

Six Easy Roads to Planning Perdition

Q: From both your knowledge of UCLA and your new perspective “down under,” how do you see planning?

A: **John Friedmann** Professor Emeritus

1. The seduction of “being parochial”

The Great Seducer murmurs into your ear: *Think local, act local. All the universe is in a grain of sand. Los Angeles (or name any other city) is a huge laboratory for aspiring planners. Work in it. Discover it. Why bother with anywhere else? There is so little time.*

And Old John replies: *Time is scarce, but the world is wide. Los Angeles is only one dot on the map and doesn't foreshadow what's in store for any other city. Look beyond the horizon if you want to know your own backyard. Without knowing about other places, and how they are different from where you live, study, and work, you lack perspective and your capacity for innovative thinking is restricted to what's before you. Learn about planning cities and regions in Asia, for example, where most of the world's urbanization will take place in the coming century. Then return to look at Los Angeles with new eyes, with a vision trained to see differences and similarities. Planning is increasingly a cosmopolitan profession.*

2. The seduction of “community”

The Great Seducer murmurs into your ear: *Work in the community, for the community, become a part*

of it. This is how you can be a radical planner. Think people; think small; build communities. Don't be a patsy to Big Capital.

And Old John replies: You don't build communities with only people. And the city is more than a mosaic of neighborhoods, each separated from its surroundings by a moat. If you want to fight poverty, you've got to think beyond the locality to the region which supports it. Impoverished neighborhoods—communities—can do a few things for themselves, but they can't create paying jobs, they can't substitute for services which only the city can provide. Discover how the regional and the local connect; learn how region connects to region in a global system; find out the dynamics of regional change. Planners must learn to think and work at different scales. No single scale is sufficient unto itself.

3. The seduction of “learning by doing”

The Great Seducer murmurs into your ear: Get out there and practice; get real. That's the only way you ever learn anything worthwhile. Forget about books. Practice is all you need. Do projects; and when you've done one, do another and another. Until you master the art of city planning.

And Old John replies: Practice-based planning education can take you only part of the way to where you want to go. You need theoretical understandings, too. You need to get to know the tacit theories that inform your and other planners' practice. You need to find out how people elsewhere have confronted problems different from those you want to solve. Some ways of posing problems are better than others. There are principles to be learned. The issue is how to find the right balance between theoretical learning and practice.

4. The seduction of “unreflected practice”

The Great Seducer murmurs into your ear: Don't bother with planning theory; that's nothing but blabber, a bunch of overage white academics writing to entertain each other. No practitioner can afford to waste

time reading them. Just go out and practice; you'll be all right.

And Old John replies: How do you know what is good practice? Have you thought about the different practices of planning? Have you already figured out how planning relates to other knowledges and practices? Do you understand how knowledge is created and legitimized? And think about this. What ethical norms should guide you as a planner? Why are theorists talking about the "communicative turn" in planning? And when they do, what are they leaving out? What does it mean to be reflective about one's professional practice? And how shall we reflect on it? Planning theory (and the history of planning properly understood) provides a forum for rethinking a practice that should never be applied as if all the routines of planning were already settled. Can you learn to be a good planner by reading only a textbook of planning?

5. The seduction of "methods"

The Great Seducer murmurs into your ear: You are insecure. You ask: Do I have a future in planning? And so, because you feel insecure, you have a hunger for skills that will get you your first job. You want to learn the skills that are prized in the marketplace. You're right. Load up on them: do stats and modeling and GIS and social surveys. Go and study finance and learn how to put a budget together and how to finance big real estate operations. Don't waste your time in seminars discussing theories that have only fuzzy answers, if they have any at all. It's hard methods that will get you ahead in the world. And Old John replies: Don't be fooled by this craze for "how do I do this or that." What's the good of knowing "how" if you don't know the "what" or "why" of practice? Indeed, what is the problem to be solved? What are the different readings on it? Who wants it solved? And why? Is it the planner's job to second-guess the market, to build in advance of the market, or what? Methods are the least problematic aspect of planning. You can run statistical regressions until you drop and still not know what the

problem is, what should be done (if anything), and why taking on this problem is important. There are generic skills, like writing, public speaking, doing graphics, working with people in small groups, and mediating conflicts, which are useful in all situations planners are likely to face. But beyond that...go slow on methods until you know what problems you want to solve. Your time might be better spent on all those fuzzy theories that give you a headache, worrying about the what and the why.

6. The seduction of “theory”

The Great Seducer murmurs into your ear: Theory is what the smartest people do. It’s a game you, too, will enjoy. We can spend hours, weeks, months, a lifetime talking about words: lifeworld, simulacra, thirdspace, deconstruction, discourse analysis, untraded interdependencies, flexible accumulation, communicative action, heterotopia, habitus, epistemology, différance, embodiment, and so on and so forth in an endless stream of infinitely fascinating writings. Without them you are truly lost, can’t find your way. Planning you can always learn on the job. While you are studying, it’s theory you should go for.

And Old John replies: Theory is good, but practice is also good. You must have both if you want to be a planner. Theory informs practice and vice versa. Without the synapse to practice, theory is an addiction. The test of a good theory is: will it help me in my practice? If it doesn’t, leave theory to the social, human, and cultural sciences. Planners need good theories to think about cities and regions as well as about their own practice. The trick is to connect them to the objects of planning.

JOHN FRIEDMANN lives in Melbourne, Australia. His current research interests include the development of cities and regions in the Pacific Rim.