



Doug Aberley, a bioregional planning consultant from B.C., rounds out the commentaries, squarely putting both planning theory and practice in their place with a hard-hitting critique of “what we must get beyond,” coupled with an inspiring exposition of “what we must head towards.” He calls on us to reconcile our deeds to our beliefs, and shows us how we might accomplish this as collectors and tellers of important planning stories. He also shows how each of us can resolve to redefine our personal relationship with our planning vocation.

# Telling Stories to

## Integrative Approaches to Planning

by Doug Aberley PhD MCIP

**BEFORE I BEGIN I WOULD LIKE TO** make it clear that I believe planning is a unique and often wonderful discipline. In a Western civilization that is all too often determined to treat the social and physical worlds simply as machines, we occupy a very special intellectual and practical territory. Our fundamental purpose is to “see” the whole of a place, a region, a culture.

We perceive patterns where others are concerned only with texture. Our task is to synthesize what has been dispersed and to connect what has been divided. We work at the intersection of art and science, attempting to balance intuition, emotion and imagination with the careful application of problem-solving techniques and complex technology. It is a profound privilege to do what we do. This being said, there remain many aspects of current planning theory and practice that should be phased out, and many others that deserve to become part of our day-to-day practice, and thus to be considered candidates for our new millennium resolutions.

### What we must get beyond

#### Theory

As a neophyte of planning theory I dedicated many weeks to searching through shelves of dusty planning journals from Canada, the United States and Great Britain. I copied nearly a hundred of these offerings and arranged them according to year and topic in a score of binders. A close reading of this potential treasure trove ultimately delivered a rather paltry reward. It is not difficult to identify some of the deepest causes of this disappointment.

#### The persistence of rationalism:

The mythical tenets of rationalism continue to straitjacket our collective professional personality. Although many of the empirical tools associated with the rational planning model should be preserved, it is high time that

we symbolically bury the theoretical structure in which they are arrayed. Perhaps the tenets of comprehensive planning should be carved on a stone placed on the top of a tall mountain somewhere. Every student planner should have to walk towards, and up, this mountain, making stops at a women’s shelter and a First Nation community, at council meetings in villages and metropolitan centres, and at the boardroom of a transnational corporation. A single simple conclusion would be more than evident at the conclusion of this odyssey: while rational planning may be admired as a mythic goal, it does not describe how we act in the real world.

#### The normative-descriptive divide:

Traditionally, a tension has been cultivated between theorists who propose planning as it ought to be and equally persuasive advocates of theories based on planning as it is practiced. Theorists from each school tend either to ignore the work of the other or to engage the other in slyly impolite slugging matches in the pages of planning journals. As a result, we are rarely presented with the view that all of the major theories of planning have developed through a series of reactive co-evolutions. Normative rational planning begat descriptive incremental planning, descriptive advocacy planning begat normative transactive planning, and so on. We have been poorly served by theorists who do not explain continuity and connection, but rather amplify artificial differences.

#### Too few voices:

It is by now well chronicled that there are too few approaches – promulgated by too few theorists – to the problems that planners are asked to conceptualize and solve. This situation is exacerbated by the use of difficult language and styles of exposition, the repetition of tired themes, and the dominance of a few, largely male, voices. Inspirational pieces have been written, but in the eyes of a working planner the overall impression is one of obscurity and indulgence. The relatively few women, non-professionals, and persons of indigenous origin who do write planning theory often offer criticism instead of alternative prescription. This does not mean that planning theory should be “dumbed down”; it only means that we have to increase the size, diversity, and clarity of the chorus that we trust to sing our intellectual orientations to life.

#### Practice

Almost all practicing planners complain that academic planners in general, and planning theorists in particular, have their collective head in the clouds. As valid as this opinion may be, practicing planners are open to the same meta-level of criticism. Despite good intentions, working planners often do not consistently employ the processes upon which our profession is founded. In this case, our critics originate not from within our own ranks, but from the many publics that we fail to serve. Again, the factors that contribute to this crisis are not difficult to identify.

En conclusion, Doug Aberley, *urbaniste-conseil de Colombie-Britannique, distingue théorie et pratique en urbanisme dans un exposé rigoureux des éléments que l'urbaniste doit surmonter et de l'orientation qu'il doit prendre. Il nous explique l'importance d'agir selon nos convictions et donne des directions à suivre. L'urbaniste est dépositaire des acquis de la planification urbaine. Chacun de nous doit entreprendre de redéfinir ses rapports avec la profession.*

# the Future

## for the New Millennium

### Planners as de facto police:

The highest cost of institutionalizing our profession has been that we have accepted the placement of very strict boundaries around the definition of what we do. There is only one area of activity that politicians consistently direct us to perform. Although we periodically venture into more creative territory, the great majority of our collective work involves the making and enforcement of rules. In this mode, success involves crafting legislation whose goal is to subvert any form of variation. That we benignly accept the direction to be so concerned with the preservation of order must colour, to our very core, the way we feel and act, both professionally and as individuals.

### Planners as technicians:

Great pressure continues to be exerted on planning schools to turn out graduates who can hit the ground running with quantitative and technical skills. This kind of training is expected to take precedence over a more interdisciplinary approach to education, one that emphasizes skills involving listening, research, and many forms of communication. While no one will argue that technical skills are not critically important to learn, the teaching of GIS or decision analysis too often ignores the qualitative sensibilities that must ultimately guide their use.

### Planners as mercenaries:

Many planners appear to have divided their personal systems of value from the professional tasks they perform. Perhaps this separation emanates from the simple need to work, or from a sincere belief that it is possible to turn one part of your consciousness off so that another value structure can take its place. The danger of this type of professional behaviour is that our employers see us merely as loyal soldiers, always

ready to take a public participation process only so far or to put tough decisions about sustainability off for just a while longer. We readily sell our skills, but we do not persist in communicating that the stated goals of our profession go far beyond mere maintenance of the status quo.

### Planners as cynics... or worse:

Arguably, our worst collective fault is cynicism. We are left dangling by one too many politician or get manipulated by one too many developer who does not live up to her or his word. We get excluded from the decision-making loop by administration or engineering departments, or go too long without giving or receiving praise. The stress of this situation can culminate in a cynicism that will poison the atmosphere of any planning office. The final stage of cynicism is "group-think," a delusional condition exhibited by any cadre that feels besieged. Serious mistakes in judgment multiply as clients, interest groups or colleagues, who would normally be served with respect, are treated as enemies.

## What we must head towards

### Theory

In this new millennium, planning theory will not be considered the exclusive responsibility of theorists. It will be widely accepted that philosophical discourse involves the intertwining of normative and descriptive elements. The process of successfully adopting these new approaches to the evolution and use of planning theory will require the completion of several related tasks.

### Typologies:

We will have agreed that it is essential to review the existing body of planning theory, and to model—in a variety of ways—the relationships that exist between

them. The goal of this cooperative exercise will not be to come up with a single typology that "speaks" to every planner. Instead, many typologies will be developed, including those that show to what degree a planning theory is sensitive to gender issues, different cultural settings, or decentralized decision-making processes. Successive generations of planning students will be encouraged to survey this body of graphic work, and to add to it as their needs or sensibilities change over time.

### Ethics:

It will also have been accepted that, if there can be no single, uniform theory of planning which allows us to act objectively in the world, it is of paramount importance for us to be thoroughly conversant with issues related to ethics. As planners begin to operate from more transparent value frameworks, we will be healthier collectively, and more honest in the professional relationships we seek to nurture. There will be no charges of obscure behaviour if, at meetings of our peers, someone relates that they are by nature deontological but are working hard to better develop their teleological capabilities.

### Philosophical interconnection:

Planning theories will increasingly invoke the philosophical concepts and vocabulary of a much wider range of academic disciplines. Dewey's "pragmatism," Habermas's "communicative action," Gramsci's "hegemony," and Melucci's "new social movements" will be familiar to all of us. While it will be a daunting task to gain this wider orientation, it will be deemed essential that we become better at the art of philosophical discourse. The resulting expression of true interdisciplinarity, made with confidence, will help to provide the "special knowledge" that our discipline has so long sought to offer.

## Practice

Reforming the practice of planning in this new millennium will pose a far greater challenge than reforming the theories of the discipline. It is not a matter of reorienting the activities of a few planning theorists, but of thousands of working planners who occupy many types of institutional niches. In fundamentally changing the way in which we conceptualize our purpose and act in the world, a number of challenges will have been met.

### Sharing our "private heart":

We will learn to step back from the "busyness" of our day-to-day jobs so that we can regularly appraise the larger agenda that we set for ourselves as professionals and individuals. This larger agenda will be inspired as much by our hearts as by our minds. We will also learn to share these feelings and aspirations easily with other planners, as well as with constituents of the institutions and communities in which we are employed. We will become valued as much for our clear expressions of issues related to beliefs and values as we are for the application of our technical expertise.

### Thinking and acting "out of the box":

The idea that our professional success should be judged solely on how well we serve the mandates of our employers will be successfully challenged. In nurturing a new tradition of service we will work more regularly for "free," choosing a prudent amount of personal or consultancy time to dedicate to causes that exist beyond the bounds of the status quo. In addition to broadening the constituency for planning in general, we will promote the spread of innovative demonstration projects that help define how ecological sustainability and social justice can actually be achieved.

### Ecosystem connection:

Planners will reorient their practice to the central consideration that the majority of human activity is best organized within relatively small territories called "bioregions." Issues related to self-reliance in staples production, watershed restoration, efficient movement of goods, and development of bottom-up structures of governance and development, will evolve within this regional context. Planners will lead the way in explaining processes by which colonial "straight-line" boundaries will be replaced by new administrative limits that have greater respect for biophysical and cultural continuities.

## Conclusion

In my work with First Nation communities, I have often heard that the purpose of one's life and work should be the collection of stories that will someday make you a respected Elder. At this stage, you will have passed through experiences of a type and variety that engender the celebration of your worth as a repository of knowledge, humour, and insight. It is my guess that stories of by-law enforcement or official community plan revision, or tales of how you worked to maintain late capitalism, would not cut the mustard. To be valued, our stories will have to be based on a different range of experiences. How did you help bring social justice to governance? How was biodiversity re-established as local watersheds were restored? What bravery did you attain—either purposefully or unwittingly—as old ways of doing things were confronted and replaced?

If you are unfortunate, you see planning only as a career. If you have somehow managed to keep your "private heart" alive, and have helped individuals and communities realize aspirations for social justice and ecological sustainability in whatever form, you have made your life something more. It is this joining of service to a spectrum of generally accepted purpose that I hope will define planning in the new millennium. In this way, we will be able to participate more fully in the many processes that weave strong connections between humans and the ecosphere, between neighbours, and between cultures. We will be better able to balance what we "do" with what we "believe." Simple as that.

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