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Bertolini, L.

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INTERFACE

Planning and the Recession

Setting the Scene

LUCA BERTOLINI

Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The financial and economic crises are having a profound, if yet unresolved, impact on planning. Across the world, the recession has led to ongoing transformations within the state and the market, brought active development projects to a grinding halt, and forced countries and cities to question the very ways in which, sometimes for more than 50 years, the built environment has been managed.

The leading question now is: what should be done, and by whom? The tentative, emerging answers are quite different, ranging from powerful reaffirmations of public investments as macro-economic measures to counter the recession (e.g. in the USA) to draconian downsizing of the public sphere's role in guiding spatial development (e.g. in several European countries). Outside the rich west, most countries are confronted with the daunting task of dealing with the spatial impacts of powerful and largely unbridled waves of economic growth and decline.

The challenges are particularly evident in cities, where urban governments have to reconsider financially unviable portfolios of projects and policy priorities. Where should they direct scarce and shrinking resources? Even here, answers seem to differ remarkably: while some governments are pulling out of public involvement to concentrate on a few selected initiatives, others are making a deliberate shift to facilitate the enterprises of others. But the questioning of roles is not limited to government: many traditionally powerful market actors (e.g. many of the larger property investors and developers) have been badly affected and have cancelled projects, while others (including several smaller firms or owner-occupiers) have proven more resilient and seem rather to see the recession, at least in some contexts, as an opportunity. The implications of all these shifts for the urban built environment are unclear. Some see a catastrophe looming, while others point to a window of opportunity for long awaited for innovations. In all instances, a paradox seems to be recurring. On one side, there is the awareness that cities are increasingly the place where new drivers for economic development are to be found, but also more environmentally and socially sustainable ways of economic development. On the other, cities seem to suffer the most from dwindling public and private capital and great uncertainty about alternative sources of investment.

This *Interface* explores all these issues—at once fascinating and dramatic—with a focus on western Europe. Even within these geographical limits, the differences between countries' experiences are remarkable: the crisis and recession have hit in different ways and are triggering different reactions. These differences are rooted in both the more distant

Correspondence Address: Luca Bertolini, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 1018 VZ The Netherlands. Email: L.Bertolini@uva.nl

past (the various ways in which the welfare state has been set up and evolved in different places) and in more recent history (the different drivers and modes of economic growth and capital accumulation prior to the crisis and recession). The four stories that follow—as usual, written by an international mix of engaged practitioners and academics—document these differences, but they are equal in their assessment of the earnest of the situation: everywhere, the crisis and the recession have led people to question directly information that, just a short time ago, was held as undisputed truth, compelling many into a radical reconsideration of established approaches. The four stories also all show how the crisis is much more than just economic or financial, instead intersecting with broader issues, such as the long-term viability of past economic development modes and their ability to meet people’s present needs and desires. Furthermore, in all contexts the crisis and the recession have a marked spatial dimension, not only because of the collapse of property markets, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because a *spatial* mode of development is no longer viable. The focus on particular geographical areas, on particular ways of producing and consuming the built environment, or even on the very rationale behind the transformation of space, is being questioned. The implication is that what is asked of planning is not just the revival of property markets or particular areas, but rather a contribution towards identifying and cultivating more viable ways of producing development. This is a major challenge, but also a major opportunity, and arguably creates a space for innovation and change that we have not seen for decades.