


---

**Putting the Future in Planning**

**Comment**

**Thinking about Tomorrow**

**Bringing the Future to the Forefront of Planning**

Linda C. Dalton

Time is a critical dimension of planning: We study present issues, analyze their roots in the past, and propose ways to address them in the future. myriad definitions of planning explicitly note the field’s orientation to the future. The following examples span more than four decades:

Cities are aware, as never before, of the need for planning their future growth and development. (Menhinick, 1954, p. 423-1)

We define planning as a process for determining appropriate future action through a sequence of choices. (Davidoff & Reiner, 1962, p. 103)

A focus on the future and pathways of change over time… (Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, 1997, p. 223)

Methods texts and courses devote considerable attention to population projections, economic forecasts, and environmental impact analyses. Debates over the vision of plans—whether long-range, middle-range, or short-range—accept the premise that plans look ahead, and argue instead about how far and to what purpose. Thus, it seems initially curious that Isserman would feel it necessary to issue a call to action in his 1985 essay “Dare to Plan.” Myers and Kitsuse (2000) echoed that concern 15 years later: “Current practice in planning addresses the future in ways that are superficial, shortsighted, or hollow” (p. 230).

Why have planners not taken a more meaningful approach to incorporating future thinking in our work? Isserman (1985) issued this indictment: “We make plans as if the role of planning were simply to accommodate what is forecast and ignore the fact that planning can affect the future” (p. 485). Some critics claim that the contemporary focus on planning practice and communica-

---

**APA Journal • Autumn 2001 • Vol. 67, No. 4**
tion gives short shrift to the potential of the plan as a device for galvanizing interest in the future (Neuman, 1998). Myers and Kitsuse (2000) speculate that a superficial approach to the future “may be dictated by the caution required of planners in government agencies or who must seek the approval of elected bodies” (p. 230). But they also suggest that planners and planning educators have lacked adequate theories and techniques to “address the future with authority” (p. 230).

Thinking about the Future

The contribution of the three authors in this symposium is that they have gone well beyond accepting Fleetwood Mac’s admonition, “Don’t Stop Thinking about Tomorrow,” to suggest how we might think about the future. While an individual planner may not be equally adept at preparing forecasts, creating visions, and working with community members, an agency or firm can encompass this range of skills. Similarly, professional planning programs need to incorporate thinking about the future more explicitly in their curricula. Just as we teach techniques for analyzing current issues and learning about the past, we can study future possibilities. The more that we try different techniques for thinking about the future, the more we can assess their effectiveness and develop new methods. Think of the rich contribution planners and planning educators can make to the future by bringing together experience, information, vision, and discussion to set new directions for our communities.

In the comments that follow, I briefly address the contribution of each of the authors in the symposium. Then I go beyond their work to suggest additional issues and directions for bringing the future more explicitly into planning education and practice.

Cognitive Dissonance and Collaborative Planning

Wachs’ overview is critical to our understanding of how planners can think about the future. He reminds us that we should be realistic rather than nostalgic about the past (Were early planners really so visionary as claimed?). He analyzes why forecasting emerged as a powerful analytic tool and then shows how tension between the technical and political aspects of planning practice contributes to role conflict (or cognitive dissonance). He concludes that collaborative planning offers a new opportunity for role synthesis, with the incorporation of forecasting into participatory planning processes.

I share Wachs’ concerns about the role confusion involved in planning. Too often, planning theorists have proposed dualistic choices to practitioners: technician or politician, visionary or analyst, process or outcome, consensus or justice, abstractions or stories. Collaborative planning does not force such choices because it is inclusive. It calls for the recognition of a wide range of information: technical data, scientific studies, experience, personal stories, images, and intuition (Innes, 1998). Because no single kind of information is privileged, all must be examined. Thus, collaborative planning focuses on “gathering facts that matter” and making assumptions explicit (Forester, 1993, p. 28).

While Wachs argues early in his essay that “open, participatory, messy processes lack the motivational power inherent in master plans,” I demur: Democracy is a powerful political vision. And I think Wachs feels this way, too, as he expresses in his closing statement. Collaborative planning practice yields an approach to the future that is “an object of manipulation, discussion, debate, and eventually, perhaps, even consensus.”

Forecasting, Envisioning, and Polling

Cole takes our thinking in another direction. Where Wachs examines how the dilemmas of planning practice affect the way we see the future, Cole looks for methods to anticipate and imagine it. By starting with the intuitive and creative, Cole stimulates our interest in how the human mind can imagine what does not (yet) exist. He takes us away from the mundane, yet suggests that we can apply methods to such a challenging mental activity.

I was disappointed, though, that Cole did not venture further into the processes involved in envisioning and scenario building. Envisioning has become a popular community planning exercise in recent years (e.g., Klein, 1993; Helling, 1998). To some extent it draws from the historical tradition of grand plans, but it also connects the tenets of strategic planning closely with community planning. It would have been interesting to learn Cole’s views as a futurist on how community members should be involved in thinking about the future. Shipley and Newkirk (1998) note that envisioning should not be confused with participation: “There can be participative planning without the creation of a shared vision and strong visions can be personal and even authoritarian” (p. 413). Polling clearly has a representative basis and forecasting is empirical. But beyond the disciplines that bring expertise to the process, how should planners engage their publics and elected officials in envisioning the future? Would Cole support Wachs’ view of collaborative planning and bring envisioning into the fold along with forecasting and polling?
Demographic Futures

Myers welcomes a wide range of approaches to putting the future in planning and calls for bringing all of contemporary planning’s tools and techniques to bear (Myers & Kitsuse, 2000). In that spirit, he offers the concept of demographic futures as a sophisticated expansion and application of population studies to the future.

In sum, Myers asks us to think closely about what we are going to project when we look at the future. If we assume that an environmental condition today will continue to be the same in the future, we will not be able to measure future impacts with accuracy. For example, we need to understand trends in air quality that are likely to occur without any new policy or program before we can estimate the consequences of a proposed intervention.

Constraints on Thought and Action about the Future

Taken together, Wachs, Cole, and Myers address three reasons why planners may be reluctant to take a bolder approach to the future: a lack of confidence, a shortage of courage, and a reluctance to make choices among alternative techniques and scenarios.

Confidence

All three authors suggest that a more solid grounding in methods will increase planners’ capacity to conduct futures studies and thereby increase their confidence to do so. Thus, Cole constructs a typology to organize the lists of methods discussed by others such as Myers and Kitsuse (2000). He draws some useful comparisons among forecasting, envisioning, and polling, and calls for the application of both “hard” and “soft” methods to any future studies assignment. Cole provides planners with an understanding of the range and merits of the softer methods of futures studies, which complements Wachs’ and Myers’ attention to the hard forms. He shows how a variety of disciplines contributes to futures studies—highlighting how planners with their policy orientation can benefit from the insights of social scientists such as anthropologists and political scientists. His table of Web sites should prove useful to planners about to embark on futures studies for their communities.

Similarly, Myers adds to planners’ methods for understanding the future. He calls for planners to think not only about who people are and what they do, but also about how their behavior may change in the future. In looking at projections, he asks not only how they are developed, but also what they mean (for planning). For example, as he studies the Latino population in California, he identifies critical factors that affect human behavior, such as nativity, pointing out that “differences between new immigrants and settled immigrants have great significance for urban development patterns.”

As Myers’ analysis shows, Latinos currently have larger household sizes and are more likely to live in multifamily housing and use public transportation than other groups in California. However, when he adds nativity to his analysis, he finds that these characteristics are particularly associated with new immigrants. Thus, planners must ask whether Latinos’ apparent propensity to live in more compact urban settings will change as they become more settled and more affluent.

Courage

Wachs, like Isserman (1985) and Myers and Kitsuse (2000) before him, focuses on courage. If we apply the traditional, professional expertise model to planning, then confidence should generate courage. Knowledge is a powerful form of legitimacy (Burke, 1979). However, Wachs turns Isserman’s critique of forecasting into a political analysis. In revealing how planners can hide their values in the assumptions underlying their forecasts, Wachs exposes how “analytical” planners can and do affect the future. In other words, some effective planners exercise their influence through cowardly, “duplicitous behavior,” rather than overt engagement of the public and elected officials in the choices a community must face.

Choices

Cole and Myers confront us directly with sets of choices: about the methods we use, their underlying assumptions, and the alternative visions or scenarios they generate. However, after tantalizing us with a range of options, Cole leaves the balance among the methods as an unresolved issue for futurists—perhaps they experience the same role conflict as planners!

Myers uses his demographic insights to examine alternative scenarios for urban development. He connects the hard and the soft methods to create competing stories about the future of urban development in Los Angeles. Let’s compare his scenarios with those cited by Cole. Rather than contrast random and nonrandom sets of circumstances, Myers develops four plausible scenarios, all extrapolated from demographic analysis. Where Cole’s stories are more imaginative, Myers’ are more derivative—and both are of value to planners and other policymakers who are thinking about the future.

Cole and Myers offer us a rich range of options, including negative futures we may wish to avoid as well as desirable possibilities. But when and how do we choose what to pursue, and who should be involved? Cole and Myers seem content with offering choices for considera-
Planning the Future or Planning for the Future?

What difference does a preposition make? Isserman (1985) and Wachs argue that when planners make forecasts, they are implicitly choosing the future. When the forecast becomes the accepted future, then we proceed to plan for its implementation: Questions focus on how to accommodate population growth, provide jobs and housing, and mitigate environmental impacts.

Here the logic and methods of systems thinking and strategic planning may have more to offer community planners than we have acknowledged (e.g., Churchman, 1979; Sorkin et al., 1984). First, systems thinking encourages us to identify those forces that affect us, but over which we have little influence—or, in the argot of strategic planning, external threats and opportunities. We need to understand these forces and forecast them (and their implications), but to the extent that we cannot control them, we cannot choose them—and thus we must plan for (or around) them.

Second, strategic planning encourages contingency planning. Whether we are planning for external forces, or for a desired future, our planning is more powerful if we develop a range of plans to address differences in magnitude, timing, funding, and so on. In other words, rather than select a single forecast future or desired state, we choose several “likely” futures, and then plan for them. Put another way, our plans focus on the means for achieving a desired future, in the context of some forces over which we have little influence.

My campus offers a clear example. Cal Poly is part of the California State University system, which the State expects to help accommodate an increase in enrollment known as “Tidal Wave II.” Demographers know how many children are already in K–12 education, but disagree on assumptions about how many will attend traditional universities in California. Thus, we have a known force of uncertain magnitude. In planning our future at Cal Poly, we have made some important choices: to sustain our academic mission focused on professional programs, to protect our natural environment and agricultural lands, and to house more students on campus. We have examined a range of scenarios derived from the question “How might Cal Poly educate more students with or without increasing our physical capacity?” Thus, while we accept a role in serving the growth in students from “Tidal Wave II,” at the same time we can shape the nature and extent of that growth. I argue that we are both planning our future (through the choices we can make) and planning for our future (by finding the means to both serve our campus mission and accommodate additional enrollment). Because we can only estimate how many students will be in residence from year to year, we are planning for our future by emphasizing flexibility, phasing, and enrollment alternatives (e.g., summer enrollment, technology-mediated instruction), rather than a single approach (California Polytechnic State University, 2001).

Thinking about Tomorrow

Surveys of planning agencies and planners and interview studies of what planners do consistently confirm that plan making, while a critical activity, is not the dominant function of most practicing planners (Dalton, 1989; Kuehl, 1992; Hoch, 1994). Yet, the discussion so far applies best to making plans. Major exercises in constructing projections, involving communities in envisioning their future, and developing plans clearly offer opportunities for planners to apply the reasoning and methods discussed by Wachs, Cole, and Myers.

But what about the development review planner who is handling a caseload of project applications, or the community development planner who is trying to increase economic opportunities, or the housing advocate who is trying to increase the supply of affordable housing in his/her community? Where Cole’s quote (citing Jim Dator) “Any useful statement about the future should seem ridiculous” may help inspire creative thinking about long-term futures, such a view is not likely to be helpful to the planner writing a staff report for next week’s planning commission meeting. These planners are deeply involved in planning for the future. Indeed as they do so, they are guardians of it. That is why environmental review involves analysis of cumulative effects and requires that negative impacts not only be mitigated, but that the results be monitored over time.

So these planners can also benefit from a deeper understanding of the future. In determining likely impacts, the environmental planner is making forecasts; in selecting a building site, the housing advocate is choosing a future for a group of people; in examining what kinds of businesses to attract to an area, the economic development planner is applying expert advice on what industries offer employment potential. Thus, planners who deal with different issues and time horizons equally need a fuller appreciation of how to think about the future—whether “tomorrow” refers to next week, next year, or the next decade.
Implications for Planning Education

Elsewhere, I note a lack of attention to futures studies in planning education (Dalton, 2001). Debates about curriculum content among professional and academic organizations have focused on subject and method, but without explicit attention to the importance of the future. Such early leaders as Frederick Adams focused on substantive areas of study rather than on how to translate such analyses into future plans. He wrote about plan preparation and plan effectuation as essential planning steps, but did not address how they are taught (Adams, 1954). The current planning accreditation criteria are another case in point. While the Accreditation Document defines planning as future oriented, the list of areas of knowledge and methods to be covered in a professional curriculum does not expressly include the future (Planning Accreditation Board, 1999).

Perhaps the future seems to be so obviously at the center of planning that planning educators and practitioners alike forget that we need to learn how to think and make choices about the future with confidence and courage. Wachs, Cole, and Myers have stimulated a discussion about the future that needs to be extended and given the visibility it deserves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Dowell Myers, both for his persistence in advocating for more explicit thinking about the future and for his guidance in the development of this symposium and commentary.

REFERENCES


Dalton, AICP, is vice provost for institutional planning, Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo. She coordinates strategic planning, linking the University’s academic priorities with resources, including information and facilities. Dalton also teaches in the Department of City and Regional Planning and pursues research interests in planning theory, practice, implementation, and education.