What professional planning must contribute to ensure sustainable development

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The role of planners in the progress of sustainable development cannot be underestimated. Planning has always been acknowledged as central to providing spatial development patterns that underpin sustainability objectives at different scales and in numerous sectors. Sustainability, as an objective, gave planning a new focus from the early 1990s onwards, and reinvigorated debates about how to balance competing environmental, social and economic resources and outcomes. Although many of these challenges were not new, the sustainability discourse alerted the profession to issues wider than ‘the local’ and challenged it to acquire a sophisticated, multi-layered understanding of the impacts of change. In this respect, the sustainability agenda propelled planning into the highly complex discourses of globalisation, resource management, equity and futurity.

Perhaps more than any other single profession, planners responded positively to the sustainability challenge. We took on trying to manage natural resources far more carefully than previous generations, to think about the long term impacts of development, to care about the interplay between social justice and economic development. The language of sustainability now permeates the profession. Planning policies at all scales have been re-written to include sustainability objectives; education and training have been re-focused; and numerous ways of assessing sustainability have been devised and implemented. Planners have held themselves up as accountable for achieving sustainable development, and have worked hard to both make sense of, and operationalise, the concept for the best part of thirty years.

Yet when we look at the outcomes of planning it is easy to wonder if the profession should have been more measured about its ability to bring about such fundamental change. In the UK, and further afield, we see glaringly unsustainable new retail and commercial buildings, partially realised ‘sustainable’ schemes, and poorly conceived, resource-rich developments. We question how they came to be built, given the involvement of professional planners and the deeply embedded policy ambitions for sustainable outcomes that have been in place long enough to make a difference. Even now in the UK, we struggle to find examples of places that we are truly proud to hold up as ‘successful’ in terms of sustainability, and we resort to international examples, usually from Sweden or Germany to show a particular model of what can be done. When ambitious sustainability programmes are assessed we often find that the final outcomes fall well short of aspirations in the most important things: infrastructure, green technologies, community development, and basic amenities (Williams, 2007). Of course, it is possible to find some inspirational examples of contemporary planning, but on the whole progress is slow.

So, is this critical judgement of progress ‘on the ground’ fair? Of course what gets built matters, but as an assessment of the role of planning in advancing sustainability it is far too simplistic to make a judgement on this basis alone. I say this for several reasons that are worth exploring, because they offer insights into ‘what planning must contribute to ensure sustainable development’ in the future.

This critical perspective fails to account for the contextual challenges planners face in achieving sustainable outcomes, and to understand the powers that planners have now. Any assessment of planning’s contribution to sustainable development must acknowledge its position within prevailing economic, political and governance systems that are, at times, deeply at odds with any true notion of sustainability. As O’Riordan and Voisey argue, the progress of transition to sustainability requires ‘immense and fundamental changes in our society’ (1998, p.3), and ‘…to move forward involves relative
and responsive shifts in a host of institutions - in the way we think, the manner in which we judge, and in the structures and legal arrangements of our governance’ (op cit, p. 4). They argue that, ‘…the institutional arrangements that need to be readjusted in order to embrace the sustainability transition actually thrive on, and endure in, a non-sustainable world’ (op cit, p. 4), concluding that it is ‘No wonder sustainable development is taking time to be credibly articulated in policy and day-to-day behaviour’ (op cit, p.6).

Planning works squarely in this context. To achieve its sustainability goals, it is deeply entangled with, and reliant on, a host of other competing private and public sector organisations, institutions and legal and governance regimes many of which have objectives at odds with sustainable development. Planning is constrained in realising many environmental or social objectives by the pursuit of profits from development legitimised as a precondition for a ‘sustainable economy’ in the macro-economic sense. Hence, planners often find themselves negotiating at the margins rather than transforming priorities.

In addition, planners often face the ‘democratic paradox’ of sustainability (op cit, p. 15; Williams and Dair, 2007). Put simply: what is good for the planet is not always popular. Yet, planning has always been about serving ‘the public’ (McDonald, this volume). The sustainability agenda has given rise to a new type of politics in planning: where local populations (or sections of them) are told that they do not know what is good for them; and where the environment is played off against the economy, the neighbourhood against the region, and the nation against the planet. In this sense the sustainability agenda has made planning far more political, not less.

Yet, even within this context, I would argue that planning has made progress. With reference to O’Riordan and Voisey above: it has made a sustained effort to help society envision a different future; it has changed itself (institutionally) and made us judge things differently; and it has changed some of the structures and legal arrangements that it has power over. Planning has also helped to change public perceptions of the value of natural resources, the damage of unsustainable behaviours, and the collective sacrifices and benefits that we may experience in the transition to sustainability. This is not to be uncritical: planners have not always maximised their impact, even within their spheres of influence. But they have maintained a sustained and profound change in culture at the centre of the development process that is having an impact on how society evolves.

So what must planners contribute now? We need to build on the culture shift that has happened: to maintain focus within planning and exert pressure on other players in the development of land. We need to work patiently and thoughtfully in concert with other professions and organisations to develop societal understanding of the real costs and benefits of change so that in future the democratic paradox is less pronounced. We need to embrace the complexity and breadth of knowledge required to understand what ‘sustainable development’ is. We need to maintain our expertise and use it to produce credible and exciting visions and plans.

More than anything though, I think we need to regain a sense of confidence and leadership: not in a managerial sense, but of ideas, inspiration, ways of working and breadth of perspective (see Hambleton and Howard, 2012 a and b). We should not see ourselves only as mediators of others’ ideas and perspectives, but as informed and thoughtful practitioners with expertise in seeing, communicating, and achieving the bigger picture. We need to demonstrate our expertise in ‘place-based’ decision making and use this to gain confidence in ourselves and from other professions.

The transition to sustainability will require new allegiances, different ways of collaborating and new parties around the table, and planners are uniquely positioned to facilitate these changes in innovative ways (op cit). We are also able to take the long view, to understand that profound change may span
generations, and to keep perspective on both advances and setbacks. We need to use all the influence we have within whatever sphere of planning we work, and to value small, incremental, local advances, as well as the major milestones along the way. But central to this planners need to maintain a coherence of purpose. The principles at the heart of sustainability discourse still serve us well: the prudent use of environmental resources and inter- and intra-generational equity. McDonald asks if the planning profession’s unique position is derived from the fact that it is able to ‘deal with and synthesise a range of issues’ (this volume). I think in pursuit of sustainability we can do more: we should learn, educate, inspire and lead.

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References

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