

# **APPROACHES TO PLANNING**

## **Introducing Current Planning Theories, Concepts and Issues**

Second Edition

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## PLANNERS' ROLES

As the planning profession evolved, and with the proliferation of planning activities, planners' roles have grown increasingly diverse. Several studies have concluded that some roles are more effective in certain contexts than others; this reinforces what we would expect based on experience and common sense. Some of the roles that planners may fill are described below.

### Technician-Administrator

This is the traditional role of the planner in governmental contexts: the technical expert at the service of elected officials. The role can be effective when political leaders delegate authority to planners. The planner can apply professional expertise to effect objectives that have been well-defined by the policy-makers with confidence that government can muster the support and resources necessary for their realization.

Frequently, however, this situation is the ideal rather than the reality, and the expected relationship between administrative planner and politician breaks down or never even develops. This may happen when the government represents a diversity of interests that are rarely reconciled in the consensus necessary for effective action. Then the neutral administrator role must be supplemented or superseded by one of the other roles before the planner's proposals can have an impact on policy.<sup>45</sup>

### Mobilizer

Often the planner must actively develop support for plan implementation. She may assume the role of a mobilizer, making allies of government agencies or appealing to the public at large, directly or through the media. Since these actions can put the planner at odds with elected officials who are against the policies he or she advocates, the planner is assuming a political role. Political roles put the planner at risk. If he fails, or even does not succeed in mobilizing enough of a constituency in his support, the planner may find himself out of a job. However, in some contents the planning function in itself may involve a mobilizing role, where planners have to develop a constituency to legitimize their efforts; some cases of neighborhood planning have displayed this effect.<sup>46</sup>

### **Mediator**

Another political role which the planner may have to assume so as to get the planning process under way or to enable implementation of the plan's proposals is that of the mediator, or broker. Here the planner's technical expertise has to be joined with political instincts and interactive skills to combine diverse and sometimes conflicting interests into a supportive coalition. The planner's particular contribution may be in identifying problems of common concern, in developing proposals that can address these problems and at the same time bridge differences between parties or give each of the involved interests something they want. Thus, the planning process may become instrumental in developing consensus among a previously fragmented constituency around a set of mutually agreeable proposals.<sup>47</sup>

### **Entrepreneur**

Another role, less overtly public but political nonetheless, is that of entrepreneur. The entrepreneur wins support for plans by gathering the resources needed to carry them out. In this role, the planner puts together the funds, as well as the necessary administrative approval and political support, to implement plans. The planner often develops entrepreneurial proposals specifically to generate resources for the organization. The success of such efforts gives the entrepreneur planner the necessary base for implementing other plans, which may have fewer obvious and short-term benefits.<sup>48</sup>

### **Advocate and Guerrilla**

The advocate role means the representation of special interest groups. These range from neighborhood residents to poor people to organizations, such as churches, consumer agencies, or corporations.

As discussed earlier, the citizen participation required by federal programs in the 1960s meant that the role of the advocate planner became institutionalized. Though most of these programs no longer exist, the advocate planning role lives on in issue-oriented groups such as the Suburban Action Institute, the Sierra Club, and consumer organizations.

The development of neighborhood planning programs has led to the institutionalization of the advocate role in city government. The neighborhood planners, although employed and paid by city hall, are expected to be advocates for the special interests of their communities, sometimes in opposition to the more general public interest represented by the city planning agency.

The advocate role does bring planning a step closer to the people, but often results in an ambivalent situation. Sometimes it creates community planners

who are "guerrillas" in the bureaucracy, and the role conflicts have not yet been satisfactorily resolved.<sup>49</sup>

## Other Roles

The roles presented above are limited to particular contexts, or have to be assumed under particular conditions to succeed. A planner working for a strong chief executive in a well-organized city may well be most effective in a technical-administrative role. Trying to act as a broker may be unnecessary, and if she does succeed in putting together a coalition it may be perceived as an attempt to grab power, and she may lose her job. On the other hand, a planner working for a poor neighborhood may have to be a mobilizer first, then a mediator, and at the same time become an entrepreneur to attract outside resources into the community. Limiting his efforts to technical-administrative assistance and advice may doom the planner here to impotence.

Some observers have suggested other roles for planners. What these have in common, in contrast to the roles we have discussed, is their inclusive character, often in reaction to the traditional technical-professional role prescribed for the planner. For example, William Baer has suggested that planners might regard themselves as *midwives*, rather than the prevailing image of the expert, more analogous to the physician. In other words, the planner is assisting a process of decision making and policy development in which, while he is not the main actor, he is an important facilitator.<sup>50</sup>

Another effort to demystify the planner's expertise presents the planner as *adviser*. In this view:

Advice and planning are human activities that make sense of the world by talking about it ... When we give advice, we tell stories, and when we plan we are figuring out what to do with others. So advice and planning naturally go together.<sup>51</sup>

While intuitively attractive, the idea of planning as advice fails to come to grips with the question of why the planner should be qualified to give advice. It ends up straddling the range from empathy—the neighbor who understands your problems because he shares them—to the "transcendent claim" for sacred knowledge: the planner as buddy to the planner as priest.

Nevertheless, the idea of the planner as advisor generates some useful insights. For example: "How advisors are wrong depends on the kind of claims they make to being tight."<sup>52</sup> This suggests that much of the shadow that has fallen on planning in the last decade may be directly due to the inflated claims made previously. The advisor's role for the planner envisages an interaction between planner and client where the planner's claim of expertise has to be mutually agreed upon and accepted, a claim that can only be commensurate with his capabilities for performance.

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Finally, some have come to see planners as interpreters or communicators. This approach suggests that how planners develop and present proposals is perhaps even more important than the content of the proposals themselves. The planner here is a mediator in a process of social interaction, and the quality of her transmission may critically affect outcomes.

This idea is the result of two streams of thought. One is the phenomenological view of the world—that is, that peoples' actions are the result of how they perceive and experience events around them, rather than of any objective reality, if, indeed, any such reality could be agreed upon by everyone.<sup>53</sup>

The second is a school of thought that sees social and political interactions as encompassing what are traditionally regarded as "objective" science and knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the mediators of such knowledge, or experts, have to be conscious of their roles, and of the organizational, class, or cultural biases and interests of the messages they create and transmit.<sup>55</sup>

The planner's role as interpreter and communicator is to present to society—in the form of decision makers and affected constituencies in governments, institutions, and organizations—a version of reality and of the interventions possible to change it. The planning process, then, is an ongoing dialogue among the participating public, with the active mediation of the planners, to arrive at a societal consensus on what is happening, and what can be done to change what is amiss.

What do these views imply for how planners should act in practice? Research on this question is still in its infancy, and as of yet there are not many answers. However, all their implications suggest a much more responsive, interactive, and experience-based mode of planning, and less reliance on analysis by scientific methods, or on a rational planning method that aims to persuade by the reasonableness of its proposals and the objectivity of its information.<sup>56</sup>

The experience of successful contemporary practitioners also confirms these findings; together they assert the importance of the planner's political context. The effective planner is the one who appreciates the realities, opportunities and constraints of the institutions in which she is acting and their wider political environment.<sup>57</sup> Intuitively, or as a result of her education and experience, she will command a repertoire of political strategies and will know how and when to deploy them to best effect. Guy Benveniste shows how planners can use some of these strategies in their roles as advisors to "The Prince," which is what he calls the planners' client: the government or agency in which he works, or the official, board or committee whom he serves.<sup>58</sup>

*Reprise:* As with planning models, planners' roles have come to display an amazing diversity, both in theory and in practice. The planner can be anything: from a back-room technician (perhaps a "grey-eminence" in the evolution of policy) analyzing the implications of the output of a computerized land-use model, to an advocate presenting a community's "counter plan" to the local council; from an entrepreneur hobnobbing in the corridors-of-power with the officials of national funding agencies, of banks and insurance corporations, or of benevolent foundations, to an administrator-bureaucrat amending the wording of a zoning ordinance; from a communicator at the same time understanding the problems of a neighborhood group and winning their trust, to an advisor telling a community and its elected officials the story of what their city might become, and how to make it happen.

Today, the only thing that is certain about planners' roles is uncertainty: the changeability of roles in different contexts, the ambiguity of previously unquestioned claims of scientific infallibility and professional expertise, and the continuing emergence of novel views of planners' roles with the diffusion of different views of human and societal relations. As a result, the burden on the individual planner is heavier than it has ever been before. Expectations are as high as ever, but no one—not the theorist, not the educators, nor even experienced and successful practitioners—has any norms of role behavior to suggest beyond the kind of truisms that are easily accessible to common sense: adapt your role to your situation, become worthy of the trust of the people you work with, and so on. In the next chapter, we shall explore the implications of this uncertainty for the way planners view themselves, and the way planning is viewed by society.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES**

1. In your community, region, or State, think of an example of each of the following substantive planning areas:
  - (a) Land-use planning;
  - (b) Urban design;
  - (c) Transportation planning;
  - (d) Planning public investments in facilities and infrastructure;
  - (e) Housing;
  - (f) Environmental planning;
  - (g) Energy planning;
  - (h) Regional/state economic development;
  - (i) Neighborhood and community development;
  - (j) Health planning.