
Survey 16: Privatization and the rhetoric of planning practice

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Abstract. In this paper the privatization of the planning profession is examined. The analysis proceeds with an exploration of how planners represent their profession through text and speech. Three kinds of rhetoric dominate discussion: a rhetoric of instrumentalism, which is concerned with reestablishing physical planning at the core of the discipline; a rhetoric of negotiation, which often loses sight of why negotiation was initiated in the first place; and a rhetoric of performance assessment, which is content with a planning which achieves its sponsors' goals. None of these concentrations is intrinsically wrong, but their cumulative effect has been to permit a commodification of the functions of planning, which has subsequently facilitated the privatization process. Other elements of planning, not susceptible to commodification, have been dropped from the discourse. One such loss has been the rhetoric of reform, which has traditionally connected planning with its progressive roots and political action. Also absent is a rhetoric of theory, which would permit comparative analysis of the meanings of a postmodern planning.

“Urban and regional planning is a systematic creative approach to addressing and resolving social, physical and economic problems of cities, suburbs, metropolitan areas, and larger regions. It involves identifying problems and opportunities, devising alternative policies or plans, analyzing and implementing these options and evaluating implemented plans.”

ACSP Guide to Graduate Education in Planning, 1986, page vii

1 Postmodern planning

One important, but neglected, aspect of the contemporary planning scene is the trend toward privatization. Privatization is occurring in many sectors as part of the general tendency toward a restructuring of 'postmodern' social, economic, and political life. Privatization is a term which has acquired many meanings. It can refer, for instance, to the process of contracting-out for the provision of formerly public services (such as garbage collection), or to the sale of government assets (including the denationalization of state-run industries and the sale of public housing). In general, privatization is regarded as the process by which certain government functions are delegated, or returned, to the private sector. (For a representative sample of the literature on privatization, see Ascher, 1987; LeGrand and Robinson, 1984; Swann, 1988; Veljanovski, 1987.)

There is a wealth of evidence supporting the notion that planning is becoming increasingly privatized, including the growth of planning personnel in private-sector positions; the packaging and marketing of planning services for sale (for example, requests for information and data); and the prominent trend in planning education toward a development-oriented curriculum. Surprisingly, most of these tendencies seem to have been absorbed without comment into the realm of planning practice. Yet my contention is that the relatively unexamined phenomenon of privatization could portend a fundamental, even irrevocable, change in the way in which planning

is conducted. In our present state of ignorance, we are unable to know whether this change is for the better or the worse. Accordingly, in this paper, I begin a long-overdue appraisal of privatization in planning.

My first task is to outline the general problem of privatization as it applies to planning in the postmodern era. After these general comments, I shall focus on the specific realm of planning practice in order to examine how it is facilitating and accelerating the trend toward privatization. My inquiry is directed toward how planning practice is represented in the texts prepared by planners themselves. Such textual analysis involves a study in the *rhetoric* of practice, that is, the voices and arguments employed by planners in defining and defending their professional realm (compare with Krieger, 1981). In the second section of the paper, I define rhetoric as being composed of three distinct strategies of communication. After this, in the central analysis of the paper, three important archetypes in the rhetoric of contemporary planning practice are described, and their implications made explicit. Finally, I shall argue that the commodification of certain of the functions of planning has made privatization possible, and has resulted in a dangerous curtailment of the range of discourse in planning.

2 Privatization of planning

The urbanization process has been described as the outcome of conflict between two social organizations: the state and civil society (Clark and Dear, 1984; Dear and Scott, 1981). As part of its mandate, the state developed a land-use planning apparatus which undertook the typical range of state functions (regulation, control, etc) as they applied to the field of property and land development. Separate agencies in civil society also drive the urbanization process, primarily through the myriad decisions of private firms and households.

The consequent urban form is the result of tensions and contradictions which beset the activities of state and civil society (Wolch and Dear, 1989). Indeed, the history of urbanization can be read as a series of mediations and temporary accords between these two relatively autonomous sectors. Urban outcomes vary according to whose star (state or civil society) is in the ascendancy during each successive time period. The history of the planning profession has, until very recently, been a story of the progressive professionalization of land-use planning within the apparatus of the state.

One characteristic of the 'disorganized capitalism' of postmodern society is a shift in the balance of power away from the state and toward civil society (Lash and Urry, 1987; Offe, 1987; Scott, 1989). This has been supported by a conservative ideology which has promulgated the need for a 'retreat from the state', although many scholars caution against the too-ready adoption of such political rhetoric into our analyses (for example, see Wolch, 1989). In the case of planning, it seems incontrovertible that an increasing proportion of the planning functions of the state have been absorbed by the private sector. Crudely stated, it is as if two very different sets of rules now govern the practice of planning. Planners who continue as agents of the state apparatus can still shelter under the mantle of legitimacy afforded them by their elected officials; they may yet claim to act in the 'public interest'. In contrast, planners who are agents of private capital are responsible ultimately to the 'bottom line' of profitability. At issue, in this paper, is whether or not these two approaches are compatible; they could turn out to be destructively antagonistic.

Privatization in planning has developed in two ways: through a restructuring of the planning apparatus of the state; and through private-sector initiatives.

In the first instance, planning has been affected (like many other sectors) by the general restructuring of the welfare state. This has taken many forms, including cutbacks and rechanneling of financial and programmatic commitments. In the USA, for instance, many programs which hitherto employed planners now no longer exist or have been drastically curtailed (including the Community Development Block Grant initiative and the affordable-housing programs of the Department of Housing and Urban Development).

There has been a parallel erosion of the mechanisms of planning, which has perhaps proceeded furthest in the United Kingdom, where some government planning functions have been abolished (Reade, 1987). But in several countries, there have been apparently benign relaxations of planning regulations in order to promote economic development. The cumulative effect of these changes has more resembled a death by a thousand cuts rather than an outright abolition of the profession. For example, in 1987, members of the British Royal Town Planning Institute were informed that countryside planning was "outside the mainstream of Institute concern". It was something better dealt with by "ecologists, estate managers and leisure specialists rather than professional planners" (Fyson, 1987, page 3). In Canada, when it came to the time (in the early 1980s) to revise the Planning Act of Ontario, members of the provincial planning institute voted decisively to exclude 'social planning' from their mandate.

One of the key elements in the government-led push for privatization is the process of *commodification*. In the present context, this term refers to the transformation of routine government functions into packageable units which can then be marketed and sold like private goods. Privatization is facilitated when commodification occurs, and fees for service can be charged (as is typically the case with many of the information services in planning, including census data, facts about traffic and market areas, appraisals, and so on).

Spurred on by the need to recover costs and thereby demonstrate efficiency in government services, state-sponsored commodification strategies have proliferated. Purchases of government services are now a commonly accepted part of doing business. Representatives of capital have responded by intensifying their efforts to capture the state planning apparatus (through memberships on planning boards and commissions, lobbying, political contributions, and corruption). Neither of these strategies is new, of course; they have simply been accelerated by privatization. In the longer term, however, three other initiatives may do more to create a private-sector planning than these 'business-as-usual' methods.

First, private-land and property developers have already gone some way toward creating an analogous planning apparatus. This is, some would no doubt argue, a necessary defense because staffing levels in public-planning departments have been eroded whereas regulatory procedures have remained intact or have even expanded. Hence, private capital takes on its own experts to help navigate the bureaucratic maze. Whatever the impetus, the net outcome is that the private sector is now buttressed by a new 'advocacy planner', equipped to advance the case of capital with expertise which is equivalent to that of the public-sector planner.

Second, active prodevelopment lobbies have been instigated, by such groups as the Urban Land Institute and the National Association of Homebuilders in the USA. They have, almost unnoticed, created a climate in which the necessity and wisdom of so-called 'public-private partnerships' go unchallenged. This trend is, I believe, different from past practices in which the interrelatedness of state-led and capital-led initiatives was recognized as 'reality', and was incorporated into everyday planning. At present, we are observing a qualitatively different phenomenon in which planners are being convinced by the rhetoric of a corporatist-style planning,

that is, one in which the rules of the development game are conceded in advance in return for a seat at the negotiating table. The corporatist approach has been reinforced by public-sector agencies anxious for development partnerships which allow them to leverage private dollars to support public projects.

Third, the corporatist ideology has been extended into planning education. Private-land and property development-interests have morally and financially supported the introduction of a more development-oriented curriculum. This movement has shifted the emphasis in planning education via the introduction within planning schools of specializations in real-estate development, course work emphasizing development and entrepreneurial skills, and the hiring of new faculty to teach these courses. The net effect has been to 'dilute' the emphases of the traditional curriculum of planning schools. Note that this is another case where existing trends have been harnessed by, and given new impetus because of, the phenomenon of privatization. In this instance, education in planning schools had long been moving in the direction of a 'generic' curriculum; that is, toward a structure of course work which would teach skills which could be applied in a wide variety of work environments (including the private sector). Such a 'tool-kit' approach to professional education has lent itself quite naturally to manipulation by the promoters of a development-oriented curriculum. The growth of enrolments in those universities offering development specialties within planning has prompted many more schools to explore this option.

In many ways, the response of the profession to privatization is entirely predictable, even rational. Planners and educators are simply responding to a changing job-market; recently qualified professionals are merely going where the jobs are. Some planners actively support the current trends. But on the whole, from the evidence of their publications and conference calendars, most planners (academic and non-academic) are content to remain silent on the issue of privatization. This silence is dangerous. It lends itself to distortion and confusion. As one example, consider what is happening to social planning in the privatized world. Social planning has little or no perceived relevance to 'development' issues, and those who call themselves social planners increasingly find themselves away from the flow of the mainstream. They find jobs outside the professional planning departments, often in other branches of government, or in the voluntary sector. As a consequence, they tend to lose their affiliation with planning, and fail to reproduce their subdiscipline within the profession. The 'mix' of subdisciplinary specializations within the profession is thus biased away from the sphere of social planning. As in the case of Ontario, what we once called 'social planners' may soon be mandated out of existence.

The privatization of planning is a phenomenon which requires an urgent and comprehensive examination. I cannot hope to undertake such a task in the space of a single paper. My emphasis in what follows is on the structures of planning practice, and particularly, the ways in which the language of professional planners has facilitated commodification and privatization. I shall argue that planning discourse reflects three highly specific obsessions, each of which has acted to promote privatization. Notice that I do not claim that these rhetorics represent the full story about privatization, nor are they, in themselves, necessary and sufficient conditions for privatization. I simply wish to show that, in the current political climate, they are propelling planning professionals into a mutant form of practice which we have not yet begun to evaluate. In order to proceed with this objective, I shall first need to set out some essential preliminaries about the nature of rhetoric (compare with Clark, 1985; Olsson, 1980).

3 The meanings of rhetoric

Conventional definitions of the word *rhetoric* draw attention to the structures of writing and speaking, as well as to classical notions of the art of persuasion. In this paper, I shall identify three particular dimensions of the term: (1) *persuasion*, emphasizing rhetoric as the art of speaking, or how people convince one another to adopt a particular line of thought and/or action (McCloskey, 1985, page 29); (2) *power*, which is a view of rhetoric as a strategy to exercise control over others (Maranhao, 1986, page 237); and (3) *community*, in which the culture defined by the rhetor and the persuaded constitutes a community of interest, and rhetoric thus becomes the 'central art' whereby culture and community are established, maintained, and transformed (White, 1985, page 28).

These three elements of rhetoric are present in most discourse, to a greater or lesser extent. For instance, a planner's work may involve speaking to an audience. Such presentations typically require a creative process, because the planner often changes the presentation to become more convincing or responsive (by, for example, modifying some unpopular aspects of a proposal). The speech act also involves—at least implicitly—a community of identity around the presentation. There is a shared ethos that the speech is about the kind of community we wish to create.

Hence, in a typical planning encounter, planners are given a language to speak by their culture; they have the power to transform that language through argument; and they appeal to the often-implicit commonalities of an 'interpretive community' through their dialogue (Clark and Dear, 1984). The analysis of rhetoric is therefore "the study of the ways we constitute ourselves as individuals, as communities, and as cultures, whenever we speak" (White, 1985, page 35).

In theoretical discourse, rhetoric may be used to win acceptance for a particular explanation or interpretation; in practical planning discourse, it argues for a specific proposal. As it is impossible to defend the 'eternal truth' of one theory, or the unambiguous merit of one proposal over another, the power of the advocate's rhetoric becomes of central significance. In the absence of proof or certitude, all that advocates can aim to do is to temporarily satisfy their interlocutors of their position.

I shall use the phrases 'speech acts' or 'the speech of planners' to convey the *totality of dialogues engaged in by the community of planners*. These include statements of principle (what planners believe they should do); of intent (what they would like to achieve); of action (what they actually do); and of self-criticism (what they ultimately achieve). The relevant 'texts' of practice will include not only transcripts of professional meetings but also legal documents, exhortations by professional leaders, guidelines on professional ethics, general plan statements, and so on.

4 The rhetoric of practice

I want now to let the texts of planning 'speak for themselves'; that is, to discover how planners represent their professional practice. Two caveats are necessary before I begin. First, my analysis is based on a survey of papers addressing planning practice which have appeared during the past ten years in the principal journals in the USA, Great Britain, and Canada. These sources were supplemented by consideration of the major texts and monographs which appeared during the same period. Such a 'sample' is inevitably biased and incomplete. (It was never my intention to provide a complete accounting of the literature for the purposes of this survey.) However, the dimensions of practice identified below will, I believe, represent an identifiable culture of planning which others should recognize easily (compare with Forester, 1989; Friedmann, 1987; Hall, 1988; and Reade, 1987).

Second, in what follows, I have used many quotations from a wide variety of sources. With some effort, I could have selected several entirely different sets of

references to make exactly the same points. No personal criticism is intended of those individuals I have chosen to cite. Many have made enduring contributions to the field of planning, and I have no desire to impugn their motives or integrity. But, like me, they are caught in a web of words and traditions. In this paper, I have attempted to look beyond these restraints, to search for a clearer understanding.

In the contemporary culture of planning practice, three styles of rhetoric predominate: what we say we are going to do; what we actually end up doing; and how we judge what we have done. In more formal terms, these concerns translate into three distinct rhetorics of practice: (1) the *theory of practice*, being statements of principle about the nature of planning practice; (2) *accounts of practice*, being analyses of the actual professional encounter; and (3) *performance evaluation*, being post hoc judgements of the utility or effectiveness of planning practice. In what follows, I examine a limited number of exemplars of each of these dimensions of practice.

4.1 *The theory of practice*

The theory of planning practice is relatively underdeveloped. There may be many reasons for this, not least because it raises difficult epistemological and ontological problems (for example, see Bourdieu, 1977). There are also severe technical difficulties in developing a theory which takes account of the multitude of different planning environments in which practice occurs, or of the proliferation of tasks undertaken in the name of planning.

A focal theme in contemporary rhetoric on the theory of practice is the need to recover the traditional core of planning. This usually translates into a reassertion of the central role of physical, or land-use, planning as the key to the identity of planning, and of the societal utility of the fundamental skills possessed by the planning professional (the planner's 'tool-kit'). Other concerns, such as social planning, tend to be relegated to the periphery of professional concern. Planning discourse thus becomes confined to a narrow range of technical support functions which practitioners presumably feel they can defend as legitimately and recognizably their own territory.

The retreat from planning is particularly evident in Britain, where the Thatcher government has launched a series of attacks on selected elements of planning practice. One government White Paper (a draft of legislative proposals) was revealingly entitled "Lifting the burden". It made clear that planning has been identified as a convenient and manageable 'burden' to be removed. The consequence, as noted by one British planner, Bailey, is that:

"The planning profession has a major task ahead of mobilising undoubted public support ... while also rehabilitating the concept of positive planning" (Bailey, 1986, page 31).

One version of what is meant by the term "positive planning" is revealed by Breheny (1983). He begins by arguing for a 'practitioner friendly' approach, blaming theorists for allowing theory and practice to drift apart. The reason for the separation (he claims) is that Marxist-inspired work, "which now holds sway academically", is too divorced from the specifics of practice (Breheny, 1983, page 103). (See Hall, 1988, chapter 10, for an alternative interpretation of this separation.) Breheny suggests that a reassessment of planning can only come from a solid reappraisal of its roots. He alludes favorably to those who are "concerned to pin down the essential features of planning *before* proceeding with the task of theory building" (page 106, emphasis added).

Although this could be read as a well-intentioned plea for theorists to gather more information about what planners actually do, Breheny proceeds rapidly to a

more mechanical conclusion:

“Land-use or town and country planning is concerned with government intervention in the private land-development process. The purpose of this intervention is to achieve particular social, economic, and physical outcomes by the control of land development The role of planners is to assist in the administration of this activity and in helping governments make and implement decisions” (page 106). Breheny’s reconstruction of a practical theory of planning is thus neatly completed. He is saying, in effect, that these are the things that we do, so (by extension) we should write a theory to account for them. He concludes by advocating a “rebuilding of planning from its core functions of control and policy in relation to land use” (page 114). It is hard to see how he could have concluded otherwise, given his starting point.

Many planners are seeking to reestablish their legitimacy via this new instrumentalism. The appeal to return to the roots of planning, and for the development of a positive theory, might be regarded as a ‘realistic’ response to a harsh political environment; or it could reflect a conscious or unconscious ideological bias on the part of its advocate. But whatever its source(s), the appeal to restore the technical base of planning has one very important corollary. The renewed emphasis on technicism (the planner’s ‘tool-kit’) has strongly detracted from the social and utopian ideals which have hitherto characterized planning.

Many advocates of positive planning now seem disinclined to raise their gaze above the technical details to consider the socioeconomic and political context of their work. As Mandelbaum (1987) has observed, there is a widespread ignorance about social theory, which is sometimes coupled with an apparent unwillingness to contemplate the implications of that theory. Take, for example, Harris’s rejection of the Marxist interpretation of planning practice suggested by Scott and Roweis (1977):

“The fundamental difficulty lies in the fact that the approach of Scott and Roweis—at least in the hands of less experienced analysts, students, and critics of planning—provides an easy way out of the difficulties of learning, practicing, and accommodating to planning. The tasks, the difficulties, and the process of planning are imputed to the developmental tendencies of society as a whole, and these tendencies are in turn explained by standard Marxist concepts, frequently oversimplified. The effect on actual planning is either paralytic or revolutionary” (Harris, 1978, page 221).

Harris then goes on to define his view of a “positive social theory” which attempts to “define and explain what happens in society” (page 221). In their response to Harris’s attack, Scott and Roweis are understandably bemused:

“This allegation is predicated upon untenable reasoning; it is like calling for the abolition of pianos because the ‘less experienced’ are likely to produce dissonant sound effects. ... One of the prime tasks which confronts us as scholars and teachers is to participate ... in overcoming inexperience (including our own) rather than to ban the instruments by which it may be overcome” (Scott and Roweis, 1978, page 229).

4.2 *The professional encounter*

During the 1980s, another important literature has developed, emphasizing the study of actual (or direct) planning practice. Its predominant concern has been with what Bolan (1980, page 261) has called the “phenomenology of the professional episode”. This work has focused on the importance of language and communication; it has tended to de-emphasize planning technique and methodology. The approach has derived great impetus and authority from Forester’s applications of Habermas’s

critical theory:

“critical theory gives us a new way of understanding action, or what a planner does, as attention-shaping (communicative action), rather than more narrowly as a means to an end (instrumental action)” (Forester, 1980, page 275).

The study of direct practice has since achieved a relatively high degree of sophistication, and has found concrete expression in the planning curriculum.

Forester (1987, page 136) himself continues to examine the rhetorical structure of planning encounters. He has developed a model of ‘anticipatory practice’, for example, in which planning practice consists of three elements: “envisioning a problem situation, managing arguments concerning it, and negotiating strategically to intervene”. In other work in this field, Baum (1983) and Schon (1983) have directly addressed the issue of the planner’s own politics in professional practice. Kaufman (1987, page 113) offers a view of planner as ‘ethicist’, identifying three key dimensions of his (Kaufman’s) own practice: *normative*, a belief that planners have an ethical responsibility to serve the public interest; *action-oriented*, attempting to intervene selectively for planned change; and *realistic*, about the complex politics of decisionmaking (compare with Wachs, 1985, on the matter of ethics in planning).

The analytical turn toward the phenomenology of the professional encounter was (in hindsight) necessary and long overdue. It has had the effect of raising planners’ consciousness about the political, social, and economic context within which their work is conducted. The professional encounter approach had honorable roots in hermeneutics; it filled an important theoretical vacuum left by the (temporary) demise of the rational comprehensive model, and the atheoretical appeal of transactive/creative planning. It seemed to offer a respectable theoretical foundation upon which we could drape our felt needs for dialogue, mutual learning, and legitimacy. Its apparent ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice accelerated its widespread acceptance: it facilitated debate around power in planning; and it apparently rationalized planners’ interventions without the need to appeal to idealism, ideology, or political commitment. Hall has argued, however, that these theoretical props are illusory:

“the practical prescription all comes out as good old-fashioned democratic common sense, no more and no less than Davidoff’s advocacy planning of fifteen years before: cultivate community networks, listen carefully to the people, involve the less-organized groups, educate the citizens in how to join in, supply information and make sure people know how to get it, develop skills in working with groups in conflict situations, emphasize the need to participate, compensate for external pressures” (Hall, 1988, pages 339–340).

Whether or not Hall is correct in his judgement is a question I must defer for the present, but his remarks have direct consequences for this analysis. Hall reveals that critical theory can provide a theoretical legitimacy for those who wish to maintain a social/democratic voice in planning. This is not a motivation to be sneered at. However, when *stripped of its social vision*, the rhetoric of the professional encounter is quickly reduced to yet one more form of instrumentalism in planning. In a bastardized version of the phenomenological approach, planning practice has been distilled to an exercise in the mechanics of persuasion. For those who advocate this crude reductionism, it seems that the only scholarly game in town is figuring out how planners get to ‘yes’. The planning curriculum is besieged by new course offerings in strategy and negotiation. Planners themselves now celebrate successful decisionmaking. Sometimes it seems to matter little what kind of decision is being achieved. As they strive to reach a satisfactory closure, planners seek only to communicate effectively to anyone who is across the table.

In his defence of this kind of negotiated practice, McDonic noted:

“Planning today is *not* the negative, rigidly bureaucratized, paternalistic or domineering function that it is often accused of being Modern planning is sensitive, people-centered and ‘open’ to a degree undreamed of in the past” (McDonic, 1986, page 6).

But what *exactly* are we being open about? The question of planning’s mission(s) may again have been lost. Many scholars and practitioners have submerged their critical senses in the euphoria of successful professional encounters; and the study of planning practice has been reduced to a singular search for correctness in conversation.

4.3 Performance

In contrast to the proliferation of studies on professional encounters, there is only a relatively small literature on ‘performance assessment’. By this, I mean retrospective analyses of the achievements and failures of planning: the kind of study which asks, “What would have happened if there had been no planning?”; or, “How much better would things have been if they had been properly planned?” Such questions are important, and their answers must be sought urgently if we are to explore the meaning of planning practice (compare with Reade, 1987, chapter 7; also, Dear and Laws, 1986). The study of such questions about performance poses no insurmountable technical difficulties. Why, then, is there such a dearth of performance analyses? Could it be that we are too fearful of what the results of such research could show, or of revealing our inability to truly influence the course of development?

The principal technical hurdle in performance analysis is the determination of the appropriate criteria for judging the outcomes of planning. For instance, Hall’s 1980 study, *Great Planning Disasters*, viewed success or failure in terms of public reaction to a planning scheme. (But public opinion is notoriously fickle; the Sydney Opera House, for instance, has shifted from status of pariah to a well-loved symbol of Australia.) Knudsen (1988) evaluated Danish planning outcomes in terms of “degrees of control”, that is, how far planners’ original intentions were carried through to the final result. Other criteria are possible, but Reade (1987, page 88) reminds us that performance analyses have not been limited by technical difficulties, rather by planners’ unwillingness to recognize or concede the importance of such analyses.

Roeseler’s (1982) *Successful American Urban Plans* is a series of essays discussing representative achievements of US urban planning over the past thirty to forty years. It is a fascinating exercise to reread this book as a statement about a philosophy of planning practice. Planning should occur, according to Roeseler (page 45), in “an atmosphere of sincerity and result-orientation that represents the very best of enlightened conservatism and self-interest”. He views planning practice as a technical exercise that is part of the wider function of urban management: “Its sole purpose is to lay before the decision makers feasible alternative solutions to perceived issues of public concern” (page 21).

Roeseler’s histories are primarily a retelling of the roles played by the many ‘great men’, including business people, planners, and politicians, who molded the appearance of US cities. The book is full of references to people who were ‘committed’, had ‘brilliant leadership’, possessed ‘fine guidance’, were ‘sincere’ and ‘tireless’, had ‘timeless genius’, showed ‘tolerant appreciation’, and so on. Despite his protestations about the need for cooperation in successful planning, Roeseler builds a view of planning that is simultaneously *antigovernment* [“The role of government is ... to intervene only when absolutely necessary” (page 184)]; *anti-bureaucracy* [“The work of these men could not be duplicated by a thousand bureaucracies” (page 19)]; *antipolitics* [“Politics never entered the picture” (page 104)];

and profoundly *antitheoretical* ["little was to be gained from the theoretical" (page 134); "[He] wasted no time with theory" (page 147)].

What exactly does Roeseler regard as a measure of success in planning? Somewhat akin to Knudsen, he begins by defining success as the achievement of 'what you set out to do', including the achievement of, inter alia: an extensive freeway building program; a Haussmann-like clearance of slums; cooperation between public and private sectors; the absence of political conflict; establishing an ongoing planning administration; and revision of a zoning code. Planning failure is epitomized in the "pathetic urbanization" of Houston (Roeseler, 1982, page 73)—a conspicuously unplanned city. Planning was unsuccessful there because of the "blatant failure of the economic power structure, the bankers and merchant princes, to do their part in the democratic process". Instead, public affairs were given over to "opportunists and fast-talking salesmen". The future of Houston, according to Roeseler, awaits the "return to enlightened self-interest for the good of all".

For Roeseler, planning practice is ultimately a matter of determining the public interest. "A proposition either is or is not in the public interest. If it is, indeed, in the public interest, it may be implemented; if it is not, it must be rejected" (page 21). This is hardly a nonproblematic assertion, and Roeseler concedes that things can go wrong: "It is all up to the people and their leaders. A public that tolerates corrupt and inept leadership deserves it. The image of the city is an unmistakable expression of its spirit—an expression of fair play, opportunity, and reasonableness" (page 69).

From a similar set of performance concerns, Blowers reaches a somewhat dispiriting conclusion:

"Town planners appear to be concerned with vague purposes such as the protection of the public interest, the rational allocation of land use or the promotion and preservation of an attractive environment. But these are matters of opinion and value requiring no special expertise. They amount to an ideology not a profession It is difficult to see how town planning constitutes a profession in the sense of specialized skills and knowledge and a commitment to specific goals The notion of professional town planning should be abolished" (Blowers, 1986, page 17).

Blowers's pessimism takes an interesting turn, however. He advocates the promotion of a "positive planning" but with a "focus on social effects". He asserts that this would require *researchers*, not professional planners as currently conceived. Planning should provide the "knowledge base for political decisions", but as part of a generic process of decisionmaking in a decentralized system of local government.

"In such a devolved system of local government town planning would no longer be a separate, professional function of local government but an integral part of a process of local service delivery" (Blowers, 1986, page 18).

A clear message in Blowers's writing is that an instrumental positive planning must be integrated with some notion of the public interest, or the study of social effects, in order to be planning. Without this 'visionary dimension', planning performs simply a management information function. Qadeer contends that this is, in fact, where we now find ourselves:

"By preoccupying itself with controls and grants, the profession has rendered itself peripheral to the public interest. It is now a minor activity of the government Planning practice is little distinguishable from administrative routines" (Qadeer, 1987, page 276).

4.4 Summary

If we listen to how planners represent themselves, we discover three kinds of discourse dominate in current planning practice: (1) a *rhetoric of instrumentalism*,

which seeks to reassert an obsolete professionalism; (2) a *rhetoric of rhetorics*, which focuses on strategies of persuasion; and (3) a *rhetoric of performance*, which judges planning according to the extent to which it promotes its sponsors' interests.

Case 1 is what Mandelbaum (1987) would call the 'contingency table' approach to planning. Planning becomes a routinized technical response to one of a number of well-defined professional tasks which deal primarily with matters of land-use control. This retreat to a previous orthodoxy is a reactionary attempt to retrieve the 'cloak of competence' which was perceived to exist in association with that earlier orthodoxy. To its advocates, it seems to matter little that the world has changed irrevocably, that the old legitimacy thus cannot be recovered intact, and that such a retreat is likely to be viewed as an admission of obsolescence, or even defeat.

Case 2 is a powerful star in the skies. It has engaged many prominent scholars; it promises to bridge theory and practice; and it is sometimes touted as the principal concern of the community of planning theorists. But to base planning knowledge in a theory of negotiation is a reductionist game, if we allow ourselves to forget why we are engaged in negotiation in the first place.

Case 3 may yet prove to be the Achilles' heel of public planning. In extremis, the profession has been transformed into an empty bureaucratic vessel, to be filled (and thus activated) by any public or private agency desiring it to operate. Planning becomes tolerable to the extent that it facilitates what its various sponsors wish to achieve in the name of an undefinable 'public interest'.

None of these developments may be intrinsically 'wrong', although Reade (1987, page 216), *inter alia*, is highly critical of current trends. But we have to ask: "Is this what we want planning practice to be? Are we even aware that this is what planning practice has become?"

5 Deconstructing planning practice

"What, then becomes necessary [in planning] is *not* head-on confrontation—messy and often unsuccessful at the best of times—but, instead, the reinforcement of existing worthwhile initiatives and momentum. The trick is—judo-style—to give a jolly good shove to anything that is moving in the right direction"

F Tibbalds, "Presidential Statement", 1988, page 10.

Former president Tibbalds's commonsense advice to his professional colleagues has an ominous dimension certainly not intended by its speaker. In general, it might be true that the trick is to give a shove to anything that is moving in the right direction. But on the evidence of this paper, *significant portions of the discourse in planning are now immobilized or may be moving in the wrong direction.*

Present in our discourse are the rhetorics of land-use planning, negotiation, and performance. Powerful voices are heard persuading the community of planners to recover (some would say retreat to) former skills; to facilitate; and to align themselves with a myriad public and private interests. Planners who adopt a more critical tone are often refused a hearing; for example, a controversial paper may be refused publication in the mainstream journals, or attacked as a betrayal of the profession. The manipulation of discourse in this way is, of course, nothing new. It is the principal *modus operandi* of academic and professional life. But what happens when such social Darwinism leads to the extinction of something truly important?

Deconstruction teaches us to look for absences as well as presences in our discourse (Dear, 1986; 1988). So far in this paper, one glaring excision from our discourse has been identified: the *rhetoric of reform*. There have been very few explicit attempts to connect contemporary planning discourse with its progressive roots. By this, I

do not mean an uncritical return to the old obsessions and dreams, nor am I arguing for yet more intellectual biographies. Instead, I would wish to restore the reform tradition to a more prominent position in our discourse *and* thereafter to forge a politically aware and socially conscious planning agenda relevant for late-twentieth-century planning. (Honorable exceptions to the over-arching silence on the rhetoric of reform include Brooks, 1988; Friedmann, 1987; Hall, 1988; 1989.) The planner's ability and responsibility to forge substantive visions of the urban future have been all but forgotten in the rush to become 'technocratic facilitators'.

This loss of the rhetoric of reform is, I believe, the principal reason that planners have not balked at the trend toward privatization. The three predominant rhetorics have impoverished our discourse and our identity as planners. The reduced dialogue has become fixated upon the instrumental logics of planning: "This is what we can do; isn't it useful? No? Well, we can also do this, too, ...". The various functions of planning have been readily *commodified*, that is, packaged as routinized skills and made available for sale to the highest bidder. Under the fiscal realities of postmodern capitalism, planners have increasingly begun to sell themselves and their practice to the private sector, especially since the state has begun to spurn them. As a natural corollary, those parts of planning which are not susceptible to commodification have been neglected or even discarded. The reform tradition, for instance, has little identifiable market utility; so we have stopped talking about it.

It is highly unlikely that all planners deliberately undertook to limit their discourse, or that they did so in order to promote commodification and privatization. (Some planners, of course, have done both.) The three rhetorics were most probably stimulated by the desire to defend a profession which was manifestly under attack. Nevertheless, the cumulative effects of a disorganized defence, plus a self-interested advocacy on behalf of a particular rhetoric, have been to reduce planning to a series of instrumental functions. These can easily be annexed by diverse private interests, most especially the industries involved in land and property development. The fact that the current political climate actively supports privatization has translated what began as an opportunity into a current reality.

Another significant dimension of planning discourse that is not susceptible to commodification is the *rhetoric of theory*. By this, I mean a mode of comparative analysis of the various theories of planning (for example, Hall versus the critical theorists). Those who care only for their own theoretical viewpoint will not be concerned about this gap; nor will those without an interest in theory. But those who recognize the need to examine the qualitative differences between theories will understand that a curtailment of the discourse on theory is an unwelcome precedent. It permits us to forget significant differences between intellectual positions; it limits our ability to recognize gaps in discourse; and it obfuscates what is happening to the profession. In short, the absence of theory reduces us to passive automatons.

The lack of a rhetoric on theory is especially problematic in the current intellectual climate, in which some have adopted a lazy postmodernism and have settled into a comfortable pluralism in their attitudes to theoretical alternatives. Their justification appears to be this: that (a) as postmodernism posits the *undesirability* of deciding between competing intellectual positions (thus avoiding the hegemony of a single viewpoint), and (b) as deconstruction tells us that these differences are ultimately *undecidable*, then (c) an attitude of studied tolerance or even indifference toward other viewpoints is entirely defensible.

But this simply will not do. Such logic is a usurpation of the lessons of post-modernism and deconstruction (see Dear, 1988; Gregory, 1987; Punter, 1988; Soja, 1986; 1989; Storper, 1987). It is vital that we recover the rhetoric of

theory as an integral part of the defense of planning. Without it, in future, there may be no such thing as a separable project called planning; without it, there certainly will be no dialogue on the respective merits of the various ideas and activities of which planning is comprised.

It will be difficult to invent a planning discourse suitable for a postmodern era which celebrates intellectual relativism. But it would be tantamount to professional and scholarly suicide to ignore the challenge, and Milroy (1989) has shown us some of the benefits which flow from direct engagement with these difficulties. In White's felicitous phrasing:

"When we discover that we have in this world no earth or rock to stand and walk upon, but only shifting sea and sky and wind, the mature response is not to lament the loss of fixity, but to learn to sail" (White, 1985, page 95).

The onus in this task is on scholars and theoreticians. They will need to spend a lot of time on writing theory which practitioners will recognize as vital; and they will need to know a great deal more about what is actually happening to planning practice. The privatization of planning is a good place to set sail on both objectives.

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