Plan

Maintaining the Balance: Growth and Sustainability in Barbados

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Barbados is a very small island, with limited land and resources. In recent years, the nation has begun to experience many of the benefits of economic growth and affluence: a booming tourist economy, widespread car ownership, growing incomes and better housing. But these changes have been accompanied by growing concern about the impacts of development on agricultural and environmentally sensitive areas - impacts which have resulted in increased congestion and rapid suburbanization of rural areas.

In response, the Government of Barbados hired Urban Strategies, in association with a team of Canadian, British and Barbadian consultants, to undertake a major land-use and environmental planning study of the island. This project was comprehensive in scope, and included:

• developing a new, island-wide land-use plan and more detailed local area plans for the five major urban centres;
• planning Barbados's first national park on the environmentally sensitive east coast;
• devising strategies for reorganizing the Town and Country Planning Office and the Environmental Unit;
• developing an Environmental Management Plan; and
• creating a GIS-based mapping system for the island.

The result is an extensive body of work tied together by the overarching principle of sustainable development - change which meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. This principle was central to the study's original terms of reference and became the foundation upon which our work was organized and crafted.

In both technical and professional terms, this project proved to be a rich experience for the consulting team. It presented a unique opportunity to address virtually all of Barbados's important planning issues - economic, cultural, physical and environmental - in an integrated study.

The challenges
One of the main objectives was the development and successful implementation of planning strategies that would allow growth to continue in a more economically and environmentally sustainable manner. Achieving such a "win-win" solution is difficult, even in a familiar context. But many additional challenges were created by our efforts to export "sustainable development" to a culture that was unfamiliar to most members of the consulting team.

The learning curve
The project's one-year time frame meant that we had to make concentrated efforts to understand the physical and social structure of the island. The historic affinity between the people of Barbados and Canada stood us in good stead, for we received strong and patient collaboration and cooperation from our local counterparts.

An unfamiliar planning system: In Barbados, planning documents typically do not set out explicit uses and development policies in land-use designations, and there is no equivalent to a zoning by-law. To our eyes it appeared that many planning decisions were made...
without the benefit of a well-defined long-term policy or regulatory framework. Our experience in developing much more prescriptive planning documents allowed us to present our clients with a variety of alternative approaches for the land-use plan and the community plan.

Implementing public consultation: Although Barbadians are very informed and vocal, there is currently no requirement for public participation in the planning process. Most planning decisions are made behind closed doors, and the appeal process is open only to applicants, not the public at large. Part of our mandate was to institute a wider public consultation process in the new Physical Development Plan, which now requires public meetings and open houses for development proposals that involve amendments to it. During the preparation of the new plan, we found that structured workshops, focus groups and one-on-one interviews were very effective ways of establishing a dialogue between stakeholders, government officials and the consulting team. The officials with whom we collaborated were supportive of our proposals to institute a more transparent process and, we believe, were relying on us as "outsiders" to make public the failings of the process and to set out strategies to correct them. Developing a culture of consultation will likely require more time and experience, and it remains to be seen whether or not our message was heard by the politicians.

Unexpected economic and cultural factors also had large impacts on the outcome of the study. Among them were:

The use of land as a savings and investment vehicle: few long-term investment opportunities are available to Barbadians. In this financial vacuum, local residents buy vacant lots in new subdivisions as vehicles for savings and investment, not for the purpose of building new housing. This trend is likely to continue as the incomes and savings of Barbadians increase. As a result, there are an estimated 20,000 vacant lots in existing subdivisions—more than enough to accommodate housing requirements over the short and medium term. Although it was one of our objectives to promote more compact development patterns in existing urban areas, this unexpected factor limited how far we could push these policies.

A perceived "right" to develop land anywhere: Most Barbadians believe that they have a right to develop their land as they wish. Planning documents provide limited policy guidance. There is a lack of transparency and public participation when planning decisions are being made. The overwhelming impression is that economic development cannot be compromised. Together, these factors conspire to give landowners and developers the upper hand in the development process. Tellingly, many residents were concerned that the proposed National Park, located on environmentally fragile lands, would infringe on their perceived private property rights.

The decline of agriculture: historically, the economy of Barbados depended on the cultivation of sugar. Over the years, plantation owners have faced declining sugar prices and growing debt. Many plantations have tried to supplement their incomes by developing residential subdivisions on portions of their properties, and these subdivisions are now scattered all over the countryside. A growing market for wealthy golf-course communities has further increased the incentive for cash-starved plantation owners to develop their properties.

An "environmental ethic" has only recently begun to emerge: Coastal and environmental conservation is only now becoming a priority for many residents of Barbados. Litter and garbage are apparent in many parts of the countryside and in urban areas. Sanitary sewers are only now being installed in the coastal urban areas, and recycling is almost non-existent.

The lure of the suburban dream: Achieving a middle-class lifestyle is a powerful goal for many residents. They have a strong desire to leave the often poor-quality housing of the older urban centres for new subdivisions in outlying areas. The suburban dream, complete with large houses on large lots, two-car garages, and shopping centres with extensive parking lots, is extremely appealing to many residents, and is synonymous with success. New subdivisions, shopping centres, tourist resorts, and suburban business parks, all of which are virtually identical to those from their North American prototypes, are appearing throughout the urbanized coastal areas. These new subdivisions are being developed at densities far below historic levels. In a country where land is a scarce resource, suburban sprawl will be increasingly problematic if it is not curtailed.

Addressing these challenges: it is a daunting task to enter an unfamiliar environment and learn about it from scratch; to gain the confidence of clients, government officials and local stakeholders, and to develop appropriate, achievable solutions. Reflecting on this assignment, we can identify a few strategies that were instrumental to the success of the project:

Including local consultants on the study team: the local members of our study team made invaluable contributions. Their understanding of the cultural, economic and political subtleties of the island, including the planning process and its key players, helped to focus the issues at an early stage and saved us weeks of background research.

Involving local residents and stakeholders in the planning process: we found that the numerous workshop sessions and informal meetings that we held with landowners, business groups, environmentalists, government agencies, and other stakeholders were crucial to developing a clear understanding of the issues, testing alternatives, and finalizing recommendations.

Developing locally based solutions: one of the great challenges of this project was to devise new land-use strategies that recognized the goals of sustainable development while remaining sensitive to the aspirations of an increasingly middle-class society. Throughout this project we had to be careful not to impose ready-made (and quite likely inappropriate) "Canadian" solutions on a society with different economic, social and physical characteristics. We wanted to "push the envelope," but not so far that our proposals would be unrealistic or ignored. The contributions of local consultants on the study team, on-going dialogue with stakeholders, and careful testing and evaluation of alternatives, were essential to achieving this end.

A foreign assignment can...
be a fascinating and challenging experience. Canadian planners have a great many skills and insights to offer both developed and developing nations, and it was heartening to note the high regard in which Canadian professionals are held in Barbados (and elsewhere, we would expect). At the same time, these assignments can inform our approaches to planning and design at home. Barbados provided many such insights. Working intensely on a tiny island, surrounded by nothing but ocean, underlined just how carefully we must protect those precious resources: the water, soil and natural environments upon which we depend.

The fundamental principles that we proposed for this purpose - more compact urban growth, intensification of urban centres, preservation of the island's remaining natural areas - are equally valid in the Canadian context. At the same time, the barriers that we encountered - concerns about property and development rights, complaints that "sustainable development" will compromise economic growth, an ever-growing car culture and its impacts on development patterns and the environment - are equally familiar. In Canada, an environmental ethic is more entrenched, but the need often appears less pressing. Yet, in both cases the solutions and the many challenges to implementing them are similar.

**Summary**

In 1997, the Government of Barbados commissioned Urban Strategies, in association with a team of Canadian, British and Barbadian Consultants, to undertake a comprehensive land-use study of the island. A new land-use plan, a national park development plan, an environmental management plan, a GIS-based mapping system, and the reorganization of the Town and Country Planning Office, were integral components of the study. This article describes some of the main challenges that Canadian planners can face when working in a foreign country: short learning curve, unfamiliar planning systems, different attitudes to the environment, and the role of the public in the planning process. Many of the challenges we faced - urban sprawl, automobile congestion, the loss of agricultural land, a rapidly growing middle class, and the lure of the suburban dream - were familiar, but unexpected. The article concludes that the Barbadian context emphasizes the importance of bringing the concepts of sustainable development to the forefront of the planning process. While the differences between Canada and Barbados are obvious, many of the planning techniques and strategies used in this study are appropriate to both countries.

**Résumé**

En 1997, le gouvernement de la Barbade a chargé Urban Strategies, en association avec une équipe d'experts canadiens, britanniques et barbadens, d'entreprendre une étude complète sur l'aménagement de l'île. Cette étude comprenait un nouveau plan d'aménagement et d'utilisation du territoire, le développement d'un parc national, un plan de gestion de l'environnement, une étude cartographique basée sur le système GIS et une réorganisation du département d'urbanisme et d'aménagement rural.

Cet article relate les défis majeurs que peuvent avoir à relever des urbanistes canadiens en mission dans un pays étranger : court délai d'assimilation dans un cadre de travail non familier, approche urbanistique différente face à l'environnement et à la société. Plusieurs des difficultés rencontrées (étalement urbain, encombrements de la circulation, perte de terres agricoles, croissance rapide de la classe moyenne et attrait de la vie en banlieue) bien que familières, étaient inattendues. En conclusion, cet article souligne que pour un projet d'aménagement tel que celui de la Barbade, une petite nation insulaire aux ressources limitées, les urbanistes doivent opter en priorité pour des concepts de développement durable. Malgré des différences évidentes entre le Canada et la Barbade, de nombreuses techniques et stratégies d'urbanisme utilisées dans cette étude peuvent s'appliquer indifféremment à ces deux pays.