

Briefing: Bridging academia and practice

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Urban planning and design are both professional and academic disciplines. Relations between academia and the professions are rarely straightforward. Do universities exist primarily to provide basic training to prepare new graduates for the world of work, or to push the boundaries of thinking beyond currently accepted professional wisdom? Are academics leading or following practitioners? Do professional demands constrain or inspire critical and creative teaching and research? These were some of the questions addressed at a round table of academics, practitioners and 'pracademics' hosted by *Urban Design and Planning* at the recent World Planning Schools Congress in Perth, Western Australia (4–8 July 2011).

The round table was framed around three core questions posed by chair Stephen Marshall.

- What is the point of planning theory unless it informs practice?
- What sort of education should universities be providing to future planning practitioners?
- What can be done to improve synergy between academia and practice?

Discussion kicked off with panel responses from Perth-based planning and urban design consultant Howard Mitchell, University of the West of England academic Hugh Barton and Izabela Mironowicz from Wroclaw University of Technology, Poland. Contributors from the floor represented a range of perspectives and countries including Italy, New Zealand and the USA.

The question of the role of planning theory inspired a range of responses which reflect broader debates about the nature of planning and the nature of theory. If planning and urban design are about deliberately creating better places and shaping the future, then planning theory should guide practical analysis and shape professional advice that helps create stronger visions and strategies for positive change. If planning and urban design respond to complex social, environmental and political realities, then theory has an explanatory role which provides contingent insights to inform specific interventions. More pragmatically, if planning is an applied spatial science, then theory should underpin empirical evidence which can be used in rational decision-making. The good news for academics is that theory does indeed have an important place in relation to practice, and the roles of theory are as diverse as the roles of planners and designers.

Theory is important in the education of planners and designers, providing opportunities for future practitioners to develop higher skills in analysis and thinking, as well as specific knowledge that may be of use to them in the future. There was general agreement on the importance of developing such higher skills, which have been sacrificed in curriculum design to accommodate details of regulations and planning processes in specific planning jurisdictions. The list of specific demands on planning and design curriculum is constantly expanding, with the risk that important intellectual and professional skills can be lost in the technical and administrative details. Planning and urban design graduates need scientific and technical capabilities to provide an empirical basis for their decisions, and a firm grounding in the humanities and social sciences to be able to understand the context in which they work and to appreciate the broader implications of their craft.

Lively interaction between academics and practitioners in principle can only be of benefit to students, researchers and the profession. In practice it can be harder to achieve. Not all academics or practitioners are well suited to this kind of activity, and initiatives to improve practitioner contributions to teaching can be counter-productive if not carefully devised. Time constraints and everyday work demands can limit opportunities for academics and practitioners to venture into each others' territory, and the good will of individuals needs to be supported with practical resources and institutional commitment. Problem-based learning approaches that have been developed in other professional disciplines such as medicine or engineering may be of some value in planning and design courses, supporting the development and application of appropriate skills and knowledge.

Planning and urban design are not unique in their concern about how best to prepare graduates for professional life, how

to enhance the relationships between academia and practice and how to push theoretical boundaries without losing connection to their basic practical purpose. These are common tensions in all professional disciplines and are at the heart of some of the most important questions about the future of

universities, research and education in society and culture. Debating these issues is fundamental to ensuring a robust future for the professions and that universities are able to fulfil both their practical and higher purposes in a complex and dynamic world.

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