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During a recent departmental retreat at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, planning faculty conducted a brainstorming session in which each professor—including me—was asked to list, anonymously, some of the major issues and concerns facing the profession today. These lists were then collected and transcribed on the whiteboard. All the expected big themes were there—sustainability and global warming, equity and justice, peak oil, immigration, urban sprawl and public health, retrofitting suburbia, and so on. But also on the board appeared, like a sacrilegious graffito, the words “Trivial Profession.”

When we then voted to rank the listed items in order of importance, “Trivial Profession” was placed—lo and behold—close to the top. This surprised and alarmed a number of people in the room. Here were members of one of the finest planning faculties in America, at one of the most respected programs in the world, suggesting that their chosen field was minor and irrelevant.

Now, even the most parochial among us would probably agree that urban planning is not one of society's bedrock professions, such as law or medicine or perhaps economics. It is indeed a minor field, and that's fine. . . . But minority status by itself is not why “Trivial Profession” appeared on the whiteboard. It was there because of a swelling perception, especially among young scholars and practitioners, that planning is a diffuse and ineffective field, and that it has been largely unsuccessful over the last half century at its own game: bringing about more just, sustainable, healthful, efficient, and beautiful cities and urban regions.

It was there because of a looming sense that planners in America simply lack the agency or authority to turn their idealism into reality, that planning has neither the prestige nor the street cred necessary to effect real and lasting change.

To understand the roots of this sense of impotence and ennui requires us to dial back to the great cultural shift that occurred in the planning field beginning in the 1960s. The seeds of discontent sown in that era brought forth new and needed growth, which nonetheless choked out three vital aspects of the planning profession—its disciplinary identity, professional authority, and visionary capacity. . . . It is well known that city planning in the U.S. evolved out of the landscape architectural profession during the late Olmsted era. Planning's core expertise was then grounded and tangible. It was chiefly concerned with accommodating human needs and functions on the land, from the scale of the site to that of entire regions. . . . But urban planners in the postwar period aided and abetted some of the most egregious acts of urban vandalism in American history. Like their architect colleagues, postwar planners had drunk the Corbusian Kool-Aid and were too intoxicated to see the terrible harm they were causing.

Thus ensued the well-deserved backlash against superblock urbanism and the authoritarian, we-experts-know-best brand of planning that backed it. And the backlash came, of course, from a bespectacled young journalist named Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, much like the paperwork Luther nailed to the Schlosskirche Wittenberg four centuries earlier, sparked a reformation—this time within the planning profession.

To the rising generation of planners, coming of age in an era of cultural ferment and rebellion against the status quo, Jane Jacobs was a patron saint. The young idealists soon set about rewiring the planning field. The ancien régime was put on trial for failures real and imagined, for not responding adequately to the impending urban

crisis, and especially for ignoring issues of urban poverty and racial discrimination.

But change did not come easily; the field was plunged into disarray. As the authors of one 1970 article in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*—fittingly titled “Holding Together”—asked, how could this well-meaning discipline transform itself “against a background of trends in the society and the profession that invalidate many of the assumptions underlying traditional planning education”?

One way was to disgorge itself of the muscular physical-interventionist focus that had long been planning's métier. Forced from his lofty perch, the once-mighty planner now found himself in a hot and crowded city street. No longer would he twirl a compass above the city like a conductor's baton. So thoroughly internalized was the Jacobs critique that planners could see only folly and failure in the work of their own professional forebears.

Burnham's grand dictum “Make no little plans” went from a battle cry to an embarrassment in less than a decade. Indeed, to Jacobs, not just misguided American urban renewal but the entire enterprise of visionary, rational, centralized planning was foul and suspect. She was as opposed to new towns as she was to inner-city slum clearance—anything that threatened the vitality and sustenance of traditional urban forms was the enemy. It is largely forgotten that the popular U.K. edition of *Death and Life* was subtitled “The Failure of Town Planning.” How odd that such a conservative, even reactionary, stance would galvanize an entire generation of planners.

The Jacobsians sought fresh methods of making cities work—from the grassroots and the bottom up. Planners sought new alliances in academe, beyond the schools of architecture and design—in political science, law, economics, sociology, and so forth. But the social sciences were not primarily concerned with the city, and so at best they could be only partial allies. Second, planning was not taken seriously by any of these fields.

Even today it's rare for a social science department to hire a planning PhD, while planning programs routinely hire academics with doctorates in economics, political science, and other fields. Indeed, Nathan Glazer observed that one of the hallmarks of a minor profession is that faculty with “outside” doctorates actually enjoy *higher prestige* within the field than those with degrees in the profession itself. They also tend to have minimal allegiance to planning.

This brings us to the first of the three legacies of the Jacobsian turn: *It diminished the disciplinary identity of the planning profession.* While the expanded range of planning scholarship and practice in the post-urban renewal era diversified the field, that diversification came at the expense of an established area of expertise—strong, centralized physical planning—that gave the profession visibility and identity. Like a well-meaning surgeon who botches an operation, planners were (correctly) blamed for the excesses of urban renewal and many other problems then facing American cities.

But the planning baby was thrown out with the urban renewal bathwater. And once the traditional focus of physical planning was lost, the profession was effectively without a keel. It became fragmented and balkanized, which has since created a kind of chronic identity crisis within the field—a nagging uncertainty about purpose and relevance. Certainly in the popular imagination, physical planning was what planners did—they choreographed the buildings and infrastructure on the land. By the mid-1970s, however, even educated laypersons would have difficulty understanding what the profession was all about.

Today, planners *themselves* often have a hard time explaining the purpose of their profession. By forgoing its traditional focus and expanding too quickly, planning became a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. And so it remains.

The second legacy of the Jacobsian revolution is closely related to the first: *Privileging the grassroots over plannerly authority and expertise meant a loss of professional agency.*

In rejecting muscular interventionism, planners in the 1960s identified instead with the victims of urban renewal and highway schemes. New mechanisms were devised to empower ordinary citizens and the grassroots to shape and guide the planning process.

This was an extraordinary act of altruism on our part, and I can think of no other profession that has done anything quite like it. Imagine economists at the Federal Reserve holding community meetings and polls to decide the direction of fiscal policy. Imagine public health officials giving equal weight to the nutritional wisdom of teenagers—they are stakeholders, after all!

Granted, powering up the grassroots was necessary in the 1970s to stop expressway and renewal schemes that had truly run amok. But it was power that could not easily be switched off. Tools and processes introduced to ensure popular participation ended up reducing the planner's role to that of umpire or schoolyard monitor. Instead of setting the terms of debate or charting a course of action, planners now seemed wholly content to be facilitators—"mere *absorbers* of public opinion," as Alex Krieger put it, "waiting for consensus to build."

The fatal flaw of such populism is that no single group of local citizens—mainstream or marginalized, affluent or impoverished—can be trusted to have the best interests of society or the environment in mind when they evaluate a planning proposal. The literature on grassroots planning tends to assume a citizenry of Gandhian humanists. In fact, most people are motivated not by altruism or yearning for a better world but by self-interest. Preservation and enhancement of that self-interest—which usually orbits about the axes of rising crime rates and falling property values—are the real drivers of community activism.

This is why it is a fool's errand to rely upon citizens to guide the planning process. Forget for a moment that most folks lack the knowledge and expertise to make intelligent decisions about the future of our cities. Most people are too busy, too apathetic, or too focused on their jobs or kids to be moved to action over planning issues unless those issues are at their doorstep. And once an issue is at the doorstep, fear sets in and reason and rationality fly out the window. So the very citizens least able to make objective decisions about planning action are the ones who end up dominating the planning process, often wielding near-veto power over proposals.

To be fair, activism of the NIMBY sort is a fierce guard dog that's helped put an end to some very bad projects, by the private sector as well as the government. And there are times when citizen self-interest and the greater social good do overlap.

In Orange County, North Carolina, part of the Research Triangle and home to Chapel Hill, grassroots activism put an end to a proposed asphalt plant and stopped the North Carolina DOT's dreams of a six-lane bypass that would have ruined a pristine forest tract along the Eno River. But the same community activism has also canceled several proposed infill projects, thus helping drive development to rural greenfield sites. (Cows are slow to organize.) And the shrillest opposition has come not from rednecks or Tea Party activists but from highly

educated "creative class" progressives who effectively weaponized Jane Jacobs to oppose anything they perceived as threatening the status quo—including projects that would reduce our carbon footprint, create more affordable housing, and shelter the homeless.

NIMBYism has been described as "the bitter fruit of a pluralistic democracy in which all views carry equal weight." And that, sadly, includes the voice of the planner. In the face of an aroused and angry public, plannerly wisdom and expertise have no more clout than the ranting of the loudest community activist; and this is both wrong and a hazard to our collective future. For who, if not the planner, will advocate on behalf of society at large?

All planning may be local, but the sum of the local is national and eventually global. If we put parochial local interests ahead of broader societal needs, it will be impossible to build the infrastructure essential to the economic viability of the U.S. in the long haul—the commuter and high-speed rail lines; the dense, walkable, public-transit-focused communities; the solar and wind farms and geothermal plants; perhaps even the nuclear power stations.

The third legacy of the Jacobsian turn is perhaps most troubling of all: *the seeming paucity among American planners today of the speculative courage and vision that once distinguished this profession. . . .*

We have become a caretaker profession—reactive rather than proactive, corrective instead of preemptive, rule bound and hamstrung and anything but visionary. If we lived in Nirvana, this would be fine. But we don't. We are entering the uncharted waters of urbanization on a scale the world has never seen. And we are not in the wheelhouse, let alone steering the ship. We may not even be on board.

How did this come about? How did a profession that roared to life with such grand ambitions become such a mouse?

The answer points to the self-inflicted loss of agency and authority that came with the Jacobs revolution. It's hard to be a visionary when you've divested yourself of the power to turn visions into reality. Planning in America has been reduced to smallness and timidity, and largely by its own hand. So it's no surprise that envisioning alternative futures for our cities and towns and regions has defaulted to non-planners such as William McDonough and Richard Florida, Andrés Duany and Rem Koolhaas, and journalists such as Joel Kotkin and the inimitable James Howard Kunstler.

Jane Jacobs was just the start. It is almost impossible to name a single urban planner today who is a regular presence on the editorial pages of a major newspaper, who has galvanized popular sentiment on issues such as sprawl and peak oil, or who has published a best-selling book on the great issues of our day in this age of unprecedented global urbanization. We are the presumptive stewards of the urban future, yet we have ceded the charting of our very own field to others.

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