



## The state of planning – have we lost our roots?

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Planning originated from and has been kept alive, by input from outside its professional field. It started in anger, and a determination to do something about unacceptable living conditions, which through the Industrial Revolution had caught society unawares.

In the wake of earlier housing and factory reforms, Ebenezer Howard's dream set out in *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902), came to be backed by the architecture and surveying professions, then by government. Meanwhile in New Zealand, Michael Joseph Savage implemented what he called "*practical Christianity*" in the form of ambitious state housing programmes and associated reforms. Neither Howard nor Savage were from a professional planning background.

By the 1960s, planning had become an established profession of some status, and lost touch with its lay campaigning roots. It took another non-professional campaigner, Jane Jacobs through *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), to wake planners up to the social and economic damage they were doing by sweeping aside physically deprived, but socially vibrant, areas. The 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*, set in a 'concrete jungle' development, implies a social critique on how menacing and dehumanising the new areas could be.

Since then we've witnessed the Reagan/Thatcher era, where pro-active 'town planning' was seen as a burden on business, to be reined back. In New Zealand the government saw the physical form of cities as something for 'the market' and private sector to determine, in the years following the 1991 Resource

Management Act. In time a reaction came, in the form of the 2005 *Urban Design Protocol*, but this was not a return to the best of 'town planning'

Whilst planning does usually imply physical built environment changes, at its essence it is after something more, such as Ebenezer Howard's "*Peaceful Path to Real Reform*" (from *Garden Cities of Tomorrow's* original title) or Michael Joseph Savage's "*practical Christianity*". Some urban design is more commercially driven than motivated by the public good. Despite much value from giving urban designers their creative head, the place of what they produce its wider context is also important. Many new settlements relate poorly to wider society, urban form or transport networks and one such Christchurch example would be Pegasus.

We must be alert to, and even seek out, the next generation of 'voices out of left field', whose input would be vital to keeping planning alive and relevant.

In the current climate there is a lot of focus on the money-based economy and infrastructure development. However, infrastructure is not necessarily beneficial – witness the 1960s 'concrete jungles' – and there is much which does not express itself in conventional economic prosperity measures.

Some voices (such as *Fleeing Vesuvius*, 2011, again a non-professional source) are warning that the stability of money itself (as distinct from individual currencies) is increasingly shaky as a result of slowed growth in fossil fuel availability, and suggest possible responses.

Some planning commentators are warning how vulnerable we make ourselves if we neglect interdependence across society. For example, 'gated communities' (or virtual 'gated communities without gates') may turn their backs on wider society in ways which ultimately would bear bad fruit for everyone. Contrasting with this, in Christchurch a good example and role model would be *Project Lyttelton* with its associated *Lyttelton Time Bank*, credited with Lyttelton people weathering the earthquakes crisis more resiliently than in many other areas. In the Beatles' words, they got by with a little bit of help from their friends.

The Resource Management Act can only cover local rather than global environmental effects – another 'gap' in our planning, just as physical built environment quality was once neglected. A 'voice' worth listening to may be the *Transition Towns* movement, which brings together a wide range of practical ideas on how local communities might adapt to global ecological challenges.

Being alert to pertinent 'voices' from outside our professional circle may mean that a large part of continuing professional development will come from reading, writing and discussion outside conventional 'course attendance'. There is now a wealth of bodies and mailing lists to join, websites to delve into, subjects on which to make Google searches, and discussion forums to engage with. These embrace a wide range of different contributions, giving scope for really valuable contributions to be heard. Potential outlets for our findings range from blogs to journals. Also, by the time material becomes commercially viable as a course subject, it may already have become somewhat 'established', and thus more suitable for foundational rather than continuing professional development (such as degree or extra-mural university courses).

I suggest that planning is in danger of losing its roots through being insufficiently alert to relevant 'voices' from external professional sources. I have suggested a few 'voices' which might be worth listening to, and other readers may be able to add to these. The main lesson I would draw, however, is to be alert. After all, people outside 'the profession' are in touch

with the 'real world' and are on the 'receiving end' of our planning.

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