

5. The plan is dead; long live the planner

Peter Bradwell and Inderpaul Johar

The key problem is no longer to ensure that our social and national systems are stable, it is to ensure that our . . . procedures are more adaptive.

Stephen Toulmin¹

It is easy to speak of the democratic imperative to engage communities in the planning of their local environments. Development isn't simply the process of drawing a map; it impacts on the relationships between people, places, communities and the future they generate. But the complex nature of communities and their demands for autonomy make planning – and the role of the planner – increasingly problematic.

It is increasingly difficult for planning to reconcile local and national pressures. On one hand, as the principles of participation and local empowerment grow in popularity, it is easier for neighbourhoods to express their own views about their future. For example, planning legislation from 2004² builds in flexibility and the potential for greater community involvement in planning; the government's 'double devolution' agenda looks at shifting power not just to local authorities but to communities themselves; and Sir Michael Lyons's report³ into local governance stresses the importance of locally led 'place-shaping'. On the other hand, national and global

planning pressures, such as the need to increase dwelling density and reduce environment damage, are at least as strong as ever.

With the rise of localism, developing a planning narrative has become increasingly difficult because planning professionals have lost some of their traditional organisational power to the citizens they serve. As a result, they need to re-think traditional plan-led decision-making and recast their relationships with citizens and other stakeholders. When the plan is dead, what is the role of the planner?

Dispersed knowledge and the professional

Professional know-how is increasingly rivalled by that of their clients. Unprecedented access and availability of technical and factual information enabled by the internet has democratised knowledge, undermining exclusive professional power. This is as true for planners as it is for doctors. Today, savvy campaigners are challenging planning decisions armed with knowledge of legislation and technical processes.

At the same time, it is hard for planning officials to get a sense of how a neighbourhood *really* works or feels. The system-wide shift in the access and distribution of public knowledge has been combined with an increasing awareness that the planner has never been able to take account of the subtleties of deep *local* knowledge. As a result, the traditional intellectual tools of planning are being challenged on two fronts. Technical, system knowledge is accessible to larger numbers of people and the local, tacit knowledge of built environments is increasingly seen as beyond 'capture'.

How do we build a new professional paradigm in which planners are better able to mediate between competing demands despite their relative lack of technical and local knowledge?

Democracy and planning

We live in a world where London is better connected to New York than to Croydon. Planning is about creating and actualising visions of the future built on identity and perceived social 'need'. But relational

links within and between cities, towns, places and the future have become too multiple and powerful for purely geographic notions of identity. Strong, fluid globalising identities have continually perforated the geographic boundaries of belonging. These connections are also increasingly unpredictable, with market forces and community autonomy devolving and decentralising flows of action, connection and disconnection in contemporary cities. As communities' demands for autonomy clash with national and global responsibilities, decision-making processes themselves are brought into question.

In the past, citizens accepted planning decisions because they elected and held to account the local councillors who influenced and regulated planners' work. The fragmentation of values, proliferation of communities and multiplication of democratic channels have undermined the existing frameworks of political consensus required to legitimise planning.

Where in the past councillors were in a position to take political pressure on behalf of planners, arguably, today their decisions have been overly politicised.

How do we re-articulate the legitimacy of the planner and do more to engage communities?

Beyond the plan

What possible models can we imagine for the 'future planner'?

Kill the plan – the scenario planner

To revitalise their role as change-agents driving innovation, the planner could work beyond the plan as a 'scenario planner'. Scenario planning is based on the idea that creating several alternative futures is an excellent way to manage uncertainty. Recognising the problems of 'the plan', the planner could co-create different visions of a locality's future for residents to engage with. Making important neighbourhood dynamics visible in this way, and characterising various possible responses, is a proven way to engage the public and broaden debate.

Network planning

Network planning recognises the limits of geographic democracy, where the rights of a community are not matched by responsibility to those from 'out of town'. Citizen panels chosen by lot could link the aspirations of locals and those from elsewhere by including groups of each in a citizens' jury. There have been similar, successful models of citizens' budget schemes, with communities collectively deciding on spending priorities.

Planner as judge

The planner as judge repositions the planning system away from democratic legitimacy towards 'judicial legitimacy'. In a world of multichannel democracy, planners could rediscover professional autonomy by asserting their independence to arbitrate between competing visions of the future. The Planning Inspectorate, for example, currently plays a similar role. These judges could be drawn from a range of fields that make up the emerging urbanist 'profession'. Crucially, the independent role of a judge could position the planner as less complicit in the planning system and build greater public trust.

Facilitating emergence

We could recognise the planner as an 'enabler', helping communities to 'self-build' by sharing knowledge of how the planning system works. This would shift the planning role from development control to facilitation. 'Advocacy planning' has been used widely as a means of finding a more equitable distribution of resources for groups that might otherwise be underrepresented.

The socratic planner

Our Google culture means answers are easily found but a certain monopoly on prescient *questions* remains. Planners might increasingly trade on their ability to ask great questions rather than to provide all the answers. This is the planner as a trouble-maker,

charged with loosening the dogma of developers, communities and government, and helping to resolve conflicts of interests.

Elected chief planners

We vote for local councillors but the process of appointing planning officers and planners themselves is bureaucratic not democratic. Could we elect chief planners? Would this forge stronger connections between communities and place-shapers, and make planning more accountable? Where they have been introduced, for example, elected mayors have remoulded the planning process and its relationship to the electorate. Are such directly elected representatives better able to manage the tensions and complexities of today's communities?

Future planners

Demos is looking to build on these observations by inviting planners to talk about the future of their profession. These six models outlined above are based on what we have identified as important contemporary shifts affecting the legitimacy of planning. The shape of the profession can be remoulded only by innovative planners *themselves*, who seek to work with the grain of contemporary political, social and democratic change.

The plan might have disappeared, but planners don't have to go with it.

Peter Bradwell is a researcher at Demos and Inderpaul Johar is an architect at Zero-Zero Architects.

Notes

- 1 S Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The hidden agenda of modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 2 *The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004* (Norwich, TSO, 2004).
- 3 M Lyons, *National Prosperity, Local Choice and Civic Engagement* (London: HMSO, May 2006).