

The Future of the Planning Profession

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The Future of the Planning Profession: Planning With Many Changes, and for Many Challenges

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This Interface emerged from a symposium on the future of the planning profession held at the University of Reading in September 2019. This reflected on present new challenges concerning the means, political standing, and substantive goals of planning across the globe. Some issues discussed are longer-run and continually shifting. The conditions and tasks faced by planning have morphed, as have the types of people and sectoral balance involved in planning. Renewed scrutiny over the environment, quality of development, and its accountability to the public it seeks to serve, are active topics in the UK. Pointedly, concerns over a public sector planning that has been weakened by a decade of austerity, and destabilised by serial changes are in the forefront of peoples' minds, with advocates of further deregulation and reform currently holding court (e.g., Airey & Doughty,). With such changes ongoing now is a good time to consider the future of the profession. The essays that follow largely address issues for the profession in the UK but are also more widely applicable.

Despite a growth and diversification in planning activity, the profession in the UK is often undervalued with persistent public distrust in planners and the system. The Raynsford Report examining the planning system in England recently argued that “broader civil society consensus around the need for planning has fragmented, and many people are simply unclear about what the system is for” (, p. 23). The regulatory system has been the subject of continual structural change and this is likely to continue in years to come. The profession is once again under assault with Hugh Ellis (, n.p.) recently forecasting “the endgame” for the English planning system and “the ideals which founded the planning movement.” As a result, planning’s operating environment is breeding uncertainty, and it is more challenging to be a planner in such circumstances. A lack of transparency in the UK adds to the gap between

the planners and the planned, as well as between different forms, sectors, spatial scales, or types of 'planner.'

The issues taken up by the wide-ranging contributions below reflect the ideas for progressive change found across the profession and the breadth of concerns being aired. Numerous voices from within planning are now talking about the 'future of the profession' to varying degrees of acuity. These debates cohere around some key threads: holding up for scrutiny how the planning profession thinks about corresponding to the changing, diversifying environment; how to more effectively address the substantive challenges faced by planning; improving the state of public understanding and engagement; and lastly how actors involved in planning – notably the Universities and the professional bodies – need to work together more effectively than in the past. Attention is needed lest the knowledge producers and professional regulators become mere spectators and (critical) commentators, rather than acting to lead debate, advise and inform powerbrokers and the public.

If planning is partly about mitigating social risk, then a consequence of recent developments and experiences of the past 20 years has been the lack of success in engendering public support. Recent research produced by Grosvenor () in the UK painted a rather bleak view of mistrust in the planning system, the decisions it produces, and the motivations of its central actors. Such findings are not new, but present an uncomfortable truth that prompted the Skeffington Report to review the relationship between 'people and plans' half a century ago (see *Planning Theory & Practice* Interface contribution last year – Inch, et al.,).

Subsequently as Swain and Tait () highlight, the serial impacts of pluralism, liberalism, globalisation, risk, and rights-based claims have acted in combination to erode an already weak trust in planning and planners.

While such issues colour many accounts of planning, the function of maintaining planning's knowledge base is a challenge for a profession that has morphed and expanded, not only in the UK, but in many other countries – and some of whom are also considering the future of the profession (see CIP-ICU, ; RTPI,). This Interface section was written to maintain a debate about the future, and was coincident with celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the RTPI's Royal Charter wherein the articles of association include an emphasis on the role of a learned society. This journal is of course playing a part in facilitating exchange and learning for RTPI members and others under that heading. As such, the debate around the future of the planning profession in present conditions appears appropriate both here and now.

Contestation over what is needed to skill the profession and what knowledges are relevant worldwide has been an enduring refrain, last explored in any depth in the UK almost 20 years ago under the RTPI's Education Commission (see Brown et al.,). Planning has been characterised in numerous ways in the academic literature; the set of activities deemed 'planning' and its basis are diverse, contested and evolving. This fragmentation should alert us to a more active and responsive approach to what learning and awareness is needed by planners. Moreover, it is argued here, that a rethink is needed of how a reinvigorated modality of planning governance and learning should be formulated in the change environment that planners inhabit.

This leads to a focus on the role of the Universities as planning schools and the relations between the profession's academic base and practitioners. The relationship has been somewhat attenuated and, at times, difficult. Sympathetically this disposition could be characterised as being in positive tension, partly explained by the multiple pressures faced over time (e.g., competing priorities, resource limits, existential challenges). Such conditions also provide grounds for greater collaboration; rather than the more instrumental relations that tend to persist (e.g., accreditations, ad hoc research commissions).

The Universities play a critical role in supporting and helping the profession fulfil its duty, both in informing the profession in general and in educating and training student planners. It seems axiomatic that the relations between professional bodies, the wider practice community and universities should be mutually supportive, even if occasional disagreement is present. A healthy dialogue can ultimately assist parties to achieve similar ends. These are simply described as seeking 'better planning, better outcomes' and to advance planning for the benefit of the public.

Strengthened spaces for deliberation and mutual understanding across a now diverse profession are needed more than ever, particularly when considering the multiple changes and implications of redefinition and challenge mentioned above. Harnessing the analytical, lobbying, insight and other capacities held across the key partners in planning is critical to sustaining planning as an effective, relevant profession. Actors who recognise the value and potential of planning do need to better pool their knowledge, experience and leverage more effectively than in the past, and arrangements to facilitate this (and more) need renewed attention. If this is to be realised then the basis of partnership that has been often espoused needs further effort and maintenance.

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