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A Reader in Canadian Planning: Linking Theory and Practice
Edited by Jill Grant
Reviewed by Pamela Shaw

A Reader in Canadian Planning: Linking Theory and Practice is a text edited by Jill Grant, who is well known to this publication as a professor and director of the School of Planning, Dalhousie University and chair of the editorial board of Plan Canada from 2001 to 2004. The text does precisely what it sets out to do – it provides a link between planning theory (what ought to happen) and planning practice (what actually happens). Published in 2008, the text has been in use for a couple of years, and is worth noting for several reasons: it was awarded a Plan Canada Book Recognition Award in 2008; it provides a Canadian viewpoint that is often missing in planning textbooks (along with some carefully selected international content); and it is an excellent resource for both students and planning practitioners interested in tracing through key theoretical questions and practices in Canadian land use planning.

The text is a collection of more than 90 articles published in Plan Canada from 1980 forward. Covering more than 25 years of planning knowledge, the text includes a profusion of viewpoints on the state of planning, past and present. The use of articles from a single source gives coherence to the text, and editing the articles for length assists in keeping the reader’s focus through the text.

Each chapter begins with an introduction by Grant, which sets out the context of the articles that follow and the relationships among them. Each chapter ends with study questions that reiterate the main points from the article and assist the reader in drawing connections among the writings. The “Ideas for Essay Topics” at the end of the text is a well used resource for students searching for that elusive focus for their research papers. Also appreciated by students are “Further Readings” and the “List of Acronyms” at the end of the text – short but thoughtful additions.

The 15 chapters of the text are grouped into three sections. The first, Background and Basics, provides a succinct history on Canadian planning practice and the people, places and issues that colour Canadian planning. From Thomas Adams to Don Mills, and from questions on ethics to the joys of public participation, this section provides context for the articles that follow. The second section, Philosophy and Practice, deals with stickier issues, including planning for diversity, beauty, safety, and sustainability. The final section addresses Techniques and Tactics, and again covers a diverse range of topics from water conservation to development charges and urban sprawl.

Highlights in the text include Larry Bourne’s article on the myths and realities shaping the relationship between retail uses and urban sprawl, and Grant’s article on Rethinking the Public Interest as a Planning Concept, which discusses the disconnect between the idea of the public interest and what we do as practitioners to recognize this slippery concept.

It was enjoyable to revisit some of the older articles included in A Reader in Canadian Planning. Some remind the reader just how far the profession has advanced in the decades under consideration in this text, while others point to issues still unresolved. The photographs, tables and diagrams in the book are a highlight as well. Although produced in black and white, the graphics are clear and relevant, and the addition of updated materials adds to the overall appearance of this well designed paperback (and therefore more affordable) textbook.

The only issue one might have with this textbook is what’s missing. Choosing from the array of articles contained in Plan Canada since 1980 must have been no small task. It will be interesting to see how the 2nd edition of this text is amended and how newer issues such as climate change are presented within the structure of the text.

While the text is targeted toward planning students, it is also a first-rate resource for individuals preparing for membership in CIP-ICU and for professionals looking for useful, well organized reference on a wide range of planning issues. The text is a good companion to Gerald Hodge’s Planning Canadian Communities for any senior undergraduate or graduate level planning course.

Pamela Shaw, PhD, MCIP, is a UC Professor at Vancouver Island University, planning consultant, and author. She recently published “A Field Guide to Communication” with Oxford University Press. Her second text titled “Boxed In: Searching for the Public Good in the Retail Landscape” is under development and scheduled for publication in fall 2010.