

## STATE OF THE PROFESSION

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*President 1987 - 1990*

Since our Society published the international manual of planning practice, with the comparative presentation of planning systems in a dozen countries, some of us experienced a sigh of relief. The very substantial efforts behind this publication remained mostly hidden. In researching the fundamentals of planning legislation and some characteristics of plan implementation in every country which is represented in the book, the comparison reveals a lot of common ground. It gives you the impression that we must be doing the right thing. The planning mechanism could be captured in a common frame of reference. International communication in our field is much more meaningful with the knowledge of identifiable comparable components or recognizable differences in the legislation, methodology, and organisation of planning.

However, a mathematician would caution us for the comparison of unequal things. There is very little evidence that urban planning is more efficient in one country than in another because the planning processes are more or less centralized, more or less legally determined, more or less submitted to citizens' participation, different in methodology, private sector involvement, etc.

Urban Planning education is mostly directed towards one system, i.e. the national context of the educational institution. Even in such specialised courses as "planning in developing countries" where these countries are clustered into one group of similar traits, we ignore - very generally speaking - that in reality there are enormous differences among planning systems and procedures. There are equally enormous differences in the perception of what is most dominant among the goals of planning, in the sophistication levels of planning, in the resources allocated to planning, in the known levels of effectiveness, in the transparency of the planning processes, and many more. The differences prevail in most crucial comparative situations, which makes it so difficult to transfer experiences from one place to another. However, this does not make our congresses unproductive. If planners are not able to make some mental adjustments to such obstacles as *deviations in perception* they may also not be flexible enough to perform their function on the home front. Deviations of perception are part of a planner's life.

But the fact remains - a valid appraisal of the **state of the profession** is extremely difficult, partly because of these differences among the systems.

Some elements, however, are relatively clear - *All planning efforts, in every country, reduce a complex reality to manageable proportions of this reality.* The typical form of presenting a future state of development combines plans, models, and descriptive statements of policy and procedure. We have workable and well-accepted ways of regulating land use, infra-structure and financing procedures. The results are often encouraging and we have held congress after congress with presentations of success stories. It is a more recent fact that the failures and deficiencies of our body of

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knowledge have become a substantial part of our discussions. But we are not only far from perfect; it seems to me that we are even losing ground. Urban Planning is certainly more disputed today than it was thirty years ago. It also has been increasingly disputed in recent years in terms of its effectiveness.

Despite great progress in monitoring development with up to date statistics and mathematical models, despite more and more rigorous planning legislation, despite more sophistication in the methods of implementation, the expectations have risen more quickly than our collective ability for adequate performance and delivery. (If anyone feels much more satisfied with the performance of planning, remember the discussions at our congress in India or the ones we are holding here in Poland.)

Several adverse trends can be identified among the political reactions to the inadequacies of planning.

Adverse trend nr 1:

### **Abbreviation of the Planning Process**

There is a long legal procedure in most countries for the implementation of planning policy, before general options for political action, general planning concepts, general goals and the like can be translated into specific operational measures. This path is even longer in terms of time if the normal procedure includes an open planning process with public participation and/or if the process can be challenged in any part through court procedures. The typical time lapse for an important scheme may be 10 to 15 years.

*For several reasons political impatience will result in an attempt to abbreviate the process.* Whether such short cuts result in circumventing legally prescribed procedure, or whether political leaders take the matter out of the hands of law-abiding planners and submit it to emergency measures, our profession is seriously affected. We all know how we risk going along with political currents to remain in the mainstream. We may recommend changes in the legal base, we may venture into vast publicity games to promote faster acceptance, ...somehow we become the victims of a process in which we assisted when it was legally established. We all know, furthermore (and our colleagues from developing countries know this best,) that political leadership calls for quick delivery, at best faster than the term of office of our elected governments.

Adverse trend nr 2:

### **Consultation of Specialists from outside the Planning Profession**

In real crisis situations, e.g. when we confront serious environmental problems, or when millions of new jobs and homes should be generated almost overnight, political leadership tends to consult with specialists who promise quick delivery and who address only the urgent issue at stake.

I have observed in several countries that such specialists perform their assignments by throwing overboard everything that thoughtful planning had developed with its typical comprehensive approaches and with seemingly wrong premises. It would be a shame if our profession lost contact with such expedient processes because of moral or legal

obligations. A whole new breed of environmental specialists who monitor environmental problems, ecologists, physicians, chemists and others require our recognition. We must be open to permit their integration into the planning process. This requires much more than opening the door. Many of these specialists have demonstrated successfully that there is a gap in our perceptions.

Adverse trend nr 3:

### **Rejection of complex Procedures for long-range Strategies, e.g. Scenarios**

How can it be explained that such outcries as Rachel Carson's book, over twenty years ago, or the analysis of the Club of Rome, largely failed to generate political action? A similarly reserved response can often be observed with scenarios, or very generally, whenever too many variables are submitted to a political process. Political leaders expect clear-cut concepts for approval or rejection. They shy away from long deliberations over years. Even parliamentary bodies show this tendency, although in a less impatient form. The lesson to be learned is clearly to separate learned elaborate thinking from action plans, and to debate the former mainly in professional circles while observing the urge of political bodies to be involved primarily in decision making. Many planners may regret that in really complex subjects they cannot count on the involvement of politicians in a series of blueprints of what are the components of a problem and what are the options for taking action. Like many other aspects of our lifestyle, politics have become more hectic and time is unforgivably scarce. (In a remotely comparable situation of household management, the food industry has resolved the dilemma of prolonged cooking procedures by offering TV dinners that are ready to eat after a few minutes in the micro wave.)

Adverse trend nr 4:

### **Aversion against bleak Prophecies**

There seems to be an increasing sensitivity on the part of the political leadership to being linked with problems of a long-term nature with limited chances for quick solutions. No government likes to admit that there will be increasing unemployment, a great shortage of housing, soaring inflation or a drug problem out of control. On such issues we must resist the tendency to play down the facts. We cannot accept that environmental pollution, to mention one major field, is handled in the manner of the Sun King in France, who is reported to have said 'après nous le déluge.' Even if the outlook is bleak, if no one likes to hear it, we must speak up.

Adverse trend nr 5:

### **Management Gap due to Specialisation**

I have already indicated that the field of urban planning is constantly widening, both in terms of subject matter and in terms of sophistication, but also in terms of expectations. It was always clear that no single individual could embrace it all, unless we talk about really small communities. While the field is expanding, a new, tempting device has seemingly helped to keep under control the enormous amounts of information at any

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stage in the planning process - the computer. In their advanced applications, computer-based programmes can simulate a multitude of future developments. Our work has become unthinkable not only without the use of computers, but also without the specialists to handle this tool. Yet, while in our field specialists proliferate, including computer specialists, it becomes more and more imperative to train generalists, people capable of defining the pertinent questions that should be put to all the many specialists involved, who are capable of drawing on the essential expertise, and skilled in developing a synthesis. Many segments of specialisation develop their own line of independent thinking and there is a permanent danger of optimisation in one sector at the expense of equally significant issues elsewhere. This is also a political dilemma. Where consultation draws only on the advice of a narrow field of specialists, the recommendations will very likely ignore the impact on other sectors of the planning process.

Specialists are rarely trained in the art of necessary compromise. It requires skill, moreover, to persuade the many parties involved that the highly superior knowledge of the specialists in their particular field must be integrated and often partly subordinated to obtain an optimal solution. The problem is age old. But the dimensions of specialisation call for new and innovative processes of team work. This is all the more urgent where the leading forces in a planning operation have no way of verifying the findings of the specialists, let alone the results of computer models. A typical way out, regrettable but obviously necessary, is the method of calling for counter expertise. A high level of professional integrity is required in such processes by all persons involved.

To conclude my analyses, if urban planning is in an advanced stage of sophistication, and if the chances for centrifugal forces and for confusion are equal to those for integrated approaches towards adequate action, one thing is clear - our profession is very much alive and as exciting as ever.

Let me take this opportunity to thank you for the intriguing assignment of the presidency. I thoroughly enjoyed working for you and for the Society. Because I opened my series of prospective statements three years ago with the reference to being the captain of the ship, let me conclude by wishing the passengers, the crew, and particularly the new captain, Javier de Mesones, all the best.

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