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INTERFACE

Planning Education: Time to Think, Time to Act

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Conclusion: Time to Act

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This *Interface* started with a number of questions and issues. In response, the contributors brought in thoughts and experiences. A conversation developed. What have we learned at the end of it? Did we end with answers to those questions and issues? But also, what does this all say about what we should, and could do?

A Science or an Art?

Planning is a science, an art, or craft, and many other things. The hybrid nature of the discipline is mirrored by a variety of academic settings, aptly illustrated by Andrea Frank through a sample of planning programs in Europe (see her Table 1). Some seem still worried by the endemic inability of planning to become a clearly identifiable, strong discipline, with an accordingly academic status. But most seem to accept the fact, and even enjoy it. There might be more than just a healthy pragmatism in the latter attitude. As Andrea Frank and John Grin argue, the in-between, adaptable nature of planning might be just what is needed in the contemporary world. This is a world where spatial challenges cannot be solved by only one way of looking at things. What is essential is, rather, the ability to link different views of problems and solutions, and continue to adapt one's own to the changing demands of the situation. The challenge for planning educators seems, then, that of translating this awareness into more deliberate choices in terms of education philosophy, organization and methods. Sarah Bell documents how even a discipline with in many ways a more clearly defined, stronger position such as engineering, is providing space for hybridization and adaptability in education curricula. Next to the more traditional (and of course, still important) skills dealing with "mechanisms" and "tools"—new skills dealing with "context" and "change" are now being taught (see her Table 1). As for planning, Andrea Frank's third model of the relationship between planning and other disciplines (see Figure 1C), that of planning as a sort of neural network providing for the interaction and integration between other disciplines, could, and arguably should provide a reference. It might not be entirely applicable, at least not immediately and literally, or everywhere, but we could, if not should make serious work of trying and further articulating and applying it.

At the Interface or at the Margin?

If we follow the line of reasoning in the paragraph above, the answer seems evident: at the interface. Or perhaps, and somewhat more subtly, at the interface because at the margin. It is, after all, from the margin that other worlds can be seen, a dialogue with others can start and joint undertakings can take off. Turning a margin into an interface requires, however, much hard work. It requires understanding of how others (other disciplines, other affected

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interests) look at a problem, and it requires continuously looking for and experimenting with a language to “talk the problem” across borders. Bernd Scholl and Hanna Mattila and colleagues show us how we could teach students this in practice. We should start with a clear statement of why such an attitude is needed by putting “difficult and unsolved problems” in the middle, problems that not even we, the instructors, know how to solve. Moving from these problems we can then start exploring together with students which sort of knowledge and knowledge-bearers might help, and see and experience how far actively engaging with them brings us. It can only be done by bringing the real world into the classroom, if not the classroom into the real world, as practiced in the project-based approach at ETH Zurich. But it could, and perhaps should, go even further, with academia providing a “room for reflection” for student-professionals involved in real planning practices, as in the apprenticeship program in Finland. Along the way students can learn how coping with a complex problem requires more than just trying out different solutions, and also demands re-defining the problem itself. Sometimes it even necessitates reforming of the very organizations and institutions charged with solving the problem, or, at least becoming aware of how they shape and limit the solution space.

Coping with Changing Institutions and a Changing World

The world around planning and planning education is changing. New issues are emerging and new demands are being placed on the discipline and profession. We should, of course, prepare students for these upcoming societal demands. The contributors to this *Interface* all, however, go one step further. Issues have not only changed, but they will keep changing in the future. The question of how to shape the future is perhaps the one that most distinguishes planning as an activity. However, the ground of identification which the future provides to planners is not a firm one, as the future is by definition uncertain. Planning students must then learn to cope with this constant changing, intrinsically uncertain object that the future is. They must become “future proof” and, because the future is uncertain, they have to “learn how to learn”, as central to the project-based approach at ETH Zurich, and “learn how to keep learning”, as central to the Finnish apprenticeship program.

While continuing to discuss this matter and understanding what it means is certainly important, we also seem to know enough to be able to draw some concrete implications for planning education. It is then, not just time to think, it is then, also time to act!