried through 1947–1948. Planning for post-war reconstruction was the first task.

Muesmann's plan was quickly rejected, as the new government distanced itself from fascist and bourgeois ideologies. Muesmann's idea for homes on private lots was deemed particularly misguided. As the author of Sofia's first post-war plan apparently said: "It is the [private] yard that makes the bourgeois" (Tonev, 1945; cited by Tangurov, 2000, p. 47).

Ironically, for all the communist enthusiasm for planning, only two *Genplans* were adopted for Sofia from 1945 to 1989. The first one was approved in September 1945 (*Durjaven Vestnik*, 1945). Once again, although the citizens were not directly asked, the plan was meant to satisfy "all their needs", as socialist historians praised it (Boyadjiev, 1958, p. 18). The 1940s planning process was both different from and similar to that of the 1930s. As in the 1930s, the plan was deemed a technical, architectural exercise—an architectural competition was organized in 1944, and entries were judged by a jury, under the supervision of the Council of Ministers. This time, in lieu of the German came the Soviet experts, Baranov, Schussev and Naumov, Chief Architect of Leningrad (Jeleva-Martins, 2000). But, more importantly, the process sought to include local planners, not to exclude them as in the 1930s. The competition attracted entries from 35 local teams (Tashev, 1972; Labov, 2000). Wide professional input was secured by organizing multiple hearings to which all planning experts in the nation were invited; some hearings were open to the public. This professional participation allowed historians to claim that the plan was the product of the "collective labor of the entire guild of Bulgarian architects and engineers" (Boyadjiev, 1958, p. 18). The winning team was led by L. Tonev.

In 1956, the Council of Ministers decreed that a new *Genplan* be prepared. This time the process was less inclusive. In lieu of a national competition, the Council of Ministers pre-selected two teams, which worked under the umbrella of the two main state planning agencies (*Sofproject* and *Glavproject*). The first team was led by L. Neikov, the second by V. Siromahov. Neikov envisioned a compact city, while Siromahov proposed the massive conquest of farmland as the future location of the (in)famous Corbusier-inspired socialist housing estates (Labov, 1979, 2000). Technocratic analysis reached its climax at that time. As a member of Siromahov's team explained, the "fashionable" thing to do was to rely on statistics for every detail; statistical documents often exceeded 500 pages for one district (Mushev, 1992). The two entries were judged by a jury of experts from the socialist block (Tashev, 1972). After much debate, most of which was open to the local planning guild, Neikov's plan was chosen as more realistic, and adopted by the Council of Ministers and the Parliament in November 1961 (*Durjaven Vestnik*, 1961).

Yet Neikov's plan was quickly abandoned. Subsequent updates implicitly adopted Siromahov's ideas for building housing estates for hundreds of thousands of people around the city (Tonev, 1992; Labov, 2000). Sofia embarked on a road of spatial expansion and mass standardized construction—an era that lasted a quarter of a century.

Between and following the two officially adopted *Genplans*, there were many updates for the entire city (although none became law) and parts of it (see Carter, 1979; Labov,

2000; Kovachev, 2004). They followed the familiar formula: architectural competitions, jury panels, and wide professional participation. Unlike Muesmann's, those plans were not kept secret. Average citizens were never prohibited from attending some of the meetings but their attendance did not make much difference. Ultimately, although the urban plans were the product of professional expertise, they proceeded within the limits set in national political documents—the five-year economic plans. Furthermore, Council of Ministers' decrees mandating the need of a new plan were typically predated by directives from the *Politburo* (the nucleus of the Central Committee of the Communist Party), which set the parameters to be met in the plans, such as the “correct” standards for living or park space per person (see Labov, 1979). The classic hero of the communist master plan was thus none other but the “average human unit” (Klassanov, 1992).

Planning the Post-communist City

The New Context

After 1989, the context for urban planning in Sofia, as in all Bulgarian cities, greatly changed. The political monopoly of the communist party came to an end; a multi-party system was established. The practice of five-year national economic planning was ended. Simultaneously, the heavily industrialized state-run economy crashed. Between 1990 and 1995, inflation ranged from 40% to 80% per year; GDP fell by a third (Andrusz, 1996). Although a slow recovery has been evident since 1997 and recent GDP growth rates are at 5%, GDP in 2000 remained lower than that in 1989, and Sofia's poverty rates in 2000 stood at a staggering 37% (Buckley & Tsenkova, 2001).

One of the most important transformative processes has been that of privatization. With the establishment of the Privatization Agency in 1992, “undeveloped” land (land upon which structures have not been erected), real estate and means of production became eligible for sale and/or restitution (i.e. return to the pre-communist owners). As a result, over 800 hectares of formerly public land, designated for green space, including land in parks, as well as land in neighborhood gardens, playgrounds or other public spaces between buildings, have been either sold or restituted, and in many cases quickly developed (*Sofianetz*, 2004). At the same time, the giant state agencies that had a monopoly on large-scale construction were disbanded. Means of production in the hands of the public sector have gradually diminished, while those in the private sector have increased. In 2000, Sofia's private sector employed 52% of the workforce—a tenfold increase from 1990 (in the construction industry, this percentage was 75). Housing units in private ownership reached 92% (Buckley & Tsenkova, 2001).

The collapse of the single-party system, coupled with the process of privatization of land and real estate, placed new demands upon urban planners in Sofia. Preparing a plan is no longer limited to following the demands of a single party, which passes its directives through a neatly hierarchical system from the *Politburo* down to the compliant City Council. Further, the development process that planning seeks to guide is no longer the monopoly of a single builder, the state. The process is now open to a great variety of actors—public authorities, private builders and property owners. It also attracts the attention of many other stakeholders: special interest groups, non-profit organizations, and private citizens, who can now voice opinions in ways that 15 years ago were unthinkable. How have planning processes adjusted to this new pluralism of interests

and views; has the relationship between planners and the citizenry changed? Prior to answering these questions, a brief note on Sofia's current municipal structure and planning laws.

Municipal Structure and Municipal Planning

The Municipality of Sofia comprises the Capital City of Sofia, four towns and 34 villages. In 2001, the municipal population was 1,174,431 persons, most of whom (1,096,389 persons) lived in the capital city (Nacionalen Statisticheski Institut, 2001).

The Municipality is governed by a single administration, under a strong mayor. As of 2004, the mayor is S. Sofiyanski, a popular politician, who has been re-elected twice. The Municipality comprises 24 districts. Each district has its own mayor, appointed by the municipal mayor, and a local administration subordinated to the central one.

Since 1878, the chief official who runs daily planning functions in Sofia is the Chief Architect, now S. Janev. The Chief Architect is the head of the Expert Council, which advises the governing body, the Municipal Council, on all planning-related questions. The Expert Council reviews changes to all urban plans prior to their consideration by the Municipal Council. It also reviews and approves all development proposals. Since the Municipality is divided into 24 districts, there are also 24 district Chief Architects, who are authorized to review smaller projects in their respective districts.

According to the current Law on Territorial Planning (*Zakon za Ustrojstvo na Teritorijata*, 2004), as in the days of socialism, there are two main types of urban plans in Bulgaria. The General Development Plan ("*Obsht Ustrojstven Plan*," or *Genplan*) is the municipal land-use plan, which is adopted by the Expert Council and then the Municipal Council. Because of Sofia's status as the state capital, its *Genplans* go a step higher and need the final approval of the National Parliament. The second type is the Detailed Development Plan ("*Podroben Ustrojstven Plan*"), which is usually prepared for sub-units—districts and neighborhoods—of larger cities. This plan translates the overall recommendations of the *Genplan* into great detail by showing existing infrastructure, open spaces and buildings, and the planned location of future infrastructure, open spaces and buildings. It also includes information about the "building regime" of the area: permitted setbacks, land uses, heights, and development "intensity" and "density" (the equivalent terms of gross floor-to-area ratios and open-to-built-area ratios). Sofia has several dozen such detailed neighborhood plans, some unchanged since socialist times.

The same law prescribes the requirements for citizen participation. There is only one formal requirement—that draft plans be discussed at a public hearing. It seems that even a single hearing at any time prior to review by the Expert Council would be sufficient:

Draft development plans are subject to a public hearing prior to their reviews by Expert Councils. The agency initiating the development plan must announce the place, date and hour of the public hearing at least in one national daily and one local newspaper. A written transcript must be maintained during the public hearing, which becomes part of the documentation submitted to the Expert Councils.

Sofia 2020—The Planning Process

Efforts to prepare a new plan for Sofia started right after the end of socialism in 1989. At the time, the city had a hopelessly outdated plan from 1961. In 1990, the Municipal Council organized a competition for a new *Genplan*. Twenty-five teams took part. However, the political and economic situation was so chaotic that the process was stalled.

Between 1995 and 1998, anticipating the renewal of the process, the Municipality created the Expert Council for Territorial Development and a special section of the Directorate of Architecture and Urban Design focusing on a new comprehensive plan. It also put together an outline for the master-planning process. Following the country's stabilization in 1998, the Municipal Council voted to re-start the planning process and the National Parliament adopted a law on the plan preparation, approval and application (*Durjaven Vestnik*, 1998).

The new master plan, *Sofia 2020*, took five years to prepare, from 1998 to 2003. In 2003, however, a coalition of citizen groups argued that implementing the plan would cause ecological harm and mounted a legal challenge to the Environmental Impact Assessment that followed the plan. The courts ultimately ruled against the environmental coalition, and the Municipal Council adopted the master plan. However, as of 2005, the plan still awaits the approval of the National Parliament.

The planning process of *Sofia 2020* was very complex and included the following:

1. Phase One: Preliminary Studies (completed by March 1999)
2. Phase Two: Preliminary Draft (completed by October 2002)
 - a. Stage One: Prognoses for Sofia's socio-economic and spatial development
 - b. Stage Two: Scenarios for Sofia's socio-economic and spatial development
 - i. Open national competition: "Sofia and European Integration"
 - ii. Scenarios for socio-economic and spatial development (A and B)
 - c. Stage Three: Conceptual drafts for Sofia's territorial development
 - i. Conceptual alternatives for territorial development (I and II)
 - ii. Assessment of the alternatives and adoption of a Base Version
 - iii. Draft plan for Sofia's functional-spatial structure and development
3. Phase Three: Final Draft (completed by April 2003)

After the completion of the stages and sub-stages, the Municipality published, in a limited edition, brochures of around 50 pages that summed up the process up to that point and presented a draft plan, in text and graphs. Five such brochures were obtained by the author (Stolichna Obshtina, 2001a, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003).

Based on the brochures and the interviews, the first phase, Preliminary Studies, was a "diagnosis" of existing conditions. The second, Preliminary Draft, included a set of "prognoses" (economic, demographic, etc.) for Sofia in 2020. By that time, through the "diagnosis" and the "prognoses", the process had already attracted very wide professional participation—no less than 300 experts, in 34 inter-disciplinary teams, some working for the Municipality, others hired as consultants (Mihailovich, 2001). The "diagnosis" and "prognoses" were then used in a request for proposals—an invitation for an open national competition for ideas and drafts of the new plan. The competition, "Sofia and European Integration", also inspired wide interest that came in the form of 19 proposals. An expert jury led by Sofia's Chief Architect recognized several entries (Bogdanov, 2001;

Janev, Videlov & Karadimov, 2001). Subsequently, an expert team took responsibility for synthesizing the ideas from the winning entries, and then split in two teams to produce two competing scenarios: “A” and “B” (Dikov, 2001; Troeva, 2001). The scenarios, according to the brochures, differed in which forecast they used: “A” assumed less economic growth and promoted urban infill; “B” counted on higher growth and favored spatial expansion. “B” was chosen as more realistic and adopted as the “Base Scenario”. Then it was used as the basis of another pair of competing visions—Versions I and II—prepared by another pair of competing teams. In 2002, Version II became the basis for the Final Draft—the last phase of the process. Prior to this, reviews were solicited from a couple of dozen academicians and 34 state institutions. Through the five-year process, the drafts were continuously circulated between the Municipal Council, Sofia’s 35 members of the National Parliament, the Municipal Expert Council for Territorial Development, the National Expert Council for Territorial Development and Regional Policy, and the Ministry of Regional Development and Planning. The Final Draft, according to the last brochure, reflects the input of several hundred experts, and dozens of state agencies—input which came from dozens of formal and informal meetings, and thousands of pages of data and written critiques. But how much input came directly from Sofia’s citizenry?

As already mentioned, the law requires citizen input to the planning process in only one form—that of a public hearing. It must be said that Sofia’s authorities by far exceeded the minimum legal requirement. Several hearings were in fact organized after the completion of each sub-stage of the planning process. Official records indicate that there were 17 hearings open to Sofia’s citizenry. Seven of those were at the Union of Bulgarian Architects, two in local districts, and the rest at other venues such as the University of Architecture and Civil Engineering. Some were preceded by month-long exhibitions of various proposals and drafts of the plan (Stolichna Obshtina, 2003a).

What have been the purpose and the impact of these hearings, and of citizen participation more generally? If we use the terms in Figure 1 and Table 1, did these hearings serve to empower the citizens, collaborate with them, involve them, consult them or only inform them? Did planners regard the citizen as a decision-maker, consultant, respondent, constituent, or was s/he left out? To answer these questions, I will first describe the hearings based on personal observation of three of them. Then I will discuss the impact of citizen input, the planners’ views and the sources of the plan’s legitimacy.

The public hearings were attended by 100–200 people, mostly government or non-profit organization representatives, or members of the architectural and planning guild. The walls of the halls where the hearings were held were decorated with graphs and maps. The team of experts sat on a special podium. The hearings were tape-recorded and had two parts. The first part was a report by the expert team. The second was a question-and-answer session. Most questions came from the professional guild. Older, retired architects and planners seemed the most critical audience. The experts answered the questions confidently, often by pointing to the maps and using technical jargon. Citizens who asked a question were often scolded for not being familiar with the matter. This is how a well-known academician—an active critic of the process—described the public hearings:

There are public hearings but this is how it happens. Most people who are invited represent institutions and well-known civil groups; few regular folks come. So the

experts tell their story and that is it. It is not a discussion but rather a report on behalf of the plan's authors in front of their fellow experts. This happens for many reasons. First because we apparently do not have a civil society here. But also because we say we want to have a civil society but, in reality, we do little to develop it. If the authorities really wanted, they could start a mass campaign, using all the media, and put posters in every neighborhood, so they could disseminate the information to as many people as possible, invite their input and provoke interest. But their view is that this would require too many resources. We do not have people here who embrace this pro-public input philosophy. Otherwise, the Municipality has the potential of enlisting public input, but it prefers to engage itself in these pseudo-public hearings . . . Also, the language in these hearings is a language that the citizen cannot understand. People simply cannot understand the plan; the language is too technical. So neither is the information about the plan disseminated adequately as to reach a broad audience, nor is there an effort to use in the plan or the hearings a language that people can understand.

A key figure in the planning process offered an alternative view and explanation:

The plan will be discussed with the public mostly in the last phases. But they [the public] are really not able to give many constructive comments . . . It is really the institutions that can give comments: the Ministries, the Committees with larger weight . . . There is not much that the citizen can say. The concepts are here too broad for the citizenry to have an opinion about them . . . I maintain the thesis that the low urban planning culture of a great part of the population and their views, which are focused on their individual interests only, allows them no objective opinion. Thus, I count more on the opinion of experts and the professionalism of the plan's authors. Perhaps under a developed democratic system public input will be greater, but not here, at this stage of our transition. I am not against asking the public for an opinion but I do not expect either active support or understanding of most that is being offered in the plan on their behalf. At this stage, I count on professional opinion.

Although the interviewees differed in their views of whether the hearings had been a "failure", or "the best that we can do under the current circumstances", collectively they painted a fairly uniform picture, consistent with the author's observation. Periodically, the citizenry is presented with a draft—its color maps and charts of hypotheses, diagnoses and prognoses in full view. All citizens are welcome to comment in person or in writing. Written comments are to be "taken into account", while oral ones, during the hearings, are tape-recorded and immediately answered. Most interviewees had no idea where the tapes were kept (in fact, a key figure in the Directorate had to make several phone calls in order to find them). None could point to a specific citizen suggestion that was deemed useful enough to enter the plan. Asked about the impact of citizen input, a key informant frankly said: "To be very honest with you, I don't think that so far it has had any."

At the end of the planning process, the Directorate published a special document summarizing how external input was reflected in the plan, entitled: *Report on the Implementation of the Recommendations from the Expert Councils and the Public*

Hearings, and the Opinions of Ministries, Agencies and Other Institutions on the Preliminary Draft of the General Development Plan (Stolichna Obshtina, 2003a). The report includes sections on changes in the plan that came in response to expert reviews and recommendations from state institutions. But despite the fact that the words “public hearings” are part of its title, it does not include a section on changes in response to input from the hearings. Nor is there a section on changes in response to written citizen comments. This is perhaps because only five such comments were apparently ever received.

For most interviewees, the scarcity of citizen input did not de-legitimize the plan. Since the plan is voted upon by the Municipal Council and the National Parliament, both of which are freely elected, planners regard it as the work of representative democracy.

The plan’s legitimacy rests on two other pillars that have been widely advertised in the press. First is the claim that the plan is based on solid science. It is prepared in a “professional”, “competent” manner, through “in-depth analysis”. It is the work of the “greatest professional authorities” (e.g. Nikiforov, 2001, p. 26; Janev, Videlov & Karadimov, 2001). Choices between alternatives were typically justified on technical grounds. Take for example the way in which a decision was made to favor Scenario “B” (advocating dispersed growth) over Scenario “A” (advocating compact form). The choice between the two clearly implies a value judgment that had the potential to spur wide public debate: whether one wants to see Sofia sprawl further into the nearby mountains, or not. Yet the standard explanation (and note the convoluted technical language below!) was that the choice had to do only with which end of the economic forecast they used:

Scenario (A) is based on development trends within the lower boundaries of the parameters for integration in the European Union and their moderate growth until the end of the specified time period. Scenario (B) relies on urban development in wider spatial boundaries, the successful application of the regional development approach and a steady economic growth before and after joining the European Union. The scenarios differ mainly in their assessment of the influence of external factors, conditions and possibilities, at all levels, to effectively use funds from the European Union. (Dikov, 2001, p. 31; also Stolichna Obshtina, 2001b)

Basing legitimacy on expertise was only part of the story. The other part was that the master plan was presented not as the work of a few experts, even if they were the “greatest professional authorities”, but as the work of almost *all* the planning experts in the nation.

This is where the complexity of the planning process plays a key role. Throughout the confusing web of stages and sub-stages, once the socio-economic forecast was complete, the process perpetually wavered between two points—generation of competing ideas, and then their synthesis, like a Hegelian spiral of theses and antitheses. Thus, the competition “Sofia and European Integration” served as the broadest possible generator of ideas. The jury, as the planning brochures explain, deliberately awarded proposals of very different—sometimes radically opposite—nature just to make sure that diverse points of view made it to the second stage, the synthesis. Then, the team of experts reduced the diversity by synthesizing the visions into two camps—Scenarios “A” and “B”. Each scenario was then developed in much greater detail by a separate group of experts. Thus diversity was sought again, albeit controlled, in two competing visions. Another synthesis then followed: Scenario “B” was chosen to serve as the basis of more detailed drafts, but in combination with elements of “A”. And then diversity was sought again: Scenario “B”

branched in two; two new teams delineated it in two competing versions, I and II. Those versions then reached their synthesis in the Base Version. At this point, the Municipality deliberately sought outside critique from academics, various state institutions and, to an extent, the citizenry—critiques that it claims were properly reflected in the final draft.

It is this perpetual, deliberate attempt to seek out diverse, conflicting ideas from hundreds of experts that provides the key legitimacy of the plan. The plan is “sold” to the public as having no single author. The process has been led by certain key figures, but ultimately the plan’s authors are said to number in the hundreds. And indeed through the various stages, hundreds of experts—virtually all who have ever done notable urbanist work in Bulgaria—have taken part in one capacity or another, even if their participation amounted to being members of teams whose visions were fully rejected. Thus, whether rejected or not, all planning visions were considered; all ideas laid on the table; all views represented. The plan is then the collective synthesis of what was most valuable in all the visions. It is the product of expert consensus, the work of the collective mind of the entire profession—the result of the “broad mobilization of almost the entire intellectual potential of our country” (Janev, Videlov & Karadimov, 2001, p. 3). The country’s “intellectual potential” is apparently taken to be that of its scientific and political elite.

So what has been then the citizens’ role? Planner–citizen communication was a one-way street. The planners periodically presented their ideas and a small part of the public commented but without much impact. Then the planners proceeded with the next stage, engaging each other and the various state institutions in more debates. In Randolph’s terms (2004, Table 1), it seems the citizen’s role was close to that of a voter-constituent (under the premise: *Citizens vote for their representatives but public decision-making is a complex pursuit and should be left to skilled experts and policy-makers*). Alternatively, since some public comment was sought, perhaps the role approached that of a respondent (under the premise: *Citizens do not necessarily know what is needed or what is the best approach but their opinions should be surveyed and used in decision-making*). Or, in the terms of International Association for Public Participation (Table 2), the citizens were perhaps informed or consulted, but certainly not actively involved or empowered. While this certainly is a big step or two up the participation ladder from the year 1938, when the plan was kept a secret, it is hardly a revolution. The peculiar thing is how easily for some planners the very notion of citizen participation can be traded for that of professional participation. Asked what is the proper level of participation, one planner explained:

I don’t want to sound rude but this question is naïve. How could the citizens help in this? I have heard ideas from them about building a motorless lift to Vitosha. This is their level. The valuable ideas do and should come from professionals. What we have ensured here is that every planning professional in the city, maybe in the country, young and old—all distinguished names—have somehow participated. We are talking about hundreds of professionals that have participated in different capacities: as participants in competitions, as writers or reviewers of the drafts. An unbelievably diverse pool of ideas was generated, basically representing the entire diversity of opinion in the country. So I think that we have collected all the possible, all the valuable ideas. And this is what I call citizen participation.

Conclusion

The evidence presented here suggests that the radical changes in the context of planning that occurred in post-1989 Bulgaria are yet to be matched by equally radical changes in the process of planning. Citizen input is still not an important part of master planning. As Tsenkova (2004, p. 33) argues, the level of participation depends on “existing traditions for civic involvement in governance”—traditions which seem fairly weak in Sofia, judging from the historic accounts. This is not to say that the citizens’ capacity to challenge planning decisions has not improved. The fact that a citizen coalition mounted a lawsuit—albeit unsuccessful—against the plan is a sign of such capacity. There are also recent cases in which citizen groups not only challenged but altered planning outcomes. Such is the case of a park in front of Sofia’s Russian Church, which was saved from development only after active citizen protest. Lastly, as Almer and Koontz (2004) argue, while the main venue of citizen participation in the latest plan—the public hearings—did not have significant direct impact, they still may yield indirect benefits such as increasing the knowledge and activity of those citizens who are willing to take part in the process.

The paper has several limitations. By presenting only the four legally adopted master plans, it left without discussion events from the 1970s to the 1990s, when one could arguably find the first seeds of civic input in planning. It also did not discuss civic input in small-scale plans, where it is typically greater. Future research should address these limitations.

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