INTERFACE

Challenging theory: Changing practice: Critical perspectives on the past and potential of professional planning

Professional Planning 100 years on – Have we emancipated communities?
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Introduction
The UK’s Town Planning Institute\(^1\) was formed on 30 January 1914.\(^2\) It was the first professional body for planners in the world\(^3\) and has grown to be one of the largest. Whilst this Interface celebrates this centenary, it does not do so by way of either unquestioning celebration or through historical analysis but rather by looking afresh at the dichotomies and conundrums that were implicit in the formation of a professional body dealing with the use of that most precious resource – land.

Even this approach to marking a centenary would have little point if it is not used to face the issues that planning as a profession is dealing with 100 years on. This is the focus of this Interface of Planning Theory & Practice marking the centenary of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).

Drawing on the history of the RTPI\(^4\), we can divide those issues – and the conundrums inherent in them – into three interlocking “big questions” for the profession in the twenty-first century:

- What, now, is the purpose of, and rationale for, professionalism in planning?
- Who does – and should – planning serve?
- What are the ideas and ways of working in the profession that can take us forward?

These questions are addressed in this Interface by a group of distinguished practitioners and commentators on planning from around the globe. Peter Head is Executive Chair of the Ecological Sequestration Trust. Mee Kam Ng is the Vice Chairman of the Department of Geography and Resource Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Bishwapriya Sanyal is the Ford International Professor of Urban Development and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Mitchell Silver is the Chief Planning and Economic Development Officer in the City of Raleigh, North Carolina and immediate Past President of the American Planning Association. Vanessa Watson is Professor in the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics at the University of Cape Town. Katie Williams is Director of the Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments at the University of the West of England. The themes in the Interface are drawn together by Heather Campbell, Professor of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Sheffield and the current Senior Editor of Planning Theory & Practice.

One of the joys of editing this section with such a distinguished group of contributors is that my original thinking has been confronted and developed. The original idea was that this Interface could use the origins of the RTPI as a professional body as a basis for examining the future of professional planning. The contributors have brought not only a breadth of thinking but also a more sharply focused challenge to all those who are engaged in planning. This Interface should not simply be seen as a record of expressed views but as a call for action.
The purpose and rationale of professionalism in planning

The year 2014 does not mark the centenary of planning, or even of statutory planning in the UK. It marks the centenary of the emergence of a new professional grouping. A hundred years later, the question remains valid as to whether or not planning has a unique professional focus or whether it remains an amalgam of different skills and interests. The answer to this in terms of focus is even more difficult to find now than 100 years ago. At that time there was greater clarity of purpose for this nascent profession. Its first objectives focused as much on civic design as they did on any wider definition of town planning, and at its formation the then TPI was described as holding out great promise as “a movement that has for its object the emancipation of all communities from the mark of the beast of ugliness”5 (quoted in Cherry, 1974).

The beast of ugliness

Our current beast of ugliness takes many forms. Certainly the physical squalor or drabness of much of our built environment and the consequent search for quality must continue to be a real priority. Yet planners today can find their mission in emancipating communities from a wide variety of beasts including poverty, inequity, lack of economic growth, planning for survival, protection of cultures and of eco-systems and dealing with climate change. Has this multiplicity of tasks meant that any claim to hold a unique place in a crowded professional market place is now even less true than it may have been 100 years ago, or is the planning profession’s unique position derived from the fact that it is able to deal with, and synthesise, such a range of issues?

Even this question is too simplistic when we turn to the need for professionalism in planning. There is a conundrum inherent in the fact that a profession has been established, to put it crudely, to control the use of, and therefore access to land. This is, to say the least, a contentious activity. If we could not see the revolutionary aspect of this in the UK then our allies in the USA looking for signs of the spread of communist ideals in post-war Europe certainly could. As Time magazine stated in 1947:

Britain’s Labor Government this week proposed a revolutionary act – in its implications the most sweeping act since the Soviet Government’s decree of forced collectivization of the peasants (1929). It was the “Town & Country Planning Bill, 1947” drawn up by Lewis Silkin, Minister of Town & Country Planning (Time, 20 January 1947).

A second conundrum leads on from this – that a profession was established to deal with an activity that sits firmly within the realm of politics. The relationships between planners and politicians and political processes are clearly recognised:

By virtue of its direct involvement with people and their day to day activities, town planning inevitably has strong political overtones.6

Any false drawing of dividing lines between professionals as value-free advisers and politicians rings hollow in practice as Norman Krumholz, former Planning Director of Cleveland in the USA, stated over 10 years ago:

The simple notion that planners advise and politicians decide is a myth that has never reflected practical experience. A planner who undermines or embarrasses a powerful politician is skating on thin ice with the day rapidly warming. Those who own the most property generally also have the most influence in the law and in planning decisions (Krumholz, 2001).

If the perceived attributes of a professional are dispassion, independence, evidence-based rationality, honesty, integrity, competence and an ethical creed, then to what extent do – or can – planning professionals display these qualities when mixed up with what William Alonso has called the “rough-and-tumble of politics” (Alonso, 1986)? Are we any less professional because the decisions that we take are often political ones, or are we in fact required to operate in an even more dispassionate arena because we are immersed in political wrangling?
UN-Habitat has recognised this tension between the technical tools of planning professionalism and the processes through which planning is now undertaken:

as strategic plans are the product of diverse actors, the urban planners’ professional role is to shift to that of the facilitator of the deliberative process, while providing technical support for its translation into planning instruments, maps and other documents. (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2010)

As Peter Head states, “in the end we will come back to the need for skilled planners with the ethical integrity to build trust in local communities for successful change to happen.” Whatever the range of actors involved, the place of the professional in society is ultimately based on trust, and any profession loses its raison d’être if that trust breaks down. One study of the role of professionals in planning after a disaster found not only that this trust was threatened but that there were serious concerns that planning had, wittingly or otherwise, not demonstrated that fairness and equality of opportunity:

Differences in how residents and professionals perceive risk also reflect the great distrust many residents have of government officials, professionals, and subject matter experts. In New Orleans, planners proposed restricting the redevelopment of predominantly African-American parts of the city on grounds that they were too unsafe to rebuild; however, because they offered no viable ways for residents to return to New Orleans, reducing risk would have eliminated African-American neighborhoods (Ehrenfeucht, Nelson, & Laska, 2007).

This stark example takes us away from a professionalism that is dispassionate, to a professionalism that recognises that its decisions will have a differential effect on different groups in societies and on different places globally. This is a professionalism which actively seeks to answer the question – who should planning serve?

Who does – and should – planning serve?

The Royal Charter of the RTPI states that it will:

advance the science and art of planning … for the benefit of the public. 7

The use of the word “public” here reminds professionals that they serve not their own ends but the needs and priorities of others. This has not always been apparent in the history of UK planning. The then Minister for Town and Country Planning, the Right Honourable Lewis Silkin MP told the House of Commons during the first reading of Town and Country Planning Bill in January 1947 that:

In the past, plans have been too much the plans of officials and not the plans of individuals, but I hope we are going to stop that.8

Is it enough, however, simply to state that we serve the public, as if this word represented a homogeneous entity? Over 25 years ago Alonso identified that, in the development of US professional planning:

there was a growing realization that there was often no single public interest which the planner could represent with calm detachment, but rather a welter of particular group interests often in conflict with one another; many in the schools and the profession engaged in “advocacy planning,” representing the interests of particular (usually “disadvantaged”) groups against other interests, including those of official government plans (Alonso, 1986).

The concept of professional advocacy sits surprisingly easily in the history of professional planning in the UK. Amongst the first members and honorary members of the TPI were public propagandists including Patrick Geddes, Neville Chamberlain, George Cadbury and Seebohm Rowntree.9 This mixing of professionals and polemicists may now seem strange to those who feel that a professional body should exist to regulate its members and establish their worth like the guilds of mediaeval times.
The conundrum of a professional body proselytising and campaigning is brought out well in Heather Campbell’s reaction to the RTPI’s 2001 New Vision for Planning: 10

The substantive ethical content of the New Vision statement would be noteworthy were it penned by a campaigning group; for it to be produced by that bastion of the planning establishment, the RTPI, is all the more remarkable. The statement breaks all the accepted conventions of the stereotypical technocratic profession. Issues of substantive values are not hidden from view but are recognized as being at the very core of the planning activity. (Campbell, 2012)

Is it, therefore, the role of a professional body – particularly in such a politically charged field as planning – to speak out (with the strength of that voice amplified by the fact that it does come from a professional body)? Certainly, planners and those associated with planning have stated their beliefs clearly with dramatic consequences as Carlos Vainer has shown:

during the course of the 1970s students and staff [at the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning and Research at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro] became increasingly uneasy about the implications of the current planning policies, leading them to question current planning conceptions and practices. In 1977 the matter was, in a sense, solved manu militari, as seven professors were expelled from the programme for holding heterodox views (Vainer, 2007).

The images of Ceyda Sungur, a research assistant in the Urban and Regional Planning Department at Istanbul Technical University, being pepper-sprayed in June 2013 as she tried to protect Istanbul’s Gezi Park from development, bring that relationship between thought and action into sharp focus. They also provide a salutary example of Katie William’s assertion that “any assessment of planning’s contribution to sustainable development must acknowledge its position within prevailing economic, political and governance systems that are, at times, deeply at odds with any true notion of sustainability.”

The ideas and ways of working in the profession that can take us forward

All the issues discussed here can be seen to lead to a conclusion that, after 100 years of professional planning, the concept, the ways of working and the purposes of such planning need re-focusing, and perhaps redefining.

The contributions to this Interface deal with some of the key aspects of that re-focusing, and with some of the conundrums that will need to be dealt with in this process. We look afresh at the nexus between planning and land and property rights. We examine what professional planning must contribute to sustainable development and what innovations in planning methods and processes are required for the twenty-first century. We address African “urban fantasies” and the role of the profession in creating and sustaining those in the face of poverty. Finally, we find a thread in the history and future of planning ideas and in how the profession should perceive its role for the twenty-first century.

A stronger thread that binds this thinking together is the focus on professional ethics. There is a duty on a professional planner not to use their professional skills in a way that is inequitable or discriminatory. Certainly, the codes of conduct of planning bodies around the world make this clear, with the RTPI stating that its members:

shall not discriminate on the grounds of race, sex, sexual orientation, creed, religion, disability or age and shall seek to eliminate such discrimination by others and to promote equality of opportunity. 11

These are valuable sentiments, but planners have been, and are involved in implementing planning systems and policies which are in themselves discriminatory. UN-Habitat has stated that:

Contemporary urban planning systems in most parts of the world have been shaped by 19th century Western European planning . . . Frequently, these imported ideas were used for reasons of political, ethnic or racial domination and exclusion, rather than in the interests of good planning. (UN–Habitat, 2009)

There have been a range of examples in the past (e.g. Bollens, 1998) in which the apparently value free planning laws have been used as the justification for unscrupulous practice. A clear
example is the use of planning legislation to clear some 700,000 people from their homes or livelihoods in Zimbabwe in the so-called Operation Murambatsvina. The subsequent report from the United Nations recommended that:

There is an immediate need for the Government of Zimbabwe to revise the outdated Regional Town and Country Planning Act and other relevant Acts, to align the substance and the procedures of these Acts with the social, economic and cultural realities facing the majority of the population, namely the poor. (Tibaijuka, 2005)

Examples continue of planned development in areas deemed by the international community to be illegally occupied. In such cases as this, who is our dispassionate, ethical profession serving? We can justly celebrate the centenary of the RTPI with reports and events. But we can also celebrate the centenary by looking again both at the nature of our current beasts of ugliness and at the very basis of professionalism in planning – an ethical stance that is willing to speak out where fairness and justice are being undermined – sometimes by its own members.

In conclusion, I come back to that strand of the RTPI’s history that shows a proselytising and campaigning profession. All of the contributors focus on the need for planners to demonstrate not only expertise but also leadership – all (as Bish Sanyal points out clearly) within a democratic context. In his typically up-beat contribution, Mitch Silver says that “we need bold and courageous leaders to address the emerging issues of our time” and that he believes that “planners are guardians of our common future.”

This should not be taken to mean that planning should move away from its professional base. As Bish Sanyal says in his article, “just because planning must consider political realities does not mean that planning can be reduced to politics.” Indeed, it is interesting that the contributors to this Interface – notably Peter Head and Katie Williams – should focus so much on the need for new tools for planning. Mee Kam Ng calls for a different breed of planner “always ready to challenge social injustice and unequal power relationships”, whilst Vanessa Watson states that “it is certainly within the scope of the profession and its professional bodies everywhere to take a position.”

Can we, and should we, celebrate the RTPI’s centenary by working globally to define an international standard of professional ethics? I echo Vanessa Watson’s call for the RTPI to begin a debate with other national professional planning bodies around the world on this as a matter of urgency. That would provide a lasting marker of this centenary, one that both builds on history and sets a new path for the future.

Notes
1. The Royal Charter was not given to the TPI until 1959.
2. http://www.rtpi.org.uk/about-the-rtpi/rtpi-centenary-2014/
3. As Mitch Silver’s article shows, the American City Planning Institute (renamed the American Institute of Planners in 1939) was founded in 1917.
4. This article has benefited greatly from Cherry (1974).
5. The Right Honourable John Burns MP at the TPI inaugural dinner 30 January 1914.
6. The Charter of the European Council of Town Planners, http://www.ceu-ectp.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=89&Itemid=14
7. p.2, http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/4972/royal_charter.pdf
8. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1947/jan/29/town-and-country-planning-bill
9. The full membership list at May 1914 is in Cherry (1974).
10. http://www.rtpi.org.uk/education-and-careers/learning-about-planning/what-planning-does/rtpi-vision-for-planning/
11. The Royal Town Planning Institute, Code of Professional Conduct. http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/831098/code_of_professional_conduct_2012.pdf
12. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4715635.stm
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Celebrating the idea of planning
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The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) should be proud that it was one of the first organizations to introduce the idea that good cities require public planning by qualified professionals. It is not that no one had thought of urban planning before; there are numerous examples, starting with the design of ancient cities in the Middle East and Asia, medieval cities in Europe, the restructuring of Paris by Napoleon, extensive planning of cities by Bismarck in Germany, planned cities in the UK, and even in the USA. When the RTPI was founded in 1914, there was significant accumulated knowledge that “the market” alone did not produce either majestic or well-functioning cities (Hall, 1998). Public interventions were necessary to produce cities that served as spatial nodes for the governing of emerging markets. What differentiated the creation of the RTPI in the early twentieth century was that “town planning” was now to be embedded within a democratic process, rather than being left to the whims of kings and queens. Its goal was not just to serve the needs of the royalty and the bourgeoisie, but the “emancipation of all communities.”

To appreciate the significance of what the RTPI’s founding members were conveying by creating the new organization requires an awareness of that historical moment in 1914 – before World War I, before the Bolshevik Revolution, and before the Great Depression that led to massive
state intervention and planning, now known as “Keynesianism”. Deeply aware of the adverse impact of capitalist industrialization and urbanization on the daily life of many citizens, the RTPI’s founding members had no illusions about the power of markets to improve the situation, but they had faith that if democratic institutions provided a forum for public deliberations, guided by expert knowledge of issues related to land use, land consolidation, and land taxation, then solutions could be found that would promote both capitalist industrialization and public well-being in the context of political democracy.

Was the RTPI founded on contradictory ideas that hurt its effectiveness? Did its creation immobilize “naive planners” with fundamental “conundrums” they simply cannot resolve, as Kelvin MacDonald suggests? The evidence, now visible around the world thanks to increased interconnections in trade, communication, and flow of ideas and people, suggests the opposite. Though the RTPI did lose some of its original global grandeur with decolonization, most ex-colonies (including India, with which I am quite familiar) adopted RTPI-like societies with similar objectives: to create good cities through public planning based on expert knowledge of the structure and function of cities. Expert knowledge is necessary to craft strategic interventions that reap the benefits of market, state, and civil institutions – which collectively influence the quality of urban life.

I acknowledge that there is often a mismatch between formal town planners’ aims and their effectiveness in controlling “the various beasts of ugliness,” as Kelvin MacDonald mentions in his introductory essay. But, I have yet to find a good city that has defeated such beasts of ugliness without planning of some kind. This is true at both the macro and micro levels: nations that have surged forward developmentally all relied on some form of planning (Rodrik, 2007) – not the same in content, but similar in their intentions – and that is equally true at the city level (Hall, 1988). The principles on which the RTPI was established have been vindicated not only in England and Europe, but also in formerly colonized nations.

The question of whether professional planning societies have been effective was first raised at least 40 years ago, when most cities in newly industrializing nations faced rising unemployment, chronic housing and transportation shortages, and the concomitant rise of unauthorized and unplanned human settlements, which are yet to be incorporated in formal city plans. John Turner, who coined the term “self-help housing”, complained then that “governments have done so little with so much while people have done so much with so little!” (Turner, 1967). But even Turner acknowledged that some form of planning was necessary to tap the benefits of “self-help housing,” while regulating its adverse effects (Turner, 1979). Town planners around the world have been receptive to the kind of criticism that Turner initiated. Though their responses have varied, overall, formal planners have acknowledged that the old planning process that relied on master plans by architects and urban designers must evolve to address issues raised by unauthorized slums and informal employment, which continue to provide housing and livelihoods to a large number of urban residents in newly industrializing nations (Rodwin & Sanyal, 1987).

What kinds of professional knowledge and expertise are necessary for urban planning practices, inspired by the RTPI, to meet the unprecedented urban challenges which have been well documented by a range of planning institutions from local to global levels? To meet such challenges, do cities and nations need more professional knowledge or less? This question too was first posed nearly 40 years ago – at a time when the value of traditional professional approaches was being questioned in city planning and in other fields as well (Schon, 1973). Such questioning did not lead to the end of professional planning; however, it did demonstrate the limits of traditional knowledge, it revealed the weaknesses of purely technocratic thinking, and in general, made professional planners relatively more open to public criticism – particularly in democratic societies (Hoffman, 1989).

One aspect of the argument against traditional planning was that planning is not a purely technocratic exercise, but is inherently political in nature. Yet, John Dyckman has argued that just because planning must consider political realities does not mean that planning can be reduced to
politics (Dyckman, 1986). How cities function and how land, labor, and commodities markets work and can be influenced by public policies, how technological changes affect the use of space by urban residents – such issues need to be understood both technically and in terms of their political implications. This, of course, is easier said than practiced by academic planners who teach in professional programs. The blending of technical knowledge and political astuteness requires a much more nuanced understanding of urban issues than that which RTPI members anticipated in 1914.

It is a sign of intellectual strength, not weakness, for a professional body to acknowledge publicly the complexities of the challenges it faces – particularly for a profession that cares about underprivileged, marginalized and exploited groups, as RTPI clearly states in its 2001 public document (Royal Town Planning Institute, 2001). One can dismiss such statements as empty slogans by a professional body mired in philosophical conundrums, or as a planner, one can be proud that such a voice is among the many voices in democratic deliberations – particularly if it represents a thorough and nuanced understanding of why cities exist, grow, function and change, and, in the process, create opportunities and constraints that allow people to reach their full potential as human beings. My bias must be clear to the reader by now: I celebrate RTPI’s founding as one of the first institutions to profess the now well-vindicated idea that public planning is necessary for the creation of good cities. As we know, there have been many attempts to tarnish the ideals that motivated the idea (Sanyal, 1994), but even after a century of such attacks, the idea of planning as a form of public effort to “link knowledge with action” remains valid, not only in England but all across the world (Friedman, 1987).

Note
1. The Right Honourable John Burns MP at the TPI inaugural dinner 30 January 1914.

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The role of planning in the twenty-first century and beyond

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Introduction

The role and purpose of planning have been evolving for over the two centuries and will continue to evolve. Why? Planning is a profession that responds to growth and change. Planning responds and adapts to the issues of its time. But as the planning profession matured, some planners became entrenched within the day-to-day practice of processing applications; many forgot their purpose as planners. They forgot why they chose planning as a career in the first place. My hope is that planners will be re-energized with a renewed sense of purpose because now more than ever, we need bold and courageous leaders to address the emerging issues of our time.

But we have a dilemma. Far too often, planning has been characterized as a profession of regulators, administrators and bureaucrats. Some planners have become complacent or worn down by attacks on planning or limited to a regulatory role mandated by government. Planning needs a renewed sense of purpose and a new role to build a new legacy going forward. I believe planners are guardians of our common future. Planners deal with uncertainty about the future. Planning deals with the natural and built environment, but also the implications of political, cultural, social and economic change. In other words, planning is a profession of managing systems, but also planning for place and people. Planning is a profession that identifies and prepares for emerging issues and challenges. Planning is about the present and future.

The dawn of professional planning

In 1800, the US population was 5 million and the urbanized population was 5%. By 1900, the population had grown to 76 million with an urbanized population of 40% (Levy, 2000). The influx of immigrants, primarily from Europe, combined with the migration from rural areas to cities, presented enormous challenges to a growing nation without a specialized planning profession. Other allied professions in the USA had already formed. The American Society of Civil Engineers incorporated in 1852, the American Institute of Architects formed in 1857, and the American Society of Landscape Architects was established in 1899. Architects, engineers and landscapers all played a role in city planning and were influenced greatly by Europeans.

The city planning profession in the USA officially started in 1909, however, the emergence of “planning-type” activities date back to the mid-nineteenth century. These activities included, but were not limited to transportation to cities and the systematic mapping of sanitary conditions (Krueckeberg, 1983). Back then, planning activities were driven by free enterprise participants such as real estate developers, engineers and land surveyors. As the nation grew, towns and cities were laid out by surveyors and engineers. They also subdivided land and designed essential infrastructure such as streets, wells, drainage ways, and open spaces (Birch, 2009).
However, free enterprise activity could not keep pace with rapid urbanization and they were not equipped to deal with the public health epidemic that would soon follow due to poor sanitary and housing conditions (Silver, 2012). Motivated by progressive reformers who shared the negative implications of rapid unplanned urbanization for the poor, the planning movement embraced a mission for scientific efficiency, civic beauty and social equity (Krueckeberg, 1983). Between 1909 and 1917, political, business and progressive leaders felt it was time to establish a city planning profession that included a government-supervised comprehensive approach to growth and development (Birch & Silver, 2009).

### The purpose and role of planning

The purpose of planning is to protect the public, health, safety and welfare, to address uncertainty about the future, to analyze and prepare for emerging trends and demographic change, to plan for and sustain the environment, economy and equity. In other words, the profession should plan for place (spatial and physical) and people (cultural, political and social).

The role of planning is to respond to growth and change. Planning also manages the complexity of human settlements through infrastructure, systems and development patterns. Over the last century, the global population has grown from 1.65 billion in 1900 to 6.07 billion by 2000. According to the United Nations, the global population is expected to reach 9.15 billion by 2050 and 10.1 by the twenty-second century. The USA is expected to add 124 million people by 2050. What will these communities of the future look like? Will we, or can we, still plan and build communities the same way that we have been building them in the twentieth century?

The role of planning continues to evolve in response to the challenges of our time. Each century presents its own set of challenges. Each century includes a series of eras that define each generation. Every few decades the defining issues change (see Table 1). The planning profession has always evolved and adapted to address the issues of its time. The issues are not static and neither is the planning profession. The question before planners today is, what is next and how will we respond and adapt to the next set of challenges?

### The future of planning

Emerging issues are something planners must pay attention to. Planners should not just administer plans and zoning permits, but should watch trends like a stock-broker watches the market. If the planning profession must deal with uncertainty about the future, it must start with a commitment to

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**Table 1. Issues in planning over time.**

| Period | Issues |
|--------|--------|
| 1840–1915 | Birth of US planning rooted in congestion, public health, social reform (housing and sanitation) and civic beauty |
| 1915–1930 | Technical age of zoning ordinances, state-enabling legislation and subdivision ordinances |
| 1930–1970 | New Deal, rise of municipal planning, 701 planning grants, mortgage insurance, Interstate Highway System, urban renewal, suburbanization, fair housing act |
| 1970–1980 | Advocacy planning, public participation, environmental planning, social equity and historic preservation |
| 1980–1995 | Economic development, outcome-oriented city revitalization, urban design and architectural/design review |
| 1995–2010 | Environmental and social justice, new urbanism, anti-sprawl, smart growth and sustainability (environment, economy and equity). |
| 2010 and beyond | What’s next as we start the second century of planning? |

*Source: Mitchell Silver.*
monitoring emerging trends. While this list is not exhaustive, the challenges and emerging trends below are those, I believe, that the USA and other countries around the world will confront. A word of caution – some of the issues on this list are new. The USA and the world have not faced them before. So using search engines to find solutions may be futile. These challenges will demand research, innovation and creativity to solve these problems.

Twenty-first century challenges and emerging trends

- Demographic change: graying and browning of America
- The rise of single-person households
- The traditional family is changing
- An aging infrastructure
- Urban sprawl, aging suburbs, shrinking rural areas
- Climate change and extreme weather
- Antiquated zoning tools
- Shrinking tax bases for local governments
- Availability of water
- Obesity, public health, food security
- Jobs and the economy
- Energy
- Globalization
- Public Health
- Building resilience: codes and material

Can the planning profession revitalize its purpose and role to address these challenges? Only time will tell, but in 2009, US News and World Report listed urban planning as one of the top 50 professions in 2010 (Wolgemuth, 2009). In 2013, UBM’s Future Cities named “urban planners” as one of the 10 city jobs that are cool again in part because “the future of our cities rest with their ability to make up for the mistakes of their elders” (Ferraro, 2013). According to a more recent article by the US News and World Report that looked at 10 professions that will boom in 2020, the environmental and conservation science profession was on the list. While environmental and conservation science is a specialty within the planning profession, nonetheless, the need for professionals to tackle these issues remain. As the article explained,

Making better use of the planet’s resources will be essential as population growth strains existing infrastructure. Green energy, despite some political controversy, still seems likely to boom. Developers need more efficient ways to heat and cool buildings. And dealing with global warming may require new technology not even on the drawing board yet. (Newman, 2012)

Conclusion

If I were asked what would be the top priorities for planners to improve on over the next 20 years I would suggest that we must shift from being agents of process to agents of outcomes. The public responds to outcomes, not policies. We can either show the public a planning document or point to a neighborhood that has been transformed through smart planning intervention. We must also make the economic case for planning to show that planners are focused on creating jobs and building a strong economy. We must become our generation’s innovators who are known for addressing the emerging issues of the twenty-first century. We need to transform our planning agencies to be action-oriented problem-solvers and creative thinkers. Finally, we must be bold, courageous and visionary as we protect the public interest and show that planners not only plan for place, but more importantly, plan for people. If planners want to be valuable, then we must show our value. We should not just imagine making great places. We must also make great places happen.
I close with a modified statement I wrote for the American Planning Association’s 2011–2013 Strategic Plan:

“We must inspire planners to reach new heights of creativity, energy and innovation in planning. A new era in planning is underway. Whether we call it a planning revival, renaissance or rebirth, we must communicate to leaders and decision makers that planners protect the public interest and are guardians of our common future. Based upon emerging trends, we are the profession of those who are not only looking at the long term consequences of present actions, but are working on solutions to reduce the uncertainty about the future while enhancing the economy and quality of life.”

The planning profession helped shape our planet. The evidence is all around us. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought huge challenges to our planet and those challenges will only intensify as we move into the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries. Population growth, urbanization, climate change and demand for food, energy and water warrants that planners be bolder, more courageous and more passionate as we fulfill our role as guardians of the public interest. We must protect the public health, safety and welfare. Our community needs us, our country needs us, our planet needs us.

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**Deadly sins? Living dreams!**

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**Deadly sins of the twentieth century?**

Finnish professor Anne Haila’s face was white after watching “high-rise building blocks growing like trees from the slashed and then concretized ground” in the promotion video of
“smokeless new towns” to be built in the rural New Territories of Hong Kong. The incident happened in 1998 when, out of curiosity, she visited the territory and joined a consultation session on the development project. The plan was shelved after the Asian financial crisis-triggered economic depression. It has, however, returned to the public domain since 2012 as a result of sky-rocketing housing prices in the self-crowned “Asia’s World City”, thanks partly to wealthy buyers from the other side of the border. While the final plan might be modified, the nature of the plan remains unchanged: trees, crops and vegetation, together with the practising farmers, will be displaced to make way for a concrete forest, an unforgivable sin in the eyes of many young Hong Kongers.

And this is due to an “original sin”: too much emphasis on land value! The government, it seems, sees in every piece of cultivated or fallow land only “dollar signs”, rather than the sweat, care and efforts that farmers have spent in nurturing crops, producing food and raising generations of families. The focus on the “exchange value” of the land asset often spawns yet another sin of blindness to the value of “history, culture and heritage”.

When land is formed with the single-minded pursuit of generating more money, transportation infrastructure will serve only one function: to accelerate the conveyance of goods and labourers for the sake of more intensive capital accumulation. And cities become the racing ground for the circulation of people, goods and services in markets big and small. Consumers in these markets can only “enjoy” a faceless and characterless city, hardly an oeuvre in the Lefebvrian sense (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 149). These cities are usually products of top-down plans made by professional planners who know best! Modern cities with high technology can easily defy natural and physical constraints to satisfy the material needs and wants of urbanites. Yet, human beings are hardly just economic animals – deep in people’s hearts are yearnings for various kinds of urban dreams!

**Living dreams of the twenty-first century!**

To many, brutality towards the “indigenous population” of mother earth has to stop in the course of urban expansion – instead of “slashing and burying” natural vegetation under impermeable concrete, low impact and sustainable urban development and drainage systems (Pickerill & Maxey, 2009; Graham, Day, Bray, & Mackenzie, 2012) have to be adopted in order to respect the natural river drainage basin, the hydrological cycle and native ecological systems. Instead of “conquering” nature, cities have to learn from it, soaking up rainfall, releasing it eventually through urban streams that sustain healthy ecosystems and bio-diversities. As revealed in many traditional Chinese paintings, the natural landscape looms large with homo sapiens in their proper places – designing with nature is what twenty-first-century urbanites need to re-learn, especially when human activities have been identified as an important source for global warming and climate change (IPCC, 2007). Imagine clothing cities with nature where development means an enrichment of not just the urbanites but also the flora and fauna around them.

Similar to many previous “turns of capitalism”, the “environmental or green” turn can easily privilege the rich and displace the less economically fortunate. When concrete drains were turned into urban streams in Seoul (Cheonggyecheon) and Taipei (Zhonggang Main Drainage), gentrification set in, ousting the poorer sectors of society who could no longer afford to stay in the revitalized areas. Hence, intra-generational equity is a much bigger challenge for our generation: to nurture intact communities that are rich in social capital, and environmentally friendly with strong local economies. Some scholars call this “asset-based community development” (ABCD), development that bids farewell to a consumption-oriented society and stresses the importance of building local capacity through horizontal networking and the sharing of “gifts of head, hand and heart” among members of a neighbourhood (Cameron & Gibson, 2001; UN-Habitat, 2008). Instead
of relying on the “careless society” (McKnight, 1995) – that is, the market and professional service providers – to satisfy our needs, we have to learn anew our inherent potential to weave less materialistic but nurturing and caring communities.

In other words, we have to reverse the trend of neo-liberalism, to strike a better balance between “exchange value” and “use value” (Lefebvre, 1991; Smith, 2005) when it comes to urban development and planning. Are we constructing buildings for profits or are we building homes for people to transform spaces into real places with their culture, emotions, talents, stories and lives? Do we value escalating property prices more than the added value of long-lived spaces, spaces of collective living, collective histories, memories and responsibilities? Can we endeavour to nurture use value and let it grow so that our neighbourhoods and communities will be designed and developed in such a way that they are safe, full of history, character, trust and respect? As Jacobs (1961, p. 239) argues, “cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” Similar to advocates of ABCD, we believe that a place-based and community-centred approach to urban development and planning can counteract the trend of neo-liberalism and consumerism. In other words, we should value quality human relationships more than monetary wealth.

When our eyes are not blinded by the “exchange value” of our land and properties, we will develop the abilities to perceive and appreciate the significance of the tangible and intangible heritage embodied in the “fabric, setting, use, association, meanings, records, related places and related objects” of neighbourhoods (Australia ICOMOS, 1999). Instead of always viewing old communities as obstacles to progress we will develop more sophisticated abilities to differentiate old but socio-economically thriving neighbourhoods that have “kainos” renewal abilities, long-standing quarters that just require renewing either the built fabric or the community networks, or dilapidated structures and fragmented communities that demand reconstruction of both the built and human environments (Ng, 2010).

The existence of different types of communities will help reveal the multiple functions of transport infrastructure: to help not just the acceleration of capital accumulation but also more importantly the enhancement of accessibility of places to build more colourful neighbourhoods. Indeed transit-oriented sustainable urban development should be pursued so that dynamic and vibrant public realms can be built around mass transit stations to make accessible, sociable, economically active and comfortable places. We have to move away from car-oriented development to craft urban environments that provide equal rights to different road users, including bicycles and more importantly pedestrians.

A new breed of planners

If the urban sins of the twentieth century were results of an urbanism that over-privileged “exchange value”, adopting an exploitative attitude towards nature and conflating consumerism as the “pursuit of human happiness”, the urban dreams of the twenty-first century can only be realized through deep reflections by each of us on the past mistakes and societal-wide envisioning of values that will sustain the environment and humanity into the uncertain future. To build a city full of proud and wonderful communities, communities of “conversations” and “dialogues”, with a sustainable environment, great place-making efforts, design and heritage, we will require a different breed of urban planners, planners who are determined to care about the environment, to learn from and design with nature so that urban development will evolve as part of the natural order rather than contribute to pressing challenges such as climate change, serious flooding, global warming, the heat island effect and so on. Besides conserving nature, planners have to value local culture and history, acknowledge, respect and protect the tangible and intangible heritage of communities in the planning and development processes, trusting that old-time
practices tend to be more sustainable and full of folk wisdom. In other words, dramatic and drastic urban changes should be avoided in the urban realm and if these could not be done, changes have to respect the environment and aim to build in the long run sustainable, resilient and self-reliant communities. To accomplish these two inter-related tasks of nature and community conservation, planners have to be reflexive and ethics conscious, always ready to challenge unequal power relationships and seek social justice (Forester, 1999; Friedmann, 1987; Healey, 2003), serving as sensitive and empathetic “bridge builders” and “mediators” (Marris, 1987), facilitating communication, building consensus and fostering collegial relationships among various stakeholders. All in all, what we need is no longer “rational comprehensive planners” but rather urban planners who have “integrative” understanding of the various aspects of development and possess the tenacity and wit to work with different stakeholders to build sustainable and nature-nourishing communities.

Notes
1. “Kainos” is a Greek word meaning “new” in quality, an inherent ability to renew and recreate afresh continuously.
2. See Project for Public Spaces, http://www.pps.org/

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Turning the “beast of ugliness” into “places of beauty” through sustainable development

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Growth of ugliness in urbanization

I am a civil engineer by training, a serial innovator and someone who came into professional planning through a search for a way to achieve a higher quality of life through shaping and reshaping the “built environment”. I have always called this sustainable development and I see this as an approach to move from the “beast of ugliness” to “places of beauty”.

Rapid urbanization over the last 50 years has expanded the number of planners enormously and the emerging cities are generally ones in which people’s minute-by-minute comfort from small things has been left out, the ecology that provides their health and well-being is nowhere to be seen and crowded, narrow, culturally expressive, busy places are not planned. Urban and rural areas have become dominated by a scale of development suitable for fast dangerous cars, bringing lack of social inclusion (particularly for the disabled), noise, pollution, and a loss of daily connection between ecology and people. Air pollution is creating lung disease, water pollution gastroenteritis, and removing access to ecology is increasing mental health problems. The water cycle of rainfall and ground percolation supported by vegetation is disrupted by hard surfaces and flooding problems increase.

Buildings which frame these wide streets need insulation against road noise, and occupants cannot open windows because of air pollution. This means using air conditioning and more energy consumption. A strange and serious consequence of all this is that many people spend a large proportion of the day sitting instead of walking or cycling, and this is creating serious additional long-term health problems.

Perhaps even greater “ugliness” comes from the increasing gap between the rich and poor, with large areas of urban poverty and malnutrition right next to affluence, obesity and over-indulgence. This has as much to do with society’s choice of an economic success model as it does with planning, but the two are closely interwoven.

Looking for liveable and resilient cities

Working on major infrastructure investments, I was very conscious of the need to make a “sound business case” for any new project to make sure they are “value for money”. I am sure that all the designers and investors of the component parts of the cities that I described earlier thought they were delivering value for money, but the whole is clearly not of great “value” to all local people’s lives and these are not liveable or resilient cities.

Ziona Strelitz summarises the need in Energy People Place (Strelitz 2011):

“It is about liveable cities in which commitments to work and family, social and cultural interests, and opportunities for relaxation and chance encounter can occur with ease and within limited disposable time.”

Unfortunately, there is worse to come, because of pressures created by population growth, over-exploitation of resources and destruction of ecosystems. In the last 100 years, the Industrial Revolution has exploited the planet’s abundant resources for the benefit of people in those countries who led it. Population growth has meant there is less land per person to support the chosen way of living – 100 years ago we had 8 hectares per person and now we only have 2 hectares per person to provide food, energy, water, and to absorb waste (Head, 2009).
Fossil fuel energy consumption has been central to this model of human development and in designing and building these systems we have created the hard wiring of a non-renewable resource consuming and polluting society.

**Emergence of economics of climate change and a move to “comfort” and “smart”**

In November 2006 Nicholas Stern published a review on the economics of climate change (Stern, 2006) which showed the cost of swift action to reduce carbon emissions will be small (1% or less of national income) but the costs of doing nothing and then trying to clean up the problem later will be much higher. Ken Livingstone, the then Mayor of London, after a visit to China to see work on eco-cities and after reading the Stern report, was convinced to take action and appointed a team to prepare a Climate Change Action Plan. The Plan was published on 27 February 2007 (Greater London Authority, 2007).

In this plan we see the emergence of “comfort”, saving money, changing the way you live, a focus on reducing car use and bringing cycling back. This was a complete reassessment of “value”, but progress has been slow as we still do not have the planning tools to implement such quick radical change.

At the same time “smart city” transformation came to the fore to address these issues (Arup, 2010). It was said that smart cities can add value within a strategic sustainable development framework like that developed for London. A smart city was described as one in which:

Citizens are not only engaged and informed in the relationship between their activities, their neighbourhoods, and the wider urban ecosystems, but are actively encouraged to see the city itself as something they can collectively tune, such that it is efficient, interactive, engaging, adaptive and flexible, as opposed to the inflexible, mono-functional and monolithic structures of many 20th century cities. (p. 4)

The climate change agenda increased the sense of urgency to begin transformation of cities and there was a great clamour in 2008–2009 to speed up and scale up transformative change. In my travel and work around the world I could see very little sign of this substantive change in direction, and all the problems were still at the centre of the urbanization process except for some notable exceptions: in Bogota where beauty has come from walking and cycling through green space, Curitiba where fast buses are available to everyone, even the disabled, Hammarby Sjostad where waste is recycled for compost in urban farms and for gas to run vehicles, Seoul where a freeway was converted to a river and green corridor for poor people to travel to work, and Freiberg where solar energy is a predominant source of resilient living combined with extreme energy efficiency, and trees fill the town.

**Localism and the search for beauty**

At the same time another important development in the UK was the Localism Act 2011 and associated National Planning Policy Framework. This wholesale redrawing of planning policy resulted from great dissatisfaction with the UK 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act. The presumption for sustainable development in the new Act could be implemented through the methodology of Total Community Retrofit developed by the Institute for Sustainability (no date).

In 2011 it was clear that there was still a big gap in the toolkit planners needed to deliver “places of beauty”. I decided in 2011 to set up a new charity, the Ecological Sequestration Trust (http://ecosequestrust.org/) aiming to prove, through a global network of Regional Demonstrator Projects, a low-carbon, economically attractive and resilient planning and development path to improved water, energy and food security which enables city regions to live within planetary boundaries.

The potentially game-changing idea was to provide open-source tools to enable any region to create the metrics associated with the systems interaction between human activity, ecosystems,
resource flows and economics. Earth observation satellite programmes such as the Urban Atlas for the European Environment Agency had shown that this rich real time land-use and ecosystem data source could be used for local planning (http://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/data/urban-atlas) and so the Ecological Sequestration Trust is now bringing all this together in demonstration regions in Europe, India, China and Africa.

The role of open data, visualization and collaborative planning and design
Combining this land-use data in a systems model with local crowd-sourced social and economic data should enable advanced practical planning support tools to be available anywhere in the world from the Internet Cloud. Other tools such as Google Earth can be used alongside to create 3D visualizations to aid community involvement. Visualization is already being used successfully in the city of Berlin to support planning and delivery of a low carbon energy transition with the full involvement of communities (www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8TRchvO9Kw).

It is envisaged by the Ecological Sequestration Trust that such tools will be used in regional collaboratories where trust can be built through collaborative working with open data and systems thinking. Planners can work closely with social entrepreneurs and local community, business and public sector leaders.

There is a pressing need to speed up transformational change from the “beasts of ugliness” to the “places of beauty”. Gandhi is reported to have said, “There is no point in running fast unless you are running in the right direction.” The systems model described above is designed to enable the right direction to be explored with greater confidence and evidence, which will then help planners to facilitate the acceleration of the fashioning of a built environment that delivers the community values cherished by local cultures. In turn this may help bring trusted evidence to guide the views of political leaders.

It seems that the big data revolution, localism, decentralization and integrated systems planning, with community value at the heart, may enable this to happen. However in the end we will come back to the need for skilled planners with the ethical integrity to build trust in local communities for successful change to happen.

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What professional planning must contribute to ensure sustainable development

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The role of planners in the progress of sustainable development cannot be underestimated. Planning has always been acknowledged as central to providing spatial development patterns that underpin sustainability objectives at different scales and in numerous sectors. Sustainability, as an objective, gave planning a new focus from the early 1990s onwards, and reinvigorated debates about how to balance competing environmental, social and economic resources and outcomes. Although many of these challenges were not new, the sustainability discourse alerted the profession to issues wider than “the local” and challenged it to acquire a sophisticated, multi-layered understanding of the impacts of change. In this respect, the sustainability agenda propelled planning into the highly complex discourses of globalisation, resource management, equity and futurity.

Perhaps more than any other single profession, planners responded positively to the sustainability challenge. We took on trying to manage natural resources far more carefully than previous generations, to think about the long term impacts of development, to care about the interplay between social justice and economic development. The language of sustainability now permeates the profession. Planning policies at all scales have been re-written to include sustainability objectives; education and training have been re-focused; and numerous ways of assessing sustainability have been devised and implemented. Planners have held themselves up as accountable for achieving sustainable development, and have worked hard to both make sense of, and operationalise, the concept for the best part of 30 years.

Yet when we look at the outcomes of planning it is easy to wonder whether the profession should have been more measured about its ability to bring about such fundamental change. In the UK, and further afield, we see glaringly unsustainable new retail and commercial buildings, partially realised “sustainable” schemes, and poorly conceived, resource-rich developments. We question how they came to be built, given the involvement of professional planners and the deeply embedded policy ambitions for sustainable outcomes that have been in place long enough to make a difference. Even now in the UK, we struggle to find examples of places that we are truly proud to hold up as “successful” in terms of sustainability, and we resort to international examples, usually from Sweden or Germany, to show a particular model of what can be done. When ambitious sustainability programmes are assessed we often find that the final outcomes fall well short of aspirations in the most important things: infrastructure, green technologies, community development, and basic amenities (Williams, 2007). Of course, it is possible to find some inspirational examples of contemporary planning, but on the whole progress is slow.

So, is this critical judgement of progress “on the ground” fair? Of course what gets built matters, but as an assessment of the role of planning in advancing sustainability it is far too simplistic to make a judgement on this basis alone. I say this for several reasons that are worth exploring, because they offer insights into “what planning must contribute to ensure sustainable development” in the future.

This critical perspective fails to account for the contextual challenges planners face in achieving sustainable outcomes, and to understand the powers that planners have now. Any assessment of planning’s contribution to sustainable development must acknowledge its position within prevailing economic, political and governance systems that are, at times, deeply at odds with any true notion of sustainability. As O’Riordan and Voisey argue, the progress of transition to
sustainability requires “immense and fundamental changes in our society” (O’Riordan & Voisey, 1998, p. 3), and “to move forward involves relative and responsive shifts in a host of institutions – in the way we think, the manner in which we judge, and in the structures and legal arrangements of our governance” (O’Riordan & Voisey, 1998, p. 4). They argue that, “the institutional arrangements that need to be readjusted in order to embrace the sustainability transition actually thrive on, and endure in, a non-sustainable world” (O’Riordan & Voisey, 1998, p. 4), concluding that it is “No wonder sustainable development is taking time to be credibly articulated in policy and day-to-day behaviour” (O’Riordan & Voisey, 1998, p. 6).

Planning works squarely in this context. To achieve its sustainability goals, it is deeply entangled with, and reliant on, a host of other competing private and public sector organisations, institutions and legal and governance regimes, many of which have objectives at odds with sustainable development. Planning is constrained in realising many environmental or social objectives by the pursuit of profits from development legitimised as a precondition for a “sustainable economy” in the macro-economic sense. Hence, planners often find themselves negotiating at the margins rather than transforming priorities.

In addition, planners often face the “democratic paradox” of sustainability (O’Riordan & Voisey, 1998, p. 15; Williams & Dair, 2007). Put simply: what is good for the planet is not always popular. Yet, planning has always been about serving “the public” (MacDonald, this volume). The sustainability agenda has given rise to a new type of politics in planning: where local populations (or sections of them) are told that they do not know what is good for them, and where the environment is played off against the economy, the neighbourhood against the region, and the nation against the planet. In this sense the sustainability agenda has made planning far more political, not less.

Yet even within this context, I would argue that planning has made progress. With reference to O’Riordan and Voisey above: it has made a sustained effort to help society envision a different future; it has changed itself (institutionally) and made us judge things differently; and it has changed some of the structures and legal arrangements that it has power over. Planning has also helped to change public perceptions of the value of natural resources, the damage of unsustainable behaviours, and the collective sacrifices and benefits that we may experience in the transition to sustainability. This is not to be uncritical: planners have not always maximised their impact, even within their spheres of influence. But they have maintained a sustained and profound change in culture at the centre of the development process that is having an impact on how society evolves.

So what must planners contribute now? We need to build on the culture shift that has happened, to maintain focus within planning and exert pressure on other players in the development of land. We need to work patiently and thoughtfully in concert with other professions and organisations to develop societal understanding of the real costs and benefits of change so that in future the democratic paradox is less pronounced. We need to embrace the complexity and breadth of knowledge required to understand what “sustainable development” is. We need to maintain our expertise and use it to produce credible and exciting visions and plans.

We also need to regain a sense of confidence and leadership, not in a managerial sense, but of ideas, inspiration, ways of working and breadth of perspective (see Hambleton & Howard, 2012a, 2012b). We should not see ourselves only as mediators of others’ ideas and perspectives, but as informed and thoughtful practitioners with expertise in seeing, communicating, and achieving the bigger picture. We need to demonstrate our expertise in “place-based” decision-making and use this to gain confidence in ourselves and from other professions.

Fundamentally, though, the profession needs to articulate far more clearly what its values are and what planning “stands for”. A pre-occupation with “process” seems to have emerged in the last decade or so, at the expense of attention to substance. Planners need to develop and communicate a coherence of purpose, and not become overwhelmed with complexity and procedures. To this end the principles at the heart of sustainability (and the foundations of planning) still serve us well. We
need to “stand up for” the prudent use of land and natural resources, and for inter- and intragenerational equity. But in doing this, we need to inspire a new generation that a life in planning is colourful, exciting, meaningful and rewarding.

The transition to sustainability will require new allegiances, different ways of collaborating and new parties around the table, and planners are uniquely positioned to facilitate these changes in innovative ways (op cit). We are also able to take the long view, to understand that profound change may span generations, and to keep perspective on both advances and setbacks. We need to use all the influence we have within whatever sphere of planning we work, and to value small, incremental, local advances, as well as the major milestones along the way. MacDonald asks whether the planning profession’s unique position is derived from the fact that it is able to “deal with and synthesise a range of issues” (this volume). I think in pursuit of sustainability we can do more: we should learn, educate, inspire and lead.

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Will the profession speak out? Winners and losers in the future African city
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Cities in Africa reliably provide illustrations of some of the most extreme conditions of urban deprivation and degradation. The cities themselves are highly diverse and it would be an error to generalize about these features. Some cities are improving; however, the statistical estimates capturing urban life south of the Sahara remain depressing. Informal employment is still by far the dominant generator of income and of new urban jobs (Heintz & Valodia, 2008); close to half the population remains below the US$1.25/day poverty line (United Nations Development
Programme, 2012); and shack and slum dwellers range from 95% of the urban population in the Central African Republic to 28.7% in South Africa (UN Habitat, 2010). Yet there is a new dynamic increasingly shaping African cities. The good performance of certain economic sectors is fuelling the growth of an emerging urban middle class, with the McKinsey Global Institute (2012) estimating that a current cohort of 90 million people will grow to 128 million by 2020. This, together with Africa’s very youthful population, which will provide a larger workforce than either China’s or India’s in the next 20 to 30 years, positions Africa as the last global “emerging market” and hence highly attractive to foreign investors. The emerging urban “consuming class” is inevitably making new demands for suburban housing developments, road infrastructure (given escalating car ownership) and retail mall and leisure developments. With the growth in demand for these forms of new urban development being largely saturated in much of the global North, Africa’s cities are seen as the “last frontier” for international property development firms, many of which consist of collaborations of architects, engineers, developers and planners.

These trends undoubtedly lie behind the appearance in the last few years, of quite fantastical new visions and plans (see Figures 1 and 2) for Africa’s largest cities. Usually with the support of local politicians, these visions offer the promise of urban modernization and development, but the long-time ambition of “catching up” with global cities of the West has now shifted to the new urban icons of Dubai, Singapore and Shanghai. Architectural references are to these rising new cities of the East and Middle East, but the graphics also illustrate that the assumptions underlying these city plans are of formal, developed economies with no sign of street traders or shack dwellers, household incomes that allow occupation of costly residential towers, high levels of car-ownership necessitating freeway development rather than public transport, reliable levels of power supply to operate high-rise buildings (a rarity in many African cities; and well-capacitated local governments that can deliver and maintain such environments. The reality, on the ground, could not be more at odds with these visions. For example one of the most fantastical plans, for Kigale (capital of Rwanda), ignores the fact that 68% of the current population lives in informal housing, and the vision for the La Cité Du Fleuve in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, conveniently excludes the 76% of the urban population in slums (UN Habitat, 2010). In fact few, if any, of the assumptions underlying these visions hold in practice and it is hard to imagine what kind of understanding of the local context informed the work of the companies responsible for them.

Figure 1. Master Plan, Rwanda (Source: reference in footnote 1).
Moreover, some of these urban visions and plans have adopted labels and descriptions which suggest to African governments that these developments will be at the cutting edge of environmental and technological concerns. The current “in vogue” terminology of eco-cities and smart cities is to be found, for example, accompanying Eko City Atlantic (in Lagos) and Konza Techno City outside Nairobi. Yet it is hard to imagine how glass-box skyscrapers surrounded by freeways meet environmental or green building criteria (quite the opposite); and the entire smart city concept, which assumes that the insertion of IT infrastructure will give rise to a smart and globally connected population, has been subject to convincing critique (Hollands, 2008). Frequently, as well, these eco-cities and smart cities take the form of new “satellite cities” on greenfield sites outside of the existing city. No doubt it is easier and more profitable for developers to plan afresh, rather than negotiating land access with resistant shack-dwellers, or trying to link in to inadequate and ageing city infrastructure. It is also not impossible that the better-off middle class will favour an escape from the “crime and grime” of the existing city and will align with these interests.

Given the unreality of most of these new visions, it might be possible to simply dismiss them as likely to remain on paper, as have many other formal plans for African cities. But the Kigale plan has been formally adopted by the Rwandan government, and Eko Atlantic, Konza Techno City and La Cité du Fleuve appear to be underway (without, it seems, any public participation processes) as do a number of other projects. In the Kigale plan, it is not clear where shack dwellers currently within the city will go to: in all likelihood they will be removed or relocated to the periphery of the city, far from work opportunities and facilities. Even if only parts of these city visions are implemented, the extent to which they will accelerate exclusion of the urban poor and spatial fragmentation (“splitting urbanism” at a regional scale) is a serious concern. Such initiatives will also skew city budgets in the direction of infrastructure support for the projects, diverting funds away from the basic service needs of the poor. Finally, and despite “eco” labels, most graphics suggest the promotion of car-dependent urban forms and high energy-dependent buildings. Colouring areas of a map green is a long way from what is known to be required for truly sustainable cities. The absence of professional critique of these plans is therefore surprising, as is the fact that some have been acclaimed: the OZ Architecture Team (Colorado) received the American Planning Association Daniel Burnham Award for the best comprehensive plan (2009) and the American Society of Landscape Architects Award for best planning (2010), for the Kigale plan!
In sum, African cities, many of which are already facing the “perfect storm” of rapid urbanization under conditions of extreme poverty and inequality, unemployment, environmental degradation, weak local authorities and archaic planning systems ill-equipped to deal with market-driven development, are now facing a sophisticated international property development sector which might not have socio-spatial equity and long-term sustainability as a first priority. While professional urban planners have not always contributed to the teams formulating these plans and projects, it is certainly within the scope of the profession and its professional bodies everywhere to take a position on what seems to be a clearly emerging trend in the type of plans being developed for African cities.

Hence Kelvin MacDonald’s suggestion that the RTPI, in its next 100 years, should be able to speak out on the ethics of planning is to be strongly encouraged. Two aspects are important here. The first is that planning ethics encompass not only professional conduct but also the nature of the planning process and its outcomes. The RTPI’s *New Vision for Planning: Delivering Sustainable Settlements, Communities and Places* (RTPI website) notes that “sustainable planning” includes social justice, inclusion and environmental integrity, and should be collaborative. It is justifiable for the RTPI to ask whether the current generation of African urban visions and plans meet these criteria, and to take a public stand if they do not. The second aspect has to do with the international perspective, and MacDonald urges the RTPI to consider an international standard of planning ethics. This is vital. The work of built environment professionals is rarely confined to national borders and in this era of globalization teams are increasingly multi-national. It is urgent that the RTPI begin a debate with other national professional planning bodies around the world, and within Africa, as to what are acceptable principles to guide planning processes and outcomes, accepting that contexts are highly diverse and there is no one urban model or process that will fit all circumstances. If the global planning profession is to build and retain public confidence then a strong ethical stance is imperative, and there is no reason why the RTPI should not lead the way.

**Note**

1. For example see: Eko Atlantic (Lagos, Nigeria) [http://www.nairaland.com/564305/eko-atlantic-nigerias-answer-new](http://www.nairaland.com/564305/eko-atlantic-nigerias-answer-new); the Kigale Master Plan (Rwanda) [http://www.rdb.rw/uploads/media/KIGALI_CONCEPTUAL_Master_Plan.pdf](http://www.rdb.rw/uploads/media/KIGALI_CONCEPTUAL_Master_Plan.pdf); Konza Techno City, Nairobi [http://www.konzacity.co.ke](http://www.konzacity.co.ke) and [http://futurecapetown.com/2011/09/future-nairobi-a-2030-city-masterplan-6-new-towns](http://futurecapetown.com/2011/09/future-nairobi-a-2030-city-masterplan-6-new-towns); La Cite du Fleuve, Kinshasa [http://www.lacitedufleuve.com/project.php](http://www.lacitedufleuve.com/project.php). Also see new plans for: Maputo, Luanda and Dar es Salaam.

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The academy and the planning profession: Planning to make the future together?

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Encounters with the future

Welcome to the UK academic planning world of 2034. The generation of academics appointed in the post-Thatcher, post-Reagan years of the 1980s is now reaching the normal retirement age of 70. So how were the last 20 years?

They were like this:

The organisational entity called a “Planning School” disappeared from UK universities in 2019. The turbulent period of university restructuring in the UK, following government cuts, saw huge changes in the shape of higher education. Various research budgets were reduced, but the widely welcomed decision by the 2015 Coalition Government to reduce the fees to be paid by undergraduate students proved particularly significant, as there was only limited replacement of this income in university budgets. The universities least affected were those able to diversify their income sources so as to minimise their reliance on state funding and had long-standing strengths in the science, technology, engineering and medical disciplines, as these subjects were somewhat protected. While the international situation was less extreme, the context for planning education was tough, given the continued retrenchment of the public sector. Neo-liberalism remains the dominant policy discourse, undisturbed by the lessons from a few small-scale community initiatives.

Undergraduate and masters programmes in planning are now administered by private sector providers. The most successful being Ed Plan and Plantheworld. These providers, which are part of much larger corporations delivering professional education, work in association with international consortia of universities. They have a small core staff supported by academics sub-contracted from their universities. The core universities of the Plantheworld consortium are currently: Tongji in China, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Southern California in the USA, Melbourne in Australia, KTH Stockholm and two new private universities in Brazil and India. The programmes of study are delivered flexibly through a combination of online lectures and learning resources, and intensive locally based short courses. Anticipation in the early 2020s that massive open on-line courses (MOOCs) would completely replace traditional forms of provision have proved unfounded at undergraduate level, but have become the standard medium for the delivery of masters-level professional education. Decisions taken by non-Anglophone universities to teach in English have proved at least as important as technological developments in facilitating these changes. Using “uni-skype”, tutorials and seminars often now involve students sat in three different continents, with a tutor located in a fourth.

Significantly, by the mid 2020s the net flow of students around the world reversed. With the exception of a very few elite institutions in the West, US and European contexts have proved less and less attractive to students from the rest of the world. Students have recognised that in relation to the theory and practice of urban and regional planning, more particularly how to invest for economic growth and environmental well-being, the action was going on elsewhere in the world. Nor should it be assumed that practices in the South and East go unchallenged within the local professional and intellectual communities. It is these vibrant debates, combined with a sense of hope that the future can be better, that attract students from near and far, and is contrasted with the perceived timidity and sterility of Western intellectual discourses.

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) entered into its first accreditation agreement with a private sector provider, Ed Plan, in 2021. The erosion in the status of the planning profession and the contraction in university provision, in the end made this decision inevitable and largely uncontroversial within the Institute. At the present time, few in the UK would argue that planning has the characteristics of a profession. It has become a standardised set of managerial and technical
Gradually, zoning decisions (as they became) were automated as local authorities entered into partnerships with one of the three private providers of public services. In many cases the much-vaunted savings never materialised as computer systems failed and developers sued. More generally, the work of planning lawyers has increased many times over with the courts handling myriads of cases each year. The production of a Community Vision by local authorities is required, but members of the RTPI are not regarded as capable of undertaking this demanding and creative work.

... and the quality of life in our towns and cities? Ever more inequitable and fragmented. The ability to pay for fuel, be that to light and heat a house or work-place, drive the economy or facilitate mobility, now shapes all other decisions. Inevitably those with money have options and can reduce their energy requirements and in turn improve their health and well-being; the vulnerable have fewer choices.

Or were the last 20 years more like this?

Certainly the period up to 2020 saw retrenchment in public service provision and higher education in the wake of the austerity measures introduced following the 2008 banking crisis. But in the UK the deaths of 14 school children when their Public Finance Initiative school hall collapsed and a series of very distressing cases of the abuse and lack of care of vulnerable individuals, shook the national mood. The findings of the resulting court cases and commissions prompted recognition that re-investment in public services and infrastructure was essential, and, with a stronger economy, the 2020 government enthusiastically embraced this agenda.

Universities saw considerable change in this period. Initially, some universities merged, others effectively closed departments. For the arts, humanities and the social sciences it was a particularly difficult time, as funding was removed from both teaching and research. Government ministers questioned the value of these disciplines, with much of the research, rightly or wrongly, held up to ridicule for its irrelevance, pretentiousness and even mediocrity. More than this, students, led by students of economics, questioned the appropriateness of the then accepted curricula to the contemporary world.

This time proved a context ripe with possibilities for the planning discipline. Initially, universities struggled to justify why tax payers’ money should be spent on the musings of the inhabitants of ivory towers, but planners were able to offer practical, and crucially also intellectual, evidence of the value of academia to society. While there are certainly fewer planning schools, those that survived into the 2020s are significantly better founded than ever before. Several planning academics became directors of university/community partnerships, tangibly demonstrating how ideas can change lives for the better, and also how interactions with the real world reveal the pomposity and inadequacy of academic fashions. A few heads of planning schools made the academically and financially astute decision, as it has so far proved, to re-position their disciplines within faculties of engineering or public health. In some ways this connects the planning discipline back to its late-nineteenth-century origins, and if anything has resulted in the re-discovery of its social purpose. Planners have proved highly effective collaborators with engineers and scientists, seeking to resolve the technical and ethical aspects of social problems in an integrated manner.

The last decade has, at last, seen a renaissance in the public sector. There was only so far the pendulum of disinvestment and privatisation could swing before crisis after crisis indicated that a significant change of direction was necessary. While public private partnerships continue as the means to deliver infrastructure and certain aspects of public services, it is accepted that the public sector should lead. Many still draw on the perceived success of the 2012 London Olympics as a model of what can be achieved through confident, creative leadership. As a consequence, much of the work of the utilities has been re-municipalised. Green energy is now yielding more secure, cheaper energy supplies, with the profits being re-invested in community-based social care projects. Innovation can be seen across the public sector, not all of it successful, and social inequalities remain resistant to change. But there is a commitment to trying to make a difference and to the process of learning. Much of the innovation (which can also be seen in the private and voluntary sectors) is supported by academics. Programmes of short and longer term secondments between the academic and non-academic communities are now commonplace, the ivory tower now embracing more of the ethos of a public library, if not quite yet the open commons.
The UK was, of course, somewhat slow to commit to public sector rejuvenation, and when it did, it was evident that it possessed neither the governance frameworks to take forward such an agenda, nor the strategic leadership capabilities required to achieve innovation and deliver. The result, England has now re-introduced forms of regional government and planning that would probably not have been unfamiliar to the members of the late 1960s Redcliffe-Maud Commission. The government also sponsored the development of a suite of new master’s degrees in “strategic innovation” and provided 1,000 bursaries a year allocated to the most able students. Abilities in “practical thought leadership” are what job descriptions demand, and the new curricula are designed to educate a cadre of students in the art of “practical judgement”. This context provided planning schools with wonderful opportunities, although it did involve some painful re-learning for many academics as much existing research and teaching practices proved of little use in this new world of innovation and value-based judgement.

For once, the RTPI was quick to respond to the changing environment, and led the establishment of new accreditation practices for programmes in “strategic innovation”. These developments in the UK have found resonance across the globe and the Institute’s new model of “planning” education is now widely emulated. Alongside this, the membership of the RTPI has doubled in a decade, mainly from countries outside the UK.

Creating the future

Of course, the future will not be quite like either of these worlds. Some may regard the future as something that is done to us, about which we are powerless. However, that cannot be the world view of any planner. The activity of planning is premised on the notion that a future can be cultivated that will be better than the one that would have arisen in the absence of planning. Otherwise, to plan would be pointless. The issue therefore is how each one of us will contribute to the furtherance of planning, not merely to keep planners in jobs, but to confront, challenge and every so often conquer Gordon Cherry’s “beast of ugliness”: to create a better world.

I am conscious that as an academic one can often appear as content simply to chide the profession from the distant privilege of the ivory tower. But gone are the days when governments and societies deferentially allowed universities the right just “to be”. The future of planning is not simply an issue for practitioners and professional bodies, about which academics act as disinterested commentators, highlighting failings and inconsistencies. It requires practitioners and academics to work together, our futures, and the periodic defeats of the “beast of ugliness” depend on our collective endeavours. Inaction beyond the narrow confines of instrumental targets has become too comfortable and acceptable in the contemporary world. But inaction is a conscious action. As preceding contributors to this Interface have suggested, planners need to find their confidence and rediscover their leadership qualities.

In the first editorial of this journal Patsy Healey wrote on behalf of the founding editors that:

Above all, we are committed to the planning field as a learning endeavour where contributions are made through engagement with both practice and academic inquiry. There are many pressures to drive a wedge between these two. But we believe this weakens both types of engagement. We believe that an interactive engagement between practice and ideas is what the present discussion of the “knowledge society” requires of us. (Healey, Birch, Campbell & Upton, 2000, pp. 7–8)

This vision continues to lie at the heart of this journal. Yet, one of my greatest frustrations as the current Senior Editor is the relative absence of impassioned debate about the future of the planning idea. My preceding forays into the future, like any scenario-building process, are aimed at stimulating debate. The pages of Planning Theory & Practice are ready to publish such debates. But more than that, as Patsy Healey articulated clearly, our purpose is to encourage innovation and action, hence the journal’s strap-line, Challenging theory: Changing practice.

To challenge theory and change practice effectively requires us as academic or practitioner to ask of ourselves, and each other: what future planning worlds we envisage? But more particularly,
what future planning world will our actions bring into being? What future planning world should our actions bring into being?

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