

Planning Is Governing

Social welfare activists organized the First National Conference on City Planning to develop a “science and practice of cities” that would identify the root causes of—and implement holistic solutions to—the environmental degradation, economic disparity, and racial and ethnic discord caused by rapid urbanization and the industrial revolution. They also recruited proponents of the City Beautiful movement, who soon deemed the social activists “too radical” and subsequently marginalized their role in shaping the planning profession. These acts sparked two ongoing debates: Should planning be broadly focused on all social concerns, or narrowly focused on land use and development? How can we minimize discrepancies between planning theory and practice?

I contend that these debates are caused not by the disparate content prescribed for planning practice but our continued adherence to its historical borders. Their resolution requires redefining the scope of planning practice so that it encompasses all the roles necessary to render planning’s goals from our work. Simply put, the political arena must be considered part and parcel of planning practice.

The inequities that spurred planning into existence are reemergent. Advocates of narrowly focused planning argue that the field should be shaped by the confines of practice, and planning theory should seek to explain and improve that work. Meanwhile, the originating goals of that first conference have survived through research, normative theory, accreditation curricular requirements, and the AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, but these too have largely been conceived for current planning practice—and therein lies the source of planning’s ongoing struggle to render more thoroughgoing solutions to these inequities.

The results of our science should dictate the boundaries of our practice. If this were to occur, planning would regularly apply the knowledge obtained from our systematic study of the structures and behaviors of city populations, commerce, and cultures to their maintenance or improvement. In other words, planning would be both the motive and means of evidence-based governing.

I therefore urge us to disrupt our status quo. If they are to be realized, planning’s social, economic, and environmental justice goals require more than the necessary ingredient of planners seeking to do good through their individual practice (*Planning*, February 2018: “Doing Good Versus Doing Well”). Iconic advocacy planner Paul Davidoff’s run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives is instructive in that area. “Planning is politics,” he said, urging planners to concentrate our work in political parties because it is “the one area” where we can sufficiently engage the public to gain the support necessary to achieve our goals.

To prepare planners for politics, planning education and practice must evolve. Increasing use of the scholarship and stories of existing planner politicians, partnering with our colleagues in political science to develop new planning theory and research agendas, and offering new degree options are good places to start. Practicing planners moved to enter politics may find inspiration in “embedded planning” (*Planning*, October 2018: “We Cannot Plan from Our Desks”), which, among other things, aims to improve our understanding of communities. It can also be a fruitful means of developing a platform and building a constituency, both of which will be necessary to successfully run for office.

Planning as a science and practice of cities is governing. Let’s plan accordingly.



Viewpoint is Planning’s op-ed column. The views expressed here are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of the magazine or the American Planning Association. Please send column ideas to Lindsay R. Nieman, Planning’s associate editor, at lnieman@planning.org.



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