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Planning Lessons of the American Dream: Historical Limitations and Democratizing Potential

Planiranje lekcija "američkog sna": povijesna ograničenja i potencijal za demokratizaciju

Key words • Ključne riječi

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| American landscape | Am. krajobraz |
| American planning | Am. planiranje |
| American urbanism | Am. urbanizam |
| household living | domaćinstvo |
| planning ideology | planerska ideologija |

Abstract • Sažetak

Images of the American landscape, and of its prosperity, have been transmitted all over the world through various media. At the heart of these images is the "American Dream" of a happy, productive household living in a detached single-family dwelling unit. This mythical ideal of domesticity has been articulated and pursued in the context of a political system and planning ideology that have evolved in unique ways.

Razni mediji su diljem svijeta prenijeli slike američkog pejzaža i njegovog obilja. Srž tih slika čini "američki san" sretnog i radinog domaćinstva gdje jedna obitelj živi u samostojećoj kući. Taj mitski ideal obiteljskog života je izgrađen u kontekstu političkog sustava i načinu planiranja koji su imali posve osebujan razvoj.

1. Introduction / Uvod

In reviewing the history of planning around the world, the importance of the American planning paradigm is readily apparent. In the postwar period, American aid and policy advice was widely dispensed to developing countries. The "project of development" had a distinctively American, and even imperial, flavor. Many countries in the developing world continue to look at the American model, often in idealized ways, in search of solutions and precedents that may help them deal with the complexity of their urban fabric. American planning, however, has a very unique history – one that is firmly rooted in specific political and social circumstances, and whose lessons cannot be deciphered independent of this historical background. In this paper, I will highlight the distinctive contours of the American landscape and explore the battles that continue to shape it.

2. Grid and House: The Context of American Urbanism / Raster i kuća: kontekst američkog urbanizma

An observer of the American landscape, viewing the landscape from the air, would be struck by the pervasiveness of the gridiron plan. Whether it is the densely developed island of Manhattan, the rolling hills of San Francisco, or the suburbanized sprawl of Los Angeles, the grid is present in all American cities, large and small. Some have argued that the grid was the easiest way to conquer land and residentially colonize wilderness, and indeed the American grid may be good proof of this argument.¹

The grid is the quintessential form of American urbanism. It owes its genesis to the Land Ordinance and National Survey of 1785, when it was set upon two-thirds of the United States. The National Survey was one of the most thorough and extensive cadastral surveys in history, and it had a profound impact on every aspect of the socio-spatial structure of the country.

The idea was Thomas Jefferson's, the third U.S. President. Immediately following the Declaration of Independence, the original states holding western land claims – like New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Virginia – began to cede them to the U.S. Congress. The federal government extended these vast territorial holdings with purchases of its own from Indian tribes, and from the French. Jefferson wanted the occupation and settlement of these newly opened stretches of the continent to be orderly and equitable. His alternative to a feudalistic "Old World" sharply stratified between large landowners and multitudes of landless peasants was a "New World" with land neatly and equally divided among freeholders.² Jefferson's proposal for a survey was authorized by Congress in 1785.

The National Survey was adopted to prevent the continuation of the arbitrary colonial ways of parceling and occupying land. The Ordinance provided that all prior claims be eliminated before the land could be surveyed. It specified square "townships" of thirty-six square miles each, further subdivided into 640-acre lots. These were to be put up for sale, except one, designated for schools. The law was later revised to allow for parcels smaller than a section to be sold; and finally, the quarter-section became the standard unit, viewed as the ideal size for the family farm.

1 Kostof, 1987:292.

2 Kostof, 1987:16.

The promise of the Ordinance was that all people, mainly the newly arrived European immigrants, would be able to share in the land bounty. Almost a hundred years later, the Homestead Act of 1862 formalized this ideology. It offered to give away 160 acres of land to any individual who would claim it and pay a nominal registration fee. One only needed to live on the land for five years, cultivate and improve it, before being granted its title.

In many ways, the Homestead Act made into law what was already a prevalent American ideology – the virtues of property ownership. Jeffersonian republicanism envisioned the ownership of property as a civil right of the highest order. What was at stake here was the formulation of a cultural identity, one that would be irrevocably linked to the American house.

But the house of the American dream came into existence only after another layer of historical developments. The most dramatic of these was suburbanization - a steady outflow of population from central cities into residential communities, starting in the nineteenth century and then gaining momentum in the twentieth century. The early suburbs were exclusionary communities intended to escape the poor and unkempt masses of the feared cities.³ In the postwar period, fueled by the automobile, massive state spending on highways, and almost assembly-like production of housing developments, suburban settlements began to proliferate. The street scheme of these developed parcels was almost always a rectilinear grid. Even when housing markets started favoring curvilinear adaptations of the grid, with loops and cul-de-sacs designed for the exclusive use of residents, the basic constituent unit remained the detached single-family house, sitting on a standard lot.

This ideal suburban house is an essential element of the American Dream. It has come to signify the ownership of land, participation in the lush and ordered security of suburbs, and a sense of financial well-being bolstered through the mortgage system of an elaborate banking system.

"So the American house is much more than a house. It is a home, a sacred hearth. It is the American dream. And even though its promises and reality have come into question lately, for many, many people it remains the American dream. If they have not yet attained it, it will be the reward of hard work, proof of one's social worthiness, the promise of security. If they have, they will struggle to hold on to it, or go it one better".⁴

But the real meaning of the house may require us to go deeper. Cooper Marcus reminds us that in America, the house is a mirror of self, endowed with the symbolic meanings of entrepreneurship and success. She argues that this ideology may partly explain why state interventions in housing has always been such a contentious issue:

"America is the home of the self-made man, and if the house is seen (even unconsciously) as the symbol of self, then it is small wonder that there is a resistance to subsidized housing or the state providing houses for people. The frontier image of the man clearing the land and building a cabin for himself and his family is not far behind us. To a culture inbred with this image, the house-self identity is particularly strong. Little wonder then that in some barely conscious way, society has decided to penalize those who, through no fault of their own, cannot build, buy or rent their own housing. They are not self-made men".⁵

Today, the freestanding, detached house and yard continues to be an integral part of the American cultural landscape. It is difficult to disentangle the attachment to this form from the fact that it subsumes territorial rights over a portion of land. There is a

3 Hall, 1988:49.

4 Kostof, 1987:10.

5 Cooper Marcus, 1971:12.

formidable cluster of forces - from real estate firms to the building industry that advertise and sell the house as home, the repository of the good and desirable life.

The commodification and consumption of housing is clearly not unique to America. What is distinctive are the specific cultural meanings that have come to be associated with the home and house form. The ownership and protection of property is an almost universal phenomenon. What is striking about the American context is how far homeowners are willing to go to protect their environments. Repeated incidents where encroachers are shot, and even killed, bear testimony to the specificity of a cultural environment where acts of trespassing are seen as violations of the self and a political environment where the means to act, in this case through violence, are readily available.

3. Laws and Regulations: The Evolution of American Planning / Zakoni i propisi: evolucija američkog planiranja

It would be almost impossible to understand the development of American planning and its effect on American urbanism without grounding it in the historic context of individual rights and the evolution of legal regulations within the American political system. Indeed, invoking the United States Constitution to decipher this relationship would not be farfetched. The Constitution, which calls for clear separation of the three branches of government into Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary, is strictly observed and often elevated by conservatives to a Quran-like or Bible-like status in American political decisions. Indeed, throughout its history, the U.S. Constitution has only been amended twenty-six times, the last one occurring more than twenty-five years ago.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees specific rights like the right to privacy, under which abortion was first legally allowed in the United States; the right to free speech and expression, which allows the American press and media to ridicule public figures and elected officials, perhaps as in no other society; and the right to maintain a citizen militia, which allows individuals the right to bear arms and carry guns. In fact, the first planning initiative is contained in a right guaranteed by the fifth Amendment to the Constitution: "no private property shall be taken for public use without just compensation."

The struggle between public and private interests is a persistent theme in the history of American planning. As discussed earlier, the Land Ordinance of 1785 facilitated the rapid settlement of the American West through unprecedented land speculation. This marked the beginning of a period of private initiative barely fettered by a minimalist government. But there was trouble brewing in paradise. By the mid-nineteenth century, industrial towns had mushroomed along railroad lines. In these settlements, worker housing was typically the railroad apartment, a privately built urban complex, 5 to 7 stories high, 7.6 meters wide, and 24 meters long, with little or no sanitary facilities. The deplorable state of this housing, and the lack of governmental interventions, led reformers to demand public control of housing conditions. In 1867, the first Tenement House Law was passed in New York city. While it legitimated the railroad apartment including the provision of sanitation, it precluded the development of anything worse.⁶

6 So, 1978:22.

The first real change however came with a "New Law" written by social reformer, Lawrence Veiller, in 1901. A permanent tenement house department was created to administer the law, mandating wide air and light shafts between structures, and a toilet with running water in each apartment. At the national level, important changes were also starting to occur. The passage of the Federal Income Tax Act of 1906 was an important landmark in the Federal government's ability to assert its right in collection taxes to generate funds for national purposes as well as the delivery of federal services. In the court case of *Welch v. Swasey* in 1909, the Supreme Court established nationwide the authority of communities to regulate development of private property through limitation of building heights. At the state level, Wisconsin's Planning Enabling Act of 1909 granted municipalities the right to engage in city planning within its borders. At the city level, in Los Angeles, the Land Use Zoning Ordinance of 1909 created use zones applicable to areas of undeveloped land, a precursor to the zoning concept that would regulate future development. With the court case of *Eubank v. City of Richmond*, 1912, the Supreme Court declared constitutional the municipal control of the horizontal location of buildings on private property via set-back legislation. The New York City Zoning Code of 1916 was the first American comprehensive zoning ordinance that combined height control by zone, building setback control, and land use control. In the court case *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.* of 1926, the constitutionality of comprehensive planning zoning came under challenge. The Supreme Court found in favor of *Euclid*, establishing the constitutionality of the comprehensive zoning. The ruling was to become the basic constitutional building block of: American city planning.⁷

In many ways, this string of cases sets the regulatory mood for the initiatives of the Roosevelt presidency. In 1932, Roosevelt launched his "New Deal" program to focus on alleviating the depression through major public works projects. One of the key sectors to benefit from the program was housing. The Federal Housing Act of 1934 created the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). The latter was granted the power of eminent domain to acquire housing sites, to engage in the construction of the projects, and to make grants and low interest loans to local housing authorities. Extended loan periods and reduced down payments made possible home ownership for the millions, significantly expanding housing construction. The FHA also established the first federal minimum housing standards in the US, focusing on single family detached owner-occupied houses. These initiatives formed the institutional context for the viability and popularity of the single-family suburban home, spawning tremendous suburban growth in the postwar period and limiting other housing possibilities.

4. Politics and Process: Democracy and Paralysis in Planning / Politika i proces: demokracija i paraliza u planiranju

In the latter half of the twentieth century, American planning evolved into what is essentially a regulatory profession, mediating and balancing private rights *vis-a-vis* the public good through federal laws, state regulations, and city ordinances.

This mediation takes place within specific institutional conditions. With the exception of some environmental laws that regulate

7 So, 1978:36-39.

state and local actions, the U.S. does not have national legislation prescribing land use and management. In the 1930s, the National Resources Planning Board, a federal agency, was severely challenged and eventually abolished in 1943. The abolition went so far as to stipulate that the Board's functions could not be transferred to any other agency, in effect nullifying federal planning controls.⁸ Today, while some federal environmental laws impact state and local actions, they do not provide the legal basis for planning. Instead, it is the federal and state constitutions, along with legislative precedents, that provide the legal basis at the local level. While state governments have the right to regulate urban land uses, these are most often delegated to city governments.

At the city level, there are three key institutions in the planning process: the legislative body, the planning commission, and the planning department. The local legislative body usually activates the planning commission, finances it, approves its members, and supports its activities. Upon recommendation of the commission, the legislative body translates the plans into action. Where there are charges of violation of state or federal law, the courts intervene in the planning process. Their decisions are often final, unless a higher court appeal is rendered. The planning department is a governmental agency with the technical staff needed to prepare comprehensive plans, formulate zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations, and coordinate with other departments, functions like transportation, education, health, recreation, and construction.

The planning commission is the legal institution of the city that performs the bulk of planning functions, including comprehensive planning, zoning ordinances, and subdivision codes. It is composed of a group of private citizens often appointed by the mayor or the city council. In some cases its members or commissioners are elected. These citizens are business leaders, notable people in different professions, or community leaders. They usually do not have professional planning experience, training, or education. All city departments are required to submit their plans for review and approval to the planning commission. If the planning commission's responsibilities become too complex, a zoning and appeal boards is often created.

Since the planning commission lacks legislative power and has only limited administrative authority, its value has been questioned by some experts. Others, however, argue that it plays an important role as a forum for the discussion of the diverse interests and perspectives involved in a planning process, therefore constructing a solid democratic foundation for the policy decisions of the legislative body.⁹ Indeed, the provision for mandatory reviews by the planning commission must be seen as part of a gradual shift from planning as a rigid end-state to an incrementalist decision making process.¹⁰

Interestingly enough, the planning commission as an institution has roots in turn of the century reform movements, which sought to weed out corruption and ineptitude in local government. Reform advocates distrusted old style politics, and strove to separate community matters from political control. A planning commission citizen board suited these purposes. In this way, public utilities, school boards and other major community issues were removed from the control of mayors or city councils and

8 Scott, 1969:407-409.

9 Gallion, 1980:194.

10 Scott, 1969:245.

placed in separate commissions. The insertion of a lay citizen board between professional planners and elected officials was perceived as a welcome alternative.¹¹ The notion of an independent planning commission was also fostered by the Standard City Planning Enabling Act of 1928, and has since then been the most basic planning organization in the U.S. The intent of the Act was to make planning commissions "the guardian of the plan and the nonpolitical champion of the people's interests".¹²

There have been two major problems with the commission model. First, as at other levels of the American political system, special interest politics often shape agendas, with commissioners failing to represent the interests of the broader community. In this regard, the attempt to make the planning commission a non-political institution has rather predictably failed. Second, the absence of professional expertise can impede planning decisions and result in a lack of vision.

Planning at the local level has become increasingly important in present-day America. Since the 1970s, this arena has been shaped by two striking developments that are changing how planning mediates between public and private interests. One trend is an increase in federal, state, and local interventions for environmental and consumer protection, and the needs of special groups, like the disabled. The second is a strong ideological trend against regulation. The deregulations that have occurred as consequence of this political climate have taken two paths: attempts to change the legislative regulatory basis at the federal and state levels, and disputes in the courts. In recent years, a series of rulings by the Supreme Court have challenged the way in which local government regulate land use, establishing tighter limits to regulation.¹³

The two trends represent the simultaneous engagement and disengagement of federal, state, and local governments in different spheres of action. In the shadow of these public battles, there has been a steady campaign that is inextricably shaping the American landscape. "Not in my Backyard" attitudes or NIMBY have become the rallying cries for residents who, through their local governments, employ zoning and subdivision ordinances, building codes and permitting procedures to prevent development of special land uses in their neighborhoods. Land uses that are often resisted include low income housing. These attitudes usually stem from fear that such housing for low income people and other such uses will lower land values, create demand for new infrastructure, and decrease the quality of life through augmented density and traffic.¹⁴ NIMBY induced conflicts seem to be on the rise in most American cities.¹⁵

NIMBYISM is not the only phenomenon on the American planning scene. NIMTOOISM or "Not In My Term Of Office" attitudes have also emerged among politicians and representatives who resist taking any unpopular action during their term of office.¹⁶ These elected officials are increasingly having a hard time confronting their constituencies, as they perceive that the political cost is too high, including risking their careers or at least the possibility of reelection.

Although NIMBY and NIMTOO attitudes may be found elsewhere, in America they have been particularly nurtured by the system of laws and regulations within which planning takes place. For example, because zoning processes require that neighbors be informed

11 So, 1979:65.

12 Scott, 1969:245.

13 Teitz, 1996.

14 Kean and Ashley, 1991:3.

15 Dear, 1992:297.

16 Kean and Ashley, 1991.

about proposed land use variations, strategies of opposition have been mainly focused on zoning hearings. These information and public hearings have thus been transformed into sites of community conflict, with citizens wielding the power to stall growth. In such contexts, planners have become managers of conflicts who have to use legal strategies to perform their basic duties.¹⁷ Indeed, as Dear predicts, if the NIMBY (and NIMTOO) trends persists, the United States could

"regress into a new feudalism ... marching backwards towards the imaginary safety of feudal fiefdoms defended by NIMBY walls".¹⁸

In many ways, such local wars over territory signal a shift - even a crisis - in American planning ideology and politics. As states and localities develop their own practices, there is a growing institutional complexity with increasing numbers of decision-makers. This new context has fostered novel planning approaches, such as negotiation, consensus building, and other conflict management strategies intended to circumvent conventional political and judicial processes. Also propelling the crisis has been a conservative agenda wherein votes are increasingly rejecting government commitments and regulation and protesting increased taxation. As Teitz concludes:

"Bizarre as some of those manifestations may appear, they are, in many respects, only the extreme of a very broad tendency, that we may call planning without planners or governing without government."¹⁹

5. The American Dream and the Market: Concluding Thoughts on the New Urbanism / Američki san i tržište: završna razmišljanja o novom urbanizmu

This brief overview of American planning underscores its uniqueness and complexity, as well as the great challenges that confront the profession at the end of the century. The challenges have become the grist for a mill of furious philosophical debate and practical experimentation.

One of the recent experiments to emerge on the American planning scene has been a design movement called New Urbanism, which claims to be the panacea for American social ills. This declared anti-suburban movement has captured the attention of a growing professional and academic audience. New Urbanists propose to correct social and economic segregation and foster a sense of community by the creation of dense developments with a broad mix of housing prices and land uses.

New Urbanists claim that their vision is an alternative to the segregated, sterile and alienating postwar suburbs produced by the rational planning paradigm. In contrast, they seek to create neo-traditional communities, rich in social diversity and held together through neighborly bonds. The key mechanism of change is to be physical design - a planned, controlled and zoned environment where everything from the layout of streets to the form of porches will ensure the building of community. Critics have pointed out that such forms of environmental determinism are not only doomed to failure, but also are insidious in their social engineering aspirations.²⁰ If turf battles in American localities have created an incrementalist, and often stalled, planning process, New Urbanism seeks to impose a dictatorial solution with

17 Teitz, 1996:650.

18 Dear, 1992:288.

19 Teitz 1996:651.

20 Landecker, 1996; Pollan, 1997.

decision-making vested in the hands of an exclusionary triad of real-estate developers, design professionals, and large corporations. Conspicuous by its absence is the public.

Perhaps the most striking demonstration of these trends is Celebration, a master planned community by Disney in the state of Florida. Celebration is distinguished by its elaborate zoning and design New Urbanist codes, a tome of "Covenants, Codes and Restrictions." But more important is the fact that the town is designed, planned, and operated by a private corporation, Disney Inc. If it's controlled "cutescape" is reminiscent of Disney theme parks, its political structure is ominously different from other American localities. Here, governmental powers rest in the Disney corporation and the town hall is essentially a "one-stop shopping center" staffed by Disney executives.²¹ Surprisingly, Celebration is not all that different from the master planned communities that are springing up all across America. Managed by homeowner associations and marked by the privatization of municipal services, these enclaves pose a challenge to the American planning system.

New Urbanist communities then are in effect privatized developments, as exclusionary as the suburbs they seek to replace. The invocation of "community" is at best a marketing catchword intended to draw a specific group of consumers; at worst, its narrow definition, is a willful disengagement with issues of class and race.²² The promise of "community" has however turned out to be seductive. Recently, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development adopted New Urbanism design guidelines to promote development in previous public housing sites.

Does New Urbanism portend the end of American planning? Does it signify the outright privatization of the decisions that shape the American landscape? I see New Urbanism as a manifestation - albeit extreme - of the ideologies and practices that lie at the core of the American planning paradigm. The New Urbanist promise of a sanitized but vibrant community is a resurrection of the American Dream, altered to fit the consumerism of the 1990s. The bypassing of local governments and the cozy alliance with private corporations hearkens back to frontier days and touches on what has always been a touchy topic in the American political culture: governmental power and its limits.

But the experience of New Urbanism also has continuities with the possibilities of American planning. Despite Disney's efforts to engineer a post-political community, politics eventually moved in.²³ Residents became terribly frustrated with the inability to participate in decision-making processes. When conflicts erupted over school curricula, some of them realized that they lacked the means to articulate and effect change, eventually moving out. The ideal of a utopian community had been disturbed but the dialogic reality of American planning was restored. This more modest ideal is one of democratic participation and citizen initiatives. It is not as seductive and comforting as the American Dream but is nevertheless central to the endeavor of creating a livable American landscape.

In 1997, a journalist from the New York Times visited the town of Celebration. As he walked through the streets lined with cottage-like houses and carefully manicured front yards, he noticed a Victorian with bright red curtains in the window. He remembered a notice he had read in the newsletter of the homeowner association:

21 Pollan, 1997.

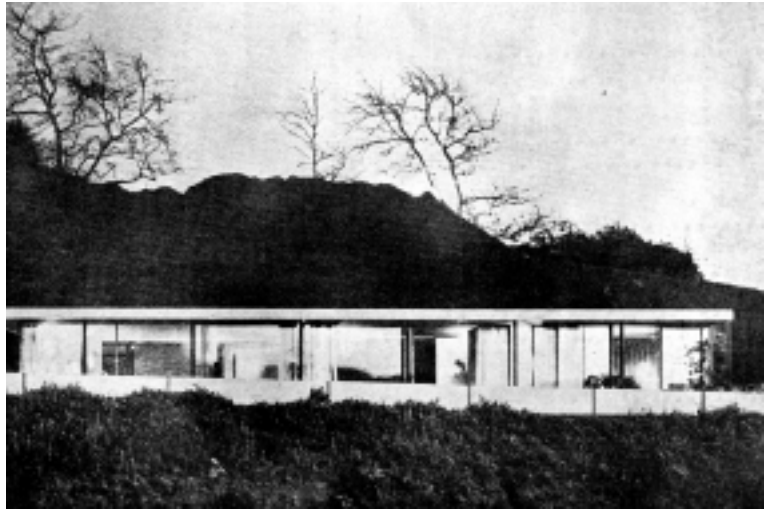
22 Hall, 1998.

23 Pollan, 1997.

FG. 1. "American dream": house and landscape
(R. Soriano, Case Study House, Los Angeles, 1950)

Source • **Izvor**
Henry-Russell Hitchcock,
Arthur Drexler: *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*,
Simon & Schuster, New York,
1952

SL. 1. "američki san":
kuća i krajolik
(R. Soriano, Case Study House, Los Angeles, 1950)



"Please refrain from using brightly colored or patterned curtains. It looks icky from the street." "Icky?" he thought, pondering on this rather ridiculous word, "This was Big Brother in the 1990s, Big Brother with a smiley face".²⁴

But those red curtains made a statement. Defiant red curtains in the window of a Victorian home in a near-simulated suburban environment in warm Florida – this is the essence of American Planning. And the lesson here is that its democratizing promise is but a product of a unique ideology and practice. It is both impossible, and impractical to attempt to replicate this planning model elsewhere.

24 Pollan, 1997.

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Sažetak • Summary**Planiranje lekcija "američkog sna": povijesna ograničenja i potencijal za demokratizaciju**

Razni mediji su diljem svijeta prenijeli slike američkog pejzaža i njegovog obilja. Srž tih slika čini "američki san" sretnog i radinog domaćinstva gdje jedna obitelj živi u samostojećoj kući. Taj mitski ideal obiteljskog života je izgrađen u kontekstu političkog sustava i načinu planiranja koji su imali posve osebujan razvoj. U poslijeratnom razdoblju se "američki san" pretvorio u skoro transnacionalni fenomen, te ga mnoge zemlje željno nastoje preslikati na svoje uvjete.

Mit se, međutim, pokazao neuhvatljivim izvan američkog konteksta, te se postavljaju ozbiljna pitanja mogu li se američki ideali planiranja, kao takvi, presaditi na druga mjesta. U ovom članku želim pokazati da iz "američkog sna" možemo izvući pouke ako pažljivo proučimo okolnosti i snage koje su stvorile prepoznatljiv američki pejzaž s njegovim jedinstvenim mogućnostima i ograničenjima. Pokazat ću kako je politička povijest demokratskog razvoja dovela do stvaranja osobitog američkog načina planiranja kojeg podržavaju posebni zakoni i propisi, i koji je obilježen trenucima paralize. Taj skup demokratskih uvjeta i kulturna povijest se ne mogu preslikati na drugo mjesto. Umjesto toga, važno je shvatiti na koji su način ti uvjeti stvorili i povijesna ograničenja, i potencijal za demokratizaciju.

Nezar AlSayyad

Biography • Biografija

Prof. Arch. **Nezar AlSayyad** Ph.D., is an architect, planner, and urban historian. He is currently Associate Professor of Architecture and Planning and Chair of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. AlSayyad founded the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE), an interdisciplinary organization for which he serves as Executive Director and Editor of the association's journal, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, currently in its tenth year.

Prof. dr. sc. **Nezar AlSayyad** je arhitekt, planer i povjesničar urbanizma. On je ugledni profesor arhitekture i urbanističkog planiranja, te voditelj Centra za bliskoistočne studije na Kalifornijskom sveučilištu u Berkeleyu. AlSayyad utemeljitelj je Međunarodnog udruženja za studije tradicionalnog okoliša (IASTE), kao interdisciplinarnе organizacije u kojoj obnaša dužnosti izvršnog direktora i urednika časopisa *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, tijekom proteklih desetak godina.

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