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## What's The Mission of Harvard's Urban Planning Program?

by **Jerold S. Kayden**

*Editor's note: This is a shortened version of Professor Kayden's talk on "Chairman's Day" in October 2004, when Rodolfo Machado's tenure as Chair of Harvard's Department of Urban Planning and Design was celebrated. Professor Kayden spoke for himself and did not present his remarks as the department's position.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### **What does the Harvard Design School's Master in Urban**

Planning degree stand for? What kind of education do we want to offer? What skills, knowledge, and attitudes do we expect to project when we launch twenty-five or so urban planning graduates into the world each year? What kind of influence do we hope to have in the professional and academic worlds? What kind of research and practice do we want to foster inside and outside our walls? Do we, or should we, have an ideology? Are we for or against New Urbanism? For or against sustainability? And what do we mean by sustainability, anyway?

In 1979, when I graduated with a masters degree in city and regional planning, the department was headed by a prominent urban economist, John Kain, and staffed with a faculty heavy on quantitative skills and light on anything else. Students of the time had a similarly weighted experience. I was required to take a yearlong course in statistics and regression analysis, a half-year course in microeconomics, and a half-year course in quantitative dynamic modeling. Roughly half of the first-year curriculum was devoted to quantitative methodologies for analyzing urban problems.

What about the other half of the first year, as well as the second year? Yes, I had a one half-year course in the history of planning and had already had another half-year course in planning law, but equally instructive is what I did *not* have: studios; need to put pencil to paper for anything other than text writing and number crunching; recourse to computers for anything other than quantitative analysis; connection with any other department or program or faculty or students at the Design School; any engagement with the built environment and physical planning issues.

Here's a story that sounds apocryphal, but I assure you of its truth. One evening, we first-year students were completing one of the weekly quantitative exercises using the dedicated computer workstations at Gund Hall, and the computers went down, as was their wont in those days. Frustrated, I said to nearby classmates, "In the days of Ebenezer Howard, this would never

have happened,” to which one of them responded, “Who’s Ebenezer Howard?” Mildly but progressively captivated, I went down the list, from Clarence Stein to Catherine Bauer to Patrick Abercrombie, never eliciting more than blank stares. Then the computers came back on.

At that moment in the history of city and regional planning education in the United States, Harvard’s orientation was hardly unique. It is no exaggeration to say that there was a crisis of confidence within the profession about its fundamental legitimacy as an academic discipline or field, an inferiority complex born of the notion that traditional planning was not disciplinary or disciplined enough, and nurtured by the dismissive confidence of those guided by the lights of such “true” disciplines as economics and its “as applied” cousin, public policy.

Why did this happen? Sadly, there were plenty of reasons.

To begin with, physical planning had been on a quarter-century losing streak. It had hardly ennobled itself through reckless reliance on urban renewal: the destruction of older neighborhoods, the removal of lower-income families, and the insertion of large-scale bricks-and-mortar projects to remake the city or solve the problems of poverty. The one-two written punches of Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Herbert Gans’s *The Urban Villagers* delivered some of the critique, but the self-critiques themselves were becoming equally assertive.

Second, the very idea of top-down, command-based planning, so much a part of previous physical planning efforts, took a beating. “We’ve got the answer” met with Robert Goodman’s guerrilla architecture. Alternative models to rational planning asserted themselves, most notably the advocacy planning approaches of Paul Davidoff and Goodman’s own 1971 *After the Planners* assault.

Third, the public sector beat a hasty retreat from physical planning as a palliative for social ills. Pruitt-Igoe me once, shame on you. Pruitt-Igoe me twice, shame on me. And money once allocated to a robust, confident civic realm of public buildings, parks, and boulevards would now be allocated to more pressing city services and social needs. If planning would henceforth produce plans rather than product, then perhaps it was not so deserving of prominence and staff lines in a city’s personnel charts.

Fourth, preservation intentionally and unintentionally undermined planning. Historic preservation gained currency, and with it a hand guided by what was there rather than by invention through substitution. With a built environment already in place needing simply the warmth and care of adaptive reuse, there was less of a need for developing a muscular physical planning approach.

Fifth, there was little intellectual direction to fill the emerging void. The sense was growing that there was no *there* there in physical planning, that the field was too unscientific, ineffective, scattered, error-prone, imprecise, indeed too interdisciplinary to sustain itself intellectually, and that only by marshalling the hard social sciences could it be saved. Let’s face it. It’s hard

to be interdisciplinary, at least within the academy. Each discipline jealously guards its prerogatives and will often disfavor, rather than embrace, someone disloyal enough to imbibe at another’s trough. The academic world pushes toward specialization, and too often the resulting nation-states emerge as narrow, insular, parochial.

Some urban-oriented, non-planning academics took a more subversive approach, seeing the previous planning project as captured by the wrong powers and in desperate need of a bottoms-up recasting. They alighted in the departments and met only scattered resistance. Indeed, by the time the late ’70s rolled in, there was, among some, an intellectual surrender to the forces of economic gravity, to the perception that quantitative methods could rescue this otherwise minor discipline, as Nathan Glazer once described it in his depressingly accurate article about the field.<sup>1</sup> Not, by the by, that law or business or public policy curricula are any more disciplinary—but that’s a discussion for another day.

The story of city and regional planning at the Design School followed this script to its logical conclusion in 1980. There would be no *deus ex machina* to save the department, just the internal and external recognition that city planning no longer *belonged* at the Design School. The University’s inevitable decision to transfer more than 200 planning students and virtually all the planning faculty to the Kennedy School of Government was almost anticlimactic. Ironically, the city and regional planning degree did not find the happy home it might have sought at the Kennedy School, but for reasons also not germane to this talk.

#### CURRENT HISTORY

At the Design School after 1980, discussions about reintroducing a new, physically oriented planning program were deeply contested. Architecture Chair Harry Cobb summed it up when he wrote the following in 1981 to Dean Jerry McCue: “I concur with your view that the best vehicle for introducing these larger-scale disciplines into our School (and hence into practice) is a ‘first professional degree’ program parallel to those in architecture and landscape architecture. However, in implementing such a program we must be careful lest we regenerate the just-completed cycle of alienation between architecture/landscape architecture and planning.”<sup>2</sup>

The School continued to administer its pioneering Urban Design program. Proposals for a new physically oriented urban planning degree were advanced to the university president without tangible result. At some point in the 1980s, the School incorporated the Urban Design program into a newly created Urban Planning and Design Department, but with one slight omission: it would offer only the post-professional urban design degree and no first professional degree in urban planning. The absence spoke volumes about the residual effects of the School’s lackluster experience with city planning, and the fears within and without that a reborn urban planning program would succumb to the siren call of policy analysis and once more veer off course.

In fact, it took fourteen years of convalescence, the deep commitment and deft political skills of Professor Frank Vigier, the strong backing of Dean Peter Rowe, and the Kennedy School of Government's willingness to reconfigure its planning degree through the good offices of Professors Alan Altshuler and Tony Gomez-Ibañez for a compelling vision of, and new degree in, planning education to emerge.

In the fall of 1994, the first class of students arrived. I began my full-time appointment spring term of that first academic year. There was a sense, I recall, of keeping one's head down, of seeing how the ground would lay out, of doing the work of the degree program quietly. In my view, that was a correct read of the situation. Many at the Design School wanted to make sure that they weren't getting a beautifully designed Trojan horse at their doorstep, only to find it disgorging an army of regressing economists and quantitative analysts who, by disposition and background, would have no particular affinity with or skill for addressing physical outcomes of public policies.

### THE PROGRAM

The new degree program adopted a new name, Master in Urban Planning, to replace the old city and regional planning moniker, and that reflected far more than a nominal difference. The new degree locates its intellectual core in its singular focus on the built environment. Here's a proposed mission statement: *The Harvard Urban Planning program teaches students how to understand, analyze, and influence the variety of forces—social, economic, cultural, legal, political, ecological, technological, aesthetic, and so forth—shaping the built environment.* More than any individual creative act, these forces affect the “form, function, and feel” of the built environment in ways not fully appreciated by scholars and professionals alike. The built environment, in turn, shapes the quality of human experience at work, residence, and play, thereby linking Design School-styled urban planning to a central human project worthy of any profession.

Let me unpack the mission statement. The *built environment*, literally as well as figuratively, covers the waterfront as well as the landscape, from buildings to infrastructure to structured natural landscapes, from the cities to the suburbs and beyond, in the United States and throughout the world. The *variety of forces*, singly and together, reminds us that the built environment is, at the end of the day, a stand-in for much deeper currents in individual and collective human experience, and that the built environment does not spring into existence solely by dint of individually heroic acts. Through an innovative pedagogical mix of studios, lecture courses, seminars, and workshops, the program teaches students *how to understand* these forces—*understanding* requires deep immersion in the histories and theories of urbanism and urban planning as phenomenon and profession; *how to analyze* these forces—*analysis* demands facility with a variety of specific technical skills, including of course quantitative skills, deployed within decision-making frameworks; and *how to influence* these forces—*influence* calls for political and managerial abilities and fluency with laws and in-

stitutions, operating under the label “implementation.” I like to say: “To plan is human, to implement, divine.”

Influencing the forces shaping the built environment means providing today's broader range of decision-makers—the public officials, the private operators, and the other members of multiple public constituencies—with the type of information that allows them to connect forces with specific built outcomes. Exercising influence also demands a base of values, because influence without values is a dangerous thing. Values derive from, among other places, critical discussions about cities, representation, stakeholders, interests, power, and process. Influence requires self-conscious consideration of the planner's professional role. Influence is necessarily ideological, but it need not espouse a dominant ideology. Influence requires a vision of, for want of a better word, a *better* built environment, constructed from concepts of equity, justice, efficiency, productivity, and beauty.

Let me use my own research and teaching about law and the built environment to discuss how this mission of urban planning at the Design School may work. Zoning resolutions, subdivision controls, historic preservation ordinances, design review processes, sign by-laws, smart growth laws, and other public regulations have enormous impacts on the shaping of the built environment. They do so on a wholesale, rather than retail, basis, in the sense that they determine the form, function, and feel of large swathes of city and country rather than of a single building.

Identifying and evaluating the impact of law requires a careful comparison of text, tables, and plans with on-the-ground outcomes, a task well-suited to specially trained urban planners. Fluency not only with the vocabulary of law, but also with its empirical impacts, easily distinguishes, for the better, the urban planner from the lawyer. I should know. I'm a lawyer too. I insist that my students develop what I call legal design literacy when it comes to seeing the built environment. By that I mean a learned ability to look at the built environment and discern the discrete impact of law, as opposed to all the other forces. Why do buildings sit on or zigzag from the front lot line? Why is the height three stories or thirty? Why is the density only two houses, unclustered, per acre, with no multi-family housing? Why is the building top articulated? Why is everything brick, look-alike, single-use? Why are there no free-standing billboards? Why don't the streets have sidewalks? And my colleagues in the Urban Planning and Design Department participate in our pedagogical mission through their own specific lenses.

### DESIGN

I am sometimes asked whether urban planners are designers. Is that a trick question, I wonder? It is true that I did not use the word “design” in my urban planning program mission statement. I said *shaping* the “built environment,” but could just as easily have substituted *designing*. I wonder, however, whether the word “design” confuses as much as enlightens. Of course the urban planning program is offered by the Design School,

and I neither want the name changed—Columbia’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Historic Preservation is a mouthful—nor do I feel in any way disenfranchised whenever I walk into Gund Hall just because planning isn’t on or above the lintel. (OK, maybe Gund Hall doesn’t have a lintel.)

What is the difference between urban planning and urban design in a department that teaches both? To choose one particular issue, do urban planning students really need to know how to draw *well*, as well as trained architects and landscape architects who are finishing post-professional degrees in urban design? Do urban planning students need to attain the same level of understanding of urban morphology as that attained by urban designers? Do urban planners need to have the same technical skills and artistic inventiveness in reading, representing, and manipulating three dimensions as urban designers? By placing the two groups—one already professional, one pre-professional—side by side, do we need to exercise special care in explaining to both that they have different backgrounds and roles to play in shaping the built environment, and do we need to say, perhaps more forthrightly than we have in the past, “Vive la différence!”?

For me, the answer is “Yes.” Just as urban planning education should not have fallen for the siren call of policy analysis, so too should it resist the siren call of excessive design proficiency. An urban planning program that stresses the shaping of the built environment need not, indeed should not, become “urban design lite,” any more than an urban design program should become “urban planning lite.” I see the urban planning program here, celebrating its tenth anniversary this year, as confident enough to draw distinctions as well as sections, make arguments as well as models, speculate theoretically as well as figuratively, and undertake discussions and critiques that do not for their persuasive power depend exclusively on graphic techniques for analysis and communication.

To oversimplify a bit, if urban designers are action painters, directly designing the built environment, then urban planners are one-step-away professionals uniquely positioned to confront the array of previously discussed forces on the one hand and the built environment on the other. The specific product of urban planning can be text, a two-dimensional plan, an ordinance or regulation, a report, a program of uses, an evaluation of current uses, as well as a rendering or model representing three dimensions, but it does not have to be so rendered or modelled to be valid. The products of text, plans, regulations, reports, programs, and evaluations will themselves have a profound impact on the built environment. If that sounds a bit restrained for some, it sounds powerful and challenging to me.

And that does not mean that the full richness of design at the School will play anything less than a significant role in our urban planner’s education. To begin with, the urban planning curriculum itself teaches and should continue to teach a basic degree of proficiency with formal design tools. And beyond that, the student has additional opportunities to sharpen abilities. I developed a designer’s eye, although not a skilled designer’s hand,

by taking full advantage of the curricular and cultural environment of the School. Urban planning students can follow that path if they have a voracious appetite for seeing what is done in the studio, for attending reviews, for listening to lectures, for reading journals in the library, for taking courses that teach formal design, for exercising the initiative to educate themselves. And if urban planners seek to become designers, then more power to them. But that desire can only be fulfilled through serial rather than simultaneous engagement. For the two years of urban planning here, there are only twenty-four hours in a day, and more time spent attempting to become more of a designer than necessary for the field means less time spent learning what is necessary for the field.

#### CHALLENGES AHEAD

Over the coming years, I believe that my colleagues and I need to develop more clearly and deeply, through research, teaching, and practice, what we mean when we talk about a variety of forces shaping the built environment. We must explain which theories, which methodologies and technical skills, and which bodies of knowledge planners must master in order to address intelligently the built form. Other urban planning programs may be broader or may focus more on economic or social policies. We are at the Design School. We are excited about this important place in the urban planning field. We must keep our eye on the ball. When Harvard University President Larry Summers confers degrees to all graduates of the Design School at commencement, he exhorts them “to shape the space in which we live.” That’s a wonderful send-off for our urban planning students, along with their fellow urban designers, architects, and landscape architects, as they attempt to make their mark in the world. □

#### NOTES

1. “Schools of the Minor Professions,” *Minerva* 12, July 1974, 346–364.
2. Harry Cobb letter to Dean Gerald McCue, February 3, 1981, in a packet distributed to faculty at the time.