

Planning Education: Striking a Better Balance

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Note: *A list of more than 100 co-signatories appears at the end of this article.*

An Incomplete Education

Although the importance of physical planning has gained recognition over the last 20 years, planning education has lagged, becoming less relevant to the needs of graduates who are required to take many courses peripheral to jobs offered by state and local agencies, and by consulting firms.

Unfortunately, few planners' training includes detailed study of traditional towns and cities, or new and emerging urban forms meeting 21st century challenges. Planning students are generally not required to analyze how the scale and arrangement of a community's component parts (such as neighborhoods, streets and boulevards, parks and open spaces) contribute to its functioning as a livable, walkable, bikeable, sustainable place.

Many planning schools have focused instead on demographic trend analysis, sociology, engineering basics, planning theory, land-use law, public policy formulation, citizen participation, quantitative methods, transportation planning, social and health planning, local planning administration, gender studies, and GIS. All of these are important (particularly engineering basics as they pertain to slopes and hydrology), but it is curious that one of the profession's central subjects (i.e., the physical layout of towns and cities) is studied so little.

As Prof. Tom Campanella of UNC has observed, "Once the traditional focus of physical planning was lost, the profession was effectively without a keel. It became fragmented, creating a chronic identity crisis — a nagging uncertainty about purpose and relevance...By forgoing its traditional focus and expanding too quickly, planning became a jack-of-all-trades, master of none." In the view of Prof. Eugenie Birch of the University of Pennsylvania, "Planning schools place too much emphasis on subfields such that students do not identify with being planners or with the sole distinguishing feature of the profession -- the town planning or physical planning knowledge that should unite the field"

As a result, planning education at most universities significantly underserves the needs of their graduates. In the words of Karen Hundt, who directs the Community Design Group at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency, "Because too many planners focus on zoning and land use, rather than on three-dimensional aspects, they often cannot visualize what the codes and policies they write will produce."

Doug Kelbaugh, Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Michigan, adds that "cities and towns need more generalists to complement specialists on their staffs. If MUP

graduates had more urban design and physical planning skills, it would improve our communities, as well as their career prospects."

The committees determining academic accreditation standards should take notice and greatly expand the number of their members who understand and appreciate the spatial and physical (as well as the economic, ecological, and social) aspects of community design. Otherwise, it is unlikely that curriculum imbalances will be redressed, as the ever-growing list of required nondesign courses crowds out opportunities for design training. As Prof. Emily Talen of Arizona State University notes, "I've never agreed that education for planners should elevate economic theory and methods above urban design. Why should input-output analysis be more important to an urban planner than knowing the elements of a walkable street?" The problem is so critical that some planning firms prefer hiring landscape architecture graduates instead of planners, as they possess solid design backgrounds and can learn most technical aspects of planning on the job.

III-Prepared Practitioners

Rick Bernhardt, Executive Director of the Metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County Planning Department, notes that "the largest deficiency in planners I've hired over the last 40 years is their complete lack of understanding of urban design basics. Successful implementation of planning programs for building more sustainable, efficient, and livable communities must be based on a solid urban design foundation."

Davidson, NC has selected architects and landscape architects to fill its planning positions for decades. According to Dawn Blobaum, such design education trains one "to think broadly, to envision a future and articulate that vision, both verbally and through drawings. This serves you well as you puzzle through the many issues in town planning, as you discuss those issues with citizens, and as you codify those issues in ordinances." An architectural graduate she hired as a planner (Kris Krider) recalls that the department was therefore able to create its own design unit which was useful in commenting on public works projects, in-house small area planning efforts, and site plan review.

In nearby Huntersville, Planning Director Jack Simoneau agrees: "Some design background is important. We've hired landscape architecture graduates, as their sense of design and ability to draw concepts are very helpful to developers and staff. We hired interns from landscape architecture and architecture programs to prepare our illustrated *Design Guidebook*".

Bill Collins, former planning director for Teton County WY, recalls that he "always filled at least one planning position with a design professional. Because of their lack of design skills, most planners work more as regulators. They learn to interpret codes and regulations but don't plan. Physical form has profound impacts on the character of places, yet planning the physical form is typically left to developers, with planners becoming bystanders."

Curriculum Imbalances

The Planning Accreditation Board (PAB), which conducts accreditation for all academic planning programs in North America, contains a wide range of academics, practitioners, and officials, including some designers. Its members are selected by four organizations. APA appoints a public member (often an elected official or issue advocate); AICP appoints three practitioners; and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning appoints one university

administrator and three planning educators. Over the years the PAB has been divided on whether design should be a core curriculum requirement or just an elective or specialization, with the result that planning curricula at many universities have drifted away from having robust design and plan-making components to ones dominated by other fields of interest. To be fair, PAB members reflect the policies and priorities of the three organizations that appoint them, and are in essence messengers for those groups which have overseen the continued drift of planning away from its roots, ceding much professional ground to architects, landscape architects, and engineers in the process.

One consequence of not requiring more design and plan-making in curricula is that much faculty hiring has veered away from those core aspects of the profession. Faculty weak or uninterested in design produce more policy-oriented planners who then fill the ranks of the APA/AICP, providing little opportunity for breaking the cycle and infusing the profession with graduates sensitive to design issues and trained in spatial and physical aspects. The goal would not be to train all planning students to become designers, but to train some that way and to engage others in design issues so they learn physical design fundamentals. Many would agree with Lisa Wise, a Cal Poly lecturer who finds it “frustrating that physical planning is dominated by architects and landscape architects and that planning has become synonymous with permit-processing”.

Thirty-six years ago Mel Levin, a planning professor at Rutgers University, then with 11 years experience working for planning agencies and consulting firms, wrote "Why Can't Johnny Plan?", an article arguing for a spatial and physical planning component in planning education. In it, he asserted that students are not receiving “usable professional training” because faculty “haven’t spent enough time in the real world of planning agencies and consulting firms. They have given their energies to earning Ph.D’s and writing scholarly tomes, not drafting and implementing zoning ordinances... If they can’t teach students how to do the practical work of a planner, it’s because they’ve never been real planners themselves.”

As noted by Prof. Jon Rodiek of Texas A&M, ‘Physical planning has become the unwanted child of many planning programs, where few faculty can teach physical planning /land use planning/ urban development because they have not been trained or experienced in these aspects themselves.’ Lamenting the wide “fissure between the practice of planning and the teaching of planning”, Levin suggested that “faculty be required to have stipulated amounts of field experience as part of the procedure for hiring, promoting, or granting tenure”, adding that “the younger untenured faculty could be granted one- or two-year leaves of absence to work for agencies and consultants.”

Rodiek recommends that university departments break this cycle by proactively recruiting faculty trained and experienced in spatial/physical planning, form-based codes, and conservation design. “The purpose for introducing this physical planning capability is not to derail existing programs but to **strengthen those programs’ teaching skills and the employability of graduates.**” Of course, changes in faculty composition must be approached carefully so that existing faculty will not feel threatened.

Interestingly, academic planning departments were originally much stronger in design. The first independent department and graduate degree in city planning was created at Harvard by its landscape architecture faculty. Tom Comitta, a consulting planner from West Chester PA, writes that “From 1904 to 1935, students of city planning, landscape architecture, and architecture attended many classes together and learned how to become multi-disciplinary by cross-

registering and learning each other's craft. At MIT, in 1938, according to Vincent Kling, Sr., 'we all took classes together' (the students of architecture, planning, and civil engineering)." However, policy makers gradually tended to replace plan-makers after WWII, virtually excluding physical designers. Silo-building had begun.

APA's Urban Design and Preservation Division (UDPD) encouraged the PAB during the latest round of accreditation standard revisions "to place greater importance on urban design and physical planning in academic planning programs." The rationale, according to Jason Beske, past UDPD chair, is that "urban design courses provide valuable skills to help planners illustrate and implement planning policies and produce better projects." APA and AICP weighed in on this issue as well. Although this impassioned plea failed to produce any improvements, it did help avoid detrimental changes that would have further eroded design components.

Perhaps PAB members – and those who appoint them -- need to speak more with planning directors such as Jack Simoneau, who observes that "When planning departments have enough design work to keep an LA or architect on staff that's great, but an overwhelming majority don't. Therefore, reintroducing design into planning education is essential. Without it, each planner is on his own to figure things out. Every community would benefit, not just those with design standards. Such training would be invaluable in preparing long range/small area plans, helping to influence or demonstrate alternatives to developers, and helping communities recognize the importance of good design."

A Path Forward

For starters, all university planning departments should do as some already do, and invite graduates back after 5-10 years to speak candidly about which courses they have found most helpful -- and least helpful. The results, to be shared with the PAB, could help departments better prepare their graduates for jobs outside academia, and could help the PAB when revising accreditation criteria.

1. It's not uncommon for junior faculty to be denied promotion when he/she has focused more on professional practice and plan creation than on producing peer-reviewed articles for scholarly journals, and to learn that one's professional practice accomplishments count little in tenure decisions. This doesn't imply that any plan should be considered. In the words of Prof. Eugenie Birch, "such work must rise above the ordinary (advancing knowledge), and tenure committees would need to set criteria for judging such".

Talen suggests a middle ground: "There should be more non-tenured practitioners on faculty – 'professors of practice' (not simply adjuncts). Many schools take this approach and we should support that idea, not force these valued practitioners to become academic scholars too."

Apart from the few schools that emphasize physical planning, some others offer multiple tracks. The City Design and Development part of MIT's curriculum, which attracts 40 percent of the department's students, offers classes in urban design, site planning, land-use planning, real estate development, and the theory of city form, according to Prof. Lawrence Vale.

At UNC in Chapel Hill, Tom Campanella has called for a “renewed emphasis on physical planning: (which) is essential to refocusing, recalibrating and renewing the profession”. He continues: “Students should be trained to be keen observers of urban landscapes, ... and while they cannot master site engineering, they should be competent site analysts and be fluent in assessing site plans of others. Such training would place competency in shaping the built environment at the very center of the planning education solar system”.

Cal Poly’s “learn by doing” approach includes intensive labs, often with real clients. Interning is required, providing valuable, practical, hands-on experience. Notably, the department has added two urban designers to its faculty. Alison Pernell recalls her Cal Poly experience beginning with two years of design lab where planning students joined landscape architecture and architecture students in learning drafting, landscape design, and spatial composition. “By the third year, each class was assigned to prepare a General Plan for a client community, including facilitating a public process. At least half our design projects were for real properties which we visited.” By the fourth year, students had completed internships and had become grounded in these concepts and practices. After graduation Pernell entered the workplace feeling incredibly well prepared.

Another exceptional program is offered by Ball State University in Muncie IN, where all first year students in urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture take a common design course together with studios, lectures, and a required graphics course to build a solid foundation in all three disciplines before splitting into separate academic streams. According to the departmental website, “Studying this way underscores the point that environmental planning and design are interconnected with all other disciplines.” Another benefit of this common course is that it helps students choose their major. Perhaps due to this experience, planning students there value design studios and graphics courses, signing up for them in large numbers, recognizing that this training will help them become better and more employable professionals after graduation.

Nature abhors a vacuum and, unsurprisingly, architects have re-entered the planning realm (where they had been very active before WWII), to educate a generation of planners in designing livable towns and cities, chiefly through the CNU and the Form-Based Codes Institute. Similarly, landscape architects have also stepped in, advocating ecological planning and conservation design. To its credit, the planning establishment has gradually embraced these breaths of fresh air, although it continues to virtually ignore design education when shaping curricula. Sadly, not every planning school offers design courses, and very few require them. The few existing design related courses are usually electives taken by a minority of students, probably because they are considered time-consuming, difficult, and nonessential.

It might be very helpful if APA were to survey planning directors to determine how many municipalities have ordinances containing some design-based standard (e.g., highway overlay zones, TNDs, conservation design, form based codes). Communities with such standards would be asked if any staff has design training and, if not, would the directors see value in having personnel with such training.

The results could inform the debate over striking a better balance in planning curricula. On a hopeful note, the UDPD has been furthering the idea, originally proposed by AICP, of creating an Advanced Specialty Certification in Urban Design for AICP planners. And the Form-Based Codes Institute recently began looking at planning education and the role of design, with a view

toward creating a coalition of advocates. The time might therefore be growing ripe for substantial change not merely another deck-chair rearrangement.

A longer, more complete version of this article, plus a list of more than 100 co-signatories, will be downloadable after 11/9 at <http://www.greenerprospects.com/products.html>

The original Planetizen article, which appeared on 10/31/12, can be seen at <http://www.planetizen.com/node/59072>

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