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INTERFACE

Planning Education: Time to Think, Time to Act

# Introduction: Time to Think

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Is planning a science or an art? Is it a discipline at the interface or at the margin? What does this mean in terms of teaching? And how can we teach this while coping with momentous changes in the societal, professional and academic context of planning education? These are some of the difficult, and yet key questions that planning educators are confronted with every day. Sharing these questions and exploring possible answers might help, and in this *Interface* a diverse array of educators from both within and outside planning have done just that. But, before giving them the “floor” the central questions are further elaborated.

## A Science or an Art?

Planning is both an academic discipline and a profession. Planners are educated in academic environments where the scientific method is the standard to refer to. However, the great majority of them will end up working as professionals in a world governed rather by the need to creatively integrate different and often conflicting sorts of knowledge. These will include both scientific, codified knowledge and experiential, tacit knowledge; both the knowledge contributed by experts and the knowledge contributed by lay persons. More often than not, integrating these different sorts of knowledge will require creative skills that go far beyond the scientific method. It could be said that planning students have to learn a science but will have to practice an art. Do we recognize this apparent contradiction? How do we think planning education should deal with it? And how do we translate this view in practice?

## At the Interface or at the Margin?

Planning curricula are usually located in one of two broad types of academic environments: either a social science environment (as a spatial, economic, or management science) or a design environment (as part of architecture or civil engineering). In both these environments planning often has a peculiar position. It is a peculiar social science, as it does not just aim to understand the social world but also to actively identify and assess ways of changing it. It is a peculiar design profession, as it centers on social world-led rather than expert-led design processes. This peculiar position seems to hold both opportunities and threats. There is the opportunity of being at the forefront of innovation through the combination of different perspectives (the analytical and the creative, the

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technical and the social) and there is the threat of marginalization due to not being good enough at any of them (not enough research oriented in one place, not enough design oriented in the other). Do we recognize this peculiar position? How do we think planning education should realize the opportunities and acknowledge the threats that go with it? And how do we translate this view in practice?

### **Coping with Changing Institutions and a Changing World**

The academic institutions where planning is taught are changing, as is the world where planners will have to perform. Universities are increasingly asked to make efficient use of ever scarcer resources, and to give account for their performances against measurable targets. As a result, many planning educators appear to struggle between the conflicting demands of achieving measurable excellence in both teaching and research, and to do that with less. Outside academic institutions the world in which planners will operate is also changing. The current financial and economic crisis is accelerating the reform of government and redefining its role in the transformation of the built environment. In many countries there is a shift away from a leading role and towards a facilitating and conditioning role. The shift, however, does not go undisputed, and there are alternatives, as aptly documented by a recent *Interface* (volume 12, issue 3, pp. 429–451) on planning in the recession. Furthermore, and in an apparent paradox, at the same time that the role of planning is being contested, cities are becoming ever more central in social and economic life, and this is translating into a growing demand for knowledge to help cope with world-wide urbanization.

For planning, these changes seem to hold both threats (as with the “publish or perish” academic credo or the demise of the welfare state) but also opportunities (as with the ever-growing centrality of cities and demand for city-related knowledge). Whatever the case, they beg a fundamental rethink of the place and ways of the discipline and the profession, and thus planning education. What makes matters more complex is that changes are all but unidirectional. Planners in shrinking European or Japanese cities and planners in booming Chinese or Indian cities will, for instance, operate in radically different contexts. Yet, they are often educated in similar ways. Which changes do we see as most relevant for the education of planners, both inside academic institutions and in the professional world? How do we think planning education should cope with these changes? How are we translating this into practice?

This *Interface* offers recognition of the above and related issues and questions. The recognition will necessarily be limited, but it tries to be as representative as possible of a variety of interpretations and contexts. There seems to be little doubt that this is a transition phase, and somewhere in that variety might be the seeds of what is to come: new ways of doing things in the long term, or just hard choices to make in the short term. Contributors from different contexts have been invited: planning educators operating in different academic environments, and educators in neighboring and yet different disciplines.

First, Andrea Frank sets the scene by identifying the peculiar and yet defining features of planning education and the challenges emerging from ongoing changes in the broader context. Her contribution is followed by two outside views. Political scientist John Grin reflects on his experience of teaching “hard” scientists to deal with complex societal problems and on how the insights of policy analysis have helped him in the task, and can help planning educators in theirs. Engineer Sarah Bell introduces the background and essential features of the innovative, problem-based learning approach to engineering education recently developed at University College London and by now serving as a model for the reform of engineering curricula elsewhere. The last two contributions

document innovative experiences from within planning education. Bernd Scholl discusses the planning curriculum and philosophy at ETH Zurich, firmly centered on the tackling of “difficult and unsolved problems” through a “project-based” approach. Hanna Mattila and colleagues discuss their experience in the new apprenticeship program in Finland, and fundamentally reconsider the link between professional experience and academic education. In a final note, I will try and summarize some of the lessons learned.

While diverse, the contributors also have two things in common: the first is the passion of teaching professionals how to deal with the complexities of contemporary societal challenges, and the second is the belief that better education is not only something to talk about, but also, and perhaps most importantly, something to engage with. So, if you also share this passion and belief, you are sure to enjoy reading this!