Dr Sandra Smith

Some twenty years ago, being a professional and the acquisition of a professional designation seemed very important to me. With a Masters from UBC’s School of Community and Regional Planning and eight years of experience in England, I felt I actually deserved such a designation. Besides, I was jealous of my English colleagues. With their RTPI moniker, they could testify at public inquiries. I was always sidelined, whispering experience in England, I felt I actually deserved such a designation. Besides, I was jealous of my English colleagues. With their RTPI moniker, they could testify at public inquiries. I was always sidelined, whispering experience in England, I felt I actually deserved such a designation.

In fact, I took this yearning so seriously that I stood for election to the Planning Institute of British Columbia Council. Once elected, I found that my colleagues were more interested in arranging conferences at which much enjoyment and some knowledge was to be had. My aspirations for a professional title somehow evaporated. Or at least they died until I found myself working next to engineers whose designation brought them considerable financial rewards. Unfortunately, at that point the timing for a champion of professional titles was all wrong. No one was certain what a planner actually was; ambiguity may have even been useful, as it so often is, in a period of fast-paced “change” – or is it simply an early sign of “anything-goes” mediocrity?

Accordingly, for years now I have not thought about the need for a professional title, but I have been very concerned about professionalism, particularly when hiring planning staff. Invited recently to offer some personal reflections on planning professionalism, I found to my surprise that a professional title no longer seems very important to me – except perhaps “theoretically”. What is important to me, however, are some aspects of the “standard practice” of being a “professional” that fall beyond the dreary mix of technical skills that our education system provides, and beyond the trite cant to the effect that a professional is one who takes legal, moral and financial responsibility for their work (however important these may be).

Musing today on a desirable “cloaking” of professionalism for planners, and whether planners should aspire to a professional title, has led me to consider aspects of my work/life “theory”, created and fashioned through professional “practice”, in planning and other contexts. The invitation has allowed me to reflect on how I would ideally “bridge” this theory and practice.

Above all, I believe that a planner should consciously operate in a socio-spatial context, and, I would add, with an increasingly necessary ecological world-view – thus invoking a kind of cosmopolitanism/laced professionalism, to paraphrase the title of Sandercock’s latest book (Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities). I believe that the existence of an “institute of planners” is important, if only to gather together colleagues with a common calling and a common understanding, who strive to attain certain basic standards. Perhaps more important, especially now that change constantly assaults us, are the more enduring standards or qualities, some or all of which may well be inherent in Sandercock’s “knowledges” and “literacies”, and in her inspiring image of the planning profession as a “passionate pilgrim” (see her article in this issue of Plan Canada). I would suggest from my own experience that these ideal standards/qualities include, in no particular order:

• the ability to work in a team and to recognize that effective results can be achieved only by valuing diversity, integration and collaboration;
• the ability to listen (and I mean listen empathetically) to the client, the community, and the politician – for they will ultimately be the decision-makers;
• openness to the “emotionally imaginative” aspects of life represented by the arts and the humanities;
• the courage to think strategically; to tolerate moments when not everything fits together and tackle those ever-present value questions;
• the humility to respect others, particularly our colleagues and those we serve;
• the determination to expand the definition of the common good to include those “planned-for”;
• the courtesy to practice within one’s own area of specialty (physical, social, environmental etc.);
• the ability to provide good, solid options to assist in the resolution of planning issues, among others (not just simplistic solutions to perceived problems);
• the wit to know when reaction to incremental pressures will result in long-term planning disasters;
• and perhaps most important to this practitioner: the wisdom to recognize that work and life must be in balance.

Perhaps the embroidered coat or mask of a professional title is no longer needed when such standards-cum-qualities can be found in a professional planner.


2 For more on this see the forthcoming book – on the destruction of home – jointly authored with Doug Porteous.

Dr. Sandra Smith MCIP is a somewhat arthritic planner whose advice, these days, is given mainly to her students in the University of Victoria’s Department of Geography. She is a former Manager of Water Policy for B.C. Environment, and a former Manager of Local Planning for the Islands Trust. Her thoughts here have been enriched by recent conversations with academics Judith Allen in London, Ian Wight from Winnipeg, and Doug Porteous and Allison Habkirk in Victoria, as well as with practitioners, past and present: Kim Fowler, Brodie Porter, Tom Loney and Lyn Kriwoken in Victoria. She can be reached by email at <swsmith@home.com>

...a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies ...

or a cloak of equal grandeur.