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An invitation to “philosophize" about the planning profession and its meanderings is just too good to pass up, even when one is constrained to a thousand words. As the tooth grows longer, much of the writings on planning leave us, in Richard Sennett’s words, “to rest uneasily in that nebulous zone just left of centre, where high-flown words count for more than deeds”.

In my opinion, which is based on my reading of the appendix for planning educators in Towards Cosmopolis, Sandercock’s writing falls, plop, right in the centre. It’s of the “trash it, dump it, resurrect it” approach to planning. The inherent problem is that it is trapped in the paradigm it eschews. It is literally rummaging in the compost of planning at a considerable distance from current planning action. It is squarely “in the box”, and may even be a vague attempt at digging all the way down to an older notion of comprehensiveness, as it structures its own grand designs.

Let’s look deeper. The notion that “both practicing and trainee planners/students think that this [technical skill] is all there is to planning” is not dissimilar to the notions underlying earlier attacks on “comprehensive planning" by social activists, marginalized communities and environmentalists. It is not that the current analysis is not accurate. Earlier criticisms were equally valid, as the next ones will be. Sandercock’s notions about working with communities, dealing with change and deploying ethical values as critical elements in planning are, again, remarkably similar, as are the calls for integrating education and practice.

Nothing new here. Nor is there anything new in the solution. As with numerous past cries for change, the solution is always a new categorization, better education, or a “re-thinking in light of new concepts”. In short, we need a planning revolution, wholesale change or some other grand design that the author is promoting. Well, I’m on board. Who doesn’t need a wholesale shake-up? Besides, it diverts attention and can even be fun for planners, who then have no need to make real changes in communities.
The dilemma is not in the analytical findings, which suggest a definitional approach focused on socio-spatial processes, or a concept of planning that features the urban habitat to the exclusion of all other types of space. If the task is to prevent defining planning in a way that it does not continually become redundant, or fall into the refrain of "nothing is certain save for uncertainty," then the task itself is redundant, not the particular approach to planning. New analysis will always render the current view insupportable. New communities, interests and structures will always criticize the existing paradigm, and these critiques will come faster. The reality is that planning, as we know it at any given time, will eventually become redundant. The challenge is that "eventually" will come more rapidly.

Breaking the redundancy cycle means embracing the concept of redundancy itself. It means anticipating change. It means being flexible. It means planning. It means integrating and thinking in an interdisciplinary fashion. Students, teachers and practitioners need to learn this—constantly.

Let's return to some key factors considered at the outset: working with communities, dealing with change and deploying values. A great deal is known about communities, the changes they experience and their values. Critical to this understanding is how communities and their values are formed and adapt. This is not a fast or smooth process. One may talk about community mobilization or empowerment, but most planners know such statements are just talk. Communities resist change and values evolve slowly. People who talk about far-reaching change, and about what ought to be, are not talking about real communities. They are describing hypothetical communities—possibly communities as they should be, but more likely communities as they wish them to be. There is too much known about communities and about how their values and interests are aggregated for one to be surprised by the failure of calls for rapid, far-reaching change. Communities are too messy for simplistic solutions.

Change is a core concept in planning, and some of its key elements are known. It is often random and chaotic. It reflects response to crisis and pressure. But mostly, it is difficult to predict. This doesn't mean that some planners don't work well in environments characterized by change, chaos and uncertainty.

How do they do it, and how is this capacity learned? This is a large and central question, but some key elements can be put forward. Planners that deal well with change are essentially heuristic in outlook. They operate according to a structure of goals derived from community values; an understanding of planning principles or approaches; and internal concepts of integrity. These can be, and often are, balanced in an operational approach that many people—who they are professionals or members of the public—can recognize.

Often the notion of planning principles is a hot button, and a negative one at that. Most of the discussion on planning principles is critical in nature—a retrospective analysis of faults. The conclusions may be true enough, but they only underline the dilemma of those looking for stability and the right approach. Since neither exists, it is the search itself that is flawed. Regardless of the elegance of the approach, it will be partial. It will always exclude some and include others. It will always fall into the trap of its own critical analysis. All attempts at systematic comprehensiveness fall short, as do evocative titles such as my "rummaging" or her "passionate pilgrim". All these fall too close to Sennett's concern, noted at the outset of these ramblings, about "high-flown" words replacing (down-to-earth, well-composted) deeds.

Planners would do well to get beyond this self-destructive tendency and recognize that change—like that other, more personal organic material—happens, and when it does you learn and apply your new knowledge. As change occurs more rapidly you learn and apply faster. Eventually, you learn and apply continuously and simultaneously. Now, this is not a novel suggestion, but it is rarely practiced. Possibly as a profession we have become too dependent on (making) plans rather than (doing) planning. Or maybe we have come finally to a critical fault in the analytical paradigm: the assumption that analysis can be complete, or can lead directly to corrective action.

To me, it seems that planning has become a simultaneous quest for learning and application within a set of community and personal values. Do you get it "right"? Of course not! This is, fundamentally, an irrelevant and mundane question. It leads to a desire to create typologies and approaches which become the next windmill to tilt at.

The right question, it seems, is to be found somewhere in the chaos of community, values and change. It is an individual question with an evolving answer that is evaluated by countless communities on a daily basis. The sobering fact is that communities are often very perceptive in their evaluations of planning thought and practice. Good Luck and Learning!