Q: How is the restructuring of Los Angeles' city-region changing the theories and practices of planning?

A: **Edward W. Soja** Professor

I joined the Urban Planning faculty in 1972. What attracted me most as someone trained in geography was a distinctive feature of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning (SAUP, later GSAUP) that continues to this day. More than any other Urban Planning program in the country, then and now, the curriculum and the faculty accepted the central importance of a spatial or geographical perspective in planning education, research, and practice. While I would spend the next three decades trying to convince everyone else of the importance of critical spatial thinking and analysis, there was no need to do so "at home" in Urban Planning at UCLA. We were, among other things, spatial thinkers and actors right from the start.

What was most different here, in contrast to teaching in a department of Geography, was the exciting synergy that had been created between theory, empirical research, and practice. It was not that we did any one of these three so much better than others, but rather that, collectively at least, we kept them vitally interconnected, believing in what today would be called their synergism. It did not matter that some focused on local community development and the built environment, others on larger scale

regional planning and national development. The most theory-oriented faculty deeply respected and learned from the most practice-oriented, and vice versa.

What developed under these unusual conditions might seem paradoxical to the rest of the world. A professional school, with its commitment to practical applications, became a leading center for the community, urban, regional, and international development theory. Let me illustrate from my own personal experience, research, and writing—and from the role played by Urban Planning at UCLA in the development of Los Angeles-based urban theory—why this is not as paradoxical or surprising as it might initially appear.

One of my earliest teachers once told me that there was nothing more practical than good theory. What he did not tell me was that the relation between the theoretical and the practical was a two-way street, a creatively dialectical relationship in which each fed and stimulated the other. Being a theoretician was not simply a matter of autonomous invention and visionary breakthrough, it required not just thorough empirical research but even more so the constant pressure of the "so what?" Being in a Social Science or Geography department, one could theorize and do empirical research (and get tenure) in splendid isolation from practical applications. But this was not so easy in Urban Planning at UCLA. My greatest challenge in moving from Geography to Urban Planning was dealing with pesky and insistent students who demanded of even my most elegant spatial theorizations an extended discussion of how they could be used tomorrow in Santa Monica or Watts, Africa or Latin America. At first I resisted such utilitarian urgencies, but slowly learned that such insistent pressures were vital for the construction of "good theory." Today, I look back convinced that I am a much better theoretician for having taught in Urban Planning rather than Geography or Sociology. And I am also convinced that the best social, economic,

political, cultural, and spatial theory in the future will come from professional schools such as ours, where theory-research-practice are synergistically interwoven.

At UCLA, I shifted my primary research interests from African and Third World development issues to studying Los Angeles. I retained my spatial and, particularly, regional and political perspective, but now grounded my theoretical work in trying to make practical sense of what was happening in this remarkable urban setting. A key turning point came in the early 1980s when a group of Urban Planning faculty and students, including myself, Rebecca Morales, Goetz Wolff, Marco Cenzatti, and others responded to a call from a union-based organization called the *Coalition to Stop Plant Closures* to help them in organizing workers to resist what would later be called the "deindustrialization" of Los Angeles. In the early 1980s, Los Angeles lost more than sixty thousand jobs as automobile, consumer durables, steel and related industries shut down their factories. The Coalition, composed of unions, religious organizations, and community groups, was finding it hard to organize workers to stop these plant closures, especially with overall job growth booming in the region. Why fight and threaten job security when there seemed to be so many other jobs available?

The Coalition turned to us with a very practical yet theoretical question: what is happening to the Los Angeles economy and labor market to produce this peculiar situation and how might a better understanding of these changes help workers and communities deal better with the devastation caused by deindustrialization amidst robust overall job growth? We produced several reports and pamphlets for the Coalition (with little effect, as plant closures continued), but out of this project came a number of important developments within Urban Planning at UCLA. Beginning with an article by Soja, Morales, and Wolff published in 1983, the department (then program) became an important center for the study

of what we called *urban restructuring* and, as the article was subtitled, the analysis of social and spatial change in Los Angeles. In conjunction with this work, Urban Planning at UCLA developed a wider specialized interest in labor and labor organizing issues, as well as in the study of urban labor markets, than most other planning departments in the country. This relatively forgotten constituency of planning was not only given attention in the Urban and Regional Development (later RID) area of concentration, but also in Environmental Analysis and Policy (EAP), Social Policy and Analysis (SPAN), and the Built Environment (BE). It also increased ties between Urban Planning and the Institute of Industrial Relations (now housed with us in the School of Public Policy and Social Research) and with the Geography Department, where related research on economic restructuring in Los Angeles was being done.

Over the past two decades, this research on urban restructuring in Los Angeles has expanded in many different and productive directions and has become one of the most widely recognized achievements of the department, both locally within Southern California and internationally as well. With Urban Planning as the core, and stimulated further by the development of the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, a much wider network of scholars has coalesced around making practical and theoretical, as well as social and spatial, sense of the urban restructuring process in Los Angeles and in extending this knowledge base to understanding similar changes taking place in urban regions around the world. A good portion of this now very diverse and eclectic work was captured in *The City* (1996), co-edited by Scott and Soja, with its ambitious and symbolic subtitle, "*Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century.*" In addition to chapters by the two editors, there are contributions from many past and present lecturers and professors of the Urban Planning Department: Paul Ong, Evelyn Blumenberg, Marty Wachs, Margaret FitzSimmons, Bob Gottlieb, and Mike Davis; as well as UCLA colleagues Richard Weinstein, Charles Jencks, and Ray Rocco.

In closing this short reminiscence, I want to re-emphasize the importance of maintaining the vigorous links between social theory, empirical analysis, professional practice, and critical spatial thinking, especially as we deal with both the painful losses and new opportunities associated with our transition to the School of Public Policy and Social Research. We must try to avoid compartmentalizing these four arenas into specialized and separated domains. In particular, we must continue to recognize the key role played by our teaching and writing in the integrative field we have called Planning Theory, which for thirty years has been providing the most effective glue keeping all four of these vital arenas together.

EDWARD W. SOJA has written extensively on spatial theory and the urban restructuring of Los Angeles. He teaches critical urbanism, regionalism, and planning theory.