

PERSPECTIVE

Regional Planning: A Call to Re-evaluate the Field

Stephen M. Wheeler

The words “regional planning” appear in the titles of many academic planning departments. However, there is very little consensus about what the term “regional” means or what the agenda of the regional specialty should be. This is not a new problem, but it is one that very much needs to be addressed, as the rapid physical evolution of urban regions in the twenty-first century presents ever greater challenges in terms of livability, sustainability, and equity.

It is the argument of this brief commentary that the regional planning field has been primarily focused in recent decades on economic geography and economic development at the expense of other elements of regionalism. More holistic perspectives are needed to provide guidance in the future. A “New Regionalism” should include attention to urban design, physical planning, place-making, and equity as well as economic development. It should include qualitative as well as quantitative analysis, and needs to be based on direct observation and experience of the region to a much greater degree than at present. Perhaps most fundamentally, it should re-evaluate economic growth as the main goal of regional development, and find ways to balance economic development with environmental and social objectives.

The discipline of regional planning emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century as individuals applied new understandings of natural systems to the dramatically expanding metropolitan landscape. Trained as a biological scientist, Patrick Geddes viewed the urban region holistically as a complex ecosystem. Weaving together information from a great variety of disciplines, he denied borders between theory and practice, thought and action. He also understood the dangers inherent in the rapid growth of industrial society, partly as a result of the influence of French geographers and anarchists such as Peter Kropotkin. Ebenezer Howard likewise adopted a broad, interdisciplinary approach. His garden city model combined economic, social, and physical planning at a metropolitan scale. Regionally oriented practitioners of the time, such as Daniel Burnham, William Bennett, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., John Olmsted, and Charles Mulford Robinson, developed plans that focused primarily on physical improvements as a way to enhance economic health and livability.

In the 1920s and 1930s three distinct strands of regionalism emerged. One group, led by Lewis Mumford and the Regional Planning Association of America, continued in the tradition of Geddes and Howard in emphasizing a holistic mix of physical, social, and economic development at a metropolitan scale (although some such as Benton MacKaye also thought in terms of broader ecological regions). The aim, as before, was to transform society. A second main branch, represented by Thomas Adams, the New York Regional Plan Association, and planning consultants such as Harland Bartholomew, developed more pragmatic physical planning approaches to the metropolitan region emphasizing circulation, housing, and arrangements of land uses. This group also embraced quantitative methods, tabulating vast quantities of data on housing, traffic, infrastructure, and demographics. A third group, the cultural regionalists led by Howard Odum, was interested in ways that large-scale cultural regions of the United States could resist the onslaught of industrial growth, but found few planning mechanisms to relate to this interest.

After the Second World War pragmatic approaches to regional planning triumphed and joined with the modernist juggernaut of quantitative science and neoclassical economics to create a new discipline: regional science. Practically forgotten now, regional scientists such as Lowdon Wingo and Harvey Perloff spent enormous amounts of time developing quantitative models of regional systems, though these seem to have had very little usefulness in practice. A large number of development economists also worked on a regional scale during this period. In their 1964 book *Regional Development and Planning*, John Friedman and William Alonso in fact defined regional development as a process of changing an “economic landscape”. Regional analysis became firmly rooted in economic modeling and abstract analysis, with very little attention to the actual experience of place.

Marxist-inspired critics such as David Harvey and Manuel Castells challenged the apolitical nature of regional science in the late 1960s and 1970s, showing how powerful political and economic elements within society influenced the development of urban space. Empirical studies by many researchers illustrated how elites and growth coalitions shaped regional development. But these and later analyses still took place primarily within the field of economic geography.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century new regional concerns came to the fore. Environmental, growth management, and equity problems all demanded action on a metropolitan or bioregional scale. Concern about the physical qualities of place within urban areas fueled movements for a New Urbanism, Smart Growth, and livable communities. Concepts such as sustainable development sought to unite many of these issues under a single banner, and often concentrated on a regional frame of action.

Re-evaluating Regional Planning, Wheeler

Today academic regionalists need to develop perspectives and research agendas broad enough to incorporate these new concerns. Recent panels about the future of the regional field at Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning conferences have resulted only in a lot of headscratching among economic geographers not used to thinking in terms of physical place-making or to taking leadership in developing a normative regional agenda. It is time for this situation to change, and for regionalists to more actively address the question of how livable urban regions can be created in the long run.

What is needed within a New Regionalism is a highly interdisciplinary, strategic vision of the urban region which could provide planners, politicians, and ordinary citizens with information about how to bring about long-term positive change. New regional institutions, policies, designs, and physical planning approaches will be needed. Such a New Regionalism will combine the best elements of early twentieth century regional thought with later planning tools. It will also need to recognize the dangers that regional “hypergrowth”, as in the Silicon Valley currently, poses for regional environment and equity. Economic, environmental, and social goals of regional development must be coordinated in a sustainable way. Since the obstacles to such sustainability-oriented places are large, it will take leadership from planners and academics if such a new regional agenda is to blossom in the twenty-first century.