



## Planners in Politics: Do They Make a Difference?

Louis Albrechts (Ed.) (2020). Glos, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. 304 pages.  
\$130.50 (hardcopy), \$40 (e-book)

### Wes Grooms

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decisions are made worse by underinvestment in basic street amenities in these same places; a sobering study noted that 40% of streetlights in Detroit (MI) were either missing or broken.

A poignant through-line of *Right of Way* is the care with which victim's stories are told. The author sensitively transforms statistics on pedestrian fatalities into vignettes that remind the reader of the pain that each crash leaves, from small children to the woman who became the first pedestrian ever killed by a self-driving car. Perhaps most inspiring, we learn the story of Amy Cohen, who was spurred by her son's death in Park Slope, Brooklyn (NY), to join with other grieving parents to form Families for Safe Streets. This organization—now with chapters sprouting up across the country—has already notched several major victories, including lowering of default speed limits from 30 miles per hour to 25 in New York City (NY) and a major expansion in the use of speed cameras in school zones, both interventions that required action from the state legislature and that have been associated with significant decreases in traffic fatalities.

As gutting as our pedestrian crisis scale is, the good news is that planners possess the tools and techniques to address it. Schmitt details several steps that can meaningfully decrease fatalities, from obvious fixes like expanding the provision of crosswalks to more subtle changes such as giving pedestrians a head start at intersections (before turning traffic) and even using social norms to alter drivers' behavior. Indeed, the reader learns of an ingenious experiment in Minnesota, wherein researchers erected signs displaying what percentage of cars yield to pedestrians at specific intersections, which increased driver compliance throughout the duration of the pilot.

As to criticisms, one minor gap is too little historical data on U.S. traffic fatalities, which would help contextualize where the epidemic stands today. Although Schmitt does touch on the fascinating period of the 1920s and 1930s, during which deaths first spiked and streets were remade for the automobile's benefit, more discussion of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (when pedestrian fatalities were higher than they are today) would provide a fuller picture of current trajectories.

Overall, for meaningful changes to sweep the nation—especially the neighborhoods where traffic violence is the highest—there must be a concerted effort to shift the dialog and present the “moral basis for change” (p. 174). Schmitt makes a useful comparison to the opioid crisis; though addiction was long considered a personal failing, it has only been since Americans have confronted the *structural* aspects of that epidemic that more meaningful change has come about, such as reining in pharmaceutical companies. The author's challenge to planners is to do the same with pedestrian

deaths: understand how the roads we build, the cars we drive, the laws we pass, and whom we blame all reinforce our status as an outlier in the industrialized world regarding death while walking.

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## Power in Planning

### *Planners in Politics: Do They Make a Difference?*

Louis Albrechts (Ed.)

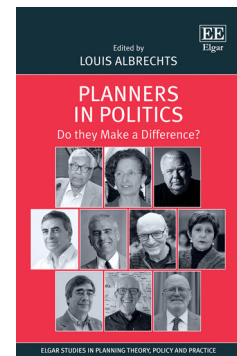
(2020). Glos, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. 304 pages. \$130.50 (hardcopy), \$40 (e-book)

*Reviewed by Wes Grooms, Gold Coast Sustainability Governance Institute*

**T**he notion that planners *should* breach the politics–administration divide is usually avoided

by planning scholarship and frequently dissuaded by the rules with which public sector planners must comply.

However, of late, theoretical and experiential arguments encouraging planners to pursue and hold elected office have come from both practice (APA, 2019) and the academy (Grooms & Frimpong Boamah, 2018; Karki, 2017). Given the nascent state of this “political turn” in planning praxis, very little knowledge exists about planner politicians (p. 7). Louis Albrechts has made a significant contribution toward closing this gap by drawing from his training, interests, and political science and planning experiences. He has assembled and presents the auto-ethnographic essays of planner politicians from around the globe in his new edited volume *Planners in Politics: Do They Make a Difference?*



Rigorously peer-reviewed essays written by planning practitioners and planning academics who, in the course of their careers, have served as appointed or elected executive politicians (that is, not legislators) are the heart of the book. These contributors were charged with describing whether and how—from planning’s perspective—they, as planner politicians, made a “positive difference” in government functions and outcomes. Inherent to this notion of a positive difference are the ways and means by which their expert knowledge of planning helped them more successfully implement and attain the normative decision-making processes and policy goals espoused in planning’s professional code of ethics, accreditation standards, and theories of practice.

Closely related is the essential, though frequently only implicit, thread in the book regarding the role that power plays in planning. Power relations are far from an unknown topic in planning scholarship. However, this book’s focus is on whether political power exercised by politicians with extensive planning expertise was key to their making this positive difference. Based on the contributors’ accounts of their time in political office, there can be no doubt this is the case. Maricato and Tanaka, for instance, narrate evidence of the growing influence and power of the political left in Brazil that contributed to Maricato’s success in advancing issues of social justice and equity as São Paulo’s Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (also see Ferrão). They discuss how the National Urban Reform Movement influenced Brazilian left politics sufficiently to achieve the inclusion of urban policy language in the 1987 Brazilian constitution that permitted the country’s judiciary to begin finding in favor of the concept of urban justice. They also recount how the political left’s machinations to retain control of Brazil’s congress led to the Ministry of Cities, in which Maricato had played a crucial role bringing to fruition for purposes of forming “coalitions to ensure governance” (p. 17): being handed to members of a far-right political party to lead. Similarly, Barbanente’s political appointment resulted from elections that created an extraordinary opportunity for giving political centrality to urban and regional planning, which itself had to be changed radically in content, process, and form to realize the political vision calling for a new development cycle based on the enhancement of tangible and intangible resources, set up by women, men, youth, and the cultural and environmental heritage of the territory.

Further, the volume offers the promise of improving the reputation, valuation, and use of planning theory in the academy and, more important, in practice. Several contributors explore how their understanding of, and commitment to, planning theory followed them into politics and deeply informed their work. For example, Ferrão’s experience reflects the ability of communicative action-based planning theory to bring to bear views,

objectives, expertise, and knowledge that “proved crucial for putting forward and implementing ideas, policies, [and] innovative decision-making processes and practices” (p. 58) across the historically hierarchically organized disciplinary silos of the government’s structure. Embedded planning can be seen in Barbanente’s noting how the onsite presence of political and technical officials and consultants from the regional planning department had moved part of regional planning out of its “natural” offices. These planner politicians were imbued with the power necessary to correct for and prevent the misuse and abuse of planning processes typical in professional practice and expand the tenets and principles of planning theory into new areas of their governmental structures. In concert with their acknowledgment of planning theory’s tendency to center the planner while too frequently ignoring or discounting adjacent actors’ power and actions, the contributors’ governing experiences should help readers better understand the emerging argument calling for the educating and electing of planner politicians.

The book’s contributors were also asked to indicate whether and how their political service had subsequently influenced their planning scholarship, teaching, or professional practice upon returning to those roles. Although their answers varied, inadequate education about politics in planning is a common theme revealed by several of these planner politicians. For example, Ferrão returned to academia, seeking to read more political science and ethics literature.

Based on his holistic assessment of the contributors’ experiences and the larger body of work investigating planning’s constitutive nature, Albrechts concludes that “planning is in politics, and cannot escape politics, but is not politics” (p. 263). This perspective is very much in line with past conclusions that planning is political but not *politics*. This determination, however, seems premature given the growing attention being paid to planning’s *contemporary* constitutive nature, which is due at least in part to claims that “*the very idea of planning* [emphasis added] . . . [is] not a technical but a political task” (p. 79), that planning *is* politics (Davidoff, 1971), or that planning *is* governing (Grooms, 2019; also see Low, 1991).

Finding that these planner politicians did make positive differences in governing processes and outcomes, Albrechts hopes that the volume will inspire planning academics and practitioners to consider stepping into politics. Concurring with that hope, I urge planning academics, students, and practitioners who are convinced of the crucial role planning can and should play in good governance and who are committed to making *full use* of the discipline in the production of a just and equitable society to read *Planners in Politics: Do They Make a Difference?*

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## Ecological Planning

### *Design With Nature Now*

Frederick Steiner, Richard Weller,  
Karen M’Closkey, and Billy Fleming

(2019). Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. 368 pages. \$80 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Larissa Larsen, University of Michigan

The question of “where” has always been at the center of planning and urban design. More recently, the importance of where has been amplified by climate change impacts and the repercussions of poor decisions. Ian McHarg’s approach, embodied in his 1969 book *Design With Nature*, offered a flexible methodology, imbued with an ethos of environmental humility, that has served as a foundational methodology in the planning field for the last half-century. By showing us where development is least appropriate based on protecting the site’s



ecological and social characteristics, McHarg answered the question of where indirectly by first answering “where not.” Using his adaptable planning method (that foreshadowed overlay mapping in geographic information systems), we can combine different biophysical and human characteristics to assess land use suitability cumulatively. McHarg’s approach embodies systems thinking and helped promote the importance of native plants, green infrastructure, and ecosystem services.

To celebrate McHarg’s impact and reflect on his legacy 50 years after the publication of *Design With Nature*, Steiner, Weller, M’Closkey, and Fleming undertook a multipart effort that resulted in the new publication *Design With Nature Now*. First, the editors requested that some of McHarg’s former colleagues and students write short recollections that highlight McHarg’s impact on their thinking and identify the lasting contributions of his work. Second, the editors choreographed an international call for planning and design projects that embody McHarg’s approach. The book highlights 25 projects that “exemplify and extend McHarg’s design philosophy and method.” These projects are divided into five categories: Big Wilds, Rising Tides, Healthy Port Futures, Toxic Lands, and Urban Futures. These projects were based on an exhibition and conference held at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 2019. The book’s third and fourth sections contain keynote addresses and commentaries on the contemporary projects delivered by planners and designers at the conference. In the following paragraphs, I identify a few of the new book’s many strengths and one missed opportunity.

Even before reading this book, I knew second-hand of McHarg’s charisma and ribald sense of humor. In the new book, several contributors, including Steiner, recount the extent of his public persona that I was unfamiliar with. Beyond teaching one of the most popular classes at the University of Pennsylvania, titled *Man and Environment*, McHarg was indeed a public intellectual. For example, in the early 1960s, McHarg hosted an interview show on public television. McHarg asked his guests wide-ranging questions about humans’ place within the world, extending to discussions on religion and philosophy. His guests were a diverse collection of contemporary intellectuals, including Margaret Mead, Eric Fromm, and Luna Leopold. His dynamic public personality and effectiveness as a communicator help explain why his ideas moved beyond the planning and design disciplines and into the larger environmental conversation of the 1960s and early 1970s. I wish the editors had moved the book’s very last piece, an excellent history of McHarg by William Whitaker, curator of the Architectural Archives at the University of