



## **Learning Note: Built Environment Seminar 14**

Date: Wednesday, 16 November 2016

Time: 07h30 – 11h30

Venue: Botanical Gardens Conference Centre

### **Seminar Background**

The Built Environment Seminar Series (BESS) aims to forge a closer relationship between our academic partners and city officials. It is modeled on having a ‘thought leader’ present a provocative paper to a mixed audience of city officials, academics and postgraduate students. A set of respondents comprising of our institutional partners as panelists and a facilitator are also part of the seminar to help ignite discussions around a particular theme.

BESS14 provided a unique opportunity to have thought leader, Subhatri (Soobs) Moonsammy, who comes from both an academic and city practitioner background. Having worked with the eThekweni Municipality for nearly 23 years, Soobs has held various planning positions including being the former Head of Planning. Additionally, she is near completion of her doctoral studies in Town and Regional Planning with the University of Pretoria. Having this “insider-outsider exploration” was described as “historic” as Soobs was able to achieve multiple outcomes given her position. Firstly, she was able to identify key issues needing to be addressed in city planning. Secondly, she was able to share these findings amongst other city officials and academics. And lastly, she was able to engage planning practitioners on how to move forward.

The key objectives of the seminar included:

1. To provide a shared platform for constructive deliberations between city practitioners, academia and key stakeholders to meet and discuss planning theory and practices in the city.
2. To allow for the sharing on a range of options that could contribute, influence or address expanding knowledges to create practice-informed relevance in planning.

### **Seminar Format**

07:30- 08:15 – Registration and Breakfast

08:15- 08:30 – Welcome and Purpose of Session

08:30- 09:30 – Presentation

09:30- 10:15 – Panel Responses

10:15- 11:15 – Open Discussions

11:15- 11:30 – Way Forward and Closure

### **Key Presentation Findings**

In the context of questionable, yet unchanging, approaches to planning worldwide there has been a growing call to develop alternate planning theory and practice from the South, which are rooted in the daily realities of how people use, give meaning to and negotiate space. Recently completed doctoral research presented by Soobs at BESS14 took up this call and examined the everydayness of planning practice in the city of Durban, with a specific focus on knowledges of land use planning, as central to planning practice. The research was framed through a multi-conceptual framework, used

in a practical and advocacy manner to guide and make sense of the empirical findings. Multiple qualitative research methods were used in this research, including institutional ethnography, informant interviews with municipal planning officials, planning consultants and local residents, as well as a review of key land use planning documentation and policy.

The research findings showed how two parallel planning ideologies are at work in the planning offices in the city and its influence in decision-making. The first is steeped in traditional planning concerns, informed by the planning profession both within and outside the municipality. Here legislation and planning 'artifacts', specifically strategic spatial plans and town planning schemes remain dominant. Planning practices influenced by this ideology advocates for 'more of the same' - planning with more clout, more or better legislation and improved linkages to municipal budgets.

The second is an emerging planning ideology where a multiplicity of stakeholders are seen as holding and acting on important knowledges for land use planning. Planning practices influenced by this ideology are ready to engage with the practical and messy realities of everyday stakeholder experiences, which is valued as critical to developing new planning modes. Whilst the former ideology remains dominant, and the latter waits for recognition, it is in the interplay and negotiations between these formal and, as yet, unwritten ways of knowing and doing planning that gives opportunity to rethink and confront planning practice. The research presented recommended some of the new planning opportunities for theory and practice that arise from this negotiated space.

#### **Panel and Audience Participation: Areas of Discussion and Key Challenges Identified**

Based on the empirical findings presented by Soobs, the seminar then opened for a panel and audience discussion on the possibilities of expanding knowledges to create practice-informed relevance in planning. The following are some key points of discussion and challenges of current planning practice that emerged.

##### Lack of Consultation on Planning Developments

There appears to be a dynamic between politicians and planners whereby politicians are making planning decisions with little or no consultation with planners. This lack of communication and partnership encourages a silo mentality when it comes to city planning, as groups often do not collaborate on issues of shared interest. Planners part of BESS14 expressed that they can often feel as if their expertise are not being utilized.

##### Binding to Legalisation

Planners are often pre-occupied with delivery (targets) and can be more concerned about complying with current legislation than addressing issues at hand. This prohibits from thinking outside the box and can limit the very things they aim to regulate. Moreover, governments are risk adverse. They often need up to two years notice to make changes to policies and procedures so it can make it difficult to procure new information and research on current planning issues. To further support this Soobs' research findings illustrated that the planning profession is "out of touch with reality and lacks innovation."

As a consequence, planning is seriously lagging behind and common practices can be regarded as illegal if they are not compliant with current legislation. This point of discussion was also emphasized in the presentation notes as findings suggested that it can be easier to stay static on planning knowledge even if it is outdated. In addition appeal authorities often aim to ensure compliance before considering reason when it comes to planning knowledge. As found in Soobs' research, administrators involved in the planning system can make approvals without critically examining what they are approving.

### **Way Forward**

#### Increased Collaboration and Dialogue (immediate to short term)

There is an urgency to continue seminars such as this one which bring together practitioners, politicians and academics to review current practice. Planning also has to build knowledge with political, societal, and professional considerations. As this happens we must consider ways to break the status quo as there is a need for more courageous "explorers" to take us beyond our current ways.

While engagement and alignment opportunities between vested groups such as city-university intuitions is an immediate recommendation, engagement must also be part of daily work, not just organized events and seminars.

#### Turning Evidence-Based Research into Changes in Ideology, Policy and Practice (medium to long term)

Evidence-based research can have profound impacts on informed and sound policy making. Opportunities for aligning theory with practice (university - city) are also strongly encouraged for future progress in city planning in Durban.