

Plan On It

A Dutchess County Planning Federation eNewsletter



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Exploring the Highs and Lows of the Planning Profession

From a Storied Beginning, Through an Era of Infamy, to Finding Our Collective Purpose

By: Paul Hesse, Community Development Coordinator

If you're reading this, you're probably aware that there exists a planning profession. This is also known as urban planning, city planning, regional planning, town planning, land planning, but it's not to be confused with event planning, although there is some of that for sure. If someone were to ask you to describe what a planner does in one sentence, could you do it? I'm a planner by training and profession, and even I don't have a good elevator pitch.

The American Planning Association describes the planning profession as a "highly collaborative field" in which the planner's role is one that provides the "big picture" and relates projects to "various goals and guidelines [...] in order to achieve a final project that meets the needs of the community."^[1] Some of my fellow planners might simply say that the job is a jack-of-all-trades occupation, and I don't disagree. My personal experience is that planners are such a versatile group that almost no task is off the table, from comprehensive planning and zoning to marketing, social media management, design, and placemaking. I might even say that planners are partly therapists.

The statement about collaborating with others to make certain that projects meet the needs of the community does ring true to me, if somewhat vague. So what exactly does it mean to work with communities in order to identify common priorities and address common needs? In my view the answer, especially for folks working in the profession today, lies in ensuring that the big picture doesn't get cropped and edited to include only some of the image. Voices not historically included in the planning process need to be lifted up and heard. And the broad impacts of land use decisions, beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood or community, need to be considered.

The profession has evolved quite a bit over the last 100 years, from grand visions using a top-down approach to ground-up democratic consensus building. Planning didn't always



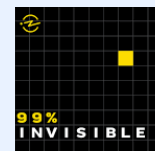
Listening To

What We're Reading

Ever wonder what your friendly county planners are reading, watching, and listening to these days? We created this segment to share interesting books, blogs and more to further spark your interest in the how's and why's of placemaking. We hope you find it inspiring!

Emily's **PODCAST**
Review:

[99% Invisible](#)



This is a podcast about design in everyday life. It covers everything from [how toilets work](#), to the issue of [abandoned cargo ships](#), to the [history of curb cuts](#). But it's not just about design—it delves into the philosophy, history, and theory behind an artifact or design concept. It also examines key social issues. A recent five-part series on homelessness, called [According to Need](#), tells the stories of people experiencing homelessness in Oakland, California—with insights and lessons for anywhere in our country.

Podcast episodes are [available online](#). You can browse episodes or select them based on keywords (cities, technology, history, etc). The site also includes links to articles and a new book by the podcast host entitled *The 99% Invisible City: A Field Guide to the Hidden World of Everyday Design*.

take a people-centered, holistic attitude when crafting plans, but through trial and much error, the profession today is on the path toward making amends for past mistakes and improving public space for all who live in our communities. A brief look at the history of the profession provides helpful context for understanding what planners do today, and what the profession brings to the table for communities.

From Ancient Sumer to the City Beautiful Movement..

Planning for the physical environment has been a human tendency since we made the leap from nomadic hunter gatherers to settlers. When the walls, roads, bridges and irrigation system of an ancient city were built, that was urban planning – “imposing order on nature for the health, safety, and amenity of the urban masses [...]”^[2] Prehistoric Native Americans settled and farmed land for thousands of years before European colonists, making land use decisions whose legacies are still seen on this continent today.^[3] In today’s cities, towns and villages, planning exists in an economically and politically pluralistic arena where the act of altering the built environment is a matter of balancing tradeoffs and managing competing interests.^[4]

The modern planning profession as we know it emerged from the schools of architecture and landscape architecture around the turn of the 20th century. The architect/landscape architect was focused on beautifying the built environment – “do[ing] for the city what architecture does for the home.”^[5] Notable influences to the modern profession include [Frederick Law Olmstead](#) (of Central Park fame) and [Daniel Burnham](#), who’s clarion call to “make no little plans [for] they have no magic to stir men’s blood [...]” defined the City Beautiful movement, which centered on monumental civic design.



Burnham’s 1909 Plan for Chicago included grand designs for civic spaces, such as this plaza with radial boulevards clearly inspired by Haussmann’s renovation of Paris in the second half of the 19th century.

At the same time, public health officials looked at cities through the lens of infrastructure, as the connection between land uses and health issues became better understood. Lack of land use controls was making people sick and resulting in some people getting the short end of the stick, to put it mildly. The crowded city of the early 20th century inspired modern improvements to water and sewer systems, not to mention the first zoning codes, which focused on things like light and air requirements and the separation of incompatible land uses (think toxin-belching, smokestack industry next to tenement buildings). Both the city planner and the public health official agreed that cities were overdue for some new thinking.

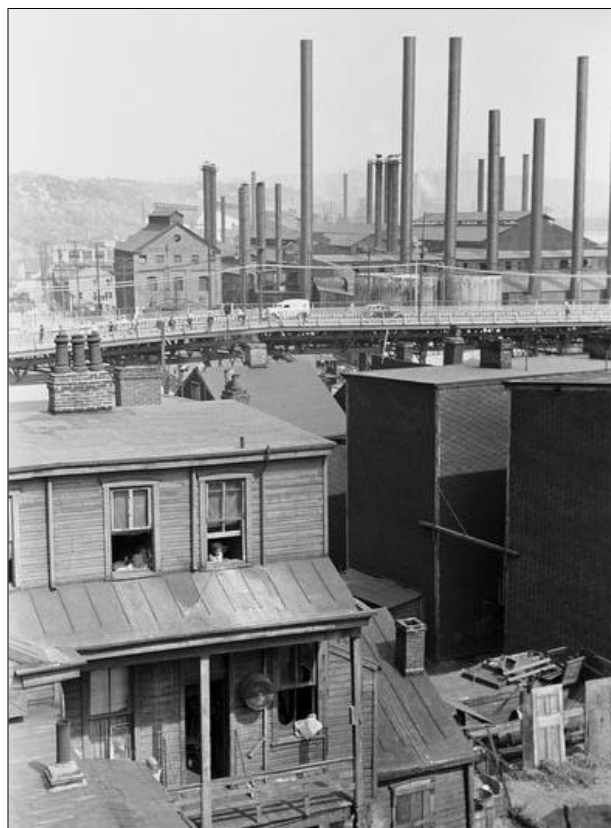
The planning profession of the early 20th century enjoyed increasing prestige. The first national conference on city planning was held; city planning commissions across the country were formed; and universities created the first textbooks and planning courses for students.^[6] By 1917, the American City Planning Institute was created, the first professional organization and predecessor of the American Planning Association.^[7] As the profession began to mature, at least in the American city, planners incorporated some of the latest thinking about cities and how we live and work in them, notably embracing the increased use of the automobile and the concept of suburbanization.

...to Urban Renewal, a Reckoning with the Past...

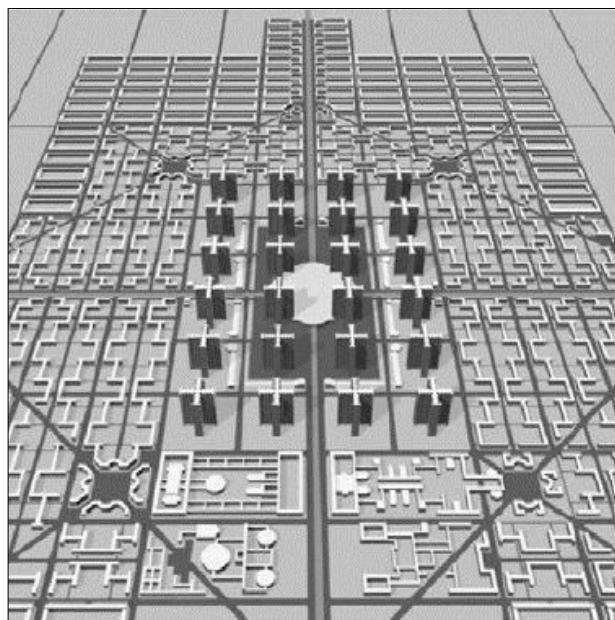
What began as a formalized profession and a systematic approach to solving the issues of the industrialized city of the early 20th century became a hubristic exercise in remaking cities wholesale. By mid-century, some planners began to flirt with the ethos and aesthetic of the high-modernism era. Design concepts by utopian visionaries such as Swiss-French architect and planner [Le Corbusier](#) were embraced by city leaders and the power brokers of the post-WWII era of the automobile. Towers, freeways and geometric design predominated the thinking, and while many of these plans were, thankfully, never realized, notable examples of high-modernist city planning do exist.^[8]

By the 1950s and 1960s, the “solution” to saving the city was thought to be razing the city, and thus, urban renewal plans across the country, particularly in the industrial Northeast and Upper Midwest, were drawn up and federal dollars flowed to help carry them out.^[9] While some of the more radical plans were not achieved, many urban renewal plans were enacted, and as one professor of urban planning put it, “planners thus abetted some of the most egregious acts of urban vandalism in American history.”^[10]

At this point, planning triggered Newton’s third law, giving rise to an equal and opposite reaction of the [Jane Jacobs](#)-era anti-planner. To be sure, planners (and city officials generally) had earned the enmity of citizen activists, with their heavy-handed top-down approach to planning. Planners today regularly deal with the fallout of the urban renewal era and struggle to build trust with communities most impacted by the consequences of urban renewal, primarily communities of color.



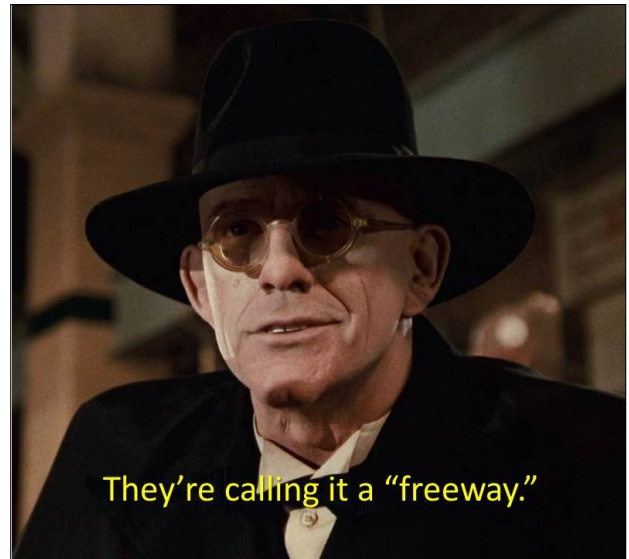
It was not unusual to find crowded tenements next to noxious industry at the turn of the 20th century, such as this scene of a steel mill next to housing in Pittsburgh.



While never built, Le Corbusier’s Contemporary City for Three Million best represents the design aesthetic of the high modernism era, with an emphasis on towers, freeways and geometric shapes.

The profession endured a lengthy identity crisis from the 1970s until the end of the 20th century, doing soul searching and trying to find its purpose within today's communities. In some ways, planning today has come full circle to focus on the built environment, just as the early days of the landscape architect, but with a shift toward humanism: placemaking with people not just for people. Planners, designers and urban thinkers such as Jan Gehl began to focus intensively on observing how people use and interact with the built environment, co-designing places with the very people who know the place best, rather than an I-know-best approach. This people-centered philosophy is summed up well by Gehl when he says, "First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works." [11]

Importantly, the profession in the second decade of the 21st century is finally acknowledging its deficit in racial and ethnic diversity. Historically, planning has been overwhelmingly white and male. In 2016, less than 30 percent of planners surveyed by the American Planning Association with 20 or more years of experience were women, and only seven percent identified as people of color. [12] Those figures are improving, but there's certainly room to grow. Representation by people of color within the profession is critical to ensuring that lived experience guides planning work. Some planners today are focused on exactly that.



The movie "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" featured the truly scary villain Judge Doom, who seeks to enact a plan to drive a freeway through the compact and transit-rich Toon Town. To quote Doom, "I see a place where people get on and off the freeway, on and off, off and on, all day and all night! Soon, where Toon Town once stood, will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that sell rapidly-prepared foods, tire salons, automobile dealerships, and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see! My God, it'll be beautiful!"



BlackSpace is a collective focused on planning for urban spaces from a Black viewpoint.

[BlackSpace](#) is a collective of planners, architects, artists and designers that works to proactively bring Black voices and concerns into a development process that has long ignored them. [13] One of the group's guiding principles is "Reckon with the past to build the future," which seeks to

acknowledge historical injustices before new work begins.^[14] Another guiding principle is “Plan With, Design With,” where planners are invited to be “connectors, conveners, and collaborators – not representatives.”^[15] In other words, plan with people and empower people to participate in realizing their own futures. This is the kind of approach that just didn’t happen in the early days of the profession.

...and Finally, Atonement

The modern planning profession was started by designers and social reformers in the early 20th century. It evolved to near cartoon-villain status during the high modernism of the 50s and 60s to include the idealism (and narcissism) of the utopianist, only to be humbled by the activist anti-planning movement. The profession as I know it today is much more aligned with advocacy planning that came from the Jane Jacobs era than utopian planning, and I think that’s a good thing.

Planning acts as a connective tissue between the community and the government, not only helping to navigate and interpret the byzantine world of land use and zoning regulations, but also helping to elevate the voices who might not otherwise be heard in the larger comprehensive planning process. And through this equity lens, perhaps the profession can begin to atone for some of its past behavior and help communities heal from past trauma.

As one planner puts it, planners are therapists and cities are clients, and being conscious of a client’s lived experience (and one’s own bias in the relationship) can help build trust and validation.^[16] Planning can be painful and messy, but that’s also true of democracy. What planners bring to the table is a mission and mandate to ensure people’s voices are heard and that the forest is not lost for the trees. Planners today operate on the plane that exists somewhere between the physical environment and the social environment, and I know of no other profession that requires skills in such diverse areas as urban design, housing, transportation, sustainability, group facilitation, social work, history, and more. Truly, it’s a jack-of-all-trades profession. And in 2021, amid climate change, the ongoing fight for racial justice and equity, the housing crisis, and a global pandemic, that versatility is as critical as ever.

More Information

[*Jane Jacobs and the Death and Life of American Planning*](#) (Places)

[*Meet the Black Design Collective Reimagining How Cities Get Built*](#) (Fast Company)

[*Planning As Therapists, Cities As Clients*](#) (American Planning Association)

[*A Brief History of the Birth of Urban Planning*](#) (Bloomberg CityLab)

[*Urban Planning Can’t Happen Without Black People in the Room – Yet It Does*](#)
(Public Square: A CNU Journal)

[*Choosing the Planning Profession*](#) (American Planning Association)

BOOK: *The Color of Law – A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* by Richard Rothstein (read/listen to an [NPR interview with the author](#))

[1] [Choosing the Planning Profession](#). American Planning Association.

[2] LeGates, Richard T. and Frederic Stout, ed. “Introduction to Part Five.” *The City Reader*. 4th edition. 2007.

[3] Coughlin, Michael R. and Donald R. Nelson. “[Influences of Native American Land Use on the Colonial Euro-American Settlement of the South Carolina Piedmont](#).” *Plos One*. March 29, 2018.

[4] LeGates, Richard T. and Frederic Stout, ed. “Introduction to Part Five.” *The City Reader*. 4th edition. 2007.

- [5] Klosterman, Richard E. "Arguments For and Against Planning." Readings in Planning Theory. 2nd edition. 2003.
- [6] Cullingworth, Barry and Roger W. Caves. "Governing and Planning Urban Areas." Planning in the USA. 3rd edition. 2009.
- [7] [About APA](#). American Planning Association.
- [8] See the City of Brasilia, BR and Empire State Plaza in Albany, NY.
- [9] The urban renewal era is inextricably linked to this country's long troubled history with race and is deserving of their own discussion. Read Richard Rothstein's masterpiece history of housing, zoning and urban renewal policies as they relate to race, *The Color of Law*.
- [10] Campanella, Thomas. "[Jane Jacobs and the Death and Life of American Planning](#)." Places Journal. April 2011.
- [11] [Jan Gehl](#). Project for Public Spaces.
- [12] Vazquez, Miguel A. and Linda C. Dalton. "[Expanding California's Leadership in Diversifying the Planning Profession](#)." Northern News. October 2018.
- [13] Berg, Nate. "[Meet the Black Design Collective Reimagining How Cities Get Built](#)." Fast Company. August 17, 2020.
- [14] [BlackSpace Manifesto](#). BlackSpace.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Aviles, Jose Richard. "[Planners as Therapists, Cities as Clients](#)." Planning Magazine. October 2020.

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This newsletter was developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development, in conjunction with the Dutchess County Planning Federation.

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