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The State of City Planning Today and Its Relation to City Planning Education

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I am mightily concerned about the state of the city planning field today, particularly in large U.S. cities, and the nature of the educational programs from which city planners come.

City planning, to me as a practicing professional and educator in the field, has always been about determining what should go where, why, how to get it there, and when. Its focus is on the physical environment of places—meeting the needs and aspirations of people who live and work in a city (or metropolitan area), consistent with the sustainable needs of the natural environment. This is not to suggest that socioeconomic needs are unimportant, or that they are less important than physical ones. But socioeconomic objectives can also be addressed through social or economic planning. To be sure, the objective of city planning is to achieve a variety of physical and social objectives; for example, a path or a street is planned and located to help people get from place to place because there are good social and economic reasons for them to do so. However, the principal achievement of city planning should be the location and design of the path in relation to other possible paths and to the uses of land, considering a multitude of physical and social concerns.

Perhaps the sharpest justification for my admittedly limited definition can be found in the requirements or expectations found in legislation enabling the establishment of city planning departments in U.S. cities and states, or requiring that such work be done.¹ That legislation most often deals with the what, where, why, how and when of city development. Another recent definition of what city planners are expected to do may be found in the job description for the new Chief Planner of Boston: "...to bring into focus the interrelated

issues and decisions around land use, built form, the public realm, the environment, community development, infrastructure and transportation that shape Boston, and relate these issues to the larger strategic goals."

In a large city, city planning, as so defined, may be extraordinarily difficult. To be effective and relevant, it must work at three physical and three time scales—and do so simultaneously. The physical scales are the city as a whole, the neighborhood or district, and the individual project or site. The time scales are long range, which is anything longer than four years (the attention span of an elected official); short range, which is any problem or opportunity that can be solved or achieved within one year of being identified or proposed; and middle range, which involves things that can be achieved in one to four years.

The San Francisco General Plan

One of my most important encounters with these issues (which now seems ages ago) was redoing the San Francisco General Plan when I was that city's planning director. This was, of course, both a long-range activity and one with a citywide (and beyond) physical scale. The work took place between 1967 and 1975—slowly, piece by piece, because there weren't funds to do it any other way. It was done by departmental staff. Most notable of the accomplishments, we thought then, were its Transportation Plan, Urban Design Plan, Recreation and Open Space Plan, and Housing Plan.

The San Francisco Urban Design Plan, completed in 1971, was apparently the first of its type, and became very well known and copied. It also became the basis for citywide legislation concerning building height and bulk, view corridors, historic preservation, shadow and light controls, and much more.

When presented, it was enormously popular and respected. People carried it into meetings, quoting it. They challenged staff and elected officials to make its proposals real; and we did indeed try. It was extremely influential for about 25 years. The plan contained four straightforward objectives, many urban form policies appropriate for San Francisco, and many principles (truths, if you will) about how to develop appropriately in San Francisco. The plan and its principles still seem, to these eyes, appropriate, and deserve continued

The San Francisco Urban Design Plan of

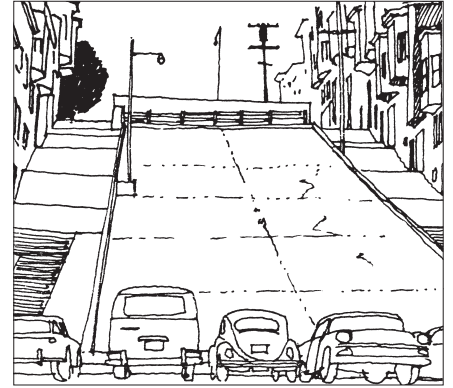
1972 followed each of its objectives with a series of "principles," urban design truths for the city many of which could be and would be translated into legislation or design guidelines by the city and private developers alike. A sampling of the principles is shown here.

1. Landscaped pathways can visually and functionally link larger open spaces to neighborhoods.
2. Street rights-of-way on hills too steep for cars or not needed for traffic are useless for people if covered with concrete. They can be modified to provide useful and attractive open space.
3. Building siting and massing with respect to street pattern influence the quality of views from street space. 3a: Tall buildings on the tops of hills allow clear views down streets. 3b: Tall buildings on slopes of hills severely restrict views from above.
4. Larger taller buildings can blend pleasantly with small-scaled areas if the change in scale is not excessive and if their form or surface pattern is articulated to reflect existing scale.
5. Visually strong buildings which contrast severely with their surroundings impair the character of the area.
6. Bulky buildings that intrude upon or block important views of the Bay, Ocean or other significant citywide focal points are particularly disruptive.

The drawings are by Tom Aidala.



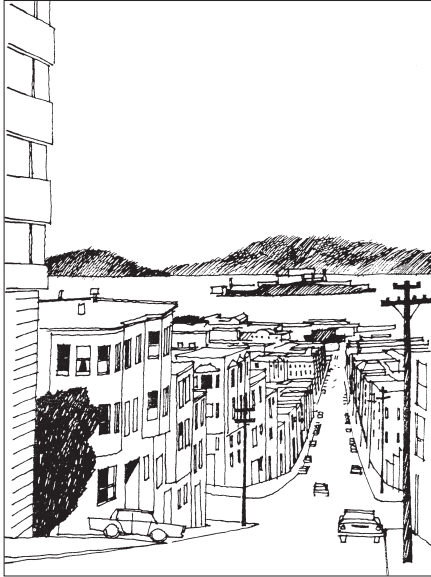
1.



2a.



2b.



3a.



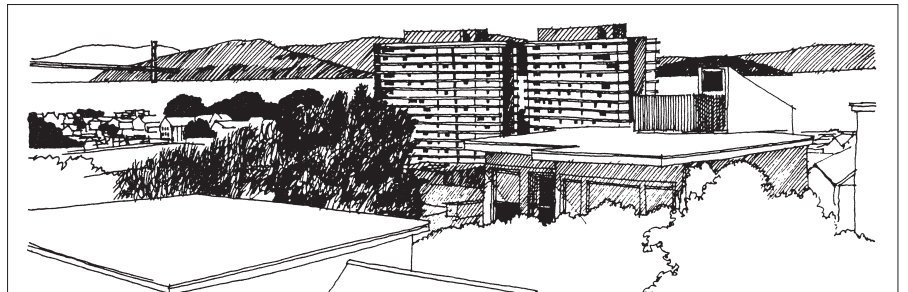
3b.



4.



5.



6.

consideration by city leaders and the general public.

It is fair to say, I think, that the Urban Design Plan was everything that one could have hoped for—again, for about 25 years. It spawned other plans, like the downtown plan which came later, and the sun protection and wind controls, and even the fine Mission Bay Plan, by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, which is now largely discarded.

It is also important to recall that the Transportation Plan (together with the Urban Design Plan) called for removal of the Embarcadero and Central Freeways. Later studies of the former even showed how this could be done—an example of detailed project planning fitting into a general plan structure. Sure, it took the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 to turn long-range ideal into short-term reality; but the physical plans were there, to be followed. It is important, sometimes, to give luck a chance.

Octavia Boulevard, recently completed, is another consequence, in part, of the Transportation Plan. As explained in greater detail elsewhere in this issue, Elizabeth Macdonald and I were fortunate to be chosen as designers for this replacement to a section of the Central Freeway.

Loss of Will

This brings me to the city planning field as I experience it today, and to the nature of the city planning education—highly related topics.² At this moment it is difficult to look positively at either the state of city planning in the U.S. or the nature of the education received by young people who would like to be city planners.

Looking back, a good place to start, might be the dropping of the word “city” or “urban” from what had always been “city planning” or “urban

planning.” The American Planning Association did this years ago, to its discredit. Teaching faculties, too, are uncomfortable with the word combination, tending to prefer “planning” alone to describe what they do. A case can be made that “urban design” as we know it today is not much more than a recent invention by some, including myself, to justify a concentration on what city planning once was, and what “planning” alone is not. Decisions such as those both reflect and foreshadow the nature of the field.

To be more current, if I am invited to a U.S. city, to consult, or talk with a downtown or other interest group, the city planning department is often absent. And in too many large cities, if I ask how important the city planning department is, or how important the city planning function is to development decision-making—or, better, whether the department is a leading, positive force in the community in guiding and deciding the nature of development—the answer is likely to be “not very important.”

Evidence of this weakness may usually also be found in terms of the low regard with which the city’s general plan is held. Too often this document is little more than an assemblage of vague motherhood words that can be interpreted in many ways, rather than a clear driving force behind public development and zoning (supposedly the control of land uses and private development to protect the health, safety and welfare of the community). The result is a civic vision that is easily changeable in the face of ad hoc development pressures, because the field has fallen into the habit of case-by-case zoning decisions (via conditional-use permits and so-called design guidelines), through which large-scale developers can easily bring political pressure to get what they want.

Then, too, it is all too common for cities to engage in public-private partnership redevelopment projects that essentially bypass adopted plans in favor of whatever large-scale development seems most popular at the moment. Something called “strategic planning” is deemed more pragmatic and timely than general planning. If city planners do have a strong position on a particular matter—and “if” is a big question here—too often, when the dust settles, they lose.

One can certainly find wonderful, usually young, idealistic people on public city planning staffs. My partner Elizabeth Macdonald and I are always pleasantly surprised by the many fine, able professionals in the San Francisco Department of City Planning. But their voices are soft, generally muffled by the managers above them. There have been far too many examples in recent years of city planning directors who are not city planning professionals, but “administrators” who really don’t know (and maybe don’t care about) the physical-social consequences of the large projects they approve.

The skill of engaging in and leading citizen participation may be found in many city planning staffs, as are research capabilities. But too often the emphasis is on how to make future decisions, not necessarily on making them or on developing creative ways to achieve them. Citizen participation is dandy, but it is one of many methods of doing plans. It is not necessarily an end in itself, and it certainly does not assure a “right” answer.³

Changed Circumstances

In any dark period there is light. We had the good fortune, in 2003, to attend and speak at the New Urbanism conference in Washington. What was most impressive were the many young professionals full of concern

and positive enthusiasm for the physical arrangement of urban places, the places where they work. These people were the equivalents of the young and not-so-young professionals one saw at American Institute of City Planning meetings decades ago. Maybe they are the same people. Whether one agrees with the tenets of New Urbanism or not, it is noteworthy and positive to see it attracts people who want to make a difference.

There are also always exceptions. Portland would seem to be one of them—a wonderful city, with slow, steady, constant, rational achievements, driven, it seems, as much by an involved citizenry as by its leaders and planners. Charleston, South Carolina, has had noted city planning accomplishments for many years, the good work being associated with the vision of Mayor Joe Riley, a true city planner. Likewise, the good things happening in Chicago seem very much associated with Mayor Daley. In Vancouver, British Columbia, the extensive and notable planning accomplishments are driven by a superb professional staff.

To be sure, not all problems with city planning lie with the planners. In the U.S. today, for a variety of reasons, phrases like “public good” have fallen from grace. The U.S., it seems, is in one of our many periods of largely uncontrolled capitalism, a form of religion in which it is believed that no controls (or plans) are best, and that unhampered individual decisions by owners and developers will produce the best, most exciting cities.

An immensely conservative ideology has penetrated to local government. This is a “those who have, get more” game. It seems the historic lessons of overbuilding and mean building, lessons of the industrial revolution of the 1800s and of the

Great Depression of the 1930s, will have to be learned again. But not now. For now, the so-called planners, in the field and in the academies, remain silent, either meek or actually believing the pragmatic, capitalist line.

Having worked as a consultant to public city planning departments, I am also continually surprised that the work is not done “in-house” by the professional staff. I rarely hired consultants when I worked in San Francisco. Why would I hire someone to do what I was trained to do and which was fun? Why shouldn’t we, the staff, have the fun? When asked why staffs don’t do the work themselves, the answer is usually that the professional-technical resources aren’t available, or that there is a need for prestigious consultants, or that staff is otherwise engaged: a pity. Personally, I believe that fear is also a reason. In our private practice, Elizabeth Macdonald and I always try to build local capacity; but that is not easily done when department budgets for advanced planning are slim and self-doubt is high. However, it is the lack of professional expertise that catches my attention most and which brings my thoughts to the education of city planners.

The heart of the problem, I believe, is that so many people who teach city planning in university graduate programs are nonprofessionals. They may tell the world and themselves that they are, but few have worked in public departments or consulting firms that prepare city plans for the public. Neither have they actually prepared a general plan, a neighborhood plan, or a project plan in any capacity, or are they professionally credentialed in architecture, landscape architecture, or for that matter, city planning.⁴ Rather than being professionals, those who teach are overwhelmingly academics, holders of

Ph.D. degrees, whose life experience has been, largely, in universities. They call themselves professionals when it suits them to do so.

Changed Priorities

If I’m right, how did the situation come to be?

Generally, in the 1950s and 1960s, there was an expansion of city planning programs at U.S. universities, many fashioned after programs at Harvard, MIT, Cornell, and the University of California at Berkeley. Those early programs—and the new ones, by and large—were peopled by professionals who were intent on teaching city planning as a profession. More often than not, the departments were housed in schools or colleges of architecture or environmental design, almost always with faculties concerned with physical environments.

Early on, these city planning departments concluded that all of their faculty members need not have degrees in one of the design-related professions. They argued that the field was a multidisciplinary one, and so might be its teachers—a reasonable conclusion. But in the years that followed they also established and developed their own doctorate programs. In part this decision was made to exist, to hold their own in their universities, to show that they were as knowing and disciplined as other faculties in their institutions. In part it also reflected the reality that some of their new faculty members came from long-established academic fields such as sociology or economics or geography, and the new faculty would have to meet the academic standards in those fields. But it was also due in part to a desire by city planning departments for status—for themselves and for the field.

It takes no great insight to see what happened once the doctorate

programs were in place: newly minted Ph.D.s, mostly trained in the social sciences, sought and found academic positions. They were not particularly comfortable teaching classes that dealt with physical planning, and certainly not with urban design. Fewer and fewer had any undergraduate or professional design experience. As a consequence, studio courses and place-making workshops, a mainstay of physical planning, either weren't taught or were taught poorly—or, they were called studio classes but really were not. In many schools, studio classes even ceased to be required.

Over time, since universities admit students with whom they are most comfortable, the emphasis changed overwhelmingly in admissions to master's degree programs from a design to a social-science orientation. At the same time, a Ph.D. became a requirement for teaching in most city planning departments, effectively cutting off design-oriented professionals from university positions. Once that scenario was recycled a few times the outcome was predictable: graduates at the master's level without much education in doing what enabling legislation says city planning is—and an emphasis on verbal policy, citizen participation techniques (void of doing plans), conflict resolution, and the like. At the same time, there was an increasing emphasis on “planning theory”—whatever that is—or, as academics in the field and at home in the universities do best, criticism of what others have done, loaded with citations to other academic work.

To a person like me, who considers himself a professional, the article in the Fall 2004 issue of the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* by Stiftel, Rukmana and Alam, purporting to deal with “Faculty Quality at U.S. Graduate Planning Schools,”

was disheartening in the extreme.⁵ Highly oriented toward statistics, it dealt primarily with publications in rarified academic journals (urban design journals don't count) and the numbers of citations authors could claim to each other's work. Yet, in a list of 53 authors with the most publications, I recognized only one person I would consider a professional city planner. The article studiously avoided anything about the quality of the professionals the schools produce, the quality of the students, or the education they received. In her last book, *Dark Age Ahead*, Jane Jacobs spoke of credentialing vs. education; this seems a prime example of that.⁶

In the late 1980s and 1990s, urban design, within city planning programs, began to appear, and, indeed, the subfield, or concentration, exists. But it is also true that the urban design concentration, if there is one, is often marginal (and treated as such) to the larger planning program(s).⁷

Given what I think explains the first evolution of the city planning field and city planning education, it comes as no surprise that at least one of the oldest and strongest university programs has faculty consider the teaching of professional city planning as being vocational training, in a very pejorative sense, and don't want to do that. One is led to wonder, then, why a professional master's degree program should continue to exist in such a university, let alone be associated with programs in architecture and landscape architecture.

The Future

What to do?

Perhaps nothing! Perhaps it is best to let matters take their course, without overt action by either the planning field or the academics. The field as represented in public agencies,

will plod along, with short spurts of energy here and there, but its people may largely become the experts in zoning, discussion-leading, and information retrieval and ordering: in short, the bureaucracy. Planning programs at universities might evolve clearly into centers for urban studies and policy. City planning—the what, where, when, how, and why—will come and go, driven by citizen groups for long periods or short, intense flares, depending on the city, the issues at stake, and people's concerns over how badly they are getting gored by capitalism run amok. Zoning commissions could replace planning commissions, and departments and planning staffs could become the targets of budget reductions as necessity dictates.

As for the education of city planners: if the faculties of existing programs are truly interested in planning policy that does not concentrate on (or largely excludes) the what, where, when, how and why; if they are uncomfortable with the word “city” or “urban” in front of “planning” and interested in socioeconomic theory and research, rather than in preparing professionals for public city planning (and perceive that activity as merely vocational training); then they should have the good manners to leave their associations with colleges or large departments that include architecture and/or landscape architecture and move to where they will be more comfortable—in any of a number of social science or public administration schools (in which, by the way, they will soon cease to exist, but that is another matter).

If this occurs, transportation planning, a subfield that has had positive influence in terms of humanizing streets and travel, might be forced from the planning programs, where they have done well, back into engineering

schools—and that might be problematic.

And what of the few urban designers—those marginal faculty, with or without Ph.D.s, who practice, teach, and do research on urban physical form issues and their relation to peoples' lives and to urban environmental responsibility? Generally, architecture departments are the wrong places for these people. That field is overwhelmingly concerned with the design of individual structures, not urban context, and not the natural environment or people in their environments.⁸ A more reasonable home would be within landscape architecture programs, with people concerned with space and the natural physical environment. The transformation, the move, would not be easy, and it would create another set of problems—not the least of which would be the required coursework and a professional culture that is overwhelmingly accommodating. But the effort, I believe, would pay off for the professional practice of city planning, for teaching and for research that would be helpful to professionals.

A better option might be to follow the model that has been put in place at the University of Pennsylvania. There, I gather, the practitioner, the professional city planner, has faculty status the equivalent of an academic. At Penn, studios, at the heart of professional education, have always been most rigorously taught. There is a tie, of course, to teaching at MIT. Alternatively, a well-defined interest organization, made up of members from many different professions, but with a well-defined and clear charter directed to the physical planning of urban communities might be established. This could well be an organization modeled after the Congress for the New Urbanism.

More optimistically for the field,

regardless of what the academy does or how the field chooses to define itself, perhaps the greatest hope lies in communities—cities, if you will—and in young people. In my experience, the actual residents of cities and neighborhoods—not all of them, but many—want some sense of improvement, of moving ahead, of problem-solving, and of the possibilities of living in healthy, safe, exciting, environmentally sustaining, well-populated urban contexts, a sense that together they are moving in positive directions. To these ends, they continually call for and require of their governments some kind of physical planning consistent with their social and economic needs. To me, it remains to be seen if the planning field as presently constituted will respond to those challenges better than it has in recent times. Clearly, I have serious doubts.

As for young people, I have, for more than thirty years at Penn and at the University of California, served on admissions committees and have read thousands of letters by people who give their reasons for applying. In my reading, overwhelmingly, their statements of purpose—with exceptions, of course—have remained the same: to help build and achieve better communities that are more egalitarian than the ones we have; that respect and use wisely natural resources; that, in short, strive for some utopian visions—many of which, but not all, evince a large element of concern for what should go where, why, how and when.

These people want to go out and to work in cities. If planning education could again become city planning education, and respond more directly and positively to these young people, the cities themselves and their city planning programs might rapidly become much better.

Notes

1. It is, by the way, amazing to me how often (when I ask them) that the members of a city planning staff, even its director, do not know what their charge is—what the enabling legislation or the city charter establishing their department and activity actually says they are supposed to do.
2. Since being a public city planner in San Francisco, I have gained a lot of experience as a city planning and urban design consultant and as a person involved in teaching. My thoughts, conclusions and concerns come from that experience and from discussions with other professionals and with people in the cities where I work. West Coast experience, particularly in and around San Francisco, colors my conclusions; but I am somewhat familiar with the East, the Southwest, Northwest, and other places. My concerns are not new, and they are not based on what professionals and academics might consider an objective, scientific foundation. Yet, they may coincide with other planners' experiences. Call them notes and meandering hypotheses, to be proven or disproved by future research—or more likely, by future events.
3. I am aware this sentence could get me booed out of some nice places.
4. Indeed, the university-credentialing arm of the American Planning Association recently put forth a proposal that would require at least some faculty members who teach city planning to have professional credentials. But the faculty at the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley, concerned with registration and credentialing matters, would hear none of it.
5. Bruce Stiftel, Deden Rukmana, and Bhuiyan Alam, "Faculty Quality at U.S. Graduate Planning Schools: A National Research Council-Style Study," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (September 2004), pp. 6-22.
6. Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead* (New York: Random House, 2004).
7. Note that I do not precede "planning" here with either "urban" or "city."
8. I would love to be wrong about this, but fear that it is only in exceptional cases that urban physical planning and design can thrive for a long period in such settings. Generally, urban designers would be marginalized in such programs, and physical planning would be a hit-or-miss crapshoot.