

The links between theory and practice: Is research helping us to address global urban challenges?

**RTPI roundtable session at the World Planning School Congress
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Summary

Participants:

- Dr Michael Harris – Deputy Head of Policy and Research, RTPI
- Professor Ela Sutcliffe – Department of City and Regional Planning, Middle East Technical University, Ankara
- Professor Rachelle Alterman – Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, Technion (Israel Institute of Technology)
- Professor Vanessa Watson – Professor of City Planning, School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics; Deputy Dean of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Cape Town; African Centre for Cities
- Professor Edward Blakely – Honorary Professor of Urban Policy, United States Study Centre, University of Sydney; Chair, Future Cities Collaborative

Michael introduced the session by briefly noting the key points from the RTPI discussion paper about the need for planning researchers to engage with the major global economic, social and environmental challenges facing countries and communities. He suggested that we need to generate and promote much more evidence for progressive models of development that provide more economic opportunity, promote health and well-being, and ensure greater security and social cohesion. At the moment, there is not enough practical, actionable evidence, communicated to policymakers and practitioners in accessible ways. As part of this, we need more research on the economic value of planning, including work that shows how planners can actively shape development markets for better outcomes.

Ela identified a number of the barriers faced by researchers in engaging with society and policymakers, including that such engagement is not typically valued for academic promotion (compared to say publication in peer reviewed journals). Ela noted the significant increase in action research with communities, but suggested that such research does not tend to inform practice. A barrier here is that there are few incentives to publish in local languages.

Even where such research is available, in Turkey there is increasing distrust between researchers and local government. Whereas previously there had been collaboration between researchers and local government in developing city plans, this is happening much less at present, given that neoliberal policies and practices tend to ignore the wishes of local communities and are focused on maximising developers' profits, including through the

extensive privatisation of public land. Academia is trying to raise these issues, but this creates a tension between researchers and policymakers. Such research can also end up being used by NGOs and campaign groups against certain developments, which academics are then appointed to review (against local government's intentions), creating further tensions.

In terms of planning education, studio courses provide valuable practical experience, including engaging with planners and city leaders. But even here, teaching workloads (along with the pressure to publish) can inhibit this kind of work. The answer might be to find ways to better link teaching and research.

Rachelle explained that she is a planner first and a lawyer second; her work is about trying to link theory and law, especially in comparative ways.

Rachelle noted that the impact factor of planning journals is lower than for some other (sometimes competing) fields such as economics. Planning is a small research field, but is mission-driven. She explained this by using three symbols or metaphors: a beacon; a compass; and a scale. The beacon – planning theory – provides a broad direction and ethics, but not direction for day-to-day practice. There is also no consensus in theory. The compass concerns implementation analysis – Rachelle emphasized the need to understand how institutions actually work, for example how plans can get lost in implementation. Also, we shouldn't preach at policymakers – they won't be persuaded by planning theory on its own. The scale represents justice and the rule of law. Planning decisions are often linked to social exclusion, and this is getting worse. While planners often assume planning law to be their '10 Commandments', they need to be more critical, and coalitions (for example, NGOs) are often required to examine the detail of the law.

Rachelle also noted that planning law doesn't matter in many Global South countries; what matters is who owns the land. This said, planning law, in the sense of the time to make decisions for example, does matter to neoliberals and developers. This type of issue is generally ignored by researchers, who tend to favour more regulation, so creating a further distance between them and policymakers.

Rachelle suggested that more research needs to be internationally comparative, identify good and bad outcomes, and the (positive) role of planners within institutions.

Vanessa emphasized the opportunity presented by this year's Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador, and the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially the 'urban goal' (SDG 11).

Vanessa noted the progressive language included in these goals (contrasted with neoliberal priorities), how planning is central to implementing these goals (especially SDG 11), and how the SDGs are universally applicable (unlike the previous Millennium Development Goals, which applied only to the developing world). This said, she noted how the 'right to the city' has been downplayed, apparently as a result of US lobbying, in favour of a (weaker) 'cities for all' promoting inclusion.

More broadly, Vanessa noted the ‘urban tipping point’ of the majority of the world’s population now living in cities, especially Global South cities, and how (reflected in the New Urban Agenda) we have to make urbanisation a ‘transformative trend’.

Vanessa noted that the forms of planning assumed in the New Urban Agenda include the ‘system of cities’, polycentrism, a hierarchy of plans from the national spatial plan to the local/city level, to be achieved via strong institutions, regulations, policies and codes. This represents a state-led, modernist, regulatory approach, but this doesn’t relate well to the Global South, which may lack these institutions and conditions, and in which the social contexts may be very different (for example, informality in cities).

However, the Habitat III process still represents a significant opportunity for planners and researchers, including for research funding. As part of this, there is the need to be critical, and in particular to open-up the ‘black box’ of the economy (for example, in recognising how cities are part of the global economy), and planning approaches need to recognise the new dynamics of place (for example, as explored in the work of Patsy Healey).

Edward described himself as a ‘pracademic’ – a practitioner and an academic, or a practice-engaged researcher. He suggested that not enough academics are close enough to practice (compared to researchers in fields such as business, law or architecture), and that researchers need to “know the fox” if they are to engage with policymakers.

Researchers need to be prescriptive rather than ‘revolutionary’, which is to say, to propose what is politically viable and implementable. They need to be taught how to make policy (and how policy is made), rather than just what it is, in order to transform policy.

A critical part of implementation is finance and development economics, but this is largely not taught (or taught well) in planning schools. Moreover, planning is seen as a ‘weak’ profession; witness the typically stronger role of economic development teams in local government (typically staffed by people with MBAs, for example). Other influential voices, such as economists, don’t read planning journals.

Edwards emphasised that academics need to get themselves in the media. Planning needs ultimately to be about influencing outcomes; the focus shouldn’t be theoretical paradigms, but training for researchers to be public actors. For example, researchers need to be able to influence policymakers (often of very different political persuasions) by identifying what they are likely to want to take credit for (for example, jobs, growth etc) and by educating them to use different language (for example, around inclusion).

The subsequent discussion included whether ‘words’ (as in for example the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda) really matter in practice; how we need indicators/metrics in academic performance management that value ‘real world projects’; how academics need to be ready to influence policymakers and the public by having three or four key, easily-understandable, non-jargony messages; how more researchers need to have “walked the walk” in terms of having engaged in/with practice; and how it is critical to find a place in the power structure to communicate from.