Cabs, Politics, and Planning

in a Dynamic Young Country

by Darren Gault

"Chagaramus… San Juan… Arima… Grand Bazaar…" The cacophony of cab-drivers calling out their destinations is almost as intense as the heat. This is Curepe Junction, a place where two major roads intersect. Over time, several private taxi stands have surfaced across urban Trinidad at locations like this one. Each group of drivers travels to a different destination in the local area. Each driver waits his turn in a corral, departing only when the car is full. Some run to a single destination while others will travel through the subdivisions and drop you at your front door for a fee of two or three Trinidad and Tobago dollars (less than one Canadian dollar).

The majority of these junctions are located next to the Priority Bus Route (PBR), an old public rail right-of-way that stretches from the capital, Port-of-Spain, in the west, to Arima in the east. Development has followed this east-west axis and is linked to the north by the Northern Mountain Range, and to the south by the Churchill Roosevelt Highway. There is a public bus service, but more convenient are Maxi Taxis (large converted cargo vans) that are also permitted on the dedicated route. Upon my arrival I found travelling around Trinidad to be most confusing. Given the informal nature of the transportation system there are no signs telling you who, at what junction, is going to what destination. The only way to learn is by trial and error.

Equally confusing is the planning policy and political environment. There are five planners for the entire country, two of them for the Town and Country Planning Division of the Ministry of Planning and Integrated Development. Given the lack of resources, the majority of planning work is reactive, triggered by development applications or complaints about unauthorized development. The division has had very limited time to plan for the future of its cities and citizens, and to review and update policy. In fact, much of the existing policy is so out of date that reference is no longer made to it.

This is where my presence might make a difference. The staple of my workload as a land-use and environmental planner is conducting policy reviews for some of the major urban centres in Trinidad. But how does one begin to formulate policy for a country where, according to reports, as much as 90 percent of the development is unauthorized and does not conform to existing development standards? Setback, height, floor-area ratios and even land-use designation, where they do exist, are often ignored. Even if adequate policy were created, a large number of existing uses and structures would fail to conform. It would be difficult to convince an applicant or appeal panel that they cannot obtain approval for what so many of their neighbours have acquired illegally.

Planning is deeply political in Trinidad. Members of the planning appeal panel are appointed by Cabinet and are permitted to operate their own consulting firms, an arrangement that often raises concerns about conflicts of interest. Administrative decisions frequently appear to override the recommendations and policy initiatives of the Ministry of Planning.

Will my efforts to create new local area plans, central business district policy, and development standards be in vain? Has so much haphazard development occurred that it has set in motion a development process that cannot be regulated?

My experience in Trinidad has taught me a great deal about the importance of public policy and the political support required to make it effective. It has taught me how to do real-time planning, and to make the best recommendation or decision possible given the limited resources and information available at the time. Trinidad is a young country, struggling to define the policy and processes that guide the system as a whole, not just at the level of planning. For this reason, I've begun to appreciate what many have referred to as the "over-regulated" (but, I might add, consistent) nature of the Canadian planning system.

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