

## Book Reviews

**Planning in Iceland from Settlement to the Present Time, Trausti Vallson, 2003, Reykjavik, University of Iceland Press, ISBN 9979-54-567-4, 480 pp.**

Professor of planning at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik Trausti Vallson has published an impressive book entitled "Planning in Iceland from Settlement to the Present Time". The large format - almost A4 size - and double column provides room for a large number of illustrations from the size of a stamp to that of a double page. Unfortunately, the illustrations are unnumbered, but a list in the back of the book tells us there are around 975, most of them black and white and a minority being coloured. Most of the illustrations are of good to acceptable quality, although some are marred by bad reproduction or extreme reduction in size.

The book starts with an introductory chapter where the subjects of the book are presented and where basic planning theory is referred to, emphasizing the importance of the interaction of the natural environment with the built environment - living, industries, occupations, settlements and the accompanying infrastructure in the widest sense. It is specific to Iceland that the forces of nature are more prevalent than in most other countries. The introduction ends with a section on "The Need to Dig Down to the Roots" emphasizing the importance of a profound scientific understanding of the historical development and action of nature as well as of society and social life. This justifies part of the title, "- from Settlement to Present Time". Based on the above, the book is organized into five "Books".

"Book One" deals with "Nature and the Forces Shaping the Country". The internal forces are related to the mega-tectonic pattern of ocean floor spreading, where Iceland, globally seen, represents the only larger onshore localization of a mid-oceanic ridge

forming dry land by intensive volcanism. The external forces - the climate and the ocean - are responsible for the dissection of the country and formation of the detailed morphology as well as the secondary dynamics of the landscape. The section also deals with natural resources and the different natural hazards - primarily volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and the specifically Icelandic phenomenon of floods due to subglacial volcanic eruptions as well as more common floods, avalanches and landslides. The section ends with considerations about the "Adaption of Settlements to Nature" based on the Ian McHarg "Design with Nature" philosophy.

"Book Two" is a historical approach to settlements starting from the first colonisations in 874 to the present. It is an interesting account of the development of agriculture and the growing organisation of the society based on the godars - the pre-Christian priest chieftains. The importance of transportation routes between the farms and later related to the coastal fishing spots is described.

"Book Three" is far the most voluminous and is devoted to urbanisation and a discussion of the causes for its much later appearance in Iceland compared with most other countries. Reasons given include the very low population density, the dominance of agriculture and the scattered fishery. The early development of the city of Reykjavik started in 1786, when a trading license was granted by the Danish king representing the colonial power. As Reykjavik developed into a capital city with true urban features proper town planning became urgent. This took place during and after WW I. The first master plan (1927) made room for a grandiose symmetric arrangement of public buildings, but was otherwise a failure because of economic -crises. WW II further represented a stagnation with scattered haphazard English military installations.

At the end of the 1950's, Danish planners - Peter Bredsdorff and Anders Nyvig (their portraits in the

book are of such bad reproduction that it would have been better to do without them) were selected by the Icelandic authorities to propose a plan for the expansion of the town in different directions. The plan included a harbour, industrial areas and a location of a new airport as well as extensive residential areas and the major overall traffic systems. The planning sketch was accepted by the authorities, however, but was never entirely realized mainly because of heavy grass roots resistance. Later master plans represent thorough revisions. Finally, the section deals with the regional planning in the capital area, the most densely populated area in Iceland (80 % of the population), now including several other urban structures and a large modern international airport. An interesting account on the planning of other towns in the country and regional planning in Iceland as a whole is also included.

The description of the development of planning in Reykjavik and surroundings is, in many ways, paradigmatic for the obstacles and the conditions faced in planning and for the public and political side of the process.

“Book four” is devoted to the “Development of Systems on a Country Scale” i.e. the superior national plans and sector planning in Iceland. Here the “Nature Conservation Plans” and the “National Plans for Sustainability” largely constitute the environmental protection planning of other countries including the management remedies as for instance EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) and so on. A National “Plan for Tourism” seeks to meet the increasing number of visitors to the country and a “Frame Plan for Energy Production” is remarkable in that it exclusively employs renewable energy systems as hydroelectric power and geothermal power production and hot water supply for domestic heating. Coastal zone planning and management, which is a field of growing importance in most other countries, is in Iceland a “Planning for Ocean Areas” thus signalling the importance of the sea as a resource area for the Icelanders. It does not however only cover fishery planning and regulation but also the marine environment, dredging, traffic, oil prospecting etc. Finally, the section deals with the “Steps Towards a National Plan” and the integration of the different levels and sectors of planning.

The heading of “Book Five” is “The Developments of Today”. It is an analysis of the views and visions that

now have the largest influence on how contemporary society is changing. This is seen in the perspective of the changes that already occurred during the 1900’s i.e. the change from a nation based on agriculture to one based on fisheries with accompanying harbours and urbanisation. It is claimed that the cities are now facing a renaissance as centres of the information society as well as service society. The chapter deals with quality of life planning as opposed to the former functionally central planning, and to meet the higher environmental standards. Again Reykjavik is analysed in terms of the new trends in planning and society and the increase in and concentration of the population as well as economic perspectives. Likewise other regions of the country are considered.

The two final pages attempt to draw a picture of “a new understanding of creating human habitats”, which it is claimed is meant to be the central motif of the book. “The forming of the human habitats” is presented as an analogy to “the forming of natural habitats”. It is claimed that natural science has created a *rather clear picture of how the various life forms were created on earth*, from primitive to complicated ecosystems. It may be a useful starting point in the analyses of the planning process, however, it is a rather simplistic one seen from the standpoint of a scientist, in this case a geologist. Nonetheless, the understanding of the dynamics of settlements and the society in a historical time frame is paramount together with an assessment of today’s situations and the future possibilities based on thorough analyses. Any planning should, as stated, be balanced with the democratic principles and be environmentally sustainable.

The end of the book has a number of useful indexes, extensive references, an index of terms etc. as well as a list of planners in Iceland accompanied by short CVs and their portraits.

The book is an impressive work, which demonstrates an intimate and detailed knowledge of a widely varied and variegated fields of planning. It is apparently primarily directed towards students and professionals. However, it will certainly also have an appeal to the interested laymen. The numerous case stories and original maps and illustrations will undoubtedly be appealing. In this respect it acts as a - possibly - complete archive of Icelandic planning. A further quality of the book is the more theoretical

and ideological comments and the frequent reference to both political and societal reactions to various planning situations. It is obvious that the book will have general interest internationally and it is thus from many points of view justified that the book now is available in the English language.

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