

Sustainable Planning: Sustaining communities and practitioners

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I assert that to be sustainable, planning must be a heartfelt, holistic and human-focused activity. Sustainable planning practice encompasses both its outcomes and the planning act itself. I consider how planning educators can encourage students to adopt a heartfelt approach as the foundation of a sustainable and sustaining professional practice. I suggest the communication of three core principles - people, place and professionalism. The focus is the social and cultural in relation to the contemporary planning endeavour in its entirety – a task which is inherently inter-related, interdisciplinary, holistic and human centered. It is my contention that such an approach is essential for sustainable planning practice – for communities under the care of planners and for the profession itself. Educators, together with employers and professional accrediting bodies, have a responsibility to ensure that planners have the necessary emotional and intellectual skills, as well as on-going support, to sustain a life-long and satisfying career.

Key Words: Sustainability, communities, practitioners, educators, heartfelt. Holistic

Introduction

What is the cornerstone of our planning work? Simply put, it is people and the places with which they interact. Planners shape the environments where individuals and communities live, work and play. This is a great privilege, as well as an increasingly complex responsibility in an ever-changing and often uncertain world. But it is also an exciting challenge – one which provides the planner with infinite opportunities to be creative, innovative and entrepreneurial, as well as humane, responsive and understanding. This is central to delivering sustainable planning practice – sustainable for the communities for whom we plan and sustaining as a professional career, the practice of which makes a difference to people’s everyday lives.

Given the socially and culturally uncertain environment of the world today and the current shortage of planning practitioners, it is essential that educators bring to the classroom a sustainable way of doing planning. This will address both the need for social and cultural sustainability for the community, along with a sustaining career for the planning professional. There has been a tendency to ignore the latter but given the growing planner shortage, this has to be addressed urgently and in diverse ways. My suggestions here are a starting point for a continuing conversation amongst planning educators and practitioners concerned for the future sustainability of the profession and its contributions to society.¹

So how might educators approach this challenge? I propose three core principles to consider - people, place and professionalism. And while my focus is the social and cultural, this cannot be seen in isolation to the contemporary planning task in its entirety – a task which is inherently inter-related, interdisciplinary and holistic.

¹ I started this conversation more than 25 years ago by talking to my colleagues in community services when I was a statutory planner in local government. I continued it by undertaking qualitative research in planning and establishing a strong human focus in different courses in the planning curriculum at UNSW. Recently I have been working on inter-disciplinary courses in indigenous and healthy city planning and last year I addressed practitioners at the Planning Law and Practice Short Course (Thompson, S. 2004, ‘Information Base: Social And Cultural’, PLP Course, UNSW: November, 2004) on the three core principles that I discuss here. In this paper the conversation continues, this time focusing on the planning educator’s role.

Principles

Three principles underpin the achievement of a socially and culturally sustainable planning – people, place and professionalism.

People

People are at the heart of what planners do – the individuals and communities for whom they plan. Not only is it essential that planners understand their characteristics and qualities, they must acknowledge people's rights in the planning process. Understanding encompasses adopting a philosophical position of social equity, as well as an appreciation of the local and global in increasingly complex and at times, conflicting contexts.

Place

Place is the environment in which individuals and communities live, work and play. It is where people and space come together. It is the planner's role to facilitate the relationship between people and space to create places of meaning, belonging and fulfillment. A deep understanding and appreciation of the people-place relationship is fundamental to sustainable, heartfelt and human focused planning.

Professionalism

Professionalism is the umbrella which sits atop the skills required by the planner. These are a growing set of attributes needed to match the increasing complex task that constitutes planning today. These skills are also the foundations of a sustaining professional practice, constituting a personally rewarding career embodying reflective practice, life-long learning and personal growth.

Below I consider the main characteristics of each principle, discussing how an ongoing understanding of each is essential for sustainable planning. And while I treat them separately, it is important to note that they are inter-related – one dependant on the other; each drawing from the other. As well as offering a series of reflections and ideas, I provide a list of resources to assist the educator in the development of a sustainable socio-cultural planning practice for the classroom.

People

Sustaining and heartfelt planning practice rests on the philosophical premise of social justice and equity. These principles must be communicated early on in the planner's education and need to be reinforced in different ways in varying planning contexts.

The principles of social justice and equity include:

- Protection of the interests of people in vulnerable positions
- The adoption of non-discriminatory planning practices
- Consideration of the equity implications of proposals in terms of who loses and who gains
- Respect for cultural diversity
- Acceptance of basic human rights
- Promotion of fair, open and participatory decision making for all groups in the community. (Menziez, 1993: 3)

Students have to understand that effective planning for people starts with in-depth knowledge of who they are, as well as an understanding and respect for their needs. There is also the legitimization of community participation in the planning process. Here the educator must stress the principle of fairness and democracy.

Who are they? What are their needs?

This is about developing and continually refining a deep knowledge of the people for whom one is planning

At the local level, this begins with knowing how many people live and work in an area, as well as gathering other basic demographic data. But it goes much further. The complexities that are present in every group must be acknowledged, appreciated and understood. For example, how are differences of age, class, gender, disability and sexuality manifested within a particular group? What are local customs, especially those which have implications for public spaces where groups meet and interact? What are the social, cultural and religious needs of different communities in the local area? How can the planning process address them? How can planners work with

other professionals in gauging, and better understanding, community needs in order to meet them?

Example 'Possible' Needs

Public space requirements are an immediate and relatively simple way to get students to consider the complexities of human difference and its varying demographic manifestations. Some examples are presented below. There are many others. To tap into these, students can be encouraged to use their own experiences and observations of diverse communities in the public realm.

Group	Possible Public Space Need
<i>Teenagers</i>	A place to meet and 'hang out' A suitable venue for skate board riding
<i>Muslim women</i>	A relatively private space where women can meet and supervise their children's play – this space must not be overlooked by others (especially men)
<i>Older Greek men</i>	A place to drink coffee together, to chat and play card games
<i>Pre-school children</i>	Safe play area which is easily supervised by parents and is unattractive to older children
<i>Retired Chinese flat dwellers</i>	Community garden; a neighbourhood park to walk along an even pathway and practice tai chi

How can I find out?

To build up a data base of 'who they are' and 'what their needs are' the planner must use appropriate and rigorous research techniques. These range broadly, from statistical analyses to qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and detailed observations of environments and people's behaviour. They also

comprise relationship building with related professionals who can assist in updating the planner's knowledge of local communities.

Understanding the nature of communities, collectively and individually, necessitates looking beyond the local area. The world today is increasingly shaped by the movements of individuals from country to country, and from rural regions to the city, maintaining traditions, while creating new lives and identities. Cultural diversity is a way of life for most nations, including Australia. Indeed, we are seen as a leader in multicultural policy and practice. Some aspects of Australia's diversity have been recognized by planners but historically the profession has planned for the able, heterosexual, white, suburban dweller, city worker, middle class male (Short, 1989). It is only relatively recently that we have considered women's needs in far flung suburbs, children's play and safety requirements, and older people's difficulties in gaining access to different parts of the urban environment. Planners are still struggling to know, understand and meet the needs of all citizens. Indigenous communities, gay and lesbian groups, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians, toddlers and teenagers, migrants and refugees, as well as the differently abled and those on the margins of society – the homeless, the poor, and the otherwise disenfranchised. Students can find these issues confronting especially if they come to the classroom with limited life experiences and little exposure to groups with different aspirations and backgrounds to their own.

The importance of developing social capital in contemporary communities is another area of growing interest and relevance for planners. This has come about as governments realize that economics alone has failed to resolve the complex problems which currently confront societies (Productivity Commission, 2003). A much more sophisticated and holistic approach is needed. Social capital, while variously defined and debated, encompasses relationships between people and the resulting networks, trust and reciprocity that transpire. Planners are in a pivotal position given their ability to create opportunities for the development of social capital. Not only are we in the business of creating public spaces, we can work collaboratively with communities and other professionals. As educators we have to open our students to these possibilities.

Bringing them into the planning process

Planners have a responsibility to address the needs of ALL citizens who live, work and gather in their locality. However, the notion of 'planning for all' is not an easy one to operationalise. This is particularly so given the diverse and complex communities which typify the local environment today. The profession's difficulty with 'planning for all' is related to the historical assumptions upon which the discipline rested and the complexities inherent in understanding the nature of cultural diversity. It is also linked to the use of traditional planning tools and outdated, culturally assimilationist attitudes. Planners have to acknowledge a wide range of community needs in terms of living styles, communicative routines and cultural traditions.

Creative and inclusive public consultations encourage communities to be part of the planning process. Effective planning embraces innovative public consultations appropriately, engaging with people in familiar environments where they feel comfortable and able to speak about the issues which concern them. To ensure effective engagement with the community, planners have to build a relationship with the community which is open and honest; a relationship which has as its foundation trust, mutual respect and a genuine willingness to really listen to what people have to contribute through a variety of expressive modes. Planners are now well served by different resources upon which we can draw in devising and implementing appropriate public consultations (see resource list). Innovative practice in this area must be the rule – rather than the exception – so that a wide cross section of the community is routinely and matter-of-factly brought into the planning process. It is the educator's role to teach students how to undertake innovative consultations and to develop students' relationship and conflict management abilities – starting them on a life-long development of these competencies.

Place

Place brings people and space together. The acknowledgment of environmental loss is an affirmation of the importance of people-place relationships and the pain which is experienced when a special place is taken away. Fried (1963) found intense grieving, similar to that associated with the death of a loved one, when well-meaning but misdirected urban planners cleared residents from inner city slums.

Today many individuals and communities have genuine and informed concerns about how the planning process will impact upon them and their neighbourhood. This is magnified in situations where it is perceived that one's sense of home is threatened by a planning proposal. For most of us, home is the place we love and know best. It is a refuge of familiarity and control in an increasingly unpredictable world. It is where we start and end each day, and where we interact with those most important to us. Home not only encompasses the dwelling space, but extends to the neighbourhood and beyond. A threat to this special place is frequently met with disbelief and a sense of impending disaster (Porteous and Smith, 2001; Read, 1996). This may translate into angry outbursts hurled at the planning officer trying to explain a development proposal or new strategic policy. At the very least, the planner must be prepared for this emotional outburst. He/she must acknowledge the deep-seated pain that the dispossession of one's home means and look for appropriate ways to address such loss.

An appreciation of the profound nature of the people-place relationship is fundamental in developing a sustainable and heartfelt planning practice. Students readily relate to the importance of home in their own lives and it is an easy next step to show them how a change to familiar neighbourhoods can be frightening and threatening for individuals and communities. In my experience in the classroom, it is not difficult to break down the separation of heart and mind in relation to this central aspect of planning, showing students how they need to be compassionate, patient, empathic and caring when working with communities facing change, no matter how small or large.

I frequently use the popular, funny and yet, poignant Australian film, *The Castle*, to show how one family, who dearly love their home, fight fearlessly and unceasingly to protect it in the face of change (Cilauro et al, 1997). This family's refusal to accept a pay-out (albeit economically 'reasonable') by the planning bureaucrats demanding to compulsorily acquire their property, can be seen as irrational and foolish. Even though the Kerrigan's home abuts a busy airport and is exposed to overhead electricity wires, this house is the family's castle, the focus of their lives together, where they can express themselves and share lasting memories and associations. They will do almost anything to defend it. Students appreciate the depth of relationship that the

fictional Kerrigan family has with their home. In class discussions after viewing the movie, they express an understanding of this intense people-place relationship, something they need to have when working with communities facing change.

There are other non-fiction examples on which I draw to show how planning practice has acknowledged that change can be difficult for people. In two cases of major urban redevelopment which resulted in the demolition of loved homes, the devastating impact of individual and community loss was addressed by planners (Costi and Bailey, 2003; South Sydney Development Corporation, 2001). The planners found ways in which the sense of home could be celebrated and commemorated. A memorial to the people and their lives in those special places meant that the pain of leaving was publicly acknowledged, even if private mourning continued.

The safer and healthy cities movements provide a wealth of examples which illustrate how planners can bring people and place together in positive and heartfelt ways (see for example, Frumkin, Frank and Jackson, 2004; Barton and Tsourou, 2000; Duhl and Sanchez, 1999). Historically, health and planning were closely related but it is only recently that this link has been revived in order to address disturbing increases in physical and psychological health problems in western developed nations. In particular, little participation in exercise, growing obesity rates and social isolation are concerning public health advocates who are looking to the built environment to change current behaviours. Working with planners, health professionals are advocating safer, compact and more pedestrian friendly cities to encourage walking and cycling as viable everyday transportation options for children and adults. The potential for planners to contribute to creating healthy urban places is considerable (Thompson, 2005) and this is an exciting area for students as they can work directly with local communities. Undertaking healthy city and safe city audits are easy field trips to organize and the teacher can readily draw on students' experiences to facilitate understandings.

It is likely that the healthy cities movement will become central to contemporary planning practice. This provides an enormous opportunity for planning educators to show their students the positive and heartfelt possibilities of the profession. These opportunities are related to what planning can do for people, as well as the ways in

which planning can be a nurturing and sustaining career. I'd now like to turn to the notion of 'professionalism' in considering how we as educators can lay the foundations for our students to have sustaining career paths in planning.

Professionalism

The planner's skills are an evolving set of attributes needed to match the increasing complex task that constitutes planning today. The attributes outlined below are inter-related and inter-dependent. They are not an exhaustive list – rather, something to consider as part of the ongoing development of professional practice that is heartfelt, holistic and people focused. As educators we have a responsibility to develop these qualities in our students in a way that will nurture and sustain them in the challenging career that is contemporary planning.

A comprehensively informed planner

Today's planner must operate from a comprehensive, holistic, integrated and interdisciplinary knowledge base. This necessitates being both locally and more broadly informed. That is, understanding the complexity of the local situation, as well as keeping abreast of current thinking and practice at the national and international scales.

The comprehensive planner appreciates and works with the ever-increasing interdisciplinary and inter-related nature of the profession. She/he is attuned to the notion that planning is much more than the allocation of land to its most 'productive' use involving planning law, sustainable environmental principles and rigorous decision making processes. The comprehensive planner works competently and knowledgeably with these important skills, placing them within an overarching social and cultural frame. The core of his/her activities is the facilitation of socially sustainable people-place relationships in all their complexity and intrigue.

Ongoing, indeed life-long, professional education in practical skill development, new thinking and exposure to theoretical developments is part of the comprehensively informed planner's responsibility. It is our duty as educators to develop and nurture a positive attitude to, and an eagerness to participate in life-long professional development.

A culturally sensitive planner

The culturally sensitive planner actively and appropriately engages with the diverse communities that inhabit urban centers today. This practice is based upon a philosophy of social justice – protecting the interests of vulnerable groups and individuals by using non-discriminatory planning practices. Students need to develop an appreciation of the power balances within communities – who are the eventual ‘losers’ and ‘winners’ of planning decisions? They have to be challenged to consider their own power and privilege in relation to those for whom they will be planning. As educators, we need to ask ‘How is this power reinforced by the use of technical jargon, policy terminology and an impatient demeanour?’ The culturally aware planner works effectively and compassionately within the contemporary reality of complex and diverse communities.

A reflective planner

The reflective planner carefully and routinely considers the ways in which she/he practices her/his profession – its effectiveness and responsiveness. The reflective planner also considers his/her own personal responsibility and ethical behaviour. This is in the tradition of Donald Schon (1983). The reflective planner acknowledges her/his personal values and prejudices, not because these are necessarily ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, but because they exist and influence the way in which the world and people’s behaviour within it are perceived. Personal positions impact upon professional responses as well as attitudes, values, beliefs, and moral and ethical stances brought to the planning office.

Ongoing professional education and personal development is part of the reflective planner’s responsibility. As educators we need to be proactive in establishing mechanisms for this to occur. For example, mentoring schemes for students can assist their transition into the workplace and professional practice generally. A supportive mentor (someone in the academy or workplace) can help in the early days of building a career. Professional supervision as part of an on-going reflective practice is sorely lacking in planning. In supervision one can reflect on different aspects of professional life to a trusted senior colleague, seeking guidance about how best to handle difficult situations. Supervision can also extend to reflecting on the stress of professional life more broadly, as well as ways of managing high workloads, inter-personal

relationships and achieving a reasonable life-work balance. Effective supervision plays a key role in sustaining professionals in their careers.

A relational planner

*The relational planner has finely honed inter-personal skills and is comfortable working with people from all walks of life – from the community and professions. The relational planner does not shy away from dealing with conflict, especially when this challenges his/her own familial responses to anger and aggression. There is an awareness of his/her own psychology and development, and an acknowledgment that the personal does impact on professional actions. The relational planner is an holistic human being, with both intellectual and emotional understandings. The relational planner constantly asks her/himself how her/his values and beliefs influence her/his attitudes and positions and the decisions that follow. He/she also examines the way in which his/her professional practice is embedded in wider societal values and norms and the assumptions upon which he/she operates. The relational planner has **compassion and cares about the people for whom she/he is planning, honouring people-place relationships.***

There is a growing awareness that to be a successful professional today much more than intellectual ability is necessary. Increasingly, the role of emotional intelligence in decision-making and individual success is being recognized as integral to all professional practice (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence should be part of the planning curriculum, particularly in senior years.

A facilitative planner

The facilitative planner recognizes that she/he is no longer, if she/he ever was, **the** expert. This is linked to the emergence of diverse groups within the community and their accompanying world-views and ways of acting. It can be argued that these have always existed, but it is only recently that this multiplicity has begun to be acknowledged.

The facilitative planner respects the depth and breadth of local knowledge. This encompasses the community's understandings of its history and complex needs, as well as the right to be involved in planning local futures, whether this is taken up or

not. The facilitative planner encourages people to tell their stories in ways that are meaningful to them. He/she takes these stories seriously, and is skilled in working with the diversity of opinions, attitudes and expectations which they embody. The facilitative planner is a good listener.

The facilitative planner also operates comfortably and competently across discipline boundaries, bringing the knowledge gained into her/his decision-making. She/he knows that she/he cannot work in isolation. The facilitative planner is part of a complex professional and lay community, paralleling an equally complex and inter-related world. It is the role of the facilitative planner to draw on this complicated web, facilitating beneficial and appropriate outcomes.

An entrepreneurial planner

The entrepreneurial planner looks for opportunities to be creative, innovative and responsive to the particularities of each planning scenario. In working with communities, he/she looks for opportunities to bring conviviality and meaning to both the processes and outcomes of his endeavours. Processes such as community consultations can be fun and when they are, inevitably more people actively participate. Spaces that are celebrated and revered by the community are where people want to congregate, meet others and share. These are places where social capital has the potential to thrive and develop. The entrepreneurial planner works with communities to create such inclusive and welcoming places. They may accommodate permanent structures such as an interactive fountain in a pedestrian mall or a range of amusing sculptures in a neighbourhood park. They may be historical features that provide an important connection to a community's heritage, or a lively urban precinct where café tables spill out onto the street, serving wonderful food from different cultural traditions. Conviviality may also be found in temporary spaces like the street fair and festival, and the outdoor exhibition of local children's art work, song or dance. The entrepreneurial planner looks for ways to create spaces which are inviting for the community, where strangers come face-to-face and are encouraged to interact, and where there are possibilities for enjoyment and pleasure in the urban environment.

A creative planner

The creative planner is able to think laterally, welcomes non-traditional ideas and is unthreatened by the use of different ways of achieving planning outcomes. Thinkers such as Edward de Bono (2000; 1994) with his holistic methods for thinking ("Six Thinking Hats") and acting ("Six Action Shoes") offer interesting suggestions for the development of the creative planner which can be used in the experiential classroom workshop. De Bono's ways of thinking range from rational to emotive and intuitive. His modes of action range from formal processes to care and compassion, authority, leadership and command. Landry and Bianchini (1995) also offer a wealth of practical ideas for educationalists in encouraging the development of creative planning approaches.

Conclusion

Today's planner is comprehensively skilled, reflective, culturally sensitive, relational, compassionate and caring, patient, ethical and responsive, facilitative, entrepreneurial and creative. Today's planner is open to new and different ideas, comfortable in a working partnership with fellow professionals and community members. Today's planner strives to create environments which have people's needs, dreams and hopes at their centre. These places sustain communities. They are well used, loved, respected and enjoyed by everyone. They nurture humanity and the deep need that we all have to connect with each other. These sustainable places are the proud legacy of the planner's work.

As educators it is our responsibility to develop these skills so that our students can meet the contemporary challenges of planning. Not only is this essential if they are to deliver sustainable, holistic, and human focused outcomes for the communities in their care, it is increasingly critical for their own personal survival in a profession that is demanding and at times, extremely stressful. It is incumbent on us to provide the foundational building blocks for our students to continually develop their professional skills and understandings. Educators have to take some responsibility for the current shortage of planners. It is not just the employers or professional institutes that should be blamed for those who depart the profession burnt out and demoralized. Sowing the seeds for an enthusiastic embrace of life-long learning, setting up mentoring schemes and encouraging professional supervision as part of reflective practice need to be part

of what the planning educator does in his/her position as teacher, mentor and role model. This will mean that our students leave the academy with the foundational emotional and intellectual resources to build careers that are personally sustaining and nurturing.

References and Resources

In this 'References and Resources' list I include both material referred to in the text as well as resources I have found particularly helpful in the classroom. This is a starting point and no doubt you will have many others to add. Inevitably I draw on my own research in my education practice as this is familiar and provides immediate examples that I can use. I encourage you to draw on your research in similar ways.

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