

# The *Berkeley Planning Journal*: Change and Growth

By Michael B. Teitz

The other night I had a dream—or more precisely, the morning, for it was a pre-waking dream of the kind that stays in one’s mind and nags at one’s consciousness all day. I was giving a seminar with Berkeley graduate students, but the location was a vast, stone walled room, mostly underground. There seemed to be an extraordinary number of students—at least sixty—and we could not stay in one place, nor was there any agreement on the subject of the seminar. Students became agitated and concerned that we were not dealing with their issues; some were angry. Their numbers began to shrink. Finally we were down to eight students, but we still had no topic, though I felt that we were approaching one. Then, the dream ended. Sigmund Freud is long dead, and his theories largely rejected. Nonetheless, from time immemorial both kings and peasants have sought to interpret their dreams, finding in them clues to action. I think that my dream was telling me something about the issues of the scholarly life today. From it, we might draw some lessons for the *Berkeley Planning Journal* (*BPJ*) as it metamorphoses into an exciting new form.

Academic life is far different from the way it was when the *BPJ* was founded 25 years ago by a visionary group, mostly Ph.D. students, at the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) at the University of California, Berkeley. It is even more different from 1963, when I joined DCRP as a young assistant professor. Even though the number of university programs teaching planning has increased, programs hire more temporary lecturers than tenure track faculty. Doctoral programs have grown faster than openings, and competition for academic positions has become much more intense. As in my dream, many more students are crowded into the grand seminar that we call the academic field of planning. They are still just as intense and committed to a higher purpose as students were in 1984, but today they face a tougher environment, intellectually and professionally.

The world of planning is challenged, perhaps as never before, both to define itself for the world it faces, and to respond effectively to changes, especially climate change, population growth, and massive urbanization. Competitor fields, such as public policy and economic development, have emerged, providing alternative approaches to urban and regional issues which reflect differing ideologies and political perspectives. On the other hand, people entering the field today have tools for research and intellectual exploration of which their forebears could scarcely have conceived. Among

such tools are the Internet and new ways to find and analyze information, and new research methods that can potentially provide better information for understanding and for policy. How the field of planning as an academic enterprise will prosper in the 21st century will depend on its ability to navigate this new world, intellectually and in practice.

## The Intellectual Challenge

Addressing the intellectual challenge to planning is a primary responsibility for those who pursue academic careers in the field of planning. They choose a life of the mind, even though planning as a particular academic discipline crosses traditional lines, and spills over greatly into practice. Along with a small number of practitioners and public intellectuals, academics write the books and papers that continually redefine the field of planning. They bring to the forefront issues that may be ignored or unrecognized in the general discourse on policy; for example, environmental justice or food policy. At their best, academics do not simply advocate, but they also do serious research that grounds arguments in the fractious discourse of politics. Planning has been shaped to a remarkable extent by the ideas of public intellectuals, such as Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, but such ideas seem to be a vanishing breed in a world of opinion blogs and short-term issues. Perhaps it is increasingly difficult for one clear voice to be heard above the tumult of conflicting voices, and for complex ideas developed at length to compete for attention against a constant flow of information. Thus, one might argue that the role of groups of scholars, whose collective voice can influence the shaping of issues and the thinking of students, is now more important than ever. Young scholars can make a real difference if they can work collaboratively and build schools of thought. For this purpose, a rejuvenated *BPJ* that takes advantage of new information technology to promote dialogue among scholars can be a powerful influence. However, whether that succeeds will depend on the coherence, innovativeness, and technical quality of their research.

As an academic field, planning, in common with some other professional schools in academia, lacks a single dominant theoretical or research paradigm of its own. If history is any guide, it is unlikely to have one in the near future. Technical fields such as engineering rely on the physical sciences for theory, and mathematics and programming for analysis and model building. Such fields group themselves into professionally identified clusters—in the case of engineering, for example, into structural, civil, electrical, and computer science. Other fields, which deal with social issues, find themselves looking to the social sciences, especially neoclassical economics and econometrics, for research paradigms. However, the past fifty years have shown that economics and other social sciences have

significant drawbacks when it comes to understanding social and political issues. Even though economics has now become the main analytical tool for debate of public issues in the U.S., it can be too easily manipulated to support opposing ideological positions, as evidenced by the formation of public policy think tanks across the political spectrum.

Planning, true to its traditions since the early 20th century, stands on divided intellectual foundations. Its roots in design and advocacy for better functioning cities have nurtured a strand of discourse that links to architecture and uses physical design methods and concepts, first in zoning, and more recently in the New Urbanism movement. In parallel, planning's origins in public health and advocacy for housing for the poor have given rise to a continuing search for social justice and public policies that alleviate social ills. It is no accident that while some early planners served real estate interests, others were ardent socialists. In addition, as planning departments proliferated in universities in the second half of the 20th century, the need for research credibility, and the desire to use scientific methods to solve difficult problems, led to more rigorous, largely social science, research methods, both as part of professional education and in academic research. Not all researchers adopted this strategy: some opted for qualitative methods, such as case studies and depth interviewing. Others, influenced by Marxist thought, used narratives informed by that framework. The result is that in the second decade of the 21st century, planning scholarship is a rather eclectic mixture that reflects the varying intellectual and ideological perspectives of faculty and students. While some departments may have nearly uniform styles of research, others are wildly diverse and often divided.

Journals are still the most important means by which researchers in a field communicate their results to each other. The articles that they publish, together with books, are the most important elements in judgments about their achievements, including promotion to tenure. By and large, the major journals in planning reflect the divisions described above, although there is an increasing tendency for papers to use rigorous methods, especially those derived from statistics and econometrics.

Where, then, does the *BPJ* fit into this spectrum? Neither at one extreme, nor the other. Student-run journals have two great advantages. First, they are very flexible, as they are not held back by publishers' constraints or by entrenched editorial boards. Thus, they can publish articles that would fit neither in form nor content into major journals. They can and should experiment. Second, they can tap into the currents and new ideas that students naturally seem to pick up on. This suggests that these journals can be innovative, and that they can roil the waters from time to time. The *BPJ* has done both; the new format should allow it to do more, so long as editorial control remains firmly in student hands. Journals such as this

should not become house organs, though they may become the voices for new schools of thought that need to be heard.

## The Challenge of Practice

For planning, the second issue raised above is practice. No planning journal can ignore practice; without it, the field withers. The question is how should the concern for practice, in its broad sense, including policy, be incorporated into a journal's makeup. Perhaps the most evident way is through the identification and analysis of the large issues emerging at any moment. Students are strongly aware of those issues, for example, climate change, which will affect the course of their careers and lives. A journal cannot change the world, but reading a beautiful piece of prose—or, for that matter, poetry—can change someone's mind. Good writing about important questions can be a powerful feature of a small journal. Not everyone can do it. The editors' task is to find those among their colleagues who can and want to write, and to encourage them to think about doing it both within and outside the framework of rigorous academic research. *BPJ* has been good at this, with written and photo essays that convey important messages.

Practice, in the more limited and conventional sense, fits equally well into this framework. Students are continually interviewing local planners and political actors, and they are looking at local planning issues and achievements. They can write about the fabric of practice at the local level, identifying issues that reflect both global and local concerns. Students are continually creating reports and studio projects for local practitioner clients, but the fruits of this labor are not usually made available to the public. The journal could serve as a means of communication with the wider public and disseminate research concerning the communities that support us. It may even be our duty, as a public university. Ideally, this type of effort would be guided in part by a strategic sense on the part of the editors of what the journal is for, and where it should go. The editors can engage with practitioners through their choice of topics and methods; for example, by including a series of interviews or essays on planners in comparable positions in local cities, or dealing with a single issue. This takes focused thinking, and perhaps more time than hard-working graduate students can afford. Nonetheless, it is worth some effort. A side benefit might be material that will enhance students' ability to make career choices. The important thing is to get well-done research that is relevant to practice into the hands and heads of practitioners.

A third element in relation to practice for journals such as *BPJ* is to be critical. Planners need to be challenged as well as supported. Flawed movements in planning, such as urban renewal, are often so widely

accepted that criticism is vital, albeit often rejected. While students cannot be investigative journalists, they can probe into local planning issues and find out what is going on. A critical voice may cause issues for the institution in which the journal is embedded, but it remains a key part of a healthy profession. Nonetheless, critical analysis almost always raises questions, especially if it seems to be linked to an ideology that questions the status quo. No one is free of ideology, but an overtly ideological stance can be counterproductive, leading to lack of credibility among those whom the critic needs to reach and persuade. That may have been the case in some of the more strident criticism in the past, and it is worth thinking about.

Finally, a journal such as the *BPJ* can contribute to the practice of scholarship itself. As I discovered when thrust into the co-editorship of the *Journal of Regional Science* whilst still a graduate student, there is no better way to learn how to write and edit one's own work than to be immersed in the publication process. The *BPJ* has helped generations of doctoral students learn how to assess potential publications, and how to edit them so as to improve their clarity and impact. My hope and belief is that this tradition will continue to take the *BPJ* to new heights. Future editors will build on a great foundation, while transforming the Journal to meet the needs and opportunities of their times. All of this will be done while sustaining the great seminar that is our joint endeavor.

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