

## PHYSICAL PLANNING THOUGHT: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Gary Pivo  
Cliff Ellis  
Michael Leaf  
Gerald Magutu

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*City planning scholars recently have been calling for greater attention by schools of city and regional planning to the intellectual field of physical planning. This article responds by offering a retrospective of the physical planning field and a future research agenda. Both are organized around five perennial questions which, it is argued, have always been at the core of the field. The questions address the forces that shape physical development, the evolving urban form, possible and desirable physical futures, the impacts of development, and institutional means for guiding urban growth.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The basic definition of physical planning has changed very little during the past few decades: *Physical planning is concerned with the general pattern of land-use, the character and location of public buildings and structures, the design of streets, the location and development of transit and transportation systems, and all other physical facilities which are necessary or desirable to promote the economic betterment, comfort, convenience, and the general welfare. (Webster 1958, p. 137)*

Since then the field has grown to include urban design and environmental planning. This is reflected in a current description of the "physical city" which includes overall form, topography, buildings, infrastructure, transportation, utilities, open space, density, climate, vegetation, aesthetic quality, and urban design (Branch, 1985).

A study was recently completed by one of the authors which examined changes during the past fifteen years in available specializations, faculty interests, and courses offered in the subject areas suggested by this definition of physical planning. The subject areas included land-use planning, land-use policy, urban design, infrastructure, transportation, environmental planning, and urban spatial structure. The general conclusion of the study was that physical planning subjects are being taught at a number of planning schools but many schools are not particularly active or have nearly abandoned activity in the physical planning area (Pivo, 1989).

The future of physical planning education and research in professional schools of city and regional planning has received serious attention recently in the planning literature. Professor David Sawicki, former president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, argued in his 1987 presidential address for greater attention to the traditional concerns of the profession (Sawicki, 1988). He wrote "that it is, in fact, our lack of focus both substantively and organizationally that is leading to our demise." He claimed that certain activities should be a part of our professional definition and that we have been giving up our interest in the very problems which set us apart from other professions. According to Sawicki:

*Many young scholars are captivated by romantic notions of political and social reforms; meanwhile, the frontiers of planning method or of substantive areas like infrastructure planning and finance go unexplored. The fringe dominates while the core stagnates, and our graduates have no sense of the profession they expected to join. We are in danger of losing the balance between our traditional concerns with the physical environment and the social concerns we adopted in the early 1970s.*

Professor Marc Weiss stated the case for a resurgence of physical planning even more directly when he wrote that "physical planning...(should be the) core basis, the stable future of planning education and research" (Weiss, 1988).

If physical planning is to play a central role in the future of city and regional planning education it would be helpful to have available a retrospective of the field and a discussion of its prospects for the future. In a 1987 doctoral seminar, convened by Professor Collignon at the University of California, Berkeley, the authors of this paper found that, except for a few aging articles (Raymond, 1978; Mocine, 1966), there were no recent discussions in the literature on the past and future of physical planning. This paper offers a retrospective of the field and a suggested agenda for future research. Both of these are organized around five perennial ques-

tions which appear to always have been at the core of the field. The emphasis is on writers and thinkers in the field rather than physical planning practice. A similar work on physical planning practice would also be a useful contribution.

## PHYSICAL PLANNING THOUGHT IN RETROSPECT

### *Five Perennial Questions*

The physical planning field can be organized around five perennial questions. These questions cover the range of studies and writings that have emerged in the literature since the mid-nineteenth century. Answers to these questions have been pursued during nearly every period of the field's development. The questions are as follows:

What are the forces that shape land-use and the infrastructure that supports it? Understanding the factors that influence land-use and public improvement patterns is a central concern of the physical planning field. The forces that shape our cities are important to understand because they explain and predict the impacts of planning decisions, influence future urbanization patterns, and create the context for planning activities.

What is the evolving physical form of urban and regional settlements? As the forces which shape the city change and evolve, they create changes in the form of physical development. Understanding this ever changing landscape is critical to understanding the impacts of physical planning policies and newly emerging issues. Over the years, the description of urban and regional form has been the subject of many watershed studies (Firey, 1947; Gottman, 1961; Leven, 1978; Berry, 1980).

What are the possible and desirable futures for physical development? Normative and prescriptive discussions about the form of development that should occur, as well as presentations of scenarios that could occur, have always received attention in the field. They provide planners with a better understanding of their options and a basis for making the unavoidably ethical decisions these options imply. From visionaries and utopianists (Meyerson, 1961) to ethical philosophers (Haworth, 1963; Mumford, 1934), authors have been fascinated with the normative elements of city planning. At the same time the choices that are more realistically available also have received a great deal of attention (Goodman and Goodman, 1947; Downs, 1970).

What are the social, economic, and ecological impacts of current and future physical urban forms? Even before the more recent emphasis on environmental impact assessment, researchers were studying the effects of development. Impacts of the pattern (Lynch, 1961; Marris, 1962; McHarg, 1969; Kozlowski and Hughes, 1967), the size (Lillibridge, 1952; Applebaum, 1976), and more recently the rate of physical development (Malamud, 1986) have all been the subject of research.

What institutional means are available for guiding physical development? A great deal of effort has gone into exploring how physical plans are implemented or inhibited. Studies range from investigations of zoning and other regulatory devices (Delafons, 1969) to critiques of the property market as an institution for determining the amount and location of growth (Pivo, 1984).

