

**Is Sustainability an Appropriate Focus for Planning Education?
A Discussion Paper**

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At the University of Otago, both in the planning programme and in the Geography degree programmes sustainable development is arguably, the most used theoretical paradigm. For planning practice, New Zealand's primary legislation the Resource Management Act (1991) and the more recent Local Government Act (2002) are focused on the principle of sustainability, explicit in the former and implicit in the latter. In practice, sustainable development has become the most prominent guiding force, primarily with regard to the physical environment. Certainly, New Zealand since the passing of the Resource Management Act has seen the entrenchment of the dominance of biophysical planning and land use planning, where an environmentally determined 'sustainable management' has been adopted rather than a wider social, economic and environmentally oriented sustainable development. In New Zealand the land use planning dominance is now being challenged and the call for wider, more innovative socially oriented planning approaches being made. For planning education this call has resonance and relevance for those of us responsible for curriculum design and delivery. This paper will explore the role of the sustainable development paradigm in planning, its roots, its attractions, benefits and its limitations.

The Rising Dominance of the Sustainability Ideal

A quick trawl of some of the international and national Planning Institutes and key organisations involved with planning reveals a profession which has 'sustainability' as one of, if not its key stated objective. The concept of sustainable development is at the forefront in mission statements, career advice, definitions of what planning is, as a focus for future development, as a central research focus and in the case of the Australian Planning Institute forms part of its logo. The following examples taken from the Institutes' own web sites clearly illustrate the centrality of concern around sustainability:

- *Commonwealth Association of Planners:*

The Commonwealth Association of Planners seeks to focus and develop the skills of urban and regional planners across the Commonwealth to meet the challenges of urbanisation and the sustainable development of human settlements.

- *Canadian Planning Institute:*

'Planning' means the scientific, aesthetic, and orderly disposition of land, resources, facilities and services with a view to securing the physical, economic and social efficiency, health and well-being of urban and rural communities...Responsible planning has always been vital to the sustainability of safe, healthy, and secure urban environments.

- *Royal Town Planning Institute:*

The RTPI is currently reviewing its own policy on sustainable development. The subject was discussed by the RTPI Council in detail in April 2002. The RTPI frequently addresses the issues associated with sustainable development through, for example, consultation responses to Government and other public bodies, press releases and articles in *Planning*.

The RTPI has published a new teaching aid entitled "Education for Sustainable Development: A Manual for Schools".

In November 2002 the RTPI set up a Sustainable Development Think Tank. The Think Tank comprises of 14 members of the Institute, its aims include; the production of a sustainable development strategy for the RTPI, advice to Management Board on the implementation of the strategy, identification of alliances with other organisations and the production of a topic based policy.

- *PIA Planning Institute of Australia:*

PIA has as its subtitle in its banner ‘Creating sustainable communities’.

The notion of sustainable development is one that appears to be of great interest to the planning profession globally. It is central to their research and future development (RTPI), it is part of the first stage of representation of the profession as in PIA’s banner, it is in the definition of planning (CPI), and forms a central objective of planning practice (CPA). In New Zealand this centrality is well entrenched in the profession too.

Sustainability in New Zealand

In New Zealand, sustainability is similarly at the forefront as the following quote from the New Zealand Planning Institute website indicates:

Planning in New Zealand is based on the concept of "sustainable management" of natural and physical resources. Global concerns about the gradual loss and destruction of many of our natural resources mean that communities at international, national and local levels must learn to live ‘sustainably’. With the passing of its latest integrated planning legislation, the Resource Management Act 1991, New Zealand is now at the leading edge of international moves to achieve sustainable management.

New Zealand was an early if not the first convert to the sustainability ideal. Indeed its Resource Management Act (RMA) predates the 1992 Rio Earth summit often taken as the founding stage of sustainability. The RMA places sustainability at the centre of planning in New Zealand. Where this centralising becomes problematic, however, is in the attachment of a specific set of understandings to this term. In New Zealand the full term used is ‘sustainable management’ which relates to “managing the use, development and protection of physical resources in a way, or at a rate which enables people and communities to provide for their social, economic and cultural well being, health and safety while....” (RMA, 1991,s.5). It can be argued that as New Zealand’s legislation plainly defines sustainability so planners should know what they are dealing with it. Nonetheless, there are problems with this definition in that as the Parliamentary Commission for the Environment relates, this has not prevented confusion and has not necessarily resulted in progress:

The sustainable development story of the 1990s is also one of confusion about what sustainability is all about. New Zealand made a flying start in the late 1980s with the crafting of the Resource Management Act... Ironically, this starting point has contributed to our now being behind many other nations. We are behind in our thinking and the way we interpret the more holistic concept of sustainable development...New Zealand could have been a leading light on sustainable development now – but we are not (PCE, 2002, p.4).

Further the New Zealand definition offers a very limited version of sustainability and one deeply rooted in the ‘natural and physical resource’ ethos of environmental planning. The focus of ‘sustainable management’ at the centre of New Zealand Planning is one that is increasingly being questioned. Indeed, Prof. Jenny Dixon in her inaugural address at the University of Auckland stated: “Planning has become more environmentally focused as notions of sustainability have been embraced” and goes on to argue the case rather that “planning as a discipline is about working with communities in creative ways to shape futures” (Dixon, 2001 pages 5 and 7). In New Zealand legislatively and in the general consciousness of planners, sustainability is at the forefront, but it is a limited, environmentally deterministic, land use planning focused interpretation. As sustainability becomes both increasingly used and contrarily increasingly questioned both within and outside planning generally, there needs to be more discussion on what the guiding principle for planning should be and whether sustainability, can assist in moving towards a more creative, future oriented community centred planning of the type Dixon identifies. At this stage, it is perhaps apposite to ask how has planning got to the stage where sustainable development is so central to the professions representation of itself and if offers a suitable vehicle for this wider planning?

Planning Theory and the Development of Sustainability

Sustainable development has a recognised set of themes and concepts. Commonly used concepts included in discussions around sustainability would include amongst others, concepts such as inter and intra-generational equity, meeting essential human needs, sustainable levels of growth, conserving and enhancing the resource base, social justice, trans-frontier responsibility, maintaining natural capital and improving the quality of human life. Attached to this plethora of concepts and articulations of sustainability there

are a number of generally agreed goals of sustainable development focused around environments that are:

- Clean and healthy
- Resource efficient
- Socially equitable
- Participative
- In harmony with the natural environment
- Vibrant (and some would say spiritual)
(after Freeman and Thompson Fawcett, 2003, p.15)

These goals are broad in scope and only indicative of the myriad of ways in which sustainability is interpreted and the vast range of contexts within which sustainable development ideals are applied. It is this breadth that causes much of the angst that planners feel in addressing issues through the sustainable development lens. So, what does sustainable development actually mean for planners and how does it relate to planning?

The 'success' of sustainable development in infiltrating planning may well be in part due to the fact that several of its key tenets are deeply rooted within planning and long familiar to planning theory and practice. Over time planning has adjusted its orientation in accord with matters of urgency and the primary issues of the day. As it has done so, it has also sought explanations and provided a rationale to explain why it is doing what it is doing and the manner in which it is being done. Such adjustments are part of the flexible and adaptable nature of planning. Indeed as Friedman (1987), Yiftachel (1988), Taylor (1998) and Allmendinger (2002) amongst other planning theorists demonstrate, there is a range of impressive planning theories developed and indeed borrowed from outside planning that have been used over time. Sustainable development being but one of these. Within this body of planning theory a number of approaches to planning can be detected, some of the key ones being:

- Planning as physical-morphological;
- Planning as design-physical planning- master planning;
- Planning as social reform;
- Systems planning;
- Planning as political process-advocacy, public participation...;
- Political economic determinism; and
- Social democracy.

To this list I would add:

- Planning as sustainable development

These broader approaches encompass a range of more specific approaches, concepts and themes that have direct resonance for any current discussions of sustainable development. If we look at the goals of sustainable development as listed above connections to earlier planning ideas and thinkers whose ideas have had relevance for planning can readily be seen:

- *Clean and healthy* – the early public health focus of planning, Victorian ‘philanthropists’ Titus Salts, Robert Owen and William Lever, especially the planning focus on developing appropriate building codes to ensure minimal quality housing, the slum clearance movement of the 1960s and 1970s and for planners in developing countries this is still the key concern.
- *Resource efficient* – Mumford’s concern (1961) with the descent of cities into crisis, Goodman and Goodman’s (1947) essay ‘A city of efficient consumption’
- *Socially equitable* - Engels (1845) and Marx, Jane Jacobs (1961) and Delores Hayden (1984) on and the rise of marginalised groups, primarily women, as a planning concern, David Harvey’s ‘Social Justice and the City’ (1973)
- *Participative* - Davidoff’s advocacy planning (1965), Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of citizen participation’, Sandercock and Forsyth (1990) on the ‘gender’ agenda.
- *In harmony with the natural environment*; Olmsted’s public parks ideal (1938) Ebenezer Howard’s (1898) ‘Garden City’, Ian McHarg’s ‘Design with Nature’, and Owen’s (1991) ‘Planning Settlements Naturally’.
- *Vibrant*: Louis Wirth (1938) ‘Urbanism as a way of life’.

The above list is indicative only, and many more could be included and indeed many of those included under one category indeed were broad thinkers and concerned themselves with broader issues than those encapsulated in the one category. To illustrate, the Victorian philanthropists as they are rather grandly called in planning education, followed many of the tenets of sustainable development. They provided low cost, durable housing made from local materials, and workplaces powered by waterpower based on the productivity of local materials such as sheep and were places where everyone walked to work. They were also concerned for the social and physical well being of the families, provided almshouses for the elderly and parks and allotments were provided to encourage healthy lifestyles. However, the villages were run in a hierarchical, patriarchal top down fashion with no participative input outside their labour from the workers. Still, they were fairly impressive in the context of nineteenth century industrialising Britain. It is important that any new directions in planning builds on those that have positively shaped planning to date. The sustainable development idea incorporates issues and concerns around spatial planning and physical design, planning as social reform and democracy, it recognises interrelationships (systems), the political process in planning and indeed sustainable development has had a strong presence in political thinking. Though it eschews economic determinism, it recognises the importance of economic well-being and appropriate levels of economic growth and development. Within planning, there is then much understanding, that can contribute to a planning appropriate approach to sustainable development.

Sustainable Development: Is it an Appropriate Paradigm for Planning?

Does sustainable development, therefore, provide any new direction for planning, if it can be argued that in fact the tenets of sustainable development are long familiar to planning and planners. Sustainable development differs from many of the earlier planning ideas, approaches and theories in that it is diffuse and subject to ongoing debate. It is a highly contested notion. It has been distorted by a whole range of disciplines, professions and in various practice contexts to mean whatever the user wishes it to mean. As such it has lost coherence and for many even validity as a term. To quote Welch: "Because of the widespread and often indiscriminate use, the term sustainability is not unequivocal; the

gulf between the Brundtland Commission ‘definition’ and practicality is as great as ever” (Welch, 2003, p.23). Then again, sustainable development it could be argued, provides a coherent interface bringing together many of the ideas already central to planning, placing them in a setting appropriate to the 21st century. This debate is important to the question that needs to be asked, which is; whether sustainable development is indeed an appropriate guiding principle for planning now and is so what does sustainable development actually mean?

Sustainable development like many ‘paradigms’ used by planners, emanates from outside of planning but has, nonetheless, been eagerly adopted by them. A strength of such an adoption is that it enables planners to converse at both a practical and theoretical level with other theorists and practitioners from outside planning and it gives the planner entry into wider planning contexts, such as the Earth Summit process, the development of national sustainable development strategies and the creation of the wider development vision involved in urban regeneration. With strength though comes weakness and one weakness is that an external paradigm has been adopted that is not rooted within planning. It does not focus on what planners do or on planning processes. Neither is the drive for sustainable development located within the arenas within which planners mainly work. Local authority sustainable development strategies, for example, may include planners in the consultation and development process but rarely are planners central players in the process. If the potential that sustainable development offers for positive environmentally appropriate planning is to be realised then as I stated in an earlier paper on sustainable development in New Zealand:

Planners need to be key players in the evolution towards sustainable development. In doing so they need to stand firm against the current tendency towards regulatory planning focused on land use and reassert their role as promoters of the social, economic and environmental well-being of their constituents (Freeman, 2004, 324).

Can planners embrace sustainable development when in fact much of the movement in planning is actually towards narrower more bureaucratic planning that is at odds with the wider integrative vision encompassed in the notion of sustainability? Sustainable

development confronts planners with challenges. It is a diffuse concept, it has been hijacked by a whole range of disparate professions and for equally disparate ends, it is quite likely impossible to achieve, it is a highly debated and contested notion and it lacks the certainty common to other theories and approaches. Given these challenges can sustainable development be of value in planning education?

Sustainable Development and Planning Education

Just as in earlier eras design, public good and other themes were central to planning education I would argue that currently sustainable development occupies a similar centrality. In New Zealand the centrality of sustainable development comes in large part from the external environment. Sustainability or at least the ‘sustainable management’ version is the defining concept for New Zealand legislation and planning practice. When students undertake planning employment as casual employees whilst studying, or as graduating planners they become immersed in the whole process of planning as ‘sustainable management’. This then raises questions of what the role of sustainability is in planning education and the wider purpose of planning education. Most planning academics would concur with the view that it is not the responsibility of planning education to produce planners able to just work within any one theoretical paradigm or in practice that references itself primarily by one piece of planning legislation. There is pressure from practice for academics to produce planning graduates able to slot into the immediate work environment and to have the skills applicable to that work environment. In New Zealand that work environment is one dominated by land use planning under a ‘sustainable management’ philosophy. Whilst such a pragmatic view has some validity it needs to be tempered with the need to produce students with a broad vision of planning able to work across different practice regimes and in different planning contexts. In her inaugural lecture Jenny Dixon identified a set of skills that planning education needs to provide for its students:

- An ability to understand” the bigger picture” and to critically engage in issues with colleagues and communities
- A strong professional and personal identity

- Confidence in their own discipline and of their contribution as planners
- A high level of critical, analytical, design and communication skills
- Commitment to ensure that issues are addressed in terms of social and physical sustainability, equity and democracy (2001, p. 7)

Sustainable development does provide a vehicle through which the widening social and economic vision of planning can be engaged with whilst retaining the environmental component of planning so fundamental to planning practice in New Zealand. Planning education needs to engage, in New Zealand and elsewhere with sustainable development. This must not, however, be to the exclusion of other theories, approaches and paradigms important to the developing skills of planners and which provide students with an understanding of core planning ideas and practices.

Sustainable development is an appropriate tool in planning education. If it is to retain its current high position it does need to be carefully presented and considered. Planners and planning educators need to be clear about what sustainable development is for them. Is it just the Brundtland definition, is it environmental planning or is it something wider? The actual definition does not matter so much as some common agreement on, not so much what sustainable development is, but what its limits are so that its essence for planning is not compromised by its continual appropriation and misuse in the wider world. The roots of sustainable development and its links with planning's theoretical and historical development need to be explored and meshed. Its strength in planning comes from its building on and affirmation of some long standing planning principles, principles of enjoining the natural and built environment, concern for providing healthy physical environments conducive to enhancing people's well being and the principle of participation and inclusion in decision making. Such an approach demands broad thinking within planning education and from practice. It is an exciting approach and one that enables planners to talk to others whose jobs also influence the quality of the physical and social environments in which we live. It is too late for planners to retreat to the familiar fortress of land use planning. As planning academics it is incumbent on us to prepare students to engage with this challenging context of sustainable development, but

it is a preparation that needs to be deeply rooted in a profound sense of what planning itself is, where it comes from and where it is heading.

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