

40th Anniversary Retrospective

Nancy L. Grden
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In celebration of the 40th anniversary of Carolina Planning, two Department of City and Regional Planning alumni share their perspectives on the changes in the planning profession in the past four decades.

Celebrating the 40th Year of Carolina Planning



Nancy L. Grden, '75

As a masters student, 1973 and today

In 1974, several Department of City and Regional Planning second-year students had an idea, scanned the market, saw a need with no competition, laid out a development plan, sought and received seed funding, and launched a prototype a few months later. It sounds like the usual new business start-up in an accelerator program, yet it was actually the genesis of the *Carolina Planning Journal*. Unbeknownst to us at the time, we were entrepreneurs within our city and regional planning program. However, while Bloomberg reports that 80% of new businesses fail within 18 months, Carolina Planning has continued to operate these 40 years. Thanks to the succession of dedicated and talented editors, authors, and readers, it is the oldest student-run planning journal in the nation.

Special acknowledgements go to fellow DCRP students Jim Miller, Lee Corum, and John Carroll among the core of our founding group; then Department Chair George Hemmens and retired Chair Jack Parker for their unwavering support for us and an assistantship to me as editor; faculty advisers Dave Godschalk and Gorman Gilbert; and student advisers Jim Foerster, Wanda Lewis, and Chuck Roe. The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation provided seed funding through a 2-year grant for the venture, and the NC APA provided our first customer

distribution channel. DCRP students and planning professionals submitted articles for consideration, with Michael Nugent, Ben Orsbon, Marilyn Sandorf, Winston Harrington, Arthur Cooper, Stuart George, Robert Crow, Pete Stroup, and Fred Carr as selected inaugural authors. There is no doubt that Carolina Planning could not have launched without all these individual and organizational leaders and supporters. The *Carolina Planning* start-up experience influenced my career, and the curriculum, faculty/student dialogue, and opportunities to see planning in practice remain living landmarks for me to this day.

The articles in that first publication provide a window into the major issues the planning profession confronted at the time: comparison of state land use policies, planned unit developments (PUDs), local effects of industrial mix, the option of community-based corrections, and water/sewer extension policies to guide development. More recent issues of the journal have evolved to address broader

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topics such as innovative collaborations, planning for equity, urban greening, resilient cities, and the relevance of our profession. While the topics have certainly evolved to reflect the challenges of the times, the core principles, themes, and worldviews evidenced throughout the years are constant, and unique to the field of planning. There are five planning foundations of continued relevance in various private sector, public sector, and NGO environments today:

All the Audiences. We, as planners, were “early to the party” in recognizing and embedding citizen and stakeholder engagement as expected elements of ideas and decision-making. In fact, we did so even before the convenience of social media infrastructure and mobile technology revolutionized the definition of community. Most every unit of government and every company now wants to tout their “like us on Facebook” philosophy and stature, and to use new and continuously evolving tools for soliciting and responding instantaneously to audience feedback. I fully expect planners will lead the next wave

as biotechnology are seeking to find the right mix of the double blind placebo-controlled study with the “N’s of 1” cases for personalized information and treatment decisions.

Short-Term (Not) vs Long-Term. We as planners are visionary and long-term by nature, yet, our training also includes the practicality of “how to get there,” an alchemy so critical in policy, politics, and business. Businesses, which report earnings on a quarterly basis and market cap second by second on a stock exchange, often have difficulty to successfully manage the blend of planning and doing. The ability to both envision a future state and to then execute a path to the result has been identified as a key factor in success and innovation for organizations. Planners have the fundamentals to be those entrepreneurs who do both.

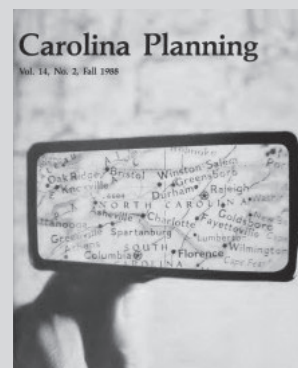
The End Game of Societal Benefit. We, as planners, embrace societal benefit, diversity, and inclusion as ideals for our work and elements of our education. Today, private sector companies incorporate social purposes as



1974



1982



1988



1990

of data mining and trending by leveraging this continuous individual feedback to make community policy and program decisions.

Interdependency and Ecosystems. We, as planners, routinely anticipate and acknowledge the interconnections among people and places, social and land use policy, environment and economics. We used the word “ecosystem” long before its more recent arrival into our popular social vernacular to describe how we are part of an ever-adapting system. This mindset is more important than ever in our complex world as everything from individual actions to broad government policy can result in unintended consequences when considered in isolation.

Data and Windshield Surveys. We, as planners, look to include our profession within the ranks of the social sciences, applying scientific rigor to the study of problems and the rationale for decision-making. Yet planning practitioners and academics alike never let us forget the value of a “windshield survey” to see the realities of results and opportunities. Today, even scientific fields such

part of their mission statements and adopt diversity and inclusion goals as part of their culture. New forms of business organizations, such as benefit corporations, allow companies to identify and measure both profit and social goals. Social entrepreneurship, eco-friendly organizations and programs, and sustainability are becoming commonplace. Planners can be expected to play a growing role in economic development by articulating, supporting, and leading this change.

As we look to the future, there is no doubt that the planning profession is more relevant than ever before. Our profession, and the people it attracts, must increase our leadership roles and translate our knowledge and skills to new global challenges and opportunities. I fully expect that Carolina Planning will be both a monitor and harbinger of the planning profession’s continued evolution in its next 40 years, fulfilling its original mission to provide a forum for discussion, to enhance awareness of the planning profession, and to improve the exchange of planning information.

40 Years of Planning: A Change DID Come?



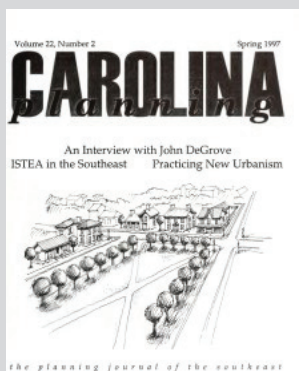
As a masters student, 1973 and today

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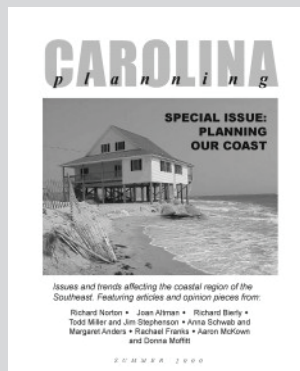
It was August 1973, in Memphis, Tennessee. I looked carefully again at the cars which I had narrowed down as the best potential vehicles for me. I had worked and saved enough to make a good down payment on something reasonably nice but not too expensive, that would take me from Ole Miss to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to complete my transition from undergraduate to graduate school. I just

lines of color and economics, not only in Mississippi, but also in Chicago, where, due to my parents' divorce, I spent summers with my father during the 1950's and 1960's. For example, the 4-room wooden building with the pot belly stoves, outdoor privies, and outdoor spigots, that we called "School" through the 4th grade, compared to the relatively modern brick building with central heat, air conditioning, and of course, indoor plumbing, of the white school downtown. But we had great, dedicated teachers, and thanks to my mother, an avid reader, my brother, sister and I were voracious consumers of the printed word. When "the movement" came to Tunica in the early 1960's, I would often sneak out of the house to join the older kids in protest marches.

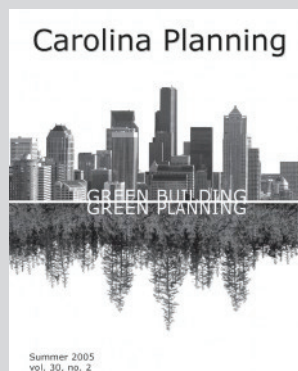
As a teenager, I was concerned and excited about a



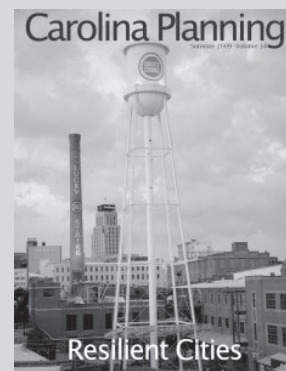
1997



2000



2005



2009

marched down the aisle a few days before in Ole Miss' summer commencement. I needed a car, though. Then, suddenly, one of the vehicles "spoke" to me: a shiny, red, 6-cylinder Chevy Nova, simple, no frills except for the optional air conditioning - that would be nice! But now, time to get serious. The dealer was asking this ridiculously high price of \$2995! I remembered what my Uncle Tommy said: "Don't ever pay the sticker price." I felt really good when I got him down to \$2700 with a payment of \$83 per month. When I left the car lot that day, I began a journey that, in a sense, I am still on 40 years later: to discover how urban planning and all of its accoutrements can make a much better world.

I was born in the Mississippi Delta Village of Tunica, at a colored birthing clinic, in November 1952. Not unlike many Black Mississippi Delta natives, I spent the first few years of my life on a cotton plantation, in the gray, unpainted, red-roofed sharecropper's home of my grandparents. It wasn't long before I was very much aware of the vast inequities in the social structure along the

number of things: the Vietnam War, Woodstock, the first Earth Day, poverty in the Delta and substandard living conditions, peace, love, brotherhood... My brother (older by two years) and I often talked about what we could eventually do to make an impact, and to help make the world we knew better. Both of us ended up going to college at a somewhat unlikely place in 1969 and 1970, respectively, the University of Mississippi, "Ole Miss" as it was and is popularly known. Our first plan was to study journalism and eventually launch a newspaper somewhere in the Delta, with the adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword." We thought that the field would provide a vehicle for necessary change. However, both of us ended up going in different directions, looking for other means to facilitate social change. He chose law school and I, after giving it some thought, chose urban planning. I had heard of the profession of planning for the first time two years earlier while working a summer job as an editorial clerk for a Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) newsletter in Northern Alabama. Armed with layers of idealism about what

planning could do in rural areas, but little real knowledge about the field, I came to the UNC Department of City and Regional Planning in August 1973 in my red Chevy Nova.

The two years of graduate school at the Department of City and Regional Planning were two of the most intellectually stimulating years of my life. There was so much to learn, and I found it particularly challenging to try to relate planning theory to real life. I must admit that I was always a bit frustrated with the concept of the “rational planning model.” Nevertheless, I was determined to become a “Plannist,” a student of everything. So, I took a variety of classes, including Land Use Planning under F. Stuart Chapin, who taught from his famous text book, *Urban Land Use Planning, Housing and Public Policy* under Michael Stegman, *Transportation Planning* under Gorman Gilbert, and *Regional Development and Economic Development*, from Profs. Edward Bergmann and Emil Malizia. I wanted to study everything so that I could eventually do anything. I’ve always liked variety when it comes to work. And throughout my career, I’ve almost always, in some way, been able to apply the “rational planning model” that I learned in 1973. I say in “some way”, because like with most theoretical models, with time and different circumstances, even the stable model requires tweaking. Nevertheless, I think the rational model is still relevant and has served my career well.

I began my professional career in 1975, armed with theoretical knowledge and idealism and a zeal for change-for-the-better. My first job was in Raleigh for Wake County government, helping to administer the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a post-recession job training and supportive services program. That lasted 13 months, before I was attracted to an applied research firm called MDC, Inc., then based in Chapel Hill. My work at MDC, Inc. involved travel all over the U.S., and extensively to eastern NC. After nearly two years, I moved down east, to Greenville NC, to work as a planner with the State Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, providing all types of planning assistance to small local governments over a wide swath of the eastern part of the state.

I developed both Housing Elements and Land Use Elements under the old 701 program, a “grant condition” program that required communities to develop a general plan which indicated the locations and amounts of land to be used for residential, commercial, industrial, transportation, and public purposes prior to qualifying to use certain urban renewal funds. I revised and updated zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations, conducted pre-development plat reviews for regulatory compliance, and conducted annexation feasibility studies. It was great use of my graduate training in a variety of ways. However, after two and a half years of working with the State agency I moved to Wilmington to take my last “job” as a planner with a consulting firm of engineers, architects, and fellow planners. In 1989, after nine years of a focus on airports and other transportation facilities, I started Ken Weeden

& Associates at my kitchen table, and have worked on numerous projects in the transportation and aviation fields for 25 years as an independent consultant.

In 1973, I think many, if not most, of my classmates at UNC were drawn to the urban planning profession because of its potential to help bring about change. Many of us were idealists to some degree, truly believing that we could make a difference, whether in environmental, housing, transportation, community development, economic development, or social planning issues. And truly, in the last 40 years, many of us have.

The profession itself has gone from being relatively obscure to the general populace, suspicious (especially in rural areas) or just outright rejected in the early 1970s, to an easily recognized mainstream occupation, with the requisite accompanying simulation games and mobile phone apps. To many of us choosing to remain in North Carolina for our careers, part of our job was to sell the concept of “planning” to our constituents, and sometimes to our employers. A friend of mine took a position as the first-ever Planner in a down-east NC county in the mid-1970s. The County Commission Chairman came by his new office to meet him soon afterward. Upon leaving, the older gentlemen stated politely, but firmly, that the new Planner should enjoy his job and do anything with it he wanted, as long as he did not do any “planning.” Another friend worked in the rural North Carolina mountains, conducting land use surveys to make maps of existing land use from the windshield but getting out occasionally to get a better look. One day an angry landowner barreled up in a pickup truck, jumped out, shotgun in hand and inquired what in the world were they doing on his land! My friend very nervously tried to explain, only to hear the landowner say something like, “Son, I’d rather you mess my wife, than mess around with my land...now gee-itt!” And, as my friend later told me, they dee-id!

Today, it would be unusual for city and county governments to not have urban planning functions and/or designated planning departments. Surely, we’ve come a long way. So have the tools of planners, with amazing use of computers, simulation software, mapping, and the addition of more specialties within the field. I still believe that planners do, indeed, make a difference and facilitate vehicles for significant change in many areas of our society. However, I look back at the young, sometimes visionary idealists of 40 years ago, now grown mature, some retired or ready to retire, who were drawn to this peculiar profession, and wonder...what kind of people are being drawn to urban planning today? Do they too want to “change the world?” Somehow, I hope so. I truly hope so.