Reflections on Planning Professionalism: Mark Seasons

Mark Seasons

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One of my challenges as a planning practitioner and educator is to identify and deliver what planners "need to know" in order to become and remain effective, literate professionals. My understanding of this comes from years of planning practice and a varied professional career. Planners need to anticipate and adapt to changes in our planning environment. Planning practitioners and academicians need to be concerned with relevancy. Surely it goes without stating that planning practice must be guided by ethics. The list goes on.

There's nothing new or startling about any of this. We will always need a community of planners that is equipped with the skills, the knowledge and, perhaps most important, the attitudes necessary to deal with complex and changing planning environments. This process begins with a formal education in planning and continues throughout one's career.

The skills part seems self-evident and includes the usual aspects: analysis, synthesis, understanding of research instruments, communications, mediation, team and project management, and many others. Many of these skills are generic, timeless and easily transferred. The university planning programs, CIP and affiliates have done a very good job of providing education and training programs in these areas. New skills will be required, and they will be added to our repertoires.

However, the things we need to know — the substantive areas — are often less well developed, or too narrowly specialized. Certainly, practitioners know lots about planning law and planning processes — perhaps too much. We should view formalized and legalistic planning processes as means to ends (however defined), and not necessarily as ends in themselves. Sometimes we get these confused.

I'm not sure that planners of my generation (what an awful phrase) had proper preparation in the planning fundamentals: economics (successfully avoided by too many of us!), ecology, sociology, demography, engineering and governance. That's why it is so refreshing to see Sandercock stressing some of these areas in her article. We need literacy in these areas; we also need numeracy. We need to know about organizational theory, impact assessment, and evaluation, about the politics of planning, the concepts and application of strategy. It's not about becoming expert in these areas; rather, it's about being aware of them.

I agree with Sandercock: planners need to know about varied cultures. But she argues that there is a tendency to "deny difference" and to "fear difference" in planning practice, and I think she's misinformed on, and possibly overstating, this point. In my experience, planners have become more sensitive to the needs of their constituents, and more skilled in communicating with different cultural groups. Her message should be interpreted as an expression of the need for planners to be open to diversity in communities, and to be aware of possible biases in practice.

Sandercock's discussion of design is also timely. Her call for design literacy takes us back to the foundations of planning practice. Communities and planning students are very keen on, and concerned with, urban design and aesthetics in general. This reflects a need for creative planning, and that's refreshing. However, urban designers are in short supply. There are few planning programs that specialize in design, although many, including Waterloo, are recruiting designers as faculty-members.

Organizational context also warrants attention. Policy planners need to learn more about the realities of life in plan approvals and review, and vice versa. The planning organizations that seem to work best are those with staff who are conversant with both sides of the mandate. This is easier said than done: each group has a different culture and worldview. It can be difficult to make the shift between policy and approvals. It is also important that planners understand life in public, private and not-for-profit environments. Furthermore, planning academics would benefit immeasurably from regular and sustained experiences in a planning practice, just as many practitioners would find a stint in academe useful. We need more mutual beneficial exchanges and secondments between practitioners and academics.

The manner in which skills and knowledge are acquired requires discussion. We need more opportunities for training, and to deliver training in innovative ways. This is especially important for mid-career professionals who are often in desperate need of intellectual stimulation and new perspectives. Let's see more university-practice exchanges or secondment programs, intensive short courses, training programs associated with the annual CIP conference, and distance-learning activities.

As for the issue of attitude, balance and moderation are essential. We need to avoid excess and dogmatism, both of which get in the way of communications, openness and mutual learning. I am weary of planners who embrace a specific planning doctrine (e.g., anti- or pro-development, anti-urban, pro-environment, etc.) to the exclusion of other viewpoints.

Planning can only benefit from diversity in training and philosophy. The profession must continue to be inclusive in nature. There must be room for different disciplines and the diverse perspectives they bring to the profession. I enjoy and have benefited from the richness brought by planners who have backgrounds in environmental studies, design, architecture, and many other areas.

In my view, the most important professional (and personal) attributes are wisdom, judgment, and tolerance of differences. Traits such as flexibility, creativity and adaptability have been discussed ad nauseam, but are, despite over-exposure, essential. So is optimism, an inquisitive nature, and alertness to opportunities for change.

Above all, we need passion and commitment. Otherwise, why bother? That's why the "passionate pilgrim" is such a positive, welcome and timely model for planning practice.