

# TWENTY YEARS *of* CRITICAL PLANNING

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**T**wenty years ago, three PhD students—Moira Kenney, Rebecca Abers, and myself—initiated Critical Planning. Mirle Rabinowitz and Orit Stiglitz joined us in the production process. The time has come to reflect on where the journal/our journey has taken us.

When I arrived in Los Angeles in the fall of 1993, Rebecca and Moira were wait-

ing for me with a proposal to run a student journal on planning. They had heard that I worked as an architecture critic in my home country of Switzerland just before coming to UCLA to do my PhD in planning, and they wanted to build on my experience with print media. The idea morphed quickly from a simple student-run journal to a more ambitious double-blind, peer-reviewed journal that would

become a forum for “sharing the high quality of written work done by our peers” on a national and international level (Editorial, *Critical Planning*, 1993). We knew what we wanted, we just didn’t really know how to do it, given that both Rebecca and I had just started with our PhDs, while Moira was only in her second year. But the support of faculty and staff, in particular John Friedmann as well as Vanessa Dingley from the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, helped us to think it through intellectually and financially.

And the journal needed a name! At first, it was supposed to be called something like *Planning Journal of GSAUP*,<sup>1</sup> but that sounded a bit bland to me and it didn’t really capture the kind of work that the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning (GSAUP) had become known for in the 1970s, when critical thinkers of the time were defining the field in unique ways. “Critical” was more than ever the term that people associated with GSAUP at the beginning of the 1990s: faculty members representing the period when “the first key element of criticality”<sup>2</sup> were formed (John Friedmann, Ed Soja, Lee Burns, Marty Wachs, Allen Heskin, Don Shoup), together with the “second wave” from the early 1980s (Jackie Leavitt, Michael Storper, and Margaret Fitzsimmons) and some recent hires (Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Leonie Sandercock), as well as adjunct and part-time faculty such as Mike Davis, Goetz Wolff, Bob Gottlieb, and Gilda Haas,

defined the intellectual life at GSAUP in various, sometimes aggressively distinct directions, but what connected all of them was cultivating a critical perspective within planning education.<sup>3</sup> That is why most of us were there—we did not want to become mainstream planners; we came with an interest for critical theory, which meant we were interested in a systematic approach that made urban planning part of a wider discourse on urbanization, economic restructuring, and path-dependencies, a notion that critically investigated the world in which planning was taking place. What better name than *Critical Planning*!

The format of the journal was pretty much the same as it is still today, with a small difference. It was the time that postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking also had made their way into the planning discipline. We were taught about different ways of knowing, and that meant that we were particularly keen to find diverse ways of writing planning history and theory and engaging with planning practice. Therefore, we actively sought numerous forms of articulations: poetry, stories, essays, all were next to articles that followed the regular style of an academic publication. This might have been lost over the years but what remains is that the journal has become the springboard for many budding young minds: Rachel Weber, Neil Brenner, Julie-Anne Boudreau, Mustafa Dikeç, Sonia Hirt, all distinguished academics now who had early career publications in *Criti-*

cal Planning. For all of them, it was their very first urban academic article in a peer-reviewed journal!

Since launching the journal twenty years ago, a lot has happened. We all finished our PhDs and got jobs: Rebecca Abers is now a Professor at Instituto de Ciência Política at the University of Brasilia. Moira Kenney is the Executive Director of the state-wide First 5 Association in California. And as for myself, I have become an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto, where I teach mainly planning students. We all have busy lives with jobs, husbands, and kids and are far away from the journal we once launched.

What are our perspectives on things now? I contacted Rebecca, Moira, and Leonie Sandercock, to see what they had to say twenty years later.<sup>4</sup> I asked them five specific questions and this is how they answered.

## REBECCA ABERS

### *What have you done since 1993?*

I finished my degree in 1997 and moved to Brazil with Alberto. We have two kids, Tom (14) and Nina (almost 11), and I teach political science at the University of Brasilia. I have been quite out of touch

with planning, though a couple of years ago I participated at John and Leonie's PhD jamboree and found the Canadian planning students to be simply lovely. My move to political science really occurred as I wrote my dissertation and found that planning couldn't help me answer the questions I had: I needed causal theories about mobilization, participation, and the state. Although I think the move has been good for me, I have found the possibility of political scientists to distance themselves from practice to be a bit frustrating. Academics can be very pretentious, and I remember that planning academics were less so...although maybe that's just selective memory.

### *How has the experience of launching a new journal enriched your way of thinking/doing?*

I think that most of all it helped me appreciate the logic of academic submissions processes, and to think about what goes on inside the head of editors, to whom, many times since, I have submitted my work.

### *What role do you see for a peer-reviewed, student-initiated journal such as Critical Planning in the landscape of academic publications?*

As it becomes increasingly important for

students to publish while still in school, it may be an important outlet for [their publishing]. On the other hand, I imagine that it is harder to make a student journal into a prestigious enough one that makes it count in a job search....How has Critical Planning done on that respect? (I know, I am not supposed to answer a question with a question).

*How has planning changed over that period of time? And what do you consider pivotal moments in world history that had an impact on planning?*

Well, I am no longer really a planner, but I think that all kinds of things have changed, especially since that post-Berlin wall period that we were in back then... I would generally say that the conditions in which action takes place are different, most importantly because of the Internet, which has profoundly changed organizing processes. On the other hand, some things seem a lot the same, such as the loss of a unified progressive utopia. I say all this, of course, under the influence of the current wave of protests that are sweeping Brazil, which have, among other things, made this country seem a lot like the countries that underwent the Occupy movements of two years ago. As you can see, I still think of planning as the terrain of progressive activists. Perhaps this is an outdated perception? Or something that only made sense at the

UCLA planning school—something that has been gone for most of the last twenty years? I don't know, those PhD students at the UCB Jamboree were pretty cool...

*Where is planning heading?*

I guess I don't know. I have entirely given up on making predictions of things anyway.

## MOIRA KENNEY

Since I left UCLA, PhD in hand, in 1995, I have done everything but critically plan! I worked for five years at the Getty Research Institute, working with an amazing team of art critics, theater directors, librarians, and others developing programs that engaged communities across LA in the life of an art museum. We developed street art projects, led high school students in community mapping projects, and organized popular education symposia. I loved the work, but thought it was time to reengage in university life, so I took a job as the Research Director at the Institute for Urban and Regional Development at UC Berkeley. We led community research and evaluation efforts in inner-city communities across the East Bay, including Richmond and West Oakland, employing students as researchers in a variety of contexts. In 2002, I finally left academia for good, taking a job with the City and County of San Francisco.

California had recently embarked on a truly bold experiment, with the passage of Proposition 10, which raised tobacco taxes by 50 cents a pack to pay for new and innovative programs for children 0-5. The most experimental aspect of the initiative was that the funds, collected at the state level, would be primarily distributed at the county level, by new public agencies (now called the First 5 Commissions) governed by local appointed commissioners, including public officials, public agency directors, and community advocates. Each commission was required to develop a strategic plan which identified local needs and brought together both public and community-based partners to implement the plan. Now, as we near the fifteenth anniversary of Proposition 10, I am honored to serve as the Executive Director of the statewide First 5 Association, which seeks to leverage the local efforts of the county commissions for statewide policy change. I love the work and am excited by the possibilities ahead of us, as Federal policy begins to catch up with local needs and with the vision launched in California in 1998. My experience at UCLA, with such talented students and faculty, has indeed shaped my work, despite my non-academic path. I came to planning thinking that we were seeking ways to lead state and local agencies in new directions and to engage with communities as partners, rather than as clients. I could not have anticipated such a full realization of this approach within the fifty-eight county governments of California, but believe that we are on the

path. If I have any regrets about the work, it is that I see few planning students working in early childhood development efforts, and know that our work would benefit from their engagement. In other news, I have a ten-year old daughter, Sadie Aurora, who thinks Rebecca's daughter, Nina, is pretty awesome.

## LEONIE SANDERCOCK

*What role do you see for a peer-reviewed, student-initiated journal such as **Critical Planning in the landscape of academic publications**?*

It's a great starting place for doctoral students to publish. I suggest it a lot as a destination for my better students. And it's also a great experience from the inside for those who get involved in running it, of what it takes to get published, because you are reading all the critical peer reviews and you can get used to the notion of receiving criticism that's maybe not as "sugar-coated" as your supervisors might be giving you.

*How has planning changed over that period of time? And what do you consider pivotal moments in world history that had an impact on planning?*

Since that time, there have been a number of important "turns" in planning:

Obviously the “communicative/collaborative turn” was imminent at that time but had not been named as such. The 90s [were] significant for the “design” turn, which on the one hand was an important antidote or complement to the social science approach and on the other, was a reflection of the efforts of urban regimes to re-make de-industrialized inner cities as attractive places for investments and gentrification. Then there was the “story turn”; and now I would say there is an emerging turn to complexity theory or complex adaptive systems thinking. That’s all at the interpretive level. Planning practice has started to address the challenges of sustainability, now morphing into an emphasis on resilience. So, I think this also answers the question [on the future of planning], albeit briefly.

## CONCLUSION

I want to conclude with what I, who have followed *Critical Planning* relatively closely, have observed over the years. The journal that we launched has become a widely respected publication within the planning profession and the social sciences. Not only planners, but also architects, geographers, political scientists, sociologists, and ethnologists are publishing their research and thinking in this journal. And I must say that it is extremely rewarding to see that over all these years, *Critical Planning* has found

a format that is able to bring together contributions by both young scholars and well-established voices within the wider field of urban and regional scholarship. Granted, some issues are more profound than others. However, it is a phenomenon that a journal can thrive with a structure where every single year there is a new cohort of students producing the journal. The long-term support of the UCLA faculty here is of course important, as are new initiatives such as the Edward W. Soja Prize for Critical Thinking in Urban and Regional Research. In my mind, the success of *Critical Planning* is that “we now draw from an ever-growing international pool of submissions from researchers of cities and regions working in a variety of disciplines,” as the editors of Volume 15 proudly announced. To see that there are submissions from various parts of the world, to realize that more than a handful of scholars of international caliber had their very first publications in *Critical Planning* and to have established scholars still publishing in *Critical Planning* gives a strong answer to Rebecca’s question about the reputation of the journal.

It is enormously pleasing to see that the dream we had in fall 1993 has become reality. And for that I want to thank the numerous people who have put their time and heart into producing *Critical Planning* over the past twenty years.

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<sup>1</sup> When I arrived at UCLA it was precisely the combination of architecture and urban planning that interested me, in spite of the difference between the two of them (see Sanyal, 2008; note 2 below). By the spring of 1994 it was clear that restructuring from the top meant that the two disciplines would be separated and would become part of new entities. Critical Planning was trying to overcome this forced divorce by having editors from both architecture and planning for a couple of years.

<sup>2</sup> Bish Sanyal, "Critical about Criticality," *Critical Planning* 15 (Summer 2008): 143-160.

<sup>3</sup> At the time the journal was founded, some faculty that had contributed to the intellectual landscape of GSAUP in the 1980s had left, Peter Marris and Dolores Hayden among them, while others who define the current Planning Department hadn't yet been hired.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that while we all got PhDs in urban and regional planning, it provided us with the opportunity to not only stay within the field but also to move successfully into other areas of interest.