An International Perspective of Contemporary Urban Planning
Conversation with
Ray Bromley

Aruna Reddi

Dr. Ray Bromley served on the full-time faculty of the State University of New York at Albany, from 1985 till his retirement in January 2020 with a full professorship since 1987. He is now an Emeritus Professor, focusing on research and writing. He was born in Britain, educated from Cambridge University in the UK combining Geography with Urban Studies and Latin American Studies. He served for ten years on the faculty of Swansea University in South Wales specializing in urban, regional and national planning, before moving to a consultancy assignment in Peru and then on to Albany.

His primary academic fields are Urban Studies and Planning, Geography, Latin American Studies, South Asian Studies, and International Development Studies. He is the author or co-author of three books, and the editor or co-editor of five books, a nine-book series, and four theme issues of academic journals. In addition, he has authored over seventy articles in academic journals and edited books. Most of his work has focused on microenterprise, informality and casual labor, and on the history and contemporary practice of urban, regional and national planning. He held Fulbright Fellowships in Peru and India, and he has worked for the United Nations, USAID, and various consultants associated with the UN, USAID and the World Bank.

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I have known Dr. Ray Bromley since 2000 as my teacher who has an exceptional impression on me. His vast knowledge in Urban Planning and international issues used to transpire in his lectures and sensitize us-students towards these issues. As the Director of the Department of Geography & Planning, he always helped me during my graduate years in SUNY, Albany. It is very nostalgic to interview Dr. Bromley to discuss different issues of urban planning after twenty years. This interview may not cover what all Dr. Bromley is knowledgeable of, but I tried to include as many issues as possible that are relevant today.

REDDI

You studied geography and planning and have extensive experience in regional planning, urban planning, and community development. How do you relate them and how do these different areas of knowledge helped you in practice and teaching urban issues? Do you think a geographer and an urban planner look at urban issues differently? Since you have education in both areas, how has it helped you to understand urban issues?

BROMLEY

As a field of study, geography is much broader than urban planning, and it is not necessarily applied to solve specific human problems. Geography embraces both social and environmental sciences, and it places special emphasis on issues of location, spatial distribution and interaction, and mapping. In contrast, urban planning focuses on a specific set of policy issues as they affect urban and suburban areas. Social and environmental issues and location are important to planning, but the scale of analysis is usually more limited, and emphasis should always go to "quality of life" and "environmental sustainability" issues as they affect the local population.

Ideally, planning should function at multiple levels: national, regional, municipal and neighborhood. Each scale of analysis needs coordination with the level below and the level above, and national, state and local governments should work together, exchanging information and coordinating policies. India is the most populous and complex democracy on earth, and this creates enormous problems in coordinating multi-level planning. Major efforts have been made ever since Independence in 1947, but there are still major problems in the quality and flow of information between levels, and in the coordination of development strategies, budgets and legislation between the different levels.

REDDI

You have lived for extended periods in several different countries, traveled quite widely around the world, and you have had students from many different countries. How have these different international experiences affected your ideas on urban issues? Please give a glimpse of your experiences.

BROMLEY

Adding all the different assignments and projects together, I have spent a total of nine years in Latin America, and about a year and a half in India. My first visit to India was for a month in 1979, but all my other experience in India has been since 2008, including a six month period teaching and researching in association with the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi. My career has been based on the synergies that result from international, interdisciplinary and comparative research, and on my fascination to learn more about new places and cultures.

Travel can be a very positive experience if you focus on the distinctive characteristics of the places that you visit and the people that you interact with. Everywhere and everyone is potentially of great interest, and it's especially useful to return to the same places again and again. That gives you the chance to observe daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms of activity, and also to observe long-term changes over several years or decades. When I first came to India in 1979, I traveled by bus from Madras to Tirupati, and then on to Bangalore. At night, in between the cities, the countryside was totally dark, while now electricity is much more widely available. In contemporary India, urban development has spread out along the highways as a form of 'ribbon development', and so the rural-urban division is much less marked than it was over thirty years ago. Population growth, urbanization, economic development and 'sprawl' have changed the landscape both within and between cities.

To better understand places, it is important to walk around a lot at different times of the day and night, and to try to experience local sights, sounds, fragrances and tastes. In India I greatly enjoy wandering through the old, historic sections of cities like Kolkata, Varanasi and Udaipur, and visiting great temple cities like Madurai, Tirupati and Amritsar.

Learning and using different languages is also important. Sadly I'm only fluent in two languages, English and Spanish, and I know only two other languages fairly well, French and Portuguese. So my ethnographic research on street and market vendors has been limited to Latin American countries. In India I have focused on the history of ideas in development and planning,

concentrating on English-language publications and archives, and on figures like Visvesvaraya, Krishnavarma, Rabindranath Tagore, and Radhakamal Mukerjee, all of whom wrote very extensively in English.

REDDI

Can you draw comparisons between Latin American and Asian cities you have visited with respect to government dealing with urban planning? In solving urban planning issues of developing countries, is lack of funds the prime concern? What are the other areas we should focus on?

BROMLEY

I have traveled widely in both Latin America and many parts of Asia, and there are many different and highly contrasting situations in both continents. Generalizations are very difficult when comparing highly developed countries like Japan, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore or South Korea, with impoverished countries like Haiti, Honduras, Cambodia or Myanmar. Differences within the two continents may be just as important as between them. On the whole, however, Latin American cities are built at a lower density than most Asian cities. Latin America makes more use of motor vehicles with four or more wheels, while Asia has far more two- and three-wheeler vehicles. Density, congestion and an extraordinary mix of people, vehicles, animals and activities are very characteristic of South-and South-east Asian towns and cities. Within Asia there is an extraordinary contrast between Chinese urbanism, which places very heavy emphasis on order, and the much more disorderly and varied world of South and South-east Asian urbanism. The unprecedented pace of urban renewal in China is replacing the traditional city neighborhoods with new high-rise urbanism, and both India and China are building new high-

rise and high-density apartment complexes on and beyond the urban periphery.

In the rapidly-growing megacities of East, South-East and South Asia, urban sprawl leads to massive problems for the extension of transportation and utility networks, creating urban agglomerations of unprecedented size and complexity. Old European ideas of 'green belts' and 'urban growth boundaries' should be considered to limit outward growth, along with fiscal incentives and transit investments to densify existing urban areas.

REDDI

How do you see cities? Are the physical form and urban design really impactful or is it social factors that have the greatest impact on urban development?
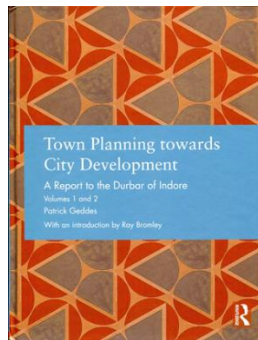
BROMLEY

Both the physical form and the social dynamics of cities are important and interdependent. Most countries, including the United States and India, have sharp social contrasts between rich and poor neighborhoods, and significant levels of segregation, not just by income and wealth, but also by race, religion, language or national origin, class, or caste. Every social group has the right to preserve its distinctive traditions and to celebrate its identity, but no group should have to endure unsafe and unsanitary housing, or having to live in highly inaccessible, polluted or disaster-prone areas. The interface of physical planning and community development is tremendously important, encouraging social integration and the effective use of public spaces and services.

REDDI

What is your opinion on "Smart Cities"? Are they going to improve life conditions of all people who live in those cities or will they widen inequalities and favor the elites of those cities?

BROMLEY

The potential for 'smart technologies' to improve the quality of life is much greater in rich countries than in poorer ones. Indian cities are characterized by high levels of complexity, congestion and environmental contamination,

and very serious problems in such simple fields as water supply, sanitation, and waste disposal. Smart technologies will help monitor and measure some problems, but in themselves they do not do the work of cleaning the drains and sewers, filling the potholes, or collecting the trash. Smart technologies may slightly reduce congestion by ensuring that more motorists take the best routes, especially when some roads are blocked by accidents, road repairs or flooding. A few workers in such fields as information technology, publishing and education may be able to do more of their work from home, and some students may switch from face-to-face learning to online learning. Many bureaucratic requirements may be fulfilled online. For most Indians, however, the smart options will have little impact because they don't relate to the real-world problems that people face in their everyday lives—problems that can't be magically solved just by tapping a few keys on a cellphone. The broader problems that India faces relate to such fundamentals as universal primary and secondary education, universal access to health care, clean water, effective sanitation,

and the elimination of discrimination against OBCs, dalits, adivasi, and religious minorities. Smart technologies will have relatively little impact on these fundamental problems.

REDDI

Does India need smart cities from the high-tech services perspective?

BROMLEY

 India needs reliable electricity supply and internet access throughout the national territory, and citizens who have easy access to computers and technical support to ensure that their computers are not hacked or infected

with malware and viruses. If only a small minority of the population have these crucial services, inequality and poverty will be accentuated.

REDDI

Historically cities have had specific role. Are the cities important and do they have any important role in today's context when the internet links most of the world, both urban and rural?
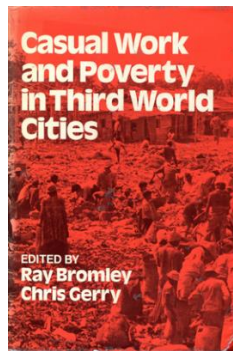
BROMLEY

Yes, the internet has contributed to the globalization our world, creating opportunities for interactions between small and distant places. Nevertheless, very large urban agglomerations like New York, Mumbai and Shanghai still play a tremendously important role in finance, business and the media. Visiting or living in a major city can be expensive and stressful, but it also offers great opportunities and a tremendous range of experiences. Though the megacities are special, however, every continent and most countries have some small cities that are prosperous and dynamic. In India, for example, Anand, Coimbatore, and Chandigarh are very successful small to medium-sized cities. Worldwide, cities like Geneva, Switzerland, Oxford, England, and Madison, Wisconsin, exemplify high quality of life and modest urban size. We can learn a lot from observing how successful cities of different sizes are managed.

REDDI

What kind of impact can social media have on community development by creating social groups without geographical barriers? Are we using them well enough to build social cohesiveness? Have you come across any such examples where a community benefited from social networking?

BROMLEY

In the United States our President is obsessed with social media and uses Twitter constantly to insult his rivals, to claim that he is being victimized by the deep state and fake news, and to boast about his extraordinary achievements and talents. This gross misuse of social media should stand as a warning to India. Education, libraries, and easy access to a wide range of perspectives presented in the media and on the internet are essential to democracy and development. Broadening access to education and in-

Casual Work and Poverty in Third World Cities

EDITED BY
Ray Bromley
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depth information sources is crucial to the future of democracy, allowing and encouraging citizens to form their own opinions. Very little can be learned from slogans and Twitter-posts, and social media can easily be hijacked to spread lies and hatred. Rather than unifying our communities and educating our populations, I fear that cellphones and social media are isolating people and increasing their vulnerability to manipulation. Strong policies are needed to protect the print media, the freedom of the press, and the rights of minorities, and to prevent the diffusion of hatred and lies through social media.

REDDI

In India, you must have noticed that the informal sector is very strong and almost has a parallel economy. However, the people who are part of this economic sector are underrated, and not given enough importance in urban planning when policies are made, and the spaces they require are not given legal authenticity for them to thrive. What were your observations from your multiple visits to India? Any suggestions?

BROMLEY

 Yes, I agree with your assessment. Informal economic activities are vital to the livelihoods of many Indian citizens, and they provide crucial goods and services that benefit many other citizens. Nevertheless, they are frequently forgotten and marginalized in the urban planning process, and they are

often harassed by police and municipal inspectors. Urban regulation is essential to prevent the sale of contaminated and toxic products, to limit the use of explosive and inflammable substances, and to facilitate traffic flow, but regulation often also supports corruption, repression and

discrimination. Planners need to give more attention to the use and protection of sidewalks, to creating neighborhood markets and small shops, to the provision of public toilets, and to public services or vendor co-operatives that can clean up garbage and represent micro-entrepreneurs.

REDDI

Some claim that urban planning is a social engineering or socialist approach that restrains individual and free growth of a city. Do you agree with this claim?
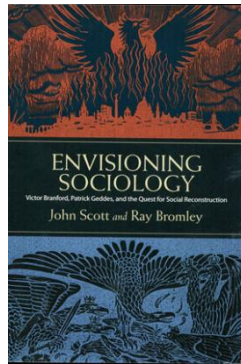
BROMLEY

No, I don't agree. Every democracy elects officials to govern 'in the public interest', and planning is a crucial element in good government. It should ensure that no social groups are excluded, neglected or marginalized, and that there are adequate support services to minimize the impact of natural and man-made disasters, and to rebuild swiftly in the aftermath of disasters. It should seek to reduce problems of congestion and pollution, and to ensure that basic services like affordable transportation, water supply, sanitation, education and health care are available to the entire population. Socio-economic inequality is rising in most countries of the world, and in a mixed economy it is essential that government works to prevent the further marginalization of the most disadvantaged groups.

REDDI

Current global trends show that the economy is centralized in few hands, and that half of the world's wealth is in the hands of much less than 1% of the population. In many countries, the governments are turning towards privatization. Is this alarming from the planning perspective? What are the repercussions of this trend on society, and especially on urban planning, and how do we deal with it?

BROMLEY

Yes, the growing wealth and power of the global plutocracy is very alarming, because it marginalizes ordinary people from major decisions and opportunities. Global trends are 'a mixed bag'. Most countries have growing economies, some of the countries like India have highest economic growth rates, and life expectancy is rising throughout the world.

Nevertheless, we face unprecedented threats of global climate change, destruction of ecosystems, extinction of many species, and rampant pollution. India is especially vulnerable because of its relative poverty, shortage of freshwater, widespread soil erosion, and major environmental contamination problems.

The evidence is clear to me that the world has only one or two decades to dramatically cut the use of fossil fuels, and to develop more sustainable technologies for housing, transportation, lifestyles, and the economy. Many people understand the global crisis and know what to do, but most transnational corporations, billionaires and leading politicians are deliberately doing the opposite—seeking to enrich and empower themselves in the short term, while accentuating the long-term crisis. The greed and selfishness of the elite few, most of whom are over fifty years old, threatens to destroy the world for our children and grandchildren.

Planning should focus on making a better future, and right now the issues and problems are big, global and long-term. It's time to restore vision and ambition to policy debates, and to widen our areas of concern from the urban built environment to the rural, regional, national and global environments. Some services can be privatized, and private options can complete with public options, but government regulation and public services are essential to ensure that the poorest and most disadvantaged social groups are not simply excluded because they don't represent a 'profit opportunity' for the private sector.

REDDI

I remember you researched on Ekistics while I was your student. As the global impact of artificial intelligence blurs barriers, can the human habitat still be studied through established planning theories such as Ekistics? What will the future of human habitat be like?

BROMLEY

Constantinos Doxiadis, the founder of Ekistics, envisaged "ecumenopolis", the inter-connection of the entire urban world through telecommunications, airways and what came to be the internet. We now have the capacity to find and link with people all over the world, and to communicate at virtually zero cost. This is a tremendous opportunity for specialist researchers, and increased communication and social interaction is complemented by a tremendous growth in the range of information available to anyone with a good education and access to the internet. The challenge, of course, is to ensure that growing global interaction supports tolerance, diversity and pluralism, and does not lead to the breakdown of local communities or the growth of chauvinism.
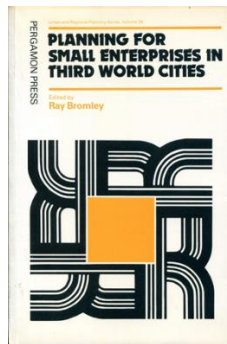
REDDI

What should Indian Urban Planners learn from American Planning, and what should they avoid following?

BROMLEY

Some American cities have made extraordinary efforts to make neighborhoods and city centres more walkable and bikeable, to ensure the safety of pedestrians and cyclists, to control parking, and to restrict the use of motor horns. It would be wonderful if India could do a little more to restrain the aggression of motorists and to limit the constant horn-blowing that characterizes so many city streets.

Some American cities have also achieved a lot in ensuring that all neighbourhoods have parks, playgrounds and sports fields available to the public, and in keeping these facilities clean. India has some wonderful parks towards the center of its largest cities, but many suburban areas and smaller cities have little provision for public parks and recreation.

Since the 1920's, the United States has obsessively zoned its urban and suburban neighborhoods, separating residential from commercial and

industrial, and also separating different types of residential building. The result is an overly simple and sterile urban environment in which people often have to drive their cars to go shopping, to take their children to school, and to engage in any sort of social activity outside the home. The U.S. has carried zoning to an extreme, and this has diminished social interaction and community activity. It has also raised the cost of housing and left many single, childless, divorced and elderly people living in large "single-family houses" that are too big for them, but difficult to sell as household sizes diminish. Hopefully India can avoid the excesses of zoning, but also take steps to restrain urban sprawl and make cities more walkable and transit-oriented.

REDDI

Who is your favorite urban planner and is there any particular reason for your liking?

BROMLEY

Dozens of names go through my mind, but I think I have to choose Patrick Geddes because he was a pioneer in linking ideas about environmentalism, community and neighborhood planning, historic preservation, rural-urban interaction, and the structure of urban hierarchies. I have published a little on Geddes, including his work on India, and I hope to write more over the next two or three years.

REDDI

What changes have you seen in urban planning pedagogy in the past few decades? Is the current education system ready to understand and handle future urban trends? What are your suggestions to the young urban planners?

BROMLEY

Over the last fifteen years there has been an extraordinary change in student behavior and study habits. Students have become highly dependent on their cellphones, and many have never grown accustomed to reading substantial articles and books. The results are very worrying, especially for urban planners. Landscape and the built environment are receiving much less attention because people spend their walking and sitting time staring at the little screens on their phones. Cell-phone addiction is a serious problem, and young planners need to define periods of abstinence, to get out to explore the real world of built and natural environments, and to resolve to read at least one complete and pertinent 10-50 page article or book chapter every week. We have more information and better access to information than any previous generation, but we must work hard to prevent the cell-phone from dumbing us down, and to restore observation, community consultation and dedicated research to their proper places as activities central to the planning process. ■

Aruna Reddi received her PhD in Urban Planning from IIT-Kharagpur and is currently working as a Professor in MES Pillai College of Architecture, New Panvel. She teaches the subjects of Architecture, and Urban & Regional Planning at both Bachelors and Masters level. Earlier, she worked in NIT Calicut as an Ad-hoc lecturer. Before getting into academics, she worked in the USA in the field of transportation planning. Aruna Reddi is also an Associate Editor of this journal – Tekton. Her research interests include land use, transportation planning, and growth management techniques.