

‘planning by gaslight’– on reforms, skills and political work in planning

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‘planning by gaslight’ – on reforms, skills and political work in planning

Gavin Parker, Matthew Wargent and Emma Street reflect on what it means to be a planner in the 21st century amid further reforms to the planning system

Professional planners are implicated not only in the shaping of sustainable (or, perhaps now, beautiful) development, but also in the politics of governance. In this short article, we argue that a widespread denial of the agency of professional planners in shaping public views and the politics inherent in this aspect of planning go some way to explain the continual degradation – or ‘gaslighting’ – of planning by politicians. If planning’s poor public image is to be combated, a new *political* orientation designed to positively promote planning is necessary.

Although the latest critique of the planning profession contained in the Planning White Paper¹ was a prompt for this article, here we are drawing upon several years’ work researching the profession as it continues to diversify and evolve. In particular, we are reflecting on in-depth discussions held across two symposia considering the future of the profession held in 2019 and 2020.² These events revealed the need to reflect on professional identity, planning skills, and education, and, of course, resources.³ Questions of public trust in the profession were also recognised, and undoubtedly such issues required urgent attention before the latest proposed reforms. Here, we argue that the *political act* of brokering public engagement in, and support for, planning is *just as necessary* as improved resourcing⁴ or refining the knowledge and skills required for admission to the profession.

Professions are said to be consummate in wielding power in contemporary society.⁵ We reassert the view that power is both a resource and a relation – it is not to be found solely in decision-making (i.e. power *over* a development proposal or

a policy document) but is also found in the power *to* shape values, and is produced *with* communities and others to create better places. Recognising and embracing the value of power *to* and power *with* is a central part of reclaiming and asserting the value of planning.

Views from practice

We take seriously the existential threats that planning faces as both a discipline and a profession (starkly laid out by Hugh Ellis recently⁶); in light of this, the views expressed at the two symposia highlighted the need to ‘sell’ planning much more effectively. The participants also foregrounded other factors necessary for an effective public planning, *inter alia*:

- Addressing a lack of *confidence* – especially in some parts of the public sector.
- Advocating over issues of *resourcing* in order to effectively formulate and implement policy.
- Reflecting on both the *development of outcomes and future visions* and ensuring that they are consistent across sectors.
- Recognising the role of professional institutions in actively patrolling the boundaries of good or ‘*ethical*’ planning.
- *Engaging* more effectively with other professionals and communities.

Instead of addressing all of these in turn, we argue that there is an overarching need to reassert the value and values of planning as part of that agenda. One of the arguments made here is that a much better articulation of how planners’ knowledge

and skills can serve to help specific places is required. This is important as the public is largely unaware of the benefit derived from planning outcomes, and the effort to work synoptically in the public interest is seldom recognised. Conversely, ‘failures’ or poor decisions loom large – especially in local politics. Similarly, the risks of an absence of good planning must be conveyed accessibly and persistently (the lesson of permitted development is surely relevant here). This involves demonstrating how positive outcomes are accentuated where good planning is applied.

Professions, expertise, and power

The impetus for this article emerges both from recent discussions and from research, but also from recent calls for greater attention to be given to understanding professions: examining how they work, and how agents form, maintain, and adapt institutions.⁷ This is apposite as planning once again goes through – in Boris Johnson’s words – ‘radical’ reforms. The proposed changes in the recent White Paper disrupt assumptions about planning knowledge, skills, and authority – and appear to be, at least partly, a consequence of a lack of public support for the achievements of the planning profession in England, and elsewhere too.

Expertise is produced, codified and validated by professions. However, the intrinsically political nature of such expertise is too often neglected (or even suppressed) by the profession itself. The result is that planners are often not sufficiently adept in the political behaviours necessary to maintain the

profession’s standing in the public eye, and in ensuring that planning systems and reforms are not co-opted by sectional interests.⁸ This is quite different from the diplomatic nature of the political skills displayed by planners in dealing with developers or local politicians.

Other interests have developed sophisticated systems for lobbying and promotional activities, ones that moreover involve a critique of planning. While this can be decried, the situation needs to provoke more than our exasperation. At present, the culture is to avoid the role of promoters. The lack of effective counter-argument and wider education – the wielding of soft power – about the need for good planning results in a dissonance between planning professionals, elected politicians, and the general public. Current efforts to address this are simply not enough.

Politics and planning identity

In this vein, there have been claims that planning requires more ‘leadership’, and the kind of political work described above is part of this. Yet the importance of developing a more public-facing profession is such that it cannot be left to a small group of senior planners. In such times, professional planners (working in whichever sector), who are more than likely to be adherents to ‘public’ values, need to be visible and publicly recognised.

If the very status of planners remains weak, then others will be selected to service whichever ideological agenda currently dominates the stewardship of the built environment. If, as we



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suspect, politicians view planners as a threat to their freedom to act, then antagonism will inevitably be present in the everyday work of planners. Planning as a profession is uniquely positioned in terms of the myriad policy concerns it intersects with, alongside its points of connection with politicians at national and local levels. That the skills and knowledges *qua* 'expertise' of the profession requires critical thinking, analytical ability and 'joining-up the dots' is not in question. The question that arises – and may in part explain the regularity of critique that the profession attracts in the UK – is the tension between a profession whose basis rests in serving the public interest, set against ideological trends that prioritise market liberalism and deregulation.

Meanwhile, boundaries around 'who is doing the planning' blur, as tasks become distributed between public, private, and third sectors, academia, think-tanks, and communities. Furthermore, the platforms used to depict planning have multiplied, and thus the capacity to generate political interventions on behalf of planning becomes more widespread but also more fractured. And so, while the fresh air of debate is welcome, it does require that all protagonists are active.

In order to sustain political support, planners need to win the hearts and minds of the wider public. This underlines the importance of power as a web of relations: planning as a profession derives power in part from its linkages and networks in a fragmented governing space and 'across more liquid, diverse, and decentered power structures'.⁷ In contemporary planning, professionals need to recognise and make concerted efforts to promote the aims of planning through strengthened networks, and generate an awareness of their own skills and abilities in the public mind, while navigating the politics that inevitably characterise day-to-day planning work.

Conclusion

Debates over sustaining the profile and merits of planning are long-standing, yet the need for planning – for example in combating climate change, in addressing the housing affordability crisis, and in rebalancing the UK's regions – is stronger than ever. To quote the late Sir Peter Hall, 'we need not less planning, but more'.⁹ But achieving a strong and responsive profession appears to be proving harder than ever, as planning continues to fragment across tasks, knowledges, and sectors.¹⁰ The question of what skills or characteristics are essential for the work of the professional planner is as old as the profession itself, and we have no definitive answer to this; but we do believe that now is the time to re-assert political skills and public-facing behaviours which ensure that the value of planning is better understood.

Planning professionals are producers and repositories of vital and valuable knowledge. This expertise gives them political influence: this needs to be recognised and to be used. Of course, such a contention raises further questions, not least how to maintain professional integrity while advocating for planning publicly. Nonetheless, as planning pauses on the precipice of fundamental – perhaps existential – reforms, now is the time for the profession and its representative bodies to dedicate even more effort towards promoting a mainstreaming of planning's value and accept this as an ongoing political act in striving towards greater public understanding.

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Notes

- 1 *Planning for the Future*. White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future
- 2 'The Future of the Planning Profession' symposium, 'FPP1', was held in September 2019 at the University of Reading, sponsored by the British Academy, and a second webinar of the same title, 'FPP2', was held in September 2020 as part of the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference
- 3 An exploratory set of open-access essays published after the first FPP symposium explore future directions for professional planning in the 21st century – see G Parker, M Wargent, O Linovski, *et al.*: 'Interface: The future of the planning profession'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 2020, Vol. 21 (3), 453-80
- 4 The RTPI recently called for a boost of £500 million to support public planning – see www.rtpi.org.uk/press-releases/2020/september/rtpi-calls-for-500m-boost-to-england-s-planning-system-in-csr-response/
- 5 M Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*. Penguin, 1991
- 6 H Ellis: 'The fight for the soul of the planner'. TCPA Blog entry, 19 Feb. 2020. www.tcpa.org.uk/blog/blog-the-fight-for-the-soul-of-the-planner-hugh-ellis 19th February 2020
- 7 M Kuus: 'Professions and their expertise: Charting the spaces of 'elite' occupations'. *Progress in Human Geography*, published online 21 Aug. 2020., p.2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520950466>
- 8 The day-to-day of planning practice can be intensely political, but predominantly in the diplomatic sense of *mediating between interests*. Here, we refer to the political act of affirming planning's value both within and without professional spaces
- 9 P Hall: 'Reflections on a lifetime of town planning'. *The Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2014. www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/oct/01/sir-peter-hall-reflections-on-a-lifetime-of-town-planning
- 10 G Parker, E Street and M Wargent: 'The rise of the private sector in fragmentary planning in England'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 2018, Vol. 19 (5), 734-50