

The future of the planning profession

Article

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Parker, G. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3079-4377>,
Wargent, M. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1448-9383>,
Linovski, O., Schoneboom, A., Gunn, S., Slade, D., Odeleye,
N.-D., Maidment, C. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9158-6910>, Shepherd, E., Doak, J., Elliot, T., Nicholls, V., Street, E.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8987-5916>, Dobson, M.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8599-9797>, Platts, S. and
Tasan-Kok, T. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4902-6650>
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Interface: The Future of the Planning Profession

Planning Theory & Practice

Editors: Gavin Parker and Matthew Wargent

PTP Editor: Lisa Bates

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The future of the planning profession

Gavin Parker

This Interface emerged from a symposium on the future of the planning profession held at the University of Reading in September 2019. This reflected on present changes and new challenges emerging to the means, political standing and substantive goals of planning across the globe. The essays that follow largely address issues for the profession in the UK but are also more widely applicable. Some issues discussed are longer-run and continually shifting. The conditions and tasks faced by planning have morphed, as have the types of people and sectoral balance involved in planning. Renewed scrutiny over the environment, quality of development, and its accountability to the public it seeks to serve are active topics in the UK. Pointedly, concerns over a public sector planning that has been weakened by a decade of austerity, and destabilised by serial changes are in the forefront of peoples' minds, with advocates of further deregulation and reform currently holding court (e.g. Airey and Doughty, 2020). With such changes ongoing now is a good time to consider the future of the profession.

Despite a growth and diversification in planning activity, the profession in the UK is often undervalued with long-run public distrust in planners and the system persisting. The Raynsford Report examining the planning system in England recently argued that “broader civil society consensus around the need for planning has fragmented, and many people are simply unclear about what the system is for” (2018: p23). The regulatory system has been the subject of continual structural change and this is likely to continue in years to come. The profession is once again under assault with Hugh Ellis (2020: np) recently forecasting ‘the endgame’ for the English planning system and “the ideals which founded the planning movement”. As a result, planning’s operating environment is breeding uncertainty and it is more challenging to be a planner in such circumstances. A lack of transparency in the UK adds to the gap between the planners and the planned, as well as between different forms, sectors, spatial scales, or types of ‘planner’.

The issues taken up by the wide-ranging contributions below reflect the ideas for progressive change found across the profession and the breadth of concerns being aired currently and are a product of various types of change. Numerous voices from within planning are now talking about the ‘future of the

profession' to varying degrees of acuity. These debates cohere around some key threads: holding up for scrutiny how the planning profession needs to think about how to correspond to the changing, diversifying environment; how to more effectively address the substantive challenges faced by planning; improving the state of public understanding and engagement, and lastly how actors involved in planning - notably the Universities and the professional bodies - need to work together more effectively than in the past. Attention is needed lest the knowledge producers and professional regulators become mere spectators and (critical) commentators, rather than acting to lead debate, advise and inform powerbrokers and the public.

If planning is partly about mitigating social risk then a consequence of recent developments and experiences of the past 20 years has been the lack of success in engendering public support. Recent research produced by Grosvenor (2019) in the UK painted a rather bleak view of mistrust in the planning system, the decisions it produces, and the motivations of its central actors. Such findings are not new, but present an uncomfortable truth that prompted the Skeffington Report to review the relationship between 'people and plans' half a century ago (see *Planning Theory & Practice* Interface contribution last year - Inch, et al., 2019). Subsequently as Swain and Tait (2007) highlight, the serial impacts of pluralism, liberalism, globalisation, risk and rights-based claims have acted in combination to erode an already weak trust in planning and planners.

While such issues colour many accounts of planning the function of informing and maintaining the knowledge base of planning, while shaping places, is a challenge for a profession that has morphed and expanded, not only in the UK, but in many other countries - and some of whom are also considering the future of the profession (see CIP-ICU, 2019; RTPI, 2019). This Interface section was written to maintain a debate about the future and was coincident with celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the RTPI's Royal Charter wherein the articles of association include an emphasis on the role of a learned society. This journal is of course playing a part in facilitating exchange and learning for RTPI members and others under that heading. As such the debate around the future of the planning profession in present conditions appears appropriate both here and now.

Contestation over what is needed to skill the profession and what knowledges are relevant worldwide has been an enduring refrain and was last explored in any depth in the UK almost 20 years ago under the RTPI's Education Commission (see Brown et al., 2003). While planning has been characterised in numerous ways in the academic literature the set of activities deemed 'planning' and its basis are diverse, contested and evolving. This should alert us to a more active and responsive approach to what learning and awareness is needed by planners and be apparent in attempts to prefigure change. Moreover, and it is argued here, a rethinking is needed of both who and how a reinvigorated modality of planning governance and learning should be formulated in the change environment that planners inhabit.

This leads to a focus on the role of the Universities as planning schools and the relations between the profession's academic base and practitioners. The relationship has been somewhat attenuated and at times difficult. Sympathetically this disposition could be characterised as being in positive tension, partly explained by the multiple pressures faced over time (e.g. competing priorities, resource limits, existential challenges). Such conditions also provide grounds for greater collaboration; rather than the more instrumental relations that tend to persist (e.g. accreditations, ad hoc research commissions).

The Universities play a critical role in supporting and helping the profession fulfil its duty, both in informing the profession in general and in educating and training student planners. It seems axiomatic that the relations between professional bodies, the wider practice community and universities should be mutually supportive, even if occasional disagreement is present. A healthy dialogue can ultimately assist parties to achieve similar ends. These are simply described as seeking 'better planning, better outcomes' and to advance planning for the benefit of the public.

Strengthened spaces for deliberation and mutual understanding across a now diverse profession are needed more than ever, particularly when considering the multiple changes and implications of redefinition and challenge mentioned above. Harnessing the analytical, lobbying, insight and other capacities held across the key partners in planning are critical to sustaining planning as an effective, relevant profession. Actors who recognise the value and potential of planning do need to better pool their knowledge, experience and leverage more effectively than in the past and arrangements to facilitate this

(and more) are in need of renewed attention. If this is to be realised then the basis of partnership that has been often espoused needs further effort and maintenance.

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The future of participation in planning

Matthew Wargent and Gavin Parker

In his Presidential Address to the Town Planning Institute in 1965, Lewis Keeble described planning as being:

... like a small flame, constantly threatened with extinction by many winds - of which the wind of gimmickry is perhaps the most dangerous. It can only be protected by a wider and deeper knowledge of its nature and function, to foster which is, I believe, the most important task immediately before us. If we succeed in doing this many of the problems which now beset us from the outside will simply fall away.

We are not so optimistic to say that planning's many problems will simply fall away with a better understanding of its purpose. However, as we reflect on the future of planning in this Interface, we see value in reasserting the role of participation in creating a more equitable, effective and durable planning system. In considering participatory planning from a UK perspective, our purpose is not to promote a fix for participation by advocating for 'better' techniques, a reformed professional workforce, or a renewed political commitment (although all of these are worthy goals), but instead we explore how planning might be infused with a participatory *ethos* that promotes public support such that we are no longer worried about planning's small flame being extinguished.

Participation in UK planning has been in question ever since the publication of the much-discussed Skeffington Report in 1969. At the time of this report, Colin Buchanan, possibly the most famous town planner in Britain, argued that if the standards of planning were higher, then the desire for public participation would disappear (Damer and Hague, 1971). Our argument here is the reverse of such paternalistic thinking: that 'good' planning should have people at its centre, with participation dispersed throughout the process, rather than served up solely as a technical bolt on to existing structures. To reimagine planning in this way is no small task and requires a leap of faith. However there is value in positing a normative vision for planning, especially at a time when confidence in planning is at an historic low, with perennial reform eroding the value of planning in the public consciousness.

Confidence is low in part because planning has an image problem. The profession continues to be haunted by labels of bureaucracy and delay, and struggles with a legacy of optimistic but ultimately

misguided attempts to redevelop urban centres in the post-WWII era. These issues cast long shadows and foster a sense of ongoing mistrust that frames contemporary engagement with the planning system. This legacy is used repeatedly by those whose interests are threatened by public interest decisions. Overcoming these historical perceptions might require exploring opportunities for joined-up participation, linking planning to other spaces of active citizenship that enjoy more positive connotations (participatory budgeting being an obvious example). We are mindful that attempts to ‘link’ planning to other activity could be viewed as precisely the gimmickry that Lewis Keeble warned against, but this suggestion is grounded in what many communities want: evidence from nearly a decade of neighbourhood planning in England consistently shows that communities excited by the prospect of greater control over their surroundings are rarely limited to the remit of land-use planning (even if they are forced to do so under current regulations) (Wargent, 2020). Communities want shared-ownership of both process and outcomes, and there are routes to achieving this through existing initiatives (Wargent and Parker, 2018). What is missing is both political will and transparency in how participatory outcomes are considered and deployed.

Neighbourhood Planning is a useful means to reflect on the state of participation, as it has been caught up in a number of irresolvable tensions that typify planning activity (see Brownill and Inch, 2019). The core issues in Neighbourhood Planning come back to a fundamental mismatch in the motivations of key actors, with communities often regarding it as a comprehensive form of neighbourhood governance (although this misconception is diminishing over time), whereas central government see it as an instrumental technique for increasing the housing stock. This is a simplification of course, but it highlights something important: that if participation is to create better places and ultimately to be less frustrating for all concerned, there needs to be a greater alignment between all stakeholders regarding what participation is ultimately for and what can result from it. This shift also recognises a simple but powerful idea: that participatory spaces might provide the opportunity for an exploration of planning’s purpose rather than reflecting an attempt to optimise the development process. The present set up in England confines ‘community control’ to initiatives that merely nuance higher tier policy, rather than devolving political power. The danger here is that such initiatives alone might be seen by some as an

adequate expression of the public interest, with participation an imprimatur for growth-at-all-costs planning, rather than ensuring that planning *as a whole* is performed in the public interest.

Greater public involvement may be far from the minds of many planners located in under-resourced planning departments driven to increasingly commercialised practices, both in the UK and elsewhere. But there are opportunities. House building by English councils is at its highest level in 30 years, and rediscovering local government control over the built environment is a prime opportunity to place the public at the centre of place-making (see the wider literature on remunicipalisation). At the other end of the scale, calls by the UK2070 Commission for a national spatial plans for the UK's constituent countries, could be driven forward by citizen juries in English regions and devolved countries. Crucially, greater participation can exist in a positive sum relationship with proactive professional planning. As planning has moved towards market-led development aided by a 'delivery state', a box-ticking culture has foreclosed spaces of reflection and professional agency required for positive planning (see Schoneboom et al. this issue). Yet our research has shown that participatory initiatives can also be spaces of learning and innovation for professional planners as well – a reclamation of time and space for professional reflection – as one planner recently stated in a focus group: “getting communities involved in planning is why I went into the profession in the first place”.

There are other obstacles of course: the increased importance placed on evidence within the UK's planned system since the 1990s has changed the nature of planning knowledge with little or no coincident rethink of the role of local/community knowledge. The effects of this are seen most starkly during plan examinations (in the UK, statutory plans are required to pass an examination to the satisfaction of an independent examiner), where the subordination of local knowledge to professional expertise leaves many communities thinking that the process is a *fait accompli*. Technical inputs and community representations are ostensibly considered side-by-side, yet an employment land needs assessment and the inhabited, experiential knowledge of communities are based on fundamentally different ontologies that represent places in very different ways. Perhaps we might experiment with reorienting the process to ask if techno-rational knowledge squares with community experience rather than *vice versa*, to help prevent the compartmentalising of public inputs that makes them so easy to

dismiss. Rather than being confined to a stage or passage point, participation could be immanent to the process. In practice this would expand the public's role to include shaping processes, supplying evidence and providing scrutiny to professionals and elected officials. This would place demands on the public (see Inch, 2015) and blanket calls for participation require scrutiny (see Lord et al., 2017), but ultimately planning requires public support. Thankfully not only can participation aid the legitimization of planning in a highly politicised environment, it can beget further public involvement - as Carole Pateman argued half a century ago, participation “develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so” (1970, p.42-43). This applies to the public, but to planners too.

There are foreseeable criticisms in this paper that we have been unable to address in such a short space. First, we have invoked ‘the public’ in an unproblematic fashion, and this may obscure ongoing issues of exclusion from planning and the inequitable outcomes that result. We acknowledge the value in asking who this public is, how they participate, and what can be done to foster more inclusive planning. Second, our hope for a public planning must be “framed by a realistic and critical perspective on the possibilities and limitations of participation” (Brownill and Inch, 2019, p.22), so we are wary of presenting participation as a panacea - but we do see greater public involvement as critical to the flourishing of planning as a progressive, socially-sanctioned activity. We may hold hopes for participation to provide alternatives to the growth-at-all-costs system, but this is secondary to opening up spaces of reflection for planners and their publics, and developing a public mandate for planning, without which planning will continue to be susceptible to the attacks that have historically impinged its capacity to shape prosperous and sustainable places.

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Firm of the future: planning practice in publicly-traded companies

Orly Linovski

Planning has historically been undertaken by actors working for a variety of employers - government agencies, private firms, and non-profits, among others. This diversity has strengthened the profession, allowing for a range of perspectives, skills, expertise, and career paths. Over the past 30 years, however, structural shifts in financial markets have begun to impact the planning profession in novel ways. Since the 1990s, at least eight firms that provide planning services have been listed on global stock exchanges. After extensive consolidation through mergers and acquisitions, these companies are now considered “mega-firms”, with offices on every continent, dozens of practice areas and thousands of employees.

In the context of widespread public sector austerity, and the growing complexity of planning work, planners working in these types of firms are often instrumental in transportation, infrastructure and environmental planning for different levels of governments, as well as neighbourhood and long-range planning. While it is difficult to determine the extent of planning work done through publicly-traded firms, they increasingly play important roles in all areas of planning. The impacts of finance-driven capitalism have been noted in areas such as infrastructure, housing, and redevelopment, and may be playing a role in restructuring the planning profession itself. In the following sections, I discuss some of the opportunities and concerns introduced by traded firms, and reflect on how this may shape the future of planning. While this is based on the experiences of planners primarily working in North America, the global extent of these firms means that practices may be similar elsewhere.

Opportunities and risks

Large, multi-disciplinary firms can offer significant benefits to planning practice. For example, clients benefit from planners’ experience working in other locations, especially for planning

that is done infrequently. Diverse firms offer the opportunity for collaboration across sectors and fields. Mega-firms with substantial resources and capacity are in a strong position to respond to the world's most pressing planning concerns, such as climate change and infrastructure, especially with the considerable complexity in this type of work. Similarly, the administrative capacity of large firms can help navigate the extensive regulatory and reporting requirements some projects require. Many planners are attracted to the unique opportunities available in these types of firms. Despite these strengths, there are also conditions in publicly-traded firms that can be detrimental to planning practice, especially if shareholder interests drive management strategies and institutional logics. While I have found that experiences vary between practices and locations, there are some common concerns with this model of practice that may impact the future of the planning profession.

Research has shown that that publicly-traded firms prioritize shareholder value, possibly to the detriment of staff, clients and even the viability of the firm itself (Froud et al., 2000). For a profession founded on the protection of the public interest, conflicts between shareholder interests and planning values require careful navigation. Quarterly reporting, with its short-term outlook, can encourage decision-making that benefits financial targets but negatively impacts planning work. Standard management practices like layoffs, “following the money” (AECOM, 2017) and office consolidation may undermine the value of local expertise and exacerbate regional capacity differences. With companies combining offices and firms to serve larger areas, and targeting regions seen as flush with resources, expertise may become increasingly concentrated, with perhaps less knowledge about specific local conditions. Common financial metrics, such as ‘days sales outstanding’, feature heavily in corporate reporting, but are hard to align with more variable planning processes, such as public engagement. While these strategies can occur in any firm, the expectation of continual financial growth on a *quarterly* basis creates additional pressures for publicly-listed firms. External actors including financial analysts, activist shareholders, or even the media, can influence firm priorities. As planning is a relatively low-value business line, especially when compared to engineering or continuing service contracts, this raises concerns for public sector clients about how cuts are made when growth stagnates.

Many multi-disciplinary firms seek to increase revenue by providing “end-to-end” services, aimed at covering the whole lifecycle of a project, from planning to construction. This raises questions about whether the pressure to sell multiple services can impact planning advice. For example, a firm may have a vested interest in a transportation project proceeding - with the opportunity to bid on higher-value engineering contracts - leading to concerns about how “no-build” options are considered and evaluated. Despite company policies designed to limit influence, some agencies adopt “conflicted out” policies, preventing firms that undertake planning work from bidding on later stages. However, with the high degree of firm consolidation, and long timescale of many projects, there may be few firms able to undertake complex contracts. With companies increasingly involved in all aspects of projects, planners will need to be aware of both the independence of their advice, as well as the *perception* of independence.

The amount of firm consolidation presents other risks to the public sector, especially in fields where there are barriers to entry due to the scale or complexity of projects. While consolidation may be followed by the creation of new firms by acquired staff, there are few companies that can engage at the mega-project scale. While competition agencies are charged with protecting the public interest in market activities, mergers of large firms with planning practices rarely trigger review, despite recent high-profile cases of bid-rigging and collusion in municipal contracts (“WSP ordered to pay,” 2019). Similarly, reliance on highly diverse, traded firms exposes the public sector to new risks, partially introduced by the volatility of markets (“Cleaned out,” 2018). These concerns can no longer be seen as beyond the purview of professional associations or even individual planners, especially in light of continuing distrust in the profession.

Planning in a financialized future

The rise of this model of practice requires a reconceptualization of how the public and private sector intersect. Both sectors face constraints – bureaucratic, political, or financial – but public sector capacity is essential to ensuring oversight on market-led planning. Recent cases demonstrate that outsourcing

planning may not result in cost or time savings, and can erode trust in planners (California State Auditor, 2018). Similarly, transparency in contracts is a continuing issue, with seemingly unrelated contracts creating unexpected planning outcomes, often based on mitigating financial risk (Farmer, 2014). Public sector planners of the future must be skilled not only in managing projects, but also involved in procurement and contract negotiations, and able to foresee and navigate a range of unanticipated implications from this model of service delivery.

In highly diversified, publicly-traded firms, planning is often a small component. Practitioners must be aware of a new range of ethical concerns introduced by this model, likely not covered by existing professional codes of conduct. While multi-disciplinary firms are not new, the scale of projects and level of consolidation create the possibility of conflicts of interest that extend far beyond the scope of the individual planner. The focus on personal conduct (e.g. accepting gifts) can miss much larger concerns with multi-million-dollar public sector contracts. In addition, the ability of large firms to provide pro-bono work for public agencies, engage in political lobbying, and influence public priorities, has the potential to undermine the ethical foundation of the planning profession, and with it the legitimacy of planning in the public's eyes.

Most planners are driven by important goals such as protecting the public interest and improving quality of life. However, it may be difficult to reconcile these with the motivations and actions of publicly-traded firms as employers. While all private firms must make a profit, financialization demands prioritizing returns for investors, using standardized metrics and short-time frames. Increasingly, planning is seen as a “growth area” for a disparate group of companies, such as global accounting and management consultancy firms (PwC, n.d.). For firms that already provide planning services, some financial actors see planning as a strength in that it provides entry to higher value projects. The future could be a time of tremendous opportunity if planning skills and knowledge are integrated in diverse fields and are applied to solving the world's most critical issues. Yet if planning practices and regulatory spaces are reshaped to serve market interests, there are significant risks posed both to the profession and its long-held goals and values of overseeing the public interest and delivering sustainable development.

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Planning professionalism and the public interest

Abigail Schoneboom, Susannah Gunn and Daniel Slade

The public interest is the defining justification for the intervention of the planning system in development decision-making and private property rights. Planning academics have noted that competing definitions of the public interest - used interchangeably with 'the common good' - abound: this is sometimes centred on protecting disadvantaged and marginalised groups (Parker and Doak, 2012) or on balancing competing private interests (Yiftachel, 1998). Yet perhaps because of its nebulous quality, the concept remains the *raison d'être* of the planning profession (Campbell and Marshall, 2002).

In the UK, austerity measures, deep restructuring and reform of the planning service since 2010 have compromised the ability of public sector planners to plan effectively in the public interest, and planning professionals are changing how they interpret and enact their obligation to serve the common good. Here, we reflect on how endemic churn, a leadership vacuum, and weakened influence of accreditation, have narrowed planners' discretionary acting space and produced a tendency to privilege client needs and pursue commercial imperatives, posing a present a very real threat to the common good (Slade et al., 2019).

Shifting career trajectories and the lure of the private sector

Shifts in funding, outsourcing, leadership (both politically and in terms of management restructuring), and practice are keenly felt by planning professionals. This is particularly true of recent graduates whose professional careers have been defined by austerity and perpetual reform. This picture is not the same across the UK's constituent nations - planners in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland remain more optimistic about acting in the public good than their English counterparts. Yet, across the UK planning professionals are adapting by adjusting their expectations and career trajectories, in turn reshaping the world in which they work.

Increasingly, Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) must regard planning as a commercial asset; pursuit of commercial logic is intertwined with a tendency to outsource all or part of the planning service, often to planning mega-firms (see Linovski, this issue). While outsourcing is often Development Management focused (i.e. adjudicating planning applications), LPAs also routinely make use of the private sector for policy and enforcement tasks (Clifford, 2019). Although outsourcing is increasingly unpopular – related to issues of cost, control and the quality of service provided – LPAs are turning to a ‘portfolio’ model of service delivery and staffing, comprising permanent, seconded, contract and agency staff, alongside shared working arrangements with other authorities or organisations, as a way of weathering austerity. Many are selling profitable elements of their services (notably design and conservation) to other LPAs or selling spare professional labour to other LPAs to process their planning application backlogs.

As planners manoeuvre in this organisational context, public sector churn disturbs planners’ ability to make considered judgements in and about ‘place’. Early career planner find themselves in high demand, being relatively well paid and rapidly promoted - fuelled by the aggressive tactics of recruitment agencies: they are also highly mobile, having a tendency to move jobs and organisations rapidly (often making the short hop to consultancy) in pursuit of more pay and experience. This movement comes at the expense of long-term relationships with communities and colleagues, hindering critical reflection and situated engagement. Haemorrhaging of senior public sector planning officers – often to private practice – results in a leadership vacuum that also places the public interest under serious threat.

The private sector often offers a more promising career path – an enticing, well-regarded and well-paid alternative to an embattled public sector where working conditions have deteriorated. Formerly more ‘noble’, the public sector’s increasingly commercial focus and tendency to base decisions on a ‘business case’, makes it less distinguishable in ethos from the private sector, and thus less attachment-worthy. Drain of talent from the public sector is compounded by younger planners’ preference for living in regional urban centres, the location of choice for large consultancies.

Discretionary acting space and the client conundrum

Professional judgement remains central to how both public and private sector UK planners execute the public interest. Little has changed in the planner's 'toolkit' - professional expertise, accreditation, and continuing professional development remain central to their decision-making and credibility. However, increasing emphasis on proceduralism, coupled with a tendency of business-minded planners to offload responsibility for the common good onto the larger system, are changing the profession's orientation towards the public interest. Accreditation remains an ethical backstop but, in a commercialised climate, its reach and influence is limited.

Under the structural changes discussed above, a 'box-ticking' culture has diminished the space planners have traditionally had for reflection, discretion and proactive planning. Fuelled by churn, planners in both development management and policy find it harder to undertake the kind of long-term strategic thinking that they associate with serving the public interest. Some consultancies even claim to be doing the public interest thinking that LPAs are no longer able to do (Wargent et al., 2019). There are certainly exceptions, such as large, transformative infrastructure projects but these are disproportionately concentrated in large urban authorities with high development demand. While planners value the ability to use their expertise creatively and proactively, there is a sense across both sectors that with fewer opportunities to achieve the planning 'balance', judgement skills are atrophying.

Furthermore, there is some disagreement among public and private sector professionals about whether the sectors need to serve the public interest in the same way. During our project's focus groups, we found a feeling among some professionals that – mirroring the way ethics are constructed in the legal profession – private sector planners are at liberty primarily to serve their clients' interests, leaving the broader public interest to the guardianship of the overall planning system. Major abuses, these planners felt, are prevented by reputational risk, with the sector being 'kept straight' by its attachment to the larger service. This pluralistic logic of competing claims (such as serving the client), rather than conducting an overall balancing judgement, some felt, might also apply to a commercialised public sector.

Planning's professional accreditation body, the Royal Town Planning Institute, recognises the conundrum of serving the paying client while also contributing to the common good. Where pursued -

public sector resources to pay for staff to pursue their licentiate are scarce – accreditation, which requires adherence to the RTPI’s Ethical and Professional Standards Advice, continues to remind professionals of their obligation toward the public interest. However, in a planning service increasingly oriented to commercial gain, accreditation cannot prevent the profession’s moral compass from potentially wandering into terrain that threatens the public interest; in the darker corners of the profession, holding a licentiate might even serve as a smokescreen for dubious practice.

While the planning profession aligns itself with the notion of serving the public interest, it does so in a contested space shaped by neoliberal values and in a local and global structural context that erodes planners’ capacity for judgement and reflection while simultaneously legitimising their obligations to paying clients. As career trajectories become shaped by short-termism or the lure of the private sector rather than enduring place attachments, and, as client need becomes privileged over ‘balance’ and the ethical impact of accreditation weakens, the profession needs continually to interrogate its capacity to serve the public interest. On the one hand, the profession might focus on how, in a changing climate, it might operationalise its ability to adapt planning culture and ethos to better service the common good.

As a sign of how far-reaching neoliberal logics have infiltrated planning practice, perhaps the truly radical act would be for the profession to recover the political sensibility that underlies its *raison d’etre* and mobilise to reverse these damaging trends.

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University, Comuniversity, UniverCity: Shaping Future Graduates as Thinkers, Operators or CivicHackers?

Nezhapi-Dellé Odeleye and Christopher Maidment

We reflect here on the role of planning education in the UK, by exploring how current societal and educational trends might crystallise into contrasting scenarios of who the planner is, in a (dystopian) future 40 years hence. However, before imagining the world in 2060 we first look backward to 1950, to the deliberations of the Committee on the Qualifications of Planners over how a profession capable of exercising the greatly expanded powers afforded by the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act might be constituted and qualified. From debates over whether planning should be social-scientific or design-led, whether it warranted a separate degree or should rely upon ‘on-the-job’ training, emerged the conclusion that chartered planners should have a postgraduate degree, accredited by the (Royal) Town Planning Institute (MTCP, 1950).

Seventy years on, the Institute continues to accredit degrees that “promote critical thinking about space and place as the basis for action or intervention” (RTPI, 2012, p.3), but in a context where the nature of a degree is evolving. Our contemporary idea of a university – a place for generating new knowledge, instilling it in students, then sending them out to use that knowledge for making a better world – relates strongly to the notion of ‘the professional’; the person trusted, not just to follow a set process, but to reflect on how knowledges can be adapted to solve social problems (Schön, 1983). Students choose a degree as a route to a career, but where the boundary between universities and the professions has traditionally been a fuzzy one, with less concern placed on specific ‘vocational training’. Yet, despite contemporary mass education, the traditional university remains a highly romanticised concept.

The direction of travel for UK Higher Education (HE) is characterised by the burden of funding HE transferring (ostensibly) from the state to the individual, leading students to seek a direct link to employment as a guarantee of value for money. In the resulting paradigm, the student is portrayed as a ‘customer’, employability statistics are a crucial measure of a university’s success and employer feedback on a degree’s failure to teach ‘practical’ skills is taken seriously.

Simultaneously, graduates are entering a world on the verge of climate chaos and demographic implosion, a dystopia characterised by new heights in ubiquitous digital technology for HE, environmental protection and escapism. Prompted by the changing behaviour of our students, and conscious of these trends, we developed three scenarios in Figure 1, in which future planners interact with this context in very different ways; as Thinkers, Operators or CivicHackers.

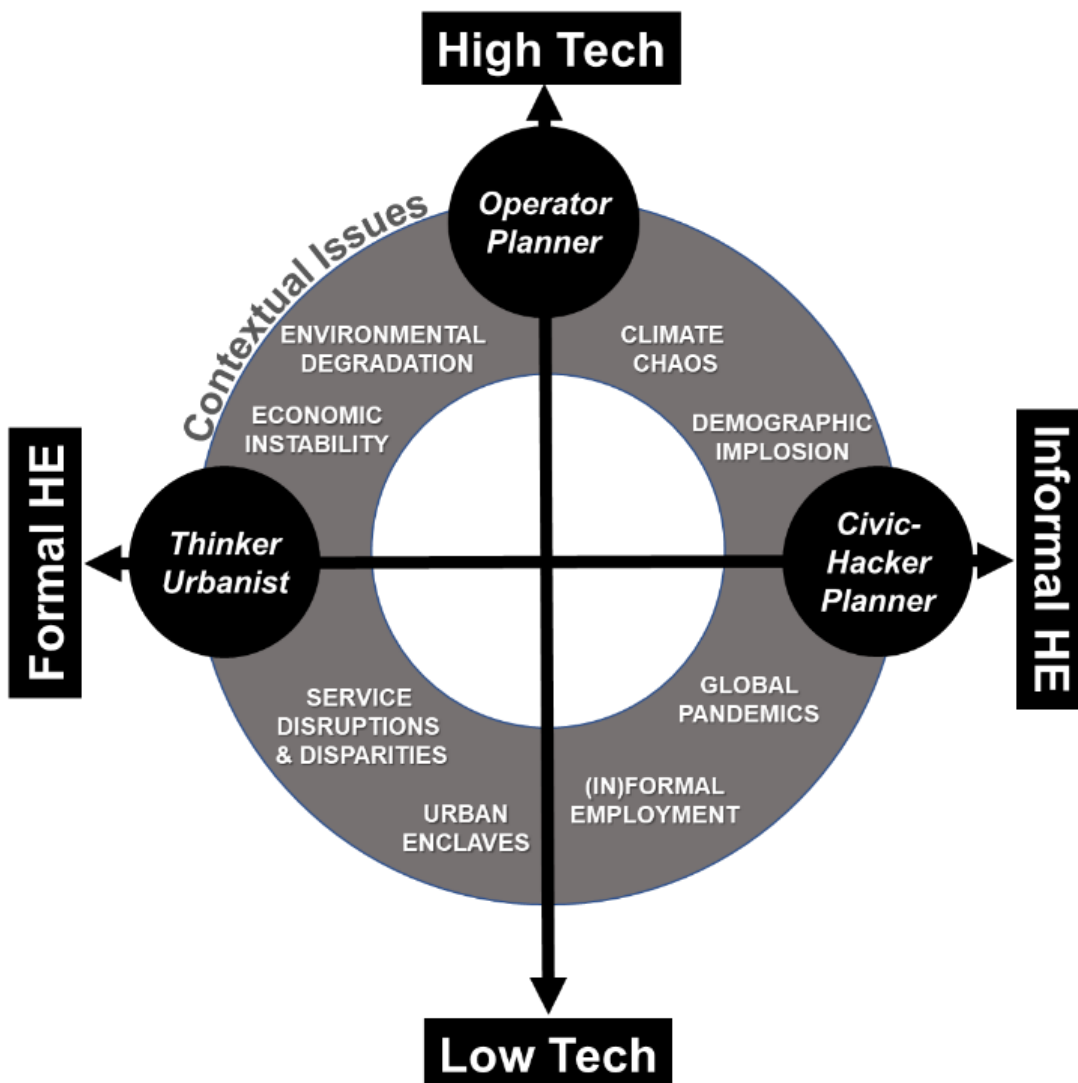


Figure 1: Three Future Scenarios as Intersections of Contemporary Trends (Authors)

The 'thinker' urbanist

Jadrien's (pronouns Ze/Hir) favourite pastime is escaping into a Virtual Reality (VR) world that recreates 20th Century natural environments. Ze inhabits a world where man-made emissions had catastrophically changed the climate by the early 2050s. Scientists failed to realise that a 'self-regulating' complex system such as Earth's climate, would tip in the opposite direction to counter-balance human 'global-warming' actions, leading to frequent southern hemisphere droughts and a new, northern hemisphere mini-ice age.

Jadrien chose (and hir family could afford) one of a new breed of degrees allowing students to select from subject modules as varied as Psychology and Archaeology; a few postgraduate modules covering planning history and theory gave hir a chance to explore how spatial planning brings these different knowledges together. Ze used VR environments to explore international case-studies, instilling the importance of context without ever leaving the classroom. Consequently, Jadrien has the ability to analyse patterns in 'big-data', but also the critical thinking skills to synthesise this with traditional knowledges.

Jadrien works for OplanFuture, a 'big-picture' think tank reinvented as a consultancy in the mid-30s to bid for government contracts preparing bioregional plans. OplanFuture won by taking a view of planning extending beyond the statutory system, encompassing knowledges that span relationships between place quality and wellbeing, using 'big' datasets that describe patterns of infrastructure use. The work took on new importance in planning for the urban densification required in a UK reshaped by the failed Gulf Stream. Jadrien's role is to collaborate with universities, health providers and platforms such as 'MoveZoop' to ensure OplanFuture's work is informed by cutting-edge knowledge and data. Employers value graduates like Jadrien - who can consider decision consequences over different geographical and temporal scales. By not getting what they demanded forty years ago, OplanFuture now have the staff they need to navigate an uncertain world.

The 'operator' planner

Kiera's transport planning job involves keeping transport flowing smoothly by operating city dashboards; these rely on big-data supplied by websites such as MoveZoop and Amzagog and her perception of society is mediated by the giant digital screens mapping these flows. Although she works for the City Authority, they are part-privatised, partnering with surviving global corporations and developers, who require access to citizen data.

Kiera attended a 'UniverCity'; a joint venture between Jadrien's traditional university, and the City Authorities. Hers was a degree-apprenticeship (DA); introduced to UK HE in the late 2010s, DAs reversed the traditional order of learning. Students became part of the workplace first, attending university second, working in a paid entry level position, with tuition sponsored by a state levy on employers.

Kiera's UniverCity curriculum trained her to use the Authority's criteria-based systems and how to transform big data to understand patterns and flows covering everything from mass transit user destinations, to health and crime hotspots, and the use of emergency drones to address these. Through live-projects Kiera learned how to pull the right levers to direct these flows in the direction of pre-established performance criteria. By the course end she could react to unexpected flow changes - particularly those caused by extreme weather. Being employed was part of the assessment, valuing work-based knowledge in a way that Jadrien's degree did not.

Kiera exemplifies the range of profession entrants that DAs were heralded as attracting, better reflecting the societal diversity that planners should serve. Competition was fierce, but she persevered, having no other way to afford the exorbitant fees charged by traditional universities (student loans were withdrawn in 2040, due to huge budget deficits). Consequently, Kiera feels a strong sense of loyalty and obligation to the City Authority; if it wasn't for spotting the job listing with the degree training attached, Kiera would never have realised her affinity for complexity. Her philosophy is to follow the rules and try not to worry about current insecurities – that's the politicians' job, isn't it?

The 'CivicHacker' planner

A social-worker and environmentalist at heart, Paul was attracted to planning for its claimed emphasis on people and the environment. This commitment led him to work for 'Planning AiDE', reconstituted as a Cooperative, part-funded by a levy on planning approvals, and refocused on co-producing neighbourhood-planning in an increasingly privatised, big-data-led system (see Parker and Street's (2018) ideas on how Planning Aid could be organised and funded to take on this role). Paul is adept with new technologies, and 'freeware' hacks. As a 'CivicHacker' planner, his job is enable citizens to legally 'hack' the Smart-city dashboard systems to monitor, challenge and extract neighbourhood 'Smart-community-gains' from environmental renewal projects.

Paul attended a Comuniversity, the result of the ailing 'Open University' being taken over by the Charities consortium (narrowly avoiding the bankruptcy that afflicted many traditional universities, following further HE funding cuts). They repackaged the traditional universities' MOOCs [Massive Open Online Courses] and used community facilities as bases for blended-learning 'campus days'. This enabled many under-privileged students to engage in community-led HE. Paul's major project (non-traditional dissertation), was a VR prototype plugin to help disadvantaged communities correct data held on them – enabling proof of their eligibility for 'universal credit'. He lives in self-built, co-housing in a transitioned town – and leads survival skills workshops in his spare time.

Future planners for future cities

The planner's professional identity centres on linking knowledge to action, to shape better places., The cautionary tale is that embracing current trends of linking HE more directly to employers, while equipping graduates to operate proprietary systems and procedures, risks eroding the space for developing critical thinking, creativity and other 'soft' skills. Conversely, each of the three planners represent the potential for planning education to evolve in multiple directions, creating a more diverse

profession with a wider range of tech-specialisms & clientele; these highlight the need for planning educations equally accessible to a diversity of students and contexts, rather than a range of bank balances.

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Planning the ‘good place’: utopia, dystopia and the future

Edward Shepherd and Joe Doak

Dystopia, utopia and the ‘good place’

The future is always uncertain. Yet it feels as though uncertainty is also a defining feature of the present. Whether it is climate change, population growth, technological revolution, geopolitical crises or pandemic, the future is colliding with the contemporary world which now seems beset by challenges which threaten to dwarf the imagination.

Because of the existential scale of some of these challenges, it is easy to pull back from facing them and to find refuge in the concept of dystopia. Dystopias are easy to imagine and many bring with them associations of judgement, of fate, of punishment of transgression, concepts which lie at the heart of many great myths, religious and otherwise. We seem to yearn somehow for apocalypse. Indeed, a dystopia can lurk behind an apparently utopian vision. Does utopia (‘ideal place’) not, after all, derive from a Greek word meaning ‘no place’ (*ou-topos*)? Is it not, therefore, a deceptive ideal, a mirage that can lead us into dangerous territory? Perhaps. There is something deeply suspect about the idea of perfection.

A dystopian future does no doubt feel more likely than a perfect one. But to surrender to this is a failure of imagination. It is the easy way out. It is much harder to tread a line between the twin pitfalls of dystopia and utopia - to imagine a way in to the future that does not shy away from the enormous challenges ahead, which does not succumb to the comfort of despair and does not reach for an ideal so unrealistic as to constitute denial. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that ‘utopia’ (as coined by Thomas More in his 1516 work) can be read as a pun relating to two Greek words, not just one. The other means ‘good place’ (*eu-topos*). This is what we collectively need to try to imagine. No matter how dark the future may feel, we must continue to believe that good places are possible.

Planners have an important role here - they have a responsibility to survey the landscape of the present, to try to understand its features and to do the hard work of the imagination required to respond positively and bring people together to assist in the creation of the good places of the future. The mix of skills and knowledge needed to do this effectively is rapidly developing and will continue to do so. We speculate below on what these challenges might mean for the planning practice of the future. In doing so we do not seek to make firm predictions, but rather to raise questions which may help point the way between utopia and dystopia towards the good places of tomorrow.

Imagining the future

Towns and cities are likely to get more technologically advanced and larger. This will generate more data which can potentially be harnessed by planners to predict, model and guide the development of places.

Will planners therefore need to become data scientists? Or will they simply need to understand the power of the data available to them so as to be able to ask the right questions of those with the requisite skills?

Yet there is a risk that these proliferating datasets could be distorted. There might be latent biases in the data and in the algorithms which find the patterns within them. These could reflect inequalities in the distribution of access to technology through society and thus in the data being captured, or a lack of diversity in the organisations conducting the analysis. Might a 'digital underclass' be created whose dreams and values are absent from the data generated from more powerful and privileged participants in the economy? Might this absence be reflected in the planning and development decisions which are made based on the emergent patterns? This could mean that the visions which are developed from these biases further entrench them, compounding historic disadvantage. Planners will need to continue to be keenly alert to these risks of data injustice and to engage critically with the conclusions that the analyses of newly available data appear to suggest.

Nevertheless, an increased volume of data combined with the development of machine learning might have the potential to give planners more tools to combat some of the major challenges ahead. However,

hopes that there will be some kind of ‘technical fix’ to problems arising from climate change seem to be the worst kind of utopian thinking. The world could burn while we wait to be saved by technology.

While there is great potential for more ‘resilient’ practices to arise from efficiencies gained from technology, we should not forget that responses to the climate crisis must involve collective action, behavioural and political change as well as targeted technological adjustments. Planners will be in a strong position to nudge communities to make the necessary behavioural changes and to work positively with those same communities to ensure that their concerns about climate change are reflected in the strategic visions for their areas.

How will planners need to engage with the politics of the future? Will populist currents continue to swirl, eroding the ties that have bound nations and regions together? Will local identities harden as more people compete for scarce resources? As populations shift from areas most affected by climate change we may see a further fragmentation of places across various scales as barricades (literal or figurative) are erected. Might this fragmentation further challenge the kind of coordinated and strategic approach which is so much part of planning? Or will we see a re-entrenchment of cooperation and coordination as the true scale of the emergencies of the future become apparent and the realisation dawns that we need to work together to face them effectively? To facilitate this, planners would need to engage productively with communities of different interests and further develop the skills necessary to support this – listening, facilitating, mediating, negotiating.

Will planners come to be more respected as their role in reducing, regulating and distributing risks is more valued? Or will any moves towards greater cohesion be confounded by bad tempered politics and fear? And will the planner then be further vilified as a technocratic, ‘rational’ meddler in the politics and affairs of local places? Planners will need to make a more compelling case to future politicians and communities for the importance of their work and the positive and transformative potential of planning.

Perhaps planners of the future will look to technology to de-politicise planning and the development process? In the context of the existential-scale of the climate emergency there may be pressure to shift to political systems which are able to make decisions more quickly, which can cut through the debates and

vested interests which tend to snarl up democratic systems. We will need land for renewable energy, for water conservation, domestic food production, for resilient settlements and infrastructure. The politics of this will be complex.

Might planners therefore look to forms of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to make development decisions on their behalf, to appraise the risks and benefits of proposals and plans and find the appropriate balance in the context of multiple competing demands? Might AI be better placed to make ‘rational decisions in the public interest’ (whatever that may mean in the future, where the stakes could be as high as the survival of the human race)? But what would be the costs of this to our humanity, to our freedoms? And would this push the human planner to the point of irrelevance? It would seem preferable to do a better and more imaginative job in the shorter term so that things don’t end up in so dystopian a place.

Future planning, knowledge and skills

Despite the scale of the challenges ahead, it seems that the knowledge and skills the planners of the future will need are the kind they have always needed: data literacy, coordination across different specialisms, strategic management, political acumen and, most of all, the creativity necessary to envision just and deliverable outcomes. It is just that the scale and pace of change now seem to be greater than in the past and may be even greater in the future.

This will mean that planners will need to be even more agile and creative in their thinking. They will also need to do a better job than they have in the past of bringing different groups of people together to collectively imagine effective solutions to complex problems. Despite the contemporary focus on the possibilities and threats of technology, it is to human collective imagination, creativity and cooperation that we should look with hope in order to overcome the challenges that may beset us in the decades to come. It is by using these very human attributes that we may find the good places of tomorrow.

Reasons to be cheerful? Reflections from 50 years of planning leadership

Trudi Elliot, Victor Nicholls and Emma Street

Just another cog in the wheel

The planner's image has long waxed and waned in the public imagination. For some, the planner is an important guardian of the future, balancing knowledge of past, present and future in order to serve the public interest. A more commonly heard refrain however (and especially so in recent years), is that planners are merely cogs in a machine or system that is overly-focussed on "delivery" without due regard to quality or future sustainability.

The factors contributing to the current crisis in confidence facing the planning profession have been rehearsed elsewhere and we do not dwell on them here. Instead, while we accept that working in planning today is beset with challenges, we find grounds for optimism about the profession's future. The paper draws together the views of two senior professionals who have worked in a variety of leadership roles across planning. What would it have helped them to know at the outset of their careers? What lessons can they offer to help empower the leaders of tomorrow?

Leadership in planning

A recent article in the Royal Town Planning Institute's *The Planner* magazine (Morris, 2020) asked a group of English and Welsh Local Authority planning leaders about what their job entailed. One response rang especially true to us: "Planners are master jacks of all trades – the one role that has to look across the piece [sic] and involve everybody". Being able to see the big picture and have a handle on the detail is part of the challenge of leadership in planning practice, especially at senior levels involving people-management. While the scarcity of public money has meant that Local Authorities have had to streamline budgets, management structures, and operational practices in recent years, this has created

opportunities too. Planning functions may now sit in several different corporate areas meaning that collaborating on cross-cutting matters such as public health, an ageing population, or climate change may be easier.

Cost-saving measures have created a lot of churn, especially in the public sector, with junior staff moving into leadership roles they may not have otherwise assumed until later on in their careers (Slade et al, 2019). The RTPI has expressed concern about the low numbers of trained planners in director-level or ‘corporate’ local government roles, such as Chief Executive. While there are certainly very real personnel challenges in Local Authority planning, more positively, planners’ broad skills-set and their ability to work holistically on cross-cutting issues places them in a good position to work flexibly across different specialisms and tasks. Indeed, planners may now be sat at the leadership table but not necessarily in the role of Head of Planning. Instead, they may occupy a position such as Director of Place, overseeing multi-million pound budgets and matters such as highways, regeneration and development.

Of course, leadership in planning is not just about local government. As an activity, planning is carried out by those working in private, public and third sectors (Parker, Street and Wargent, 2019). Those currently in training or at the outset of their careers are likely to be working for much longer than the senior planners of today. They are also far more likely to have portfolio careers where they might switch back and forth between sectors and roles, perhaps working outside of mainstream planning, too. There are benefits here in terms of allowing individuals to maximise their career longevity and flexibility, and also in strengthening personal resilience and broadening professional experience, knowledge and skills. Employers in both the public and private sectors also stand to benefit as employees bring across insights and new or different working practices.

What we have learned

This undoubtedly optimistic and brief take on the opportunities presented by rapid change in planning contrasts with a culture of ‘planners against the world’ that can seem to dominate the profession. At one level this is an understandable response to the apparently endless criticism directed at planners. But it also does a disservice to the profession and sells short its ability to enact positive societal change.

In what follows, we present some of the things we have learned during our years of practice. We could have included many, many more. As well as being very selective, they are, of course, highly personal. They are intended to be provocative in that we hope they prompt discussion and adaptation rather than any kind of straightforward adoption. While these lessons are reflected through the prism of our professional experience - most recently in senior leadership roles - they are not meant to be ‘top-down’ in nature. The most successful practitioners absorb lessons from everywhere; members of the public, students, new graduates, colleagues... the list goes on.

As we combined our reflections, it was not a surprise to us to see that soft skills such as people management feature heavily. These skills are becoming more central to the planner’s role as the profession evolves and planning (related) tasks multiply in volume and complexity. Relatedly, our first lesson is the importance of having a sense of the big picture or overarching vision. This is critical to (re)affirming the value and purpose of planning and enthusing colleagues and those impacted by your work. We acknowledge that the disincentives to being a ‘visionary planner’ are ever-present. Plans can take years to produce, people can get stuck in the system and it is easy to lose sight of the end goal, but that’s what makes keeping it in view so important.

This leads on to our second lesson: the ability to communicate with people and (re)ignite their enthusiasm. This means honing a leadership style that enables you to engage with the wide range of stakeholders that planning involves. It may also mean managing messages according to your audience. Our third lesson is perhaps rather an obvious one but it is so important: people really matter in planning. A good leader will make sure that things get done by supporting and empowering people through processes, including their staff. Indeed, good leadership may (within reason!) involve a subtle reframing or subversion of procedures and systems if these are proving to be an obstacle to progress.

During our 50 years plus of practice, we have seen some significant changes. One of the most positive has been the recognition of the benefits that a diverse and inclusive profession brings not only for planning practice but for the kinds of places that result. Our fourth lesson is therefore that it is the role of a leader to ensure that diversity and inclusion remain front and centre in all aspects of planning practice.

Of course, progress can take on many guises but one thing we have learned (and this is our fifth lesson) is that getting things done really does matter. In our profession, this usually means delivering highly-visible, sometimes controversial things (places, plans, infrastructure, etc), ideally in a timely manner. “Delivery” should not be a dirty word so long as you are clear what success looks like. This is our sixth lesson, and achieving it means regularly revisiting the problem you are trying to solve and re-evaluating the tools and approaches you are using to get there. Pragmatism is a key ingredient here - plan-making needs to be realistic, credible and, perhaps above all, flexible.

The politics involved in planning is often decried as a block to delivery. While we agree that the political nuances are often complex, the political dimensions of planning serve an important function, tying planning into the wider democratic system. Our seventh lesson is therefore that politics (small and big “p”) is not a dirty word. It is the role of those in a leadership position to be open and sensitive to things that they may not want to hear. For this reason, being brave and fostering personal resilience is our eighth lesson. Engaging in life-long learning and personal career development has helped us.

This speaks to a wider point; that leaders need to be able to analyse problems at a range of different scales and from different points of view. This kind of strategising constitutes our ninth lesson and, in practice, might mean bringing a global perspective such as climate readiness to bear upon a localised issue, even if the connections are not immediately obvious.

Reasons to be cheerful

The challenges faced by the planners of today are certainly significant. As the world becomes ever more complex there is a very real danger that “knowledge producers [planners] ... become mere spectators and

(critical) commentators, rather than acting to lead debate, advise and inform powerbrokers and the public” (Parker, this issue). Our tenth and final lesson is that it is critical that those in leadership positions advocate for the value of planning in order to help avert this scenario. Leaders need to use all of the tools at their disposal to ensure the ongoing relevance of planning to society is recognised.

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Resourcing planning futures?

Mark Dobson and Sarah Platts

The focus of this contribution is resourcing planning futures. At the outset, it is worth making explicit that ‘resources’ encompass more than just ‘funding’, crucial as this is in the context of austerity localism (Featherstone et al, 2012). Whilst we agree it is pertinent that resources are not wasted, and this includes people’s time and energy, and that ‘performance’ in the form of speed and numbers is not the only criteria for increasing funding; we argue the debate needs to extend beyond considering simply ‘planning resources’ to more fundamentally ask: ‘what do planners in the UK need to do their job most effectively’?

There are a number of critical challenges facing planning in the 21st Century. At the meta level there is the rising challenge of climate change, public health crises (coronavirus), technological innovation and political uncertainty (Brexit). There are also serious questions concerning the future of high street and physical retail, an aging population and increasing life expectancy, the housing crisis, growing concerns over physical activity and mental health, providing and updating infrastructure and transport, access to education and employment opportunities and growing socio-spatial inequality, to name a few. Given the pace of change witnessed over the past couple of decades, it would take a brave forecaster to bet on the scope, shape and operation of the planning system and the role of planners in 2050. Therefore, rather than peering into the crystal ball, this paper briefly reviews the state of planning resources and challenges now, as a means to outline a trajectory to the planning system we want to see in the future. To this end, the paper has three key interconnected messages:

1. Planners are operating within an inefficient system;
2. The system can impede the crucial, positive role of planners in the placemaking agenda; and
3. This exacerbates the perception of public sector planning and the resource challenges.

The planning system plays a critical role in a wide range of key economic, societal and environmental issues. However, if you were to ask a planner whether they thought public sector planning was being used to its full potential to affect change and address the biggest challenges of the day, they would likely

reply that it does the best it can within the confines of the system, but is far short of playing the role it could. Given the cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary nature of planning and development practices, there is, of course, a strong argument to be made that investment into the planning system is tantamount to investing in how we address climate change, or the physical and social regeneration of England's towns and cities. The critical role that planning can play in both national and global challenges must be recognised – both to ensure that it is properly resourced, to equip planners with the right tools and to improve people's understanding of public sector planning. There is a need to continue to move away from government and public perception of planners as regulation-driven 'box tickers' to prevent cutbacks to the sector. We need a workforce of public sector planning professionals who are confident that they can make a difference; which importantly included the need to feel invested in and valued by the government. There needs to be a shift in understanding - the critical role of the public sector planner within place leadership must be recognised and acknowledged – and needs to be a key corporate priority for a Council, to deliver successful growth.

The financial cutbacks to local planning authorities (LPAs) in England in the 2010s has left planning resourcing and practice in a more challenging landscape than at the turn of the 21st Century. Of course, there have been previous periods of local government austerity following various economic and political cycles over the past 50 years. However, the recent changes to national policy - the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the spatial governance approach of localism and strengthened emphasis on viability and deregulation to support development and address the housing crisis have left LPAs in a somewhat unique position since 2010. It is painfully well known within planning practice that the public sector austerity agenda ushered in by the Coalition Government, following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, led to a significant (49%) real-terms reduction in government funding for local authorities (NAO, 2018). Even now, many LPAs are still struggling to make cutbacks and set a balanced budget given the rising costs of health and social care, education and infrastructure provision. This has led numerous commentators to claim that the English planning system is under attack and in a state of crisis, leaving question marks around its future (Lord and Jones, 2014; Henderson and Ellis, 2016; Harris, 2019). If these trends of planning system deregulation, privatisation and fragmentation (Parker et al, 2018)

continue under the Johnson Government, as we move into a new decade, the profession will likely further lose its ability to shape places and create the visions for the future, regardless of whether resourcing recovers from austerity.

Within the current planning system, there are numerous resourcing issues to lament that we cannot begin to do justice to here. However, to give a sense of the range of issues, it includes the complexity and high costs for Local Plan production and procurement processes and the availability of in-house expertise and reliance on private consultancies. Some statutory bodies lack the funding to support LPAs and planners, there is a skill shortage at various planning officer levels and often challenges in attracting, retaining and mentoring graduates. There is a challenge around the ability to recover the true costs of processing planning applications through fees, the resourcing of Chief Executives and resource implications of councillor decisions. In addition to all this, the need to adopt more commercial practices is creating increased exposure to development viability and market forces. In this context, the importance of public sector planning in creating sustainable communities needs to be articulated well to young people, to attract the next generation of planners into the sector.

The overarching theme is of LPAs having to use resources in an inefficient system, meaning that money and time is wasted as processes have to be constantly reinvented under localism. Constant 'reforms' can make it more difficult to make the planning system work, let alone to be proactive and tackle the crucial challenges facing sustainable development. We argue for resources yes, but let's make it clear why we need them and the critical contribution we can make to society with them.

We have a number of professional and practitioner champions of the UK planning system, with the Planning Officers Society (POS), Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) being significant bodies in promoting the virtues of planning and lobbying for a new approach to the system. We also have a number of prestigious academic planning departments across the country that are publishing critical research and teaching the future built environment practitioners. It is in the relationships and aligned strategic approach of these institutions that the best hope for lobbying government for change and developing a more effective practice culture rest, to shift our current planning

system trajectory away from deregulation towards strategic placemaking. Crucially, place-making must be understood and bought into by council leaders, with chief planners (supported by a well-resourced planning department) working as the driving force behind delivering the corporate agenda, providing leadership, direction and professional expertise. It is our responsibility to work together to change the political narrative of our profession. The purpose of the Future of the Planning Profession project is to bring planning practitioners and institutions, public or private, together to create a shared agenda around possible planning futures. Without pretending we have the answers, we hope that this project is the start of a fruitful discussion about the potential role planning and planners could play in the future if provided with the opportunities and resources, and we look forward to your thoughts and recommendations.

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The future of the planning profession: searching for a better place

Matthew Wargent and Tuna Tasan-Kok

Planners' everyday work revolves around the future, so considering the future of the planning profession might seem like second nature. However, as this Interface has explored, there is a growing feeling both in the UK and elsewhere that the discipline's future contains increasing uncertainty, mainly related but not limited to, the increased market dependency of planning practices. On the one hand, the planning profession has been tasked with ensuring institutional certainty, which is necessary for the legal instrumentalisation of urban development, on the other, these processes require diverse forms of institutional flexibility to enable easy, fast and efficient forms of implementation. This ambiguous position between certainty and flexibility has been subject to academic attention (Gallent et al, 2019; Waldron, 2019; Tasan-Kok, 2008) as it creates a dynamic institutional environment through which the blurred boundaries of the planning profession are defined. In this essay, we draw together the lessons from contributions above to explore how this period of uncertainty might also be seen as an opportunity to look for a 'better place' for the planning profession in both the UK and globally.

One contribution at the symposium placed planning at a crossroads: with one path leading to further deregulation (in the UK context at least), and the other towards a profession at the epicentre of addressing global challenges. If this is true, it is certainly rare for a professional community to realise its predicament whilst in the grip of such difficulties – more often than not, the most significant turning points are recognised only with hindsight. So perhaps we have an opportunity, and in reflecting on the future of the planning profession we are simultaneously framing our response to it. In their essay, Shepherd and Doak argue that we must continue to believe that good places (and planning) are possible, no matter how bleak the prospects might feel – and as planning scholars we want to continue the tradition of searching for, and believing in, a 'better version' of planning (Campbell et al., 2014). Helpfully, utopian visions often have their greatest value when society is confronting its problems – for instance the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago that helped establish the City Beautiful movement was so influential in part because the Victorians were keenly alert to the dangers of rapid industrial urbanisation (see Krieger, 2019).

The world has plenty of problems that require confronting, as alluded to by the various contributors to this Interface. So how does planning place itself at the centre of confronting these challenges? At the symposium, Finn Williams of Public Practice argued that planners should not retreat to the ‘defensible spaces’ of professions. This does not look to retreat the critique of professions as market shelter, but looks to make connections across disciplines to embrace a broad form of planning, that utilises the intrinsically synoptic (from the Greek *synoptikos* or “seeing everything together”) method of planners. It is no surprise then that the first lesson in Elliot, Nicholls and Street’s contribution is to “see the bigger picture”. Seeing that bigger picture also requires understanding the new roles of public, private and community sectors, and diversity within each one of them in new forms of planning. From this perspective, new and dynamic planning exercises enable us to explore new coalitions in which planning practices find place. Planning’s value increases as it is shared in these complex regimes of governance. Taking the discussion to this angle, Wargent and Parker’s plea to explore participatory spaces within localities speaks to a range of services that make up community life. In line with this point of view, at the symposium Joe Doak questioned where the spaces for reflection and reflexivity are in contemporary planning. This chimed with the voices of planners interviewed across various recent research projects who have reported that participatory spaces can help embattled planners reclaim time to consider for whom they are acting and reflect on planning’s purpose. We know from developments in planning theories and research that planning practice is – and should – no longer be seen as an inherently ethical enterprise, and so spaces are needed to explore the ethical implications of practice, considering what has resulted from planning decisions and how this reflects on the idea of the planner as engaging in an ethical profession (Rydin, 2019: p.230).

Renewing planning’s ethical underpinning must be done at a time when fewer planners are public servants. As Linovski’s contribution adroitly shows, knowledge accumulated through planning practice is incredibly valuable – which is why some of the world’s largest consultancy firms are moving into planning. Planners working in global consultancies face new ethical dilemmas and the wider implications of a restructured planning profession are still unfolding. Discussions at the symposium highlighted how the working practices of private sector actors can aid in the cross-fertilisation of ideas and best practice.

What is less clear is how such knowledge is unlocked and shared, and not simply bound up in consultocratic commercial models. For many, championing hope and safeguarding the public interest is still at the core of planning practice, and this calls for more than just technical knowledge and routine action. Of course, these reflections lead to more questions: how do we accommodate the marketisation of planning into planning education while remaining critical of it? Is the concept of the public interest fit for purpose in the face of ongoing fragmentation?

Indeed, fragmentation is another key concept here. Globally planning appears to be moving from an input (plans, policy) to output (project, market-led) system, and this facilitates the fragmentation of planning tasks and the increasingly specific knowledge underpinning them (Parker, et al. 2018). The diversity of actors involved in planning practice, and in particular within the private sector, adds to a complex regulatory landscape which is operationalised through disjointed “pockets of micro-regulation” (Tasan-Kok et al. 2019a). This means that while the dominant narratives of urban regulation are changing at various layers of governance, the implementation of each project brings their own perspectives, expectations and principles, creating a regulatory landscape where each project almost creates its own universe of individual values and collective moral rules, as well as norm based interactive processes (Tasan-Kok et al. 2019b), or as Alexander (2002) puts it substantive and procedural forms of public interest. This diversity of planning activities now being undertaken makes the reclamation of a positive narrative for planning all the more important, a point underscored by Dobson and Platts above.

A cursory look at the UK’s National Planning Policy Framework shows us that planners are central to a dizzying range of problems, from fixing the housing crisis to boosting economic productivity, from combating climate change to improving public health. Whatismore, a recurring theme of the above contributions has been the new demands placed on planners: to be more embracing of publics (Wargent and Parker), to be more agile and creative, better mediators (Shepherd and Doak), and more cognisant of new ethical dilemmas (Linovski). The trick will be meeting those demands in ways that underscore planning’s positive and necessary contribution. If there is one take away from these reflections on the future of the planning profession, it is this: as we learn more about how planners operate in neoliberalised

environments (see for example Zanotto, 2019 on detachment), the more important it becomes to build constructive examples of new ways of thinking about planning practice (see Tasan-Kok et al. 2016).

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Author Biographies

Joe Doak (a.j.doak@reading.ac.uk) is a Doctoral Researcher in Urban History and formally Associate Professor of Urban Planning and Development at the University of Reading. His research interests now focus on the emergence of built environments from complex social and physical milieu.

Mark Dobson (m.e.dobson@reading.ac.uk) is a Teaching Fellow in the Real Estate and Planning Department, University of Reading. His research interests include planning reform, austerity and local government in the UK and his teaching focuses on planning and development practice.

Trudi Elliot (t.elliott@reading.ac.uk) CBE MRTPI is a Chartered Town Planner and lawyer and has a wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge of planning in which she has worked in one capacity or another for twenty years.

Zan Gunn (zan.gunn@newcastle.ac.uk) is Director of Planning at Newcastle University and is a Co-Investigator on the ESRC-funded *Working in the Public Interest* project. Her research interest is in systemic reform and the ramifications for practice and professionalism within urban planning.

Orly Linovski (orly.linovski@umanitoba.ca) (RPP, MCIP) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of City Planning at the University of Manitoba. Her research and teaching are motivated by a concern with equity in planning and design, through the lens of professional practice. Previously, she worked as a planner at the municipal and provincial levels.

Chris Maidment (c.s.maidment@henley.reading.ac.uk) is a Lecturer in Planning at the University of Reading. He is a chartered planner and started his career as a planning policy officer in English local government, following a PhD at the University of Sheffield. His research interests focus on issues of professionalism, decision-making and multi-scalar plan-making.

Victor Nicholls (victor.nicholls@henley.ac.uk) is a freelance consultant and Lecturer in Development and Planning at the University of Reading. His research interests include the regeneration of New Towns in the UK and globally. With over 35 years' experience in planning, regeneration and senior management, Victor was Deputy/Assistant Chief Executive at Bracknell Forest and Basingstoke and Deane borough councils.

Nezhapi-Dellé Odeleye (delle.odeleye@anglia.ac.uk) (PhD, Oxford Brookes) lectures at Anglia Ruskin University. She has worked as an architect, community planner, principal planner, and strategic planner (first London Plan). Her research interests span 'spatiotemporal' knowledge-bases in indigenous urban design, sustainability, urban planners' agency and wellbeing in places. She remains active in community projects.

Gavin Parker (g.parker@reading.ac.uk) is Professor of Planning Studies at the University of Reading where he has lectured since 2000. He was RTPI Director of Professional Standards and Planning Aid England (2012-2014). Gavin has been a board member and served on the planning committee of the New Forest National Park Authority, UK since 2017.

Sarah Platts (sarah.platts@kent.gov.uk) is the President of the Planning Officers Society and Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Manager at Kent County Council.

Abigail Schoneboom (abigail.schoneboom@ncl.ac.uk) is a Research Associate on the ESRC-funded *Working in the Public Interest* project; an ethnographer, with a background in sociology and engineering, her research focuses on work and workplace resistance, with a growing emphasis on urban sustainability.

Edward Shepherd (edward.shepherd@reading.ac.uk) is Associate Professor of Planning and Development at the University of Reading. His research is focused on what theories of ideology can reveal about the ideas and practices of contemporary planning and development.

Daniel Slade (daniel.slade@tcpa.org.uk) is a Policy & Projects Manager at the Town and Country Planning Association, where he leads work on the Association's Healthy Homes Act campaign. He previously led the Royal Town Planning Institute's research on climate change, and has a PhD from the University of Liverpool.

Emma Street (e.j.street@reading.ac.uk) is Associate Professor of Planning and Urban Governance at the University of Reading. Her research interests include urban regeneration, architecture and regulation, and the future of the planning profession.

Tuna Tasan-Kok (m.t.tasankok@uva.nl) is Professor of Urban Planning and Governance at the University of Amsterdam. She has wide-ranging knowledge and experience in the fields of urban social geography and urban planning. Her research mainly focuses on themes of urban governance, property-led urban development dynamics, and spatial organisation through social relations.

Matthew Wargent (m.wargent@reading.ac.uk) is a Research Fellow in urban governance and planning at the University of Reading. He is interested in decision-making and in the increasing range of actors drawn into the governance of urban space. Much of his research explores public participation in planning and plan-making.