

It's the Right Thing To Do – Or Is It?

Contemporary Issues in Planning Ethics

by Sue Hendler, MCIP RPP

"We talk about ethics because it calls for extraordinary behavior. If everyone acted ethically, we would have no reason to speak of the subject."

—Howell S. Baum

You're a planner faced with the choice of supporting either the construction of affordable housing or the conservation of a wetland. Would you:

- a Support the development proposal—homelessness and inadequate housing are more important planning issues than wetland conservation;
- b Reject the development in favour of conserving the wetland—they're not building any more of them, and housing can go elsewhere;
- c Have a public meeting and facilitate a compromise among stakeholders; or

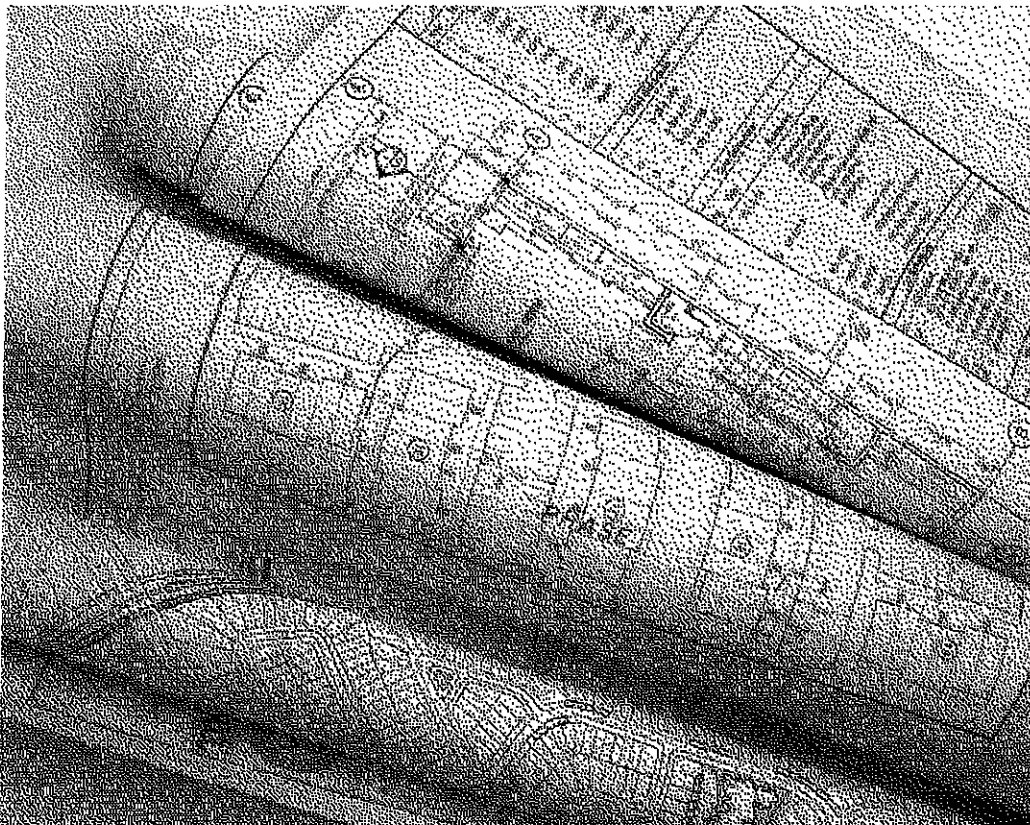
- d Complete a cost-benefit analysis and go with whatever option creates the most benefits?

This kind of question falls within the realm of planning ethics. The central idea is that planning decisions are normative and entail conflicts between values. Each of the above options can be linked to one or more ethical theories, and each represents a substantive value-based choice.

Those of us working in planning ethics analyze these kinds of issues. We may suggest particular roles for planners. We may advocate specific types of planning processes. We may examine empirically the sorts of normative decisions that planners make and the values they have.

There has been much of this work in the last two decades. Papers, chapters and entire books have been dedicated to discussions of the relationship between ethics and theory, practice, values, professional codes and education in planning. In addition, professional planners have been affected by changes in the expectations their professional organizations have of them in terms of the ethical nature of their practice. The professional codes governing practice-oriented behaviour have become more substantive and more rigorously enforced. Training in ethics and ethical conduct has become mandatory for practitioners and planning students at the post-secondary level. In return, planning organizations have sometimes been given more autonomy and power in regulating themselves and their members.

The past few years, however, have not generated much in the way of new work in this field. Every year I teach a planning ethics course, and every year I search for new course materials. There hasn't been much to choose from. The subject index in the *Journal of Planning Literature*, for example, contains few references to arti-





cles on planning ethics. Internet searches reveal the same authors and the same papers that have been around for quite some time. Professional codes generally look much the same as they did ten or, in some cases, twenty years ago.

This leaves me with a dilemma. I was asked to write an article on contemporary issues facing planning ethicists, yet I have little empirical information on which to draw. Still, I would argue that the following issues continue to be of abiding interest to planning academics and professional planners who are concerned about ethical dimensions of their profession.

An ethical framework

As a framework for this discussion, I use the typology first developed by Martin Wachs and adapted in some of my own work. This typology includes five aspects of planning ethics: everyday behaviour, administrative discretion, plans and policies, planning techniques, and planning theory. Everyday behaviour refers to things planners do all the time and that may be subject to ethical scrutiny. Conflict of interest often comes to mind here as a potential source of ethical decision making. For example, should a planner accept a dinner invitation from a developer? Should a planner work in more than one municipality (especially given current trends toward contracting out of professional services)? And so on.

Administrative discretion, on the other hand, refers to the roles that planners accept in their work. Given ambiguity regarding these roles (such as mediator, advocate and data analyst), choices must be made, and these often have ethical content. The ethical nature of plans and policies is a cornerstone of planning. The fact that planners suggest that cities and regions should look a certain way and contain assemblages of certain things means that they should not look other ways and not contain other things. Thus, one community gets a park and another does not. A mall is approved for one location but not for another. These sorts of normative decisions profoundly affect people and illustrate the kind of distributive or redistributive roles that planners play. Planners make these decisions using techniques that are themselves embedded in ethical thought. By this I mean that a technique such as cost-benefit analysis has its own ethical assumptions built into

its very logic. Finally, the ethical content of planning theory addresses the core of planning, in terms of its fundamental reason for being and its subsequent direction.

The following are suggestions of how these five categories of planning ethics are evolving in terms of the ways we think about, teach and do planning.

1. Everyday behaviour

Accountability and transparency are examples of the criteria being used to judge planning decisions. However, pressure on planners to approve projects in the face of widespread economic decline blurs the lines between planning and development. Amalgamations and job insecurity make doing the "right thing" (whatever that is thought to be) sometimes contrary to a planner's self-interest. Flatter, more participatory organizations render traditional lines of accountability less clear than traditional, hierarchical bodies. Thus, attempts to respect notions of accountability and transparency continue, but living up to them is perhaps more difficult.

2. Administrative discretion

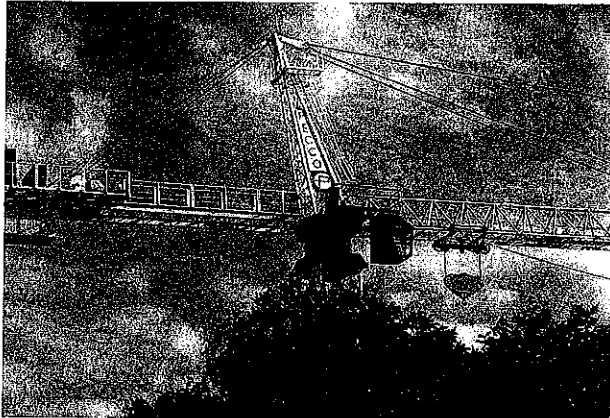
Planners are being called upon to play an ever-increasing number of roles and each of these roles requires different skills. For instance, planners may be expected to

perform tasks less reminiscent of a technician and more in line with today's emphasis on mediation and communication. Planning curriculums, then, should be evolving in an analogous manner. While planning programs are changing, there does appear to be tension between planning programs and the expectations of both prospective planners on the one hand, and their employers and multiple publics on the other. This tension is only amplified by contemporary philosophical considerations regarding community, participation and identity. Gone (mostly) are the days of conflict between the roles of planner as technician and planner as value-laden practitioner; here instead are roles focused on communication, empathy and identity, along with emphases on, for lack of a better term, "people skills."

3. Plans and policies

The normative guidance that planners provide in the form of plans and policies must now cope with issues that are either new or imbued with urgency. Calls for smaller government and less reliance on public services, all made within the context of globalization and ever-increasing mobility of capital, have contributed to profound gaps between rich and poor individuals, communities and nations. Environmental problems such as the pollu-





tion generated by long-obsolete practices and developments promise to continue to plague our land, air and water, as well as all of us who depend on these resources.

Economic development has, in some communities, become almost synonymous with planning, thus limiting the mandate of the people who choose this profession. Identity politics, resulting in ethnic enclaves, gay ghettos and other spatial manifestations of people wanting to be with others like themselves, threaten to generate cities of distinct, multiple communities, complete with gates—visible or invisible. Together, these aspects of contemporary life, and many others, highlight the often conflicting challenges of ethical planning practice.

4. Planning techniques

Both students and employers demand skill-sets that are of immediate use to graduates in planning. As tuition increases and financial pressures on students become greater, there is an increasing emphasis on the tangible "value-added" nature of a postsecondary/postgraduate professional degree. Ethics education is not on the list of skills typically wanted by students, and thus it declines in the face of competing demands on faculty time and resources. Conversely, the ethical content of the skills and techniques that are currently demanded by both prospective planners and practitioners (for example, GIS, stakeholder analysis, consensus building) often goes without adequate mention. Thus, techniques are changing but the lack of accompanying ethical analysis continues.

5. Planning theory

This category contains the question of diversity and related concerns about process. In an increasingly multicultural society, and in a postmodern/post-structural world in which hierarchies and norms are always to be challenged, an all-encompassing public interest becomes increasingly elusive. If there is no unitary public interest upon which to base one's planning efforts, then past attempts at defining a *raison d'être* of planning, along with ethical guidelines and rules of conduct, become all the more inappropriate. In the absence of this sort of norm, others become prominent, and approaches to practice and theory often become procedural. That is, the ideas of consensus-building, facilitation, involvement of stakeholders, collaboration and discourse become important to our quest for ethically responsible thought and practice. Similarly, discursive or communicative ethics replace Kantian or utilitarian ethical theory. Respect for individuals and groups is expressed through attention to their identities, regardless of whether these identities are defined primarily through gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, class and so on. Discussion of power and equity (increasingly) dominates spirited arguments in planning courses. However, empowerment, as a concept that has been prevalent in planning theory and areas of planning practice for some time, is absent from most planning codes. These sorts of disjunctures between planning theory and codified practice threaten to become more prominent in the environment that has formed the context of this discussion.

Our ethical compass

The trends described above, while profound, appear to have done little to stimulate our ethical imaginations in ways that would force us to continue questioning the value-laden nature of our profession, the normative directions of our decisions, and the mandates of our organizations. Yet this is a time at which many aspects of planners' work should be more, rather than less, subject to ethical scrutiny. Now that our techniques, roles, issues and theoretical base are changing, it seems critical to have some sort of ethical compass to guide our thought and action. Determining where north lies, however, is not as easy as it once was.

Related reading

- Baum, H. "Ethical Behavior Is Extraordinary Behavior: A Case Study in Community Planning." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 64, no. 4 (1998): 411-23.
- Campbell, H. and R. Marshall. "Ethical Frameworks and Planning Theory." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 23, no. 3 (1994): 464-78.
- Esnard, A. and E. MacDougall. "Common Ground for Integrating Planning Theory and GIS Topics." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 17, no. 1 (1997): 55-62.
- Hendler, S. "Feminist Planning Ethics." *Journal of Planning Literature* 9, no. 2 (1994): 115-27.
- Wachs, M. *Ethics in Planning* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Centre for Urban Policy Research, 1985).

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Summary

Sue Hendler defines planning ethics and goes on to summarize both the past and the possible futures of the field. Using a typology of five aspects of planning ethics, she outlines issues which she believes will help shape the field over the next several years.

Sommaire

Sue Hendler présente une définition de l'éthique de l'urbanisme dans un portrait rétrospectif et une analyse des tendances qui se dessinent dans le domaine. À l'aide d'une typologie comprenant cinq aspects de l'éthique de l'urbanisme, elle identifie les thèmes qui sous-tendent la profession pour les années à venir.