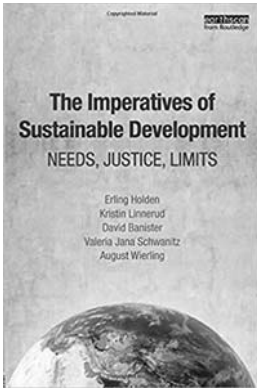


Publication Reviews

Re-Booting Ideas of Sustainable Development

The Imperatives of Sustainable Development: Needs, Justice, Limits by Erling Holden, Kristin Linnerud, David Banister, Valeria Jana Schwanitz and August Wierling, 2017, Routledge



Marking three decades since *Our Common Future* emerged as a report from the earlier discussions of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *The Imperatives of Sustainable*

Development provides an important vantage point to assess progress at a moment when 'climate crisis' has become recognized at governmental levels, just as the term 'sustainability' lies in danger of being greenwashed into the rhetorical invisibility of standardized documentation. Recognizing that the intra- and inter-generational foci of sustainable development thinking have become embedded in much policy-making, broad fields of practice, across classrooms and through frameworks of research agenda, *The Imperatives* charts a compelling trajectory for an ethical re-boot – emphasizing human needs, social justice and environmental limits, with 'an overriding need to get serious'

(p. 241). The authors, in a neatly crafted and coherently co-written text aim to refresh the 'sustainable development space' to take into account the speed and scale of environmental change since *Our Common Future* was first debated. A major strength of this text is the sense of several minds and skill sets sharing a unified voice which effectively threads chapters together, hosting a shared vision of why or how an argument or reasoning can be delivered. With the gigabyte cascade of more and more journal articles addressing issues of sustainability, downloaded bundles of core issues and keen words scattered amid 'publish-or-perish' ephemera, volumes such as this increasingly provide an essential gathering point to summarize, assess and look forward in a thoughtful, grounded manner.

A major omission in recent decades, agree the authors, has been the lack of ethical dimension as a driver for positive societal change. The book opens by refreshing the reader's rationale for the moral imperatives of sustainable development: phase one of the re-boot to assess human needs, social justice and environmental limits in the light of sustainable living, which form the foci for the next three chapters. The halfway point of the text directs the reader's attention to modelling, to 'transform sustainable development's imperatives into a concrete normative model' (p. 105). This chapter provides a thorough critique of the 'quest' for sustainability indicators and sets the context for defining sustainable development space: 'The model is a reflection of what we treasure. The space is where we should be or, if we are far off, where we should be

going' (p. 130). Subsequent pages place flesh on the model, addressing 'facts and figures' in a thoroughly rigorous chapter which merges the qualitative framing of the model with the empirical evidence around us, and then providing a comparative analysis of country-based cases. The concluding chapters look towards 'next steps', a well-reasoned and sage account that brings the co-authorial wish for sustainable futures into the limelight, via the lessons of modelling sustainable development, which is preceded by the penultimate, perhaps most engaging chapter in the book: 'Lost in Translation?' Here the authors pitch ideas of Rawls and Sen, the 'social ideal' and 'actual lives' respectively, as a means of recognizing the various pathways by which sustainable development might be reached, within the overarching context of the moral imperatives highlighted in the book's opening pages.

In sum, this is a fine, quietly provocative and candidly engaging text. Well-versed ideas of sustainable development are given new impetus, and arguably enhanced interest in some quarters where 'sustainable' has become more a required adjective than a felt need. By highlighting the moral convictions that underpin sustainable futures, the authors have provided a text that is as much for lively classroom discussion, as for calm individual pondering by practitioners and those in the business of education.

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Time for More Strategic Planning

A Future for Planning: Taking Responsibility for 21st Century Challenges by Michael Harris, 2019, RTPI Library Series, Routledge



Over the past decade strategic planning in the UK has taken a battering, particularly in England. Long-term plans for regions have been removed from statutory practice, with the

notable exception of Greater London. Although the documents themselves, I imagine, still have a place on the shelf in authorities around the country. This book provides a strong argument, proposing that there is still need for long-term thinking in the UK and more widely, and especially in the face of climate change. It presents a wealth of information from the RTPI's Planning Horizons series of research papers from the author's time in the Institute.

Harris puts the challenge of sustainability at the forefront of his arguments and offers a pretty matter-of-fact account of the failures experienced, drawing heavily on the work of our much-missed colleague Peter Hall in his *Great Planning Disasters* (1982). The book sets out the difficulties experienced in planning for the long term. It unpacks the debates around failures, and particularly neoliberal critiques, linked to the inherent uncertainties in

future visions. Here we might add that uncertainty is inevitable no matter the type of planning decision.

In fact, the book is one of great optimism, despite the doom of climate change and the gloom of planning for uncertain futures. This analysis of failures is of great value, and as Harris notes this can and has spilled over into a wider undermining of planning. Like others, such as Wray in his *Great British Plans* (2015), he offers examples of where future oriented planning has more positive effects, such as Rotterdam's flood defences.

In any case, the book's clear presentation of the wide range of materials from policy-making and social science will, I think, make it a good reference book for planning students. It charts the rise and fall of long-term planning, noting the different eras along the way, and has a wealth of examples of present challenges.

As he scans the history of planning, mainly in the UK and the USA, Harris zooms in on how time itself and future horizons became less and less a matter for concern. This analysis highlights the significance of planning knowledge; the distance between centralized endeavours and local perspectives; and the speeding up of new modes of industrial production, for instance in the discussion of the morphing of time, e.g. Rushkoff's continuous now. Time is also a consideration in the slow apocalypse challenges of today and the psychology of public and governance responses.

Overall the debates within the book focus heavily on the relationship between planning and time and Harris's argument centres on two key aspects.

Firstly, it points up the need for better information, which can give foresight on how development might (or might not) help shape a sustainable built environment. Secondly, it considers how to convey the 'need for change' to stakeholders. This means that much of the story is around how to make better connections between those in the governance landscape, including policy stakeholders in their sustainability silos and the public with their here and now realities, and knowledge from lived experience. The logic is that long-term planning has an important message to convey.

Where the argument could go further perhaps is in the role of scale within all this. Some of the conclusions offered in the book, which look very predominantly at the Transition Town experiences, seem to suggest that 'local' must be the starting point. This is probably not what was intended but just as disasters might lead to pessimism, so a local approach to the long term might fuel the current tendencies towards parochialism and elevation of the smallest scales. The 'temporal' expansion of thinking is in fact a corollary of spatial thinking. Any spatial plan will present its case not only through a sense of what the challenge is but also where it is, and the wider impacts that any change to the built environment might have.

And finally, on the critical issue of how to engage the public with a long-term future that today may seem to lack political relevance, Harris suggests that a sense of crisis might help garner support, but more thought is needed as to whether this is the best starting point for strategic decisions. Perhaps

instead strategic planning that is long term and 'spatial' could bring learning about spatial interconnectedness to the foreground and make the case for new pathways for change that need to happen. Only the future will tell.

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