New Perspectives on Planning Practice: An Introduction

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Planning practice is changing. Previous years of economic growth stimulated development and contributed to an increase in planning initiatives. Federal, state, and local planning agencies increased in such areas as employment and job training, housing and community development, social and human services, land use, natural resources, environmental and transportation planning, in addition to regional and special purpose bodies with territorial or functional responsibilities.

In times of growth, planning was viewed by many as a type of urban engineering and applied social science characterized by objective fact-finding and the so-called rational model. The plan, as a statement of the general interest, was often considered capable of generating support throughout the community. Implementation was largely a matter of choice among technical alternatives. Planners were akin to technical experts who advised decision-makers without promoting particular policy positions. If planning tended to serve private economic interests rather than the broader public, it was not necessarily that planners were partisan or captured by private interests, but rather that they were responding to the most powerful inputs they received and these came from these interests. If some planners criticized contradictions between the rational model and actual practice, or advocated minority interests and social justice ends, or used planning as a vehicle for power redistribution and social change, they were by no means typical in the field.

Today planning operates in a changing context. Economic recession has replaced growth and reduced development. This has exacerbated conditions in central cities and metropolitan areas, some of which are slowing, even declining in population, employment, and other measures of urban activity. Private groups blame government for economic problems and planning agencies for a range of ills. They mobilize substantial resources, mount campaigns to shape public attitudes, and elect representatives who reduce government and cut planning agencies. Planners no longer expect to generate widespread support, but instead may struggle for survival in the face of power.

Austerity policies and adversarial power challenge planners to recognize change and develop capacity for the years ahead. Some planners have applied skills to activate citizens, build support, and operate in a political-organizational arena. They work to formulate strategy, increase public awareness, develop community leadership, and mobilize resources for planning. However, other planners have opted to sit tight or wait for better times to return rather than to play a more active political role. They may appear passive and withdrawn, although it would be mistaken to interpret passivity and withdrawal as symptoms of apathy rather than of alienation from a situation from which they were being displaced. Meanwhile, hardly a day passes when the media fail to report government reductions and agency cutbacks.

This special issue provides new perspectives on the changing context of planning practice, identifies problems and issues in diverse arenas, and analyzes prospects for the future. The contributors represent a range of individuals, each highly experienced, deeply committed, and anxious to communicate. Together they seem to share a belief that change is needed in planning practice, research, and education, and they write as if it were possible.

John Dyckman begins by arguing that the problems facing planners go deeper than recent austerity policies to the structural context in which planning operates. Although planners once may have been concerned with broad social policy and long-range plans, they subsequently became entrenched in government bureaucracies applying instrumental rationality and technical skills to projects shaped by authoritarian regimes and powerful private interests. When private interests turned hostile, elected conservative representatives, and began to dismantle bureaucracies, planners were vulnerable and lacked constituency support. Dyckman challenges planners to learn lessons from the past and use the current situation as a basis to reexamine theory and practice. He urges them to think more critically, recognize the context in which they operate, and recall professional ideals to promote the "good life." He wants them to open dialogue with society and increase public awareness and understanding of new opportunities. In short, Dyckman challenges planners to grow from rational-technical roles to act more political and like leaders in the community.

However, most planners perceive themselves as neither political nor community leaders. Howell Baum reviews several studies of planners and finds only a minority who regard planning as properly or inevitably political, a majority of straightforward technicians who believe planning is or should be concerned with rational consideration of information, and a substantial group who are ambivalent about acting politically and who tend to emphasize technical planning as a result of this ambivalence. Others value political skills but do not use them in practice, or apply political skills but experience administrative controls and professional tensions which may prove fatal to them in the agency. There are exceptional planners who employ innovative methods to build constituency support and coalitions for agency plans, but they are not typical in the field.

This image has implications for planning research and education. First, most planners do not perceive themselves as political, a situation which could be defined as a problem for research and education to address. Second, a minority of planners are political and their work could provide lessons for others. Third, a substantial group of planners are ambivalent, but could be viewed as constituents or allies for developing new roles and changing the nature of practice. There is no a priori reason why planners could not develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes conducive to act more political or like leaders. Planning research and education could find excellent opportunities here.

Richard Bolan argues that more active participation by planners will raise ethical questions for which there is little previous guidance. Who are planners responsible to? What is it that responsibility obliges planners to do? Under what circumstances are planners responsible? Bolan address these questions in relation to the structure of ethical choice in planning practice. He constructs a matrix of ethical influence for reviewing alternative actions by planners. He analyzes ethical issues related to situations in which planners make decisions without knowing all of the circumstances, or in which there are possibilities of harm or "perverse effects," or in which good actions may be missed because of interdependencies in a network of others. He concludes that there is no precise ethics to inform practice, and that no singular or general ethical theory is likely to develop.

"Planning is in a state of crisis," Judith Innes de Neufville concludes in her article. She contends that planning schools agree on no common literature, raise questions which have no answer or produce stale debate, and provide poor instruction in ways to make planning work. She argues that planning theory is inconsistent with experience, irrelevant to application, and frustrates scholars and practitioners. She believes that educators have responsibility "to explain the profession to itself, to make explicit the nature of practice, to develop theories of how and why certain modes of practice tend to produce one or another type of result." She advocates planning theory which would be grounded in practice, descriptive and predicitive as well as normative, based in empirical research and lessons from the field. "Yet the void will not be filled until planning theory can make much more explicit what it is that planning is really about."

Carl Patton presents a case in which planning methods produced conflicting data which had limited impact on political decisions. He describes his experience in a local community development commission which conducted public meetings and surveyed citizens on the future of target areas. Commissioners and staff members compared responses in meetings and the surveys; they found substantial differences from one meeting to another, between residents and neighbors in the survey, and between the survey and meetings. Patton observes that the planning methods yielded data that were politically unacceptable, that citizen participation produced alternatives that were technically infeasible, and that community politics determined the final solution. He describes personal factors and human motives which may have affected citizen participation, and concludes that planning theory should be modified to recognize such factors. He also concludes that planning education should be altered to develop skills to communicate more effectively with the public, and to diagnose political conditions in the community. Patton thus employs participant-observation and empirical research in a small-scale social setting and draws conclusions and lessons for planning practice. Is this what de Neufville means by theory from practice?

What is the future of planning practice? This issue includes a forum in which several individuals present brief perspectives on practice with implications for research and education. Peter Marcuse, Jacqueline Leavitt, Paul Davidoff and Lisa Boyd, John Forester, and Allan Jacobs aim to examine some of the factors that may affect practice during the next decade and the alternatives available.

This issue also includes book reviews which themselves contribute new perspectives on planning practice. Seymour Mandelbaum reflects on five recent books on theory and practice. Rachelle Alterman sketches the contours of an emerging debate in recent literature on implementation analysis. Allan Heskin and Larry Fondation review a book with lessons from communtiy organizing. Dennis Gale reviews a recent work on neighborhood and urban development practice. The reviewers provide a guide to some of the growing literature in the field.