

# Anti-Hero and/or Passionate Pilgrim?

Dr. Leonie Sandercock

*A FEW YEARS AGO I FLEW OVER THE CITY in a helicopter with fellow city planners. Why couldn't all this be different, we asked: why should this house, this street, stay where it is? An unjustifiable, irrational city – untidy, crowded, anarchic. Let's put air ducts into its gasping lungs: let's relieve its clogged arteries and cut through its concentric circles. Traffic is choking its inner core: it is cowardly and sentimental to want to spare its undulating and redundant mysteries. This is the eleventh hour, time for major surgery. We managed to rearrange the city down to the last grain of sand. Upbeavals of imagination erupted under our fingers. Then we came down and saw under our giant dragonfly mountains of smoke, whirling dust.*

George Konrad, *The City Builder* (1977)

A dozen years before the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the symbolic end of the hopes that had been invested in socialism, and the system of central planning that was its core, the anti-hero of Hungarian George Konrad's novel endures his own crisis of conscience. In a harrowing monologue that runs the length of the novel, this unnamed anti-hero, this twentieth century architect/city planner in an unnamed East European city, considers his life, his work, and the many-layered history of the city he and his family – architect/planners all – have helped to mould. In his mind, the narrator/anti-hero carries on an impassioned dialogue with the city, cursing and praising, excusing and lamenting. This city builder's ruthless honesty and intelligence, his expanding awareness of having "got it wrong" in a myriad of ways, make him, in a sense, the battleground where modernist ideas (and idealism) are locked in confrontation with an ambiguous present and an even more uncertain future. His is a journey from hubris to humility.

For as long as there have been cities, there have been women and men seeking to define and then perfect the art and science of city-building. Artists and designers, inventors and theologians, feminists and socialists are among the many who have turned their thoughts to perfecting the pattern of human settlement. From architectural to political, technical

to religious, social to spiritual to environmental solutions, we have juggled with the elements of the city – its political economy, its built, social and natural environments – dreaming its perfection many times over, but never bringing the dream to fruition. Around the turn of the last century a new profession emerged, staking out a claim for itself in relation to city-building. The profession of town and country planning, these days more usually referred to as urban and regional planning, emerged at that time in response to the perceived ills of the industrial city, and among its founding ideas, although always contested, was a distinct stream of utopian thinking. Perhaps the most powerful expression of this utopian stream was the paradigm that came to dominate planning in the twentieth century: the so-called modernist paradigm.

I want to take the fictional journey of George Konrad's anti-hero as a reflection of the journey of the planning profession in the twentieth century. I want to suggest that the profession is now "between paradigms", wandering between two worlds, one of them lost, the other yet to be found. For the past thirty years, the modernist paradigm has been under attack from within planning and architecture as well as from outside these professions. It may be crucial at this moment to remind ourselves that the modernist vision was indeed a vision, both profoundly idealistic and profoundly technocratic. It

was faith in the powers of scientific and technical reason that underpinned the vision, and undermined it.

**If the modernist project has crumbled, as many have argued, how might it be reconstructed in such a way that its idealism, its ethical underpinning, is not lost? What can we learn from the anti-hero's journey? What might inspire and reinvigorate us for the next century? And what qualities will we need, as a profession, to face the challenges of the twenty-first century?**

## The Anti-hero's Journey

Many of us have written at length about the fatal flaws of the modernist planning project. Here I can only summarize, acknowledging the risk of caricature. The dream of the modernist project was the dream of the Rational City (Boyer 1983). The hubris of the city-building professions was their faith in the liberating potential of their technical knowledge, and their corresponding belief in their ability to transcend the interests of capital, labour, and the state, to arrive at an objective assessment of the public interest. Consider the following five pillars of modernist planning wisdom, along with some ways of thinking beyond their limitations.

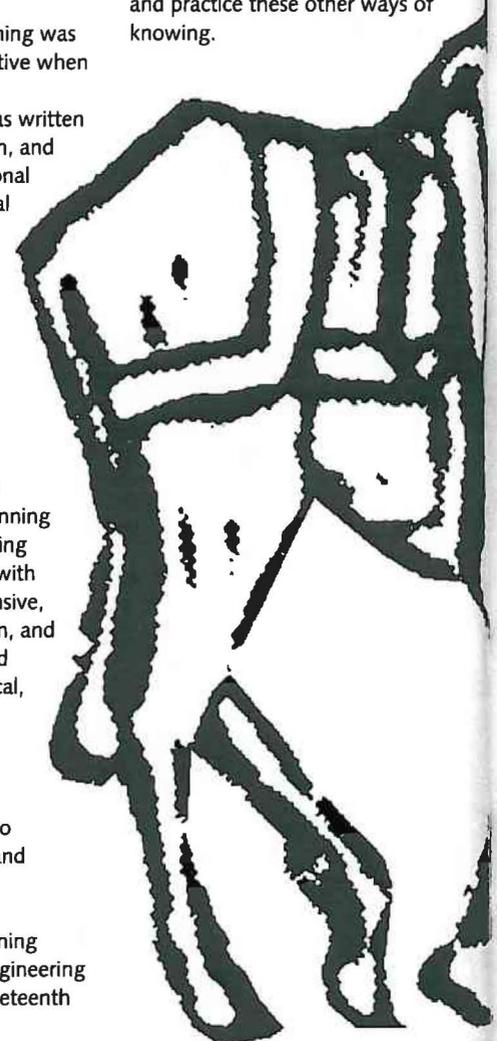
**In the old model**, planning was concerned with making public decisions more rational. The focus was predominantly on advance decision-making; on

developing blueprints for the future; and on an instrumental rationality that closely considered and evaluated options and alternatives. While means-ends rationality may still be a useful concept at the end of the twentieth century – especially for tasks like building bridges and dams – we also need a different kind of rationality that focuses on the formulation of goals. Rather than being technically-based, this rationality is communicative, with a greater and more explicit reliance on practical wisdom. Ignorance of the future is not a solvable problem; it is rather an inescapable part of the human condition. We cannot comprehend a world continually in flux, and thus our ability to project the future consequences of alternative actions with any degree of certainty is severely limited.

**In the old model**, planning was regarded as most effective when it was comprehensive. Comprehensiveness was written into planning legislation, and referred to multifunctional and multisectoral spatial plans as well as to the intersections of economic, social, environmental, and physical planning. Planning's task was understood as one of coordinating and integrating, and was regarded as necessarily hierarchical. Today, planning is no longer seen as being exclusively concerned with integrative, comprehensive, and coordinating action, and is increasingly identified with negotiated, political, and focused planning (Christensen 1993), a planning oriented less to the production of documents and more to interactive processes, and to people.

**In the old model**, planning emerged out of the engineering mindset of the late nineteenth

century, and drew its authority from a mastery of the theory and methods of the social and natural sciences. Planning knowledge and expertise was thus grounded in positivist science, with its propensity for quantitative modeling and analysis. Today there is growing acknowledgment that there are many kinds of appropriate knowledge in planning. New epistemologies – among them hermeneutics, action research, feminist and other ways of knowing and social learning – are displacing the sole reliance on the powers of positivist social science as a basis for action. Local communities have grounded, experiential, intuitive, and contextual knowledges which are manifested more often in stories, songs, visual images and speech than in the typical planning sources. Planners need to learn and practice these other ways of knowing.



In the old model, planning was a project of state-directed futures, part of a two-hundred-year modernization project that began with the industrial revolution. There is now a thriving, community-based planning practice in which planners link their skills to the campaigns of mobilized communities, working as enablers and facilitators. Rather than speaking for communities, as in the older advocacy model, this new style of planning is geared to community empowerment. Planners bring to the table skills in research and critical thinking, knowledge of legislation and the workings of state agencies, specific skills in fields like housing and local economic development, organizing and financial skills, and a commitment to social and environmental justice.

This is not, however, meant to be an argument for the rejection of state-directed planning. There are transformative and oppressive

possibilities in state planning, just as there are in community-based planning. And victories at the community level almost always need to be consolidated in some way through the state, through legislation and/or through the allocation of resources.

In the old model, as it existed until at least the late 1960's, planning was held to operate in "the public interest", and it was assumed that planners' education enabled them to identify that public interest. In the wake of Marxist, feminist, and poststructuralist dismantlings of this concept, it seems more useful to talk about planning for multiple publics, or for a heterogeneous public. Planning has never been value-neutral. It ought now to be explicitly value-sensitive,

acknowledging that the dominant notion has typically been an ideal of homogeneous and exclusionary groups, and replacing this notion with a concept that is more inclusionary and democratic. In this new arena of planning for multiple publics in multicultural societies, new kinds of multi- or cross-cultural literacies are essential.

These are the bare bones of a shifting paradigm. The old planning served modernist cities in a project that was, in part, dedicated to the eradication of difference: to the erasure of history, context, culture. Its dominant images are of identical Levittowns sprawling across the landscape, and of identical (colour-coded) high-rise towers planted in windswept wastelands, each of them "machines for living" in the modern age. The new planning, defined schematically above, emphasizes communicative rather than instrumental rationality; is less document-oriented and more people-centred; practices many ways of knowing rather than relying exclusively on technical knowledge; works through community-based organizations as well as through state agencies; questions the notion of "the public interest" and affirms the existence of multiple publics. A "politics of cultural recognition" (Tully 1995) is fundamental to the new planning. But what are its embodied inspirations?

**Inspirations for twenty-first century planning**

The inspiration for and legitimization of this postmodern planning project comes from the wide variety of social movements that have emerged across the planet in recent decades, each demanding that its voice be heard in decisions affecting neighborhoods, cities and regions. I am thinking of three broad socio-cultural forces which have been and will continue to reshape our cities: migration and an accompanying new politics of multicultural citizenship; postcolonialism and a corresponding politics of reclaiming urban and regional space by indigenous and formerly colonized peoples; and the rise of civil society in the form of multiple urban and

environmental movements, all seeking to expand our vocabulary of justice (from economic to social, cultural and environmental) and to expand our democratic practices. These struggles, in their failures as well as their successes, are managing to transform values and institutions, and the stories of these struggles constitute an emerging planning paradigm which requires a very different style of planning, a familiarity with the lifeways of different communities, and new kinds of cultural, political, economic and environmental literacies.

**Some necessary qualities of a twenty-first century planner: technical and other literacies**

When students sign up for a planning course they usually assume that they are going to be acquiring "the skills of the profession". And indeed we teach them many skills that could be described as technical, among them basic statistics and computing, economic and demographic data-collection and analysis, the use of GIS and other computer packages, report-writing and basic graphics, and of course the ability to read plans and a sound knowledge of planning legislation. Not all planners need all of these skills. Some of them can be picked up or refined in the workplace. Some technical skills become quickly outdated as technologies advance. It is important to be cautious in how we teach these techniques. Technical skills come with embedded assumptions, are used in highly ideological ways, and always depend on certain values that inform their use. How does a transportation planner decide what data to feed into her model? Why is the model privileged over other forms of analysis? The politics of statistics – beautifully articulated in Alonso and Starr's *The Politics of Numbers* (1987) – needs to be taught within a statistics course. Being technically literate, then, ought to imply a whole lot more than familiarity with a range of technical skills and subjects.

It goes without saying that the kinds of technical skill listed above are an essential part of any planner's basic tool-kit, and need continual refreshing and upgrading. What is problematic is an educational and political climate in which both practicing and trainee planners/students think that this is all there is to planning. What further qualities

are required of a planning profession that is committed to a larger project of positive social change? For that we need a whole other set of knowledges, or literacies, about context, about history and culture, about human and organizational behaviour, about politics and power. We need not only analytical and critical thinking, but substantive as well as process-oriented knowledge concerning such challenging issues as local economic development, cultural diversity, environmental degradation, and the relationship between design and behaviour. Let me expand on this, then, by talking about the multicultural, ecological, and design literacies that ought to be part of planning curricula as well as subjects for a continuing professional education program.

**Multicultural Literacy**

When people with different histories and cultures arrive in our cities, their presence inevitably disrupts the normative categories of social life and urban space. The same is true when existing residents, hitherto invisible, begin to assert their difference, make claims on urban space and services, and challenge accepted social norms – women, gays, indigenous peoples, claiming and contesting urban space and trying to make a place for themselves: places of tolerance, places of community, safe places. Their urban experiences, the focus of their struggle to redefine the conditions of belonging to society, are not only reshaping cities today, but are of necessity reshaping the way we think about planning.

As new and more complex kinds of ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity come to dominate the city, these multiple experiences increasingly demand a new basis for understanding and defining planning. There is a new cultural politics of difference in the air, and planning needs to come to terms with it. Historically, universalist ideals of community and citizenship have operated to construct a homogeneous society. Planners have encouraged the ideal of towns and neighborhoods in which people all know one another and have the same values and lifestyles. The current popularity of both the "new urbanism" and of gated communities is the latest manifestation of this denial of diversity and fear of difference.



working on behalf of the most vulnerable groups in multicultural cities and regions, accommodating rather than eradicating difference. This, in turn, means deconstructing a myth of "community" often held to be the radical Other to the public interest,

Given that we are living in what Canadian philosopher James Tully has described as "an age of diversity" in which the desire for cultural recognition, for voice and space, has forcefully emerged (Tully 1995), it seems essential that planners find ways to respond. One way is to think about how the built environment affects, and is affected by, cultural diversity. Another is to ask whose cultural norms are embedded in planning legislation, and whether it is appropriate, in multicultural societies, that the norms of one particular culture should be dominant. Yet another response is to learn new languages, both literally and metaphorically: new ways of knowing, being and acting, ways that are more humble, more collaborative, more respectful of the value of difference and cultural diversity. Planning's core concepts of rationality, comprehensiveness, and the public interest need re-thinking in the light of new concepts of empowerment, alternative ways of knowing, and multiple publics.

This is what I mean by multicultural, or inter-cultural, literacy. It involves valuing alternative forms of knowledge and methods of knowing, including traditional ethnic or culturally specific modes: from talk to storytelling, as well as a wide range of non-verbal forms of expression, such as music and painting. It involves listening and interpreting, developing skills that are sensitive to everyday ways of knowing. It suggests a different practice in which communication skills, including openness, empathy, and skillful and attentive listening, are crucial; in which we are alert to and respect class, gender, and ethnic differences in ways of knowing, and actively try to learn and practice those ways in order to foster a more democratic and inclusive planning. It involves learning to work with diverse communities, rather than speaking for them.

#### Ecological Literacy

American environmental educator David Orr has described an ecologically literate person as someone who is engaged, informed, has local knowledge and a sense of place, experiences their kinship with all forms of life, and seeks to assert and practice civic competence. Such a person, according to Orr, will appreciate "something of how social structures, religion, science, politics, technology, patriarchy, culture, agriculture, and human cussedness combine as causes of our predicament" (Orr 1992, 85-

86). This is a very different approach from that which prevails in most of our planning schools, in which there might be one subject devoted to "the environment", or in which only those students who are enrolled in the "environmental stream" or take the "environment elective" get any exposure to environmental thinking. Orr's approach is essentially ethical.

A recently completed PhD thesis by Wendy Sarkissian (1996), one of Australia's leading social planning practitioners over the past two decades, endorses Orr's premise that the environmental crisis cannot be solved by the same kind of education that helped create the problems: a modernist education that privileges scientific and technical knowledge. Sarkissian has developed a five-dimensional model of ecological literacy for planners, with the overarching goal of nurturing an ethic of care for nature. She emphasizes teamwork, experiencing nature directly, a grounding in community (including community struggles for social and environmental justice), and the study of environmental ethics. While there are obviously skills workshops that can be run for practicing planners on topics such as environmental impact assessment, what is really needed is a kind of re-visioning of planning through an ecological lens, as exemplified in recent work by Timothy Beatley on Ethical Land Use (1994) and The Ecology of Place (1998).

#### Design Literacy

In the US from the 1950's onwards, and in Australia from the 1970's onwards, the case has been made that urban planning is fundamentally a social or policy science, and that questions of design belong in architecture schools. This separation of design from planning, of the built environment from the social and political environment, has impoverished our understanding of the urban field and the arts of city-building. The retreat from design was a reaction against simplistic cause-effect notions of how the physical environment determines human behaviour; it was also a rejection of the aesthetic emphasis of design programs in favour of a social and political-economic emphasis. Much has been lost as a result of this separation. First, there is the ability to "read" the built environment and understand what makes it work, or why it doesn't work; to look at a streetscape or park or square or

ensemble of buildings and analyze the qualities of good public space. Second, there's the ability to read the "maps" and blueprints of the design profession and comment on them intelligently, to be able to translate visual renderings into a completed three-dimensional scheme and speculate about its likely impact. Third, there's the ability to engage in site planning as part of a team whose other members are trained in the design professions. And, finally, there's a more general wisdom, an understanding of and feel for the city of memory, of desire, and of spirit without which the planning professional is rendered one-dimensional, devoid of passion for or any understanding of the magic of the city (as opposed to its social structure or political economy).

In the end, we cannot ignore the inescapable connections between the built environment and human well-being, both individual and collective. We can't deny the power of design in daily life, for good and bad. This power can be as simple and obvious as the transformative effect of trees in a residential street, the qualities of natural light in a dwelling or work-space, the sounds of water created by a fountain in a busy downtown development. Or it can be as complex as the workings of patriarchy in and upon space, through design. Feminist architects, urban designers and planners have been interested in these connections, specifically as they affect the lives of women in cities and suburbs. Books like *Redesigning the American Dream* (Hayden 1984), *Discrimination by Design* (Weisman 1992), and *Gendered Spaces* (Spain 1992) offer insights on the powers of design to express and enforce relations of subordination. Other writers on urban design have noted the architectural tropes that send messages about who belongs in a space and who does not, referring to shopping malls and other public/private places where only certain kinds of people are wanted (Davis 1990; Sorkin 1992).

Understanding the social and psychological aspects and impacts of design does not reduce planning to mere physical determinism (as many of us believed in the 70's), but rather enriches its capacity to create meaning. We need to connect the history of struggles over urban space with the poetics of occupying particular places. Some urban planners are now working with artists, anthropologists,

landscape architects, and communities to do just that, in public history and public art, in community mapping and urban landscape projects that seek a more culturally inclusive approach to planning. This can only be done by designing with culture, as well as designing with nature.

Restoring design literacy to the profession requires teamwork among planners, landscape architects, urban designers, artists, and communities. This needs to begin in planning schools, and involves the blurring of jealously guarded boundaries between the different factions of the "city-building professions".

#### Conclusion: Planning as an ethical inquiry and practice

There are, and will continue to be, multiple roles for planners, including that of facilitating global economic integration through spatial planning. But the normative position which this essay has taken is for a consciously ethical and political profession, one which is prepared to address issues of social, cultural, and environmental justice in cities and regions whose contours are shaped by larger forces of economic and demographic mobility and technological change. Such a stance amounts to a paradigm-shift and demands new planning literacies. This (possibly heroic) call for an ethical planning which is inclusive of technical matters, but which goes beyond them in the way it poses questions and the way it seeks answers, is an explicit assertion of planning's ongoing moral relevance in addressing and redressing the problems of cities and regions. The importance of this exercise was brought home to me recently by the words of Tan Le, a twenty-one year old law student who was named Young Australian of the Year in 1998. In March of this year she wrote the following in Melbourne's metropolitan daily newspaper:

"I have just completed a law degree. One of the reasons I chose law - and many other young people also include this reason for choosing it - was because I believed a law degree would enable me to contribute in a special way, to do what I could to make a better world. Of course I can do this as a lawyer, but nothing in the entire law curriculum addressed this issue in a serious and engaging way. And other tertiary courses

are the same. Engineering students do not study how, as engineers, they can engage in a special way to make the world a better place. They are not invited or challenged to become part of a broader vision. Nor are students in other courses.

Young people are not being educated to take their place in society. They are being trained - trained in a narrow body of knowledge and skills that is taught in isolation from larger and vital questions about who we are and what we might become.

There is, in other words, a complete absence of a larger vision, and many young people who enter university in the hope that what they learn will help them make a better world soon find out that this is not a consideration" (The Age, 3 March 1999).

This is a powerful indictment of professional education at my own university, in my own city. Is it any different in yours?

Passionate pilgrim that I am, my personal vision is for a planning profession that embraces concerns for social and environmental justice, for human community, for cultural diversity, and for the spirit. In modernist planning's pursuit of the rational city, some of its capacity to address these concerns was lost. We must return to those age-old questions of values, of meaning, of the good city: but in attempting to answer those questions we must look for guidance from those hitherto excluded or marginalized; we must listen to all voices. We must respect the city of memory (the past) as it jostles with the city of desire (the present and future). We must rediscover the city of spirit, and invent new forms of enchantment of the built environment. The goal of planning education is not how to stuff the most facts, techniques and methods into students' minds, but how to raise these most basic questions of values:

**How might we manage our co-existence in shared space? How might we live with each other, in active acceptance of all of our differences, in the multicultural cities and regions of the next century? And how might we live lightly and sustainably on the earth?**

**My hope is to inspire coming generations to want to answer these questions, and to shine some light for them.**

## Summary

### A Portrait of Postmodern Planning: Anti-Hero and/or Passionate Pilgrim?

Many commentators have argued that the modernist planning project has failed. This paper proposes a way forward for the profession, offering a portrait of the postmodern planner as a passionate pilgrim, a tireless seeker after social, environmental and cultural justice in the planning of human settlements. I outline five critical elements of the shift from a modernist to a postmodern paradigm; I ask what, or whom, might inspire our vision of planning for the twenty-first century; and I sketch some of the qualities, or literacies (technical, multicultural, ecological, and design-based), that the passionate pilgrim will need for the journey into the next century.

**Leonie Sandercock** writes, teaches, and occasionally consults in the field of urban studies, policy and planning, with a particular emphasis on socio-cultural issues. She graduated with a BA (Hons) from the University of Adelaide, a PhD in Urban Research from the Australian National University, and an MFA in Screenwriting from the University of California in Los Angeles. She was Foundation Professor of Urban Studies at Macquarie University from 1981 to 1986, before moving to the US for eleven years, where she divided her time between screenwriting in Hollywood and teaching urban planning at UCLA. In 1996 she returned to Australia, where she currently teaches in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne. She has written nine books (and ten screenplays), including *Cities for Sale* (MUP, 1975), *The Land Racket* (Silverfish, 1979), *Urban Political Economy: The Australian Case* (Allen and Unwin, 1983, with Mike Berry), *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural History of Planning* (University of California Press, 1998), and *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities* (Wiley, 1998). Her current research focuses on managing cultural diversity in globalizing cities. She can be reached at [l.sandercock@architecture.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:l.sandercock@architecture.unimelb.edu.au), or by fax at (613) 9525 4908.

## Résumé

### Portrait d'un urbanisme postmoderne: Anti-héros et/ou infatigable pèlerin?

*De nombreux observateurs ont prétendu que la période moderniste de l'urbanisme était un échec. Cet article propose une perspective d'avenir en traçant un portrait de l'urbaniste postmoderne. Il le présente comme un pèlerin passionné poursuivant sa quête incessante d'une justice sociale, environnementale et culturelle dans l'aménagement des milieux de vie. On y expose cinq éléments marquants du passage du modernisme au postmodernisme; l'auteur cherche à savoir de quoi ou de qui devrait surgir notre vision de l'urbanisme du 21ème siècle et y ébauche quelques-unes des aptitudes ou des connaissances (technique, cultures, écologie et design) qui seront nécessaires à cet infatigable pèlerin pour poursuivre sa route dans le prochain siècle.*

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# Comments

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## Rummaging in the Compost

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An invitation to "philosophize" about the planning profession and its meanderings is just too good to pass up, even when one is constrained to a thousand words. As the tooth grows longer, much of the writings on planning leave us, in Richard Sennett's words, "to rest uneasily in that nebulous zone just left of centre, where high-flown words count for more than deeds".<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion, which is based on my reading of the appendix for planning educators in *Towards Cosmopolis*, Sandercock's writing falls, plop, right in the centre. It's of the "trash it, dump it, resurrect it" approach to planning. The inherent problem is that it is trapped in the paradigm it eschews. It is literally rummaging in the compost of planning at a considerable distance from current planning action. It is squarely "in the box", and may even be a vague attempt at digging all the way down to an older notion of comprehensiveness, as it structures its own grand designs.

Let's look deeper. The notion that "both practicing and trainee planners/students think that this [technical skill] is all there is to planning" is not dissimilar to the notions underlying earlier attacks on "comprehensive planning" by social activists, marginalized communities and environmentalists. It is not that the current analysis is not accurate. Earlier criticisms were equally valid, as the next ones will be. Sandercock's notions about working with communities, dealing with change and deploying ethical values as critical elements in planning are, again, remarkably similar, as are the calls for integrating education and practice.

Nothing new here. Nor is there anything new in the solution. As with numerous past cries for change, the solution is always a new categorization, better education, or a "re-thinking in light of new concepts". In short, we need a planning revolution, wholesale change or some other grand design that the author is promoting. Well, I'm on board. Who doesn't need a wholesale shake-up? Besides, it diverts attention and can even be fun for planners, who then have no need to make real changes in communities.

