

## **Inter-Schools conference Communicating for Development**

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### **THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE URBAN PROJECTS MANUAL**

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#### **Introduction**

It is a great pleasure to be invited to contribute to another Inter-Schools conference. As the only annual opportunity for academics and students concerned with the built environment in the South to meet and share interests and ideas, it is an event which clearly meets a need.

When I was invited to contribute a paper on the Urban Projects Manual, I must admit I was somewhat surprised. After all, the work on which it is based was undertaken twenty years ago and much has happened since and the Manual was published 16 years ago. Much has happened since then. However, when I thought about it I realised that the book has been continuously in print ever since and is about to be republished in a second expanded edition and a Spanish version is due out later this year. Obviously, like the Inter-Schools meetings, it has met a need.

I should emphasise at this point that none of us involved ever expected it to be so popular or enduring. (If we had, we would have negotiated a royalty on the contract!).

#### **Putting it together**

So what has made the Manual so popular and what does this suggest for other efforts at disseminating experience?

First of all, it was intended for a very specific audience which we knew well. When the UK government funded three British consultancy firms to prepare master plans for each of the three Suez Canal cities after the second Middle East war in 1973, Culpin Planning prepared the plan for Ismailia. This was prepared between 1974-76. To illustrate ways of implementing the plans, however, the UK agreed to finance some demonstration projects in each city. These were prepared between 1977-78 and involved a multi-disciplinary team of mainly British consultants working intensively in a confined area within the local ministry. The fact that we all *had* to work together was the catalyst in focusing collective inputs on the overall issues.

Each of us was forced to consider the impact our ideas had on other aspects of the project, so that we gradually acquired a more comprehensive understanding of what was needed and how to make it possible. Debates were often heated and lasted well into the night (there was no night life in Ismailia to distract us!), but when we meet up again after all these years, most of us agree that it was one of the most formative influences in our professional lives.

The proposals for the demonstration projects established principles for creating appropriate and affordable - even self-financing development for all sections of demand, including the poor. The essence of the proposals involved applying a market driven approach to development finance and using this to create a surplus which could then be reinvested in reducing costs for the poorest households. As the end of our contract approached we realised that the local professionals who would be responsible for implementing these proposals would be working in isolation in different government offices and without a shared view of the principles and the full range of options available. This was particularly important as we had always seen the projects as experiments in which proposals were based on balancing needs and resources, rather than simply applying official standards, regulations and procedures. When designing from first principles, you have to be clear what those principles are.

We wished to avoid the charge - which many of us had ourselves made - of consultants preparing plans and then leaving the scene without the local teams understanding how to implement the projects or develop the capacity to improve on them. Unless they understood the principles involved, there was a risk that the projects would fail and that there would be no long lasting benefit.

Discussions with London by David Allen of Culpin Planning led to a proposal to prepare a manual so that the local professionals would be able to implement the projects and strengthen their capacity to build on the experience to develop their own projects in the future. As soon as we started doing this, however, we realised that the problems facing professionals in Egypt were also being faced by their counterparts in many other countries. The manual therefore quickly became a more general publication with the Ismailia projects used as a case study, or working example for reference.

Throughout the planning of the demonstration projects we had enjoyed close collaboration with the local counterpart professionals. When preparing the manual, we were therefore able to put ourselves in their place and address the issues which we knew concerned them. Seeing the problem from the perspective of the reader or receiver of the information is a critical aspect of capacity building.

The next requirement was to present the process of planning and implementing projects in a way which people would actually *want* to use. This meant making it attractive visually and we were fortunate in obtaining the skills of a capable illustrator Peter Branfield, who had designed excellent covers for British telephone directories. These used photos by team members to produce drawing illustrating every stage of the project development process and the physical character of the project sites and there were drawings on almost every page. This helped readers to turn the pages and absorb the points being made much more easily than if it had been text only. Another lesson was therefore learned by accident - that it is important to make the dissemination material attractive as well as informative.

Finally, the language used to communicate often technical subjects had to respect the fact that most readers would only speak or read English as a second language, so jargon was reduced to the absolute minimum.

Once the Manual was completed in draft, it was translated into Arabic and tested with local professionals on site. This produced useful feedback on the organisation of the material and degree of detail people needed - anything considered non-essential was removed and points were made using bullets rather than long paragraphs. Another lesson was learned - if you can afford the time and costs, there is no substitute for market testing.

The final boost in helping the Manual become useful was to make sure that as many people as possible knew about it. We were fortunate in this respect that the publishers, Liverpool University Press, were also the publishers of the respected journal *Third World Planning Review*. It was therefore as much in their interests as ours to see that the Manual was advertised frequently in the journal and this support has continued over the years - an advantage not available to every publication.

All these factors helped the Manual to sell continuously during the 1980s and into the 1990s. The fact that there are no similar publications probably also helped. As at 1998, it had sold about 4,500 copies and been reprinted twice and was still being used on training courses in the UK and other countries. I had developed a gaming simulation exercise based on the Manual which has also been played in many different universities and is used on a Latin American training programme held annually in Bolivia. This involves anything between 12 and 50 people working in small multi-disciplinary teams to produce designs for one of the demonstration project sites. It is very similar to the action planning workshops and the development Planning for Real exercises developed by Nick Wates and Tony Gibson.

The aim of the game is to work within given cost and resource levels based on those we had to live with and produce proposals which are affordable to the poor. Players can only do this by basing proposals on what people can afford, rather than imposing arbitrary official definitions of standards and procedures. They therefore have to think from first principles about what is appropriate and reduce initial costs so that the poor can get on the housing ladder - higher standards come later when and if people can afford them. They also have to realise that the best way of generating a surplus for cross-subsidising to the poor is to include a proportion of higher income housing, together with higher value commercial and industrial activities - in other words to create mixed use urban developments rather than simply housing estates or conventional sites and services projects. This is why the Manual is called an *Urban Projects Manual* and not a *Housing Projects Manual*.

Once people have completed their proposals over perhaps a day or day and half, each team presents their proposals, the winning team being the one which provides the total number of units required without subsidy, or with the least dependency on subsidy. Of course, the real benefit of the exercise is to show that design can be a means of realising social and environmental benefits for the poor and all sections of society and that the principles of market efficiency can be harnessed for social and environmental benefits. In a recent application of the game in Cuba, one of the senior planners playing the game expressed excitement at having achieved a small profit and claimed she had learned how to become a capitalist! But, as I reminded her, (to her evident satisfaction) she had learned in fact how to become a *social* capitalist.

## **Increasing obsolescence**

All of this is in danger of sounding very self-congratulatory. In fact, of course, the success of the Manual was largely fortuitous. As the team split and we all acquired more experience, we became aware that it also had some basic limitations.

The first of these was that *the Manual was addressed primarily to other professionals*. Increasing the capacity of one set of actors was a start, but did not provide a solid basis for participatory development projects. There had been one very practical reason for this, in that by definition, there are no existing residents with which to collaborate in developments on new sites. We had tried to address this problem by proposing that studies be undertaken in existing settlements to identify community perceptions and priorities. However, this was not really sufficient.

Another gap was the recognition that several issues had not received adequate attention. One of these was the thorny issue of *land tenure and property rights*, since it was increasingly clear that no solution to shelter problems could be achieved unless people were able to obtain sufficient security to a plot of land on acceptable terms and conditions.

A remarkable film on innovative sanitation<sup>1</sup> revealed how technology was advancing in the field of treating human wastes. These showed that the nineteenth century technologies, which required miles of pipes taking wastes to central treatment plants and creating toxic sludge in the process, were unnecessary and showed how new technologies could reduce dependency on centralised systems and produce useful compost from local treatment plants. *Whilst the Manual covered a wide range of technical options, it did not reflect these recent innovations.*

The Habitat Agenda revealed another limitation in the Manual. As the role of public sector agencies increasingly changed from direct provision to one of enablement, so *the process of project planning by professionals on behalf of the poor, which the Manual seeks to improve*, gave way to more indirect approaches. Several countries were experimenting with approaches to planning new areas which involved other stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of new developments. These included the well known land pooling /readjustment programmes being undertaken in many parts of Asia and Requests for Proposals (RFPs) being introduced in Russia and other CIS countries. These all provide ways of involving land-owners, developers and NGOs in the design and implementation of new developments and make extensive use of planning and design briefs based on real costs and market prices to extract social and environmental benefits. They do not require local authorities to use scarce public resources, but increase their influence over urban development and involve a wide range of stakeholders in approaches which are consistent with the Habitat Agenda principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Human Wastes, a film made in 1995 and screened by Channel Four.

Finally, many *new sources of information* have emerged during the last two decades, which has made the Manual increasingly out of date. The obvious addition in recent years is the internet and websites which many organisations now provide. In many ways, this enables a wide range of interest groups previously denied access to information contained in expensive publications to become acquainted with current ideas and experiences, thereby dramatically reducing the time cycle by which they have previously been disseminated into international currency.

### **Giving it a new lease of life**

The continued popularity of the Manual, despite these limitations, led to a proposal in 1997 to produce a new updated and expanded edition. This was ten years after it was nominated as a contribution to the 1987 International Year of Shelter for the Homeless and marked a good opportunity to reassess its relevance.

Accordingly, DFID was approached to finance a new edition with additional technical notes to fill the gaps in the original version. Funding was approved in 1998, after which the text was updated and new technical notes added to cover the subjects missing from the earlier edition. The existing text was also reviewed and essential changes included.

The new edition is due to be published in a few months time and it is hoped that this will enable it to be of use to a new generation of professionals and students. However, we should not be complacent about the extent to which individual publications can improve understanding and effectiveness. The number of professionals working in the human settlements sector internationally is enormous and it takes time for ideas and techniques to be absorbed, and to permeate the actions of large organisations. By the time they do, new ideas and policies have been introduced, so that the chance to build on experience can be limited.

A major task for those of us involved in the dissemination of ideas and techniques is therefore to reduce the time lag between approaches, such as the Habitat Agenda, being agreed, practical policies formulated and experiences disseminated. This will require a multi-pronged approach and places a responsibility on all of us to consider what other people need to know and how they can best find out when we are preparing research proposals and carrying out research. Attention to appropriate forms of dissemination should therefore be considered at the inception of research, not left until after it is completed.