



## Recovering What Makes Planning Relevant

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### **Background**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when city and regional planning became a profession, planners did important work in the realms of public health, fire safety, natural resource conservation, civic and social reform, city efficiency, housing improvements, and city beautification. The founders espoused many bold plans to shape the future of cities. These long-range plans were to be both comprehensive and serve the public interest.

Now, planners rarely participate in the dialogue about how cities should be planned and designed. We ceded this ground to architects, geographers, sociologists, urban economists, real estate developers, attorneys, environmentalists, journalists, and others. We are conspicuous by our absence. We seem comfortable generating land use plans for local jurisdictions even though we know that integrated land use and transportation planning is needed at the regional scale. We abandoned health and safety in favor of public welfare. As a result, we embrace weak goals like “livability” and vague slogans like “making great communities happen” instead of addressing public interest dimensions of fundamental importance. We became facilitators of process and experts in public participation. But we are timid to argue persuasively for

evidence-based ideas about how to plan places and spaces in the visioning exercises we lead.

The American Planning Association’s leadership recognizes these problems and is trying to elevate the importance of the planning enterprise on many fronts. APA seeks to increase the status of the planning profession, assist planners in the trenches, find more effective ways to serve the public interest, and win stronger public and political support for planning. To accomplish these important objectives requires a better understanding of how the planning field became narrow and what can be done to increase its relevance.

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### **From Substance to Process**

The critical period was the 1960s and early 1970s. Before that time, city and regional planning was primarily physical planning that guided land use and coordinated infrastructure investments. The public interest was served by accommodating and mitigating the impacts of urban growth. The newly established Department of Housing and Urban Development provided funding for local comprehensive planning, whereas other federal agencies required local planning to access various domestic assistance programs.

Three movements had profound impacts during this period, and planners changed their approach to practice in response. The anti-war movement engendered an anti-establishment mindset that questioned top-down notions of what was best. The civil rights movement emphasized local self-determination and the importance of democratic participation at the grass roots level. The environmental movement revealed the destructive impacts of economic growth and urban development. In addition, the urban riots demonstrated the failure of urban renewal to address the real problems of the urban poor.

As part of “the establishment,” city planning came under fire during the 1960s and 1970s for “top-down” planning. Jane Jacobs became the most famous critic exposing the flaws of planning thought and action during that period. Planners were associated with modernist architecture, especially for public housing projects, that imparted the negative image of density that plagues us to this day. Planners were trapped by physical determinism that helped justify super blocks, super highways, and the use of urban renewal to destroy viable neighborhoods. Finally, physical planning seemed inadequate and less salient than the emerging fields of environmental planning, social policy planning, and community and economic development.

Until that time, the theory of planning primarily consisted of normative ideas about cities and regions. With the ascendance of the Chicago School, planning theory was linked to the social decision-making process. The normative issue became good planning process, not good urban form, and planners were tasked with participating in that process. Process theory evolved from rational decision making to satisficing, incrementalism, advocacy, and other more recent strands. Process theory has had positive impacts on practice that should not be ignored. Planners now listen to the public and work hard to turn vague and conflicting ideas into consensus visions of the future. Planners are now suspicious of designs for the built environment that have no connection to the day-to-day behavior of urban residents. Planners often function as fair arbiters when urban growth and development conflicts

Theory & Practice on:	Cities & Regions	The Planning Process
Normative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Pre</u> 1960 focus</li> <li>• Good city form &amp; function</li> <li>• Best location of the planning function</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Post</u> 1960 focus</li> <li>• Planning as social decision making process</li> </ul>
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Post</u> 1960 focus</li> <li>• Empirical studies of place &amp; space</li> </ul>	

**Table 1:** Changes in Planning Theory & Practice Pre to Post 1960

with conservation and preservation of resources.

However, this shift to process imposed significant costs. As noted, planners are seldom part of debates about the “good city.” We learned much about the spatial behavior of households, firms and local institutions, but we have not found consistent and effective ways to use this knowledge of the city to inform normative views (see Table 1).

Furthermore, participatory planning has weaknesses that cannot be easily overcome. No participatory process can truly represent the existing community. Any input or feedback planners receive is biased by class, age, race, and education, among other factors. Although a strident minority can have its way or an overpowering majority can ignore minority interests without consequence, the more serious problem is representing future members of the community who will be affected by planning. Which existing stakeholder can represent the interests of future in-migrants or unborn children?

### **Recovering Relevance**

Normative theory about cities and regions is needed to help us become more rational about our ends—means rationality is not sufficient. With substantive/ends rationality trumping process and procedural rationality, planning could become wiser as well as more efficient. We need to use behavioral theory and empirical evidence based on that theory to do more than point out the unintended consequences of public intervention. We should use what we know to forecast potential outcomes.

Our knowledge base about economic, social, and environmental forces is far from complete. Still imperfect knowledge of existing and future behavior can provide useful ideas about the way cities should be planned and designed. Planners can re-enter the debate about the good city with facts that may be more compelling than the untested opinions that abound. Planners could apply this knowledge to find what works in specific geographic contexts to test new forms of practice.

We can become more relevant by redefining planning in terms of three basic tenets. First, we need to define the public interest as achieving public health and safety. Physical and economic security is deemed very important

by the community, and public health is broad enough to encompass all areas of planning from the physical to the economic/financial.<sup>1</sup> Identifying public health and safety as primary goals would provide a sound basis for defending ideas about sustainability, smart growth, transit-oriented development, and the like. The profession would join others addressing life-and-death issues and enjoy the positive recognition that would follow.

The other two basic tenets suggest the means by which we should pursue health and safety goals. Following Mumford's admonishment to see things whole, planning should become more comprehensive. APA's current effort to re-think the comprehensive plan in light of global environmental challenges underscores this tenet (PAS Report Number 567). Comprehensive planning needs to be more inclusive to remain relevant, but comp plans will not succeed if they remain jurisdiction bound. Planning must expand its geographic scope to the regional scale to become truly comprehensive.<sup>2</sup>

Third, planners need to extend the planning horizon significantly to address health and safety goals effectively. Planning for time horizons beyond 20 or 30 years should become the norm. Planners have the expertise to blend forecasts, behavioral and technical knowledge, and alternative designs to define the planning agenda. With control of the agenda, planners will gain considerable authority. The point is not to reestablish top-down planning with no public input. Rather, the intent is to channel public participation into evidence-based debate that would render the input far more useful.

Beyond these three tenets, planners need to do more than formulate better long-term comprehensive plans. Using government powers to regulate, tax and spend, we need to implement plans. The acid test of professional relevance will rest on our ability to take meaningful actions that make communities healthier and safer places by changing the regional landscape for the better in the years ahead.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the emerging planning profession was trying to reform cities that were disease-ridden and dangerous places. Planners helped improve public health and safety by reducing the incidence of the infectious diseases inflicting urban dwellers with sanitary and storm sewers, paved streets, safe drinking water, better housing, public parks and open space, public transportation, zoning, subdivision regulations, building codes, and suburban neighborhoods. Today, we are confronted with the chronic conditions associated with sedentary lifestyles and poor nutrition. Although the alarming increase in chronic disease among Americans has many causes, the built environment is certainly extremely important when it comes to the social and economic costs of unhealthy lifestyles.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that all planning problems need to be addressed at the regional scale. We need to find ways to

move from neighborhood to city to region without having jurisdictional constraints become binding.