

Andrew Isserman

Dare to plan: an essay on the role of the future in planning practice and education¹

The planning profession today proclaims its problem-solving orientation and its pragmatism. In the meantime, planning is sacrificing its roles as visionary and idealist and abandoning its responsibility to be a source of inspiration and to produce ideas about what might be and what ought to be. Population forecasts and their use in planning practice are analysed to illustrate that the relationship between planning and the future is askew. Courses of study are recommended that are designed to help planning schools rediscover the future and in the process restore our confidence in planning and our pride in its accomplishments.

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The basic premise of this essay is that planning has lost sight of the future. The planning profession today proclaims its problem-solving orientation and its pragmatism. Planning agencies are actively involved in budgeting, public/private and development, social service funding, programme management, project administration and other short-term activities. In the meantime, something important is being lost. Planning voluntarily is sacrificing its roles as visionary and idealist and abandoning its responsibility to be a source of inspiration and to produce ideas about what might be and what ought to be.

To update a classic analogy in planning theory, Meyerson's middle-range bridge, designed to link the present and the future, is now made of pontoons. Firmly anchored to the present, the bridge disappears into the fog, but never reaches the future. It bobs and floats and changes shape with the currents expanding during the environmental seasons, losing sections when the economy storms and is battered against the political rocks. Its planners keep busy changing, redesigning, rebuilding and adding to the bridge. Some among them occasionally stop to examine its pontoons. They discuss it in articles, books and conferences. They compare its sections and design to the pontoon bridges in other lands. So busy are they that they never notice that their bridge leads nowhere. Alas, they have forgotten that planning's role is to lead from the present to the future.

This neglect of the future has several causes, among them: (i) planning's orientation toward the social sciences and scientific methods and away from architecture and design; (ii) budget cuts and a climate that make idealism, vision and inspiration seem anachronistic; (iii) the press of daily job requirements, whether in academia or

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direct practice; and (iv) our scepticism and lack of confidence in our ability to think meaningfully about the future and to effect change.

The sections that follow are an attempt to discuss these issues more concretely. First, population forecasts and their use in the planning process are analysed to illustrate that even in this area the relationship between planning and the future is askew for some of the reasons mentioned above. Correcting the situation will require development of new methods, approaches and ways of thinking. Second, specific suggestions are made for planning education. Courses of study are recommended that are designed to help planning schools rediscover the future and in the process restore our confidence in planning and our pride in its accomplishments.

Population forecasting and planning

The importance of population forecasts is noted in many planning texts. For instance:

Education planning, hospital planning, manpower planning, transport planning, land use planning, and many others ... to a lesser or greater extent rely on the availability of forecasts of future levels of population. Furthermore, the usefulness of the planning procedures will in many cases hinge on the reliability of the forecasts of the future. (Baxter and Williams, 1978, 7)

Knowledge about past populations and assumptions about future populations are fundamental to planning decisions in every aspect of community life (Krueckeberg and Silvers, 1974, 259).

These quotations probably refer to the fact that population forecasts serve as basic information for virtually every substantive area of planning from ageing to zoning. Typically, population forecasts are created as part of the background database used by planning agencies to establish the context within which planning decisions are made – for example, how many people must the sewage treatment system be able to serve in the year 2000? Indeed, so widespread is the use of population forecasts that a sample of practising planners recommended almost unanimously that all planning students be required to study methods of population forecasting (Isserman, 1977).

Despite the wide use of these forecasts and our extensive experience, we have been going about population forecasting all wrong. I have developed this view rather extensively in two other papers, so I shall not do so here (Isserman, 1984). Instead, I shall summarise some of the main arguments. I believe that we are committing three sins:

1. We are mechanically producing numbers that cannot be considered forecasts of future population.
2. We use these numbers as if they were forecasts.
3. We make plans as if the role of planning were simply to accommodate what is forecast and ignore the fact that planning can affect the future.

I think that we commit the first sin because we ape social scientists; we are tempted easily into the second because we are not social scientists; and we commit the third because we are timid and ignorant of our heritage and traditions. Let me explain each contention in turn.

Probably the workhorse of population forecasting techniques is the cohort component model. Developed by demographers, this method is an accounting framework that traces out the future consequences of the present population composition and specified cohort-specific birth, death and migration rates. Only if those rates are the most likely future rates does the method generate the most likely future population. But how does one determine the most likely future rates? The cohort component method gives absolutely no help. Remember, it is but an accounting framework; the rates must be specified before the method can be used.

Recognising that many, many sets of rates are possible, demographers prefer not to make a choice among them. They are social scientists. They have no reason or need to forecast population, so they are content with 'projection' exercises. The most common projections entail using the cohort component model to trace out the implications if currently observed birth, death and migration rates were to continue into the future. These projections are mechanical exercises that can have no claim to being forecasts.

Planning agencies make and use such projections as if they were forecasts, as if someone had determined that the underlying rates, indeed, were very likely to occur in the future. Thus, we ape the method of the demographers, but we misuse the results, because as planners we need forecasts of future conditions. The social scientists have not given us population forecasting methods, and we have not developed them for ourselves. Instead, we misapply what is available.

In our use of these future numbers we are surprisingly passive in our relationship to the future. Here are a few examples from American planning practice. In land-use planning we take the forecast population and multiply it times various per capita ratios to determine how much land should be devoted to residential commercial, educational and other purposes (such as fifty tennis courts per 100,000 people). In capital facilities funding, a growing number of federal government agencies have begun to distribute funds on the basis of future population. In air quality planning future population is multiplied by various emission factors to yield future emissions; if the total emissions will exceed air quality standards, allowable emission requirements for that area are tightened. In each case, the future population is taken as a given to which planning and society must accommodate. The fact that planning can affect the population level through zoning, public facility provision and air quality standards is being ignored in this unidirectional planning process. Future population, rather than being an input to planning, can also be an outcome. We need not only accommodate change, we can choose to effect it.

Three kinds of population forecasts are useful in such an active planning strategy:

(i) pure forecasts; (ii) normative forecasts; and (iii) contingency forecasts. A pure forecast is the most likely future in the absence of major, unanticipated public or private initiatives. A normative forecast is a desired, attainable future whose definition has evolved from the planning process. If the desired and most likely future are not the same, the normative forecast must be accompanied by a plan stating clearly and convincingly how the gap between them will be spanned. With a realistic plan, the normative forecast becomes the most likely future. Contingency forecasts are statements of possible futures, including the highest and lowest plausible population. They are recognition of the need to plan for uncertainty and may also be accompanied by plans.

Viewed in this manner, population forecasts are far more than background data. They form a vital component of an active, interactive planning process. If we could forecast in this way, forecasting practice would become consistent with our aspirations for planning. For instance, read the words of Gunnar Myrdal:

What we mean by planning is a determined effort, through our democratic institutions for collective decisions, to make very much more intensive, comprehensive, and long ... range forecasts of future trends than have been customary, and thereafter to formulate and execute a system of coordinated policies framed to have the effect of bending the foreseen trends toward realizing our ideals, spelled out in advance as definite goals for planning. (Myrdal, 1968, 251–52)

Similarly, John Friedmann states:

With respect to the future, planners typically ask three questions: What is likely to happen without specific intervention? What should happen? And how can the desired state be brought about? (Friedmann, 1973, 115)

It should be clear that the projections that we now use, those mechanical extrapolations devoid of any thought about the future, are totally inconsistent with planning as described by both Myrdal and Friedmann.

Toward forecasting skills

Developing the methods needed to make forecasting practice consistent with the planning process will not be easy. Population forecasting requires technical skills, but much, much more. Even with the most elaborate economic and demographic models, forecasting is not merely a question of building a model and running it. As has been discussed with respect to the cohort component model, forecasting involves considerable thought and analysis about the future for which the model itself is of little or even no use. These less formal elements of forecasting deserve far more attention than they have received; their existence, or even the need for them, generally is not mentioned in the planning literature.

Methods must be developed to think about the future systematically to structure thought processes, to gather information, to stimulate imaginations and to focus inquiry. To an extent, we can rely on technological forecasters, who have a good deal of experience and an extensive literature. Among their noteworthy methods are surveillance and the monitoring of events, brainstorming, scenarios and analogies. Historians, too, are experienced in combining many pieces of information with broad contextual knowledge in trying to understand change and its determinants. The way knowledge is gathered in other 'soft' social sciences may also be worth studying; for example, what can be learned from sociologists about anticipating changes in social values and tastes? Also, the procedures used so brutally and frankly in architectural competitions might be useful to judge and sharpen alternative views of the future.

The successful development of forecasting skills may involve a more fundamental change: a willingness to embrace artistic as well as scientific values, to think creatively as well as analytically. Planning's roots in architecture once strongly contributed to such spirit and values. Alonso has drawn a parallel with architecture that suggests that forecasting may well involve several different ways of thinking and analysis:

There then is a need for the continuation of the architectural traditions in planning, by way of independent thinking, dissent and long-range views. Radicalism and even utopianism are necessary to invent new alternatives, and even to invent new objectives. Long-range thinking, however uncertain and prone to error, is needed to see if the steps which we are taking one at a time lead us in the right direction. Holistic views are necessary to uncover relationships that are insufficiently recognized. (Alonso, 1971, 169-73)

The main point to be taken from this discussion is that we are not coping with the future adequately in planning. We have not done much to sharpen our tools for studying the future. Indeed, as I have argued, we may well have lost sight of the future. We certainly have not accorded it the central role that it arguably should have in planning. This argument goes well beyond population forecasting. In fact, we must learn how to think about the future before we can begin to forecast meaningfully. In the next section I address the broader question of getting the future back into planning education.

The future and planning education

Turning to planning curricula, I shall offer some suggestions that, I think, can make planning more exciting, inspiring and interesting for students and practitioners and more valuable and important to society. The courses that I propose here are intended to:

- shatter our paralysing scepticism and lack of confidence, end our boredom and restore our sense of pride in planning;²
- release us from the psychological pallor and limited aspirations caused by today's budgetary constraints and political climate; and
- develop our historical perspective and knowledge in such a way that we can know how to study and approach the future as planners.

The courses that follow are illustrative and reflect my own interests and experience. What is important is that too few such courses exist.

Solve the inner city problem

I would wager that most planners today believe that planning can do little for our nations' inner cities. The problems of race, unemployment, economic decline, poverty and so on appear just too great. We are better at reciting obstacles than we are at producing solutions.

I would undertake a year-long course (two semesters) on the inner city. The course would not study the inner city, however, until well into the second semester. The problem seems far too awesome, and we are far too cynical and defeatist for a frontal assault to be taken seriously by either instructor or student (not to mention the client population).

I would begin in the US by studying the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Take the students back to that valley in the 1930s. Make them aware of the poverty, disease (even malaria), illiteracy, infant mortality, unemployment, national recession and whatever else leads us to believe that today's problems are insoluble. Add to that an awareness of the political context: the cries of socialism that greeted planning initiatives, the power of utility companies and presidential opposition for twelve years. In short, note that all the excuses we give today for failure and inaction were present in the valley.

I would have the students read original documents and dig into the archives. They would learn planning theory and practical politics by contrasting the opposing views of Arthur Morgan and David Lilienthal. They would study who opposed the TVA and why, who benefited and who lost, what worked and what did not, what were the compromises and what was accomplished.

Perhaps most importantly, the students would learn that planning can work. They could take pride in those 'dreamers with shovels' and have heroes and models who are planners. They, and we, can gain strength from our predecessors and their accomplishments. The inner city problem cannot appear insoluble any longer when we know that

² Once proud words – vision, ideals, leadership, inspiration and wisdom – have been devalued and therefore lost. That is a pity, because with their loss we have reduced our aspirations and limited our potential.

a generation ago our colleagues successfully faced comparable, if not larger, problems. How refreshing it would be for all of us to study and learn from planning successes, particularly in a day and age when we are more likely to write and read books with titles like *Five Great Planning Disasters*. True, we can learn from our mistakes, but we can learn from our successes, too. From the way we carry on, however, our students and some of us may be surprised to learn that there have been any successes at all.

Studying the TVA's early years will not solve our inner cities' problems. Our past, if studied carefully enough, might give us some clues and ideas, however. I have not tried this experiment, but I strongly suspect that students spending two-thirds of the year studying the TVA will come up with more imaginative, far-reaching plans for the inner city than students who approach that assignment directly. Our own history can provide the inspiration that unfetters our minds, releases our imagination and permits us to dare to plan.

Think big, make big plans

Recognising the diminished prospects for our students to find local planning jobs of the traditional sort, we advise them to study real-estate finance so that a bank or developer might hire them or perhaps add a law degree to their planning degree so that a law firm will hire them or maybe an engineering degree so that an engineering firm will do so. We proudly point out that bankers, lawyers and engineers all know the value of having good planners on their side, and we can add to the list planners as hospital administrators, social workers, economists and others.

In following this strategy we keep our planning schools open because we graduate students who are employable, which, in turn, brings more students to us. Yet to an extent, we delude ourselves and strip our profession of many of its most capable practitioners. The banks, law firms and engineering firms who hire our students that meet their standards often do so to use them against planning. The planner/attorney, for instance, is hired because he is an attorney who understands planning, so he can represent clients in their fights with the planning process. I sometimes wonder how many of our best hybrids are actually going into, and staying in, planning careers. I sometimes wonder if we really are creating planners. I fear that we are surrendering too quickly, that planning is becoming a form of general trade training in a mix of skills with enough specialisation to allow planners to undertake activities that leave them indistinguishable from other professionals.

I do not question the acquisition of technical skills in finance, economics, computing, demography, architecture, design, graphics, engineering, management, accounting, geology, biology, advertising, journalism, marketing, public relations, personnel management and law. I only fear for planning when we turn out students who have no identity with planning, no personal commitment or relationship to

planning and no understanding of what planning is or might be. With no planning tradition and identity to nourish them, many of our graduates soon fall by the wayside and are lost to planning before they know it.

The situation is only compounded when we hire faculty members who lack any personal commitment or relationship to planning itself as an activity or subject of study. These faculty members often remain indistinguishable from other social scientists, except perhaps that their work is more applied. They cling to their identities as economists, geographers, regional scientists, political scientists or whatever and assume no responsibility to study and enrich planning beyond their specialities. If our educators and practitioners do nothing to distinguish themselves from others with similar social science backgrounds, then what is uniquely planning?

I recommend that we think big. We should stop being concerned only with today and with what we cannot do in these days of Reagan or Thatcher austerity. Planning will outlast any administration, unless in our rush to be relevant and marketable we completely forget what planning ought to be and give up our heritage. Let us not forget to teach planning. Let some of us become irrelevant. Let us plan as if it mattered and let us make big plans, even plans that no one is willing to afford today.

Returning to the inner city example, instead of focusing our energies on why nothing can be done under current economic conditions and, as a result, doing nothing, let us come up with a plan. Let us try to solve the problem. Forget the cost. Cost is an excuse we give today in order not to plan, not to try. Let us make plans as if we had the resources and power to implement them. Let us stretch our imaginations, challenge our abilities and learn what we can do. In the process we shall gain important planning experience and perhaps even demonstrate to society what might be accomplished if sufficient resources were committed.

We do not need to wait until the election of the next Roosevelt or Lyndon Johnson to start planning our own New Deal. Indeed, if such an administration were to be elected tomorrow, another planning disaster might result. I strongly suspect that we would not be prepared to respond effectively or wisely. We should use the ample resources currently available for our own education to prepare ourselves. We should train professors and students in our schools consciously and deliberately to be ready. I have in mind a form of shadow cabinet or perhaps a staff-in-exile of sorts.

To be ready we must make big plans and practice big planning in our schools in order to develop the requisite skills and knowledge. As we do now, some of us should specialise in transportation, some in housing, others in economic development and so on, but our eyes must be on the future, not just on the present. We must be concerned with what is *humanly* possible, not just politically and economically possible. We must accept the challenge to show the way, to be a source of inspiration to society regarding what might be. We must make big plans and explain how they can be realised. We must bring the future back into planning.

We may learn that we can accomplish little, even in our play world of ample resources. Many of us might become disillusioned with planning and with big plans. At least, however, we will have grappled with important issues of our time, we will have studied what planning might and might not be able to do and we will have become worthy of the heritage of our profession by practising it. In addition, with this focus on future policy and planning, we shall have created intellectual traditions and a purpose that belong to us, not to lawyers, engineers or any other profession.

To the past to study the future

I recently participated in a conference on the future of Europe's cities – as spatial and societal structures – fifty years from now. I was struck by the timidity of the presentations. For example, a transportation planner stated that vehicles would be much the way we know them today, except they would pollute less. Everyone made rather minor adjustments to the world we know today. It made me suspect that had we met in 1910 we would have concluded solemnly that the automobile would have little impact on urban spatial structure, except that there would be somewhat less horse manure on the streets.

I fear that we do not know how to study the future. We are too much bound up by the present in our perceptions, perspectives and views. Our training in the social sciences makes us too cautious, too unwilling to speculate about the future. Although we often proclaim that we are living in a time of rapid change, we have very short memories and an atrocious knowledge of history. Most practitioners and educators, I have found, know very, very little about the planning efforts, contexts, perceptions, attitudes and successes of our discipline a mere generation ago.

Planners should become experts in the study of change. This notion seems to me to be at the root of planning. We must train ourselves to anticipate change, to recognise change and to plan for change. Like geographers claim the study of space and have developed methods to study it, so planners can claim change as our dimension and accept the obligation to study it.

As a first step, I suggest that we take the past as our laboratory and bring it into the classroom. Before we attempt to divine the spatial structure of metropolitan areas in the year 2030, let us take ourselves back to the year 1930. What would we have had to do in 1930 to anticipate what would have happened by 1980? How could we have anticipated key future developments? What research approaches would have helped us? What thought processes? What information sources? What would we have had to study and how? What would we have had to take seriously?

From this exercise and others like it, we could begin to develop methods to study the future. We could begin to develop the theory that we need in planning: theory with implications for the future, theories that are useful in anticipating change, rather than

the usual social science theory that seems to fit what has recently occurred, but can tell us so little about what will happen next. In the process we would become better planners and would have staked out a research area that differentiates planning from the social sciences and makes it intellectually stimulating.

Conclusion

I have argued that planning should return to the future. Holistic, bold images of desirable futures were once an important part of planning. Our predecessors dared to dream and to create. Today we must again learn how.

Not all planners need come to the future. We do not need so many visionaries, but planning education must bring out the visionary in each of us. We must make the future ours.

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