CHAPTER

2

Planning Practice and Planning Theory

THE USES OF THEORY IN PLANNING

Planning theory, I have written elsewhere, "is a term that strikes terror in the hearts of many planners; it conjures up images of esoteric word games played by planning educators who have little knowledge of what practicing planners actually do."[1] Robert Beauregard paints an even bleaker picture, observing that planning theory "is generally held in low esteem. Practitioners have little use for it, students (for the most part) find it a diversion from learning how to do planning and a requirement to be endured, and planning academics, on average, tolerate it. Within academia, planning theory is marginalized; within practice, it is virtually ignored."[2]

This state of affairs is unfortunate, to say the least. I will attempt to demonstrate in this book that, on the contrary, a sound body of theory is an essential component of the planning profession—both fundamental to an understanding of what planning is and helpful to those who practice it. John Forester expresses a similar viewpoint when he suggests that planning theory "is what planners need when they get stuck; another way to formulate a problem, a way to anticipate outcomes, a source of reminders about what is important, a way of paying attention that provides direction, strategy, and coherence."[3]

More generally, I view planning theory as the *process* component of our profession; it guides us through a continuous self-examination of what it is we are doing, how we are doing it, why, for whom, and with what results. In short, it is a vehicle for profes-

sional introspection about our roles as planners. Without theory, we would have little justification for doing what we do. Theory places our feet firmly on the ground; properly conceived, it provides ethical and behavioral frameworks for the definition of professional planning practice. "Far from being an irrelevant exercise in academic game playing, then, planning theory is absolutely indispensable to our sense of identity and our ongoing development."[4]

Theory has, of course, been defined in a number of ways. It will suffice here to note a basic distinction between two types of theories. (1) *Positive* (sometimes called empirical or descriptive) theories attempt to explain the relationship between two or more variables—concepts, actions, objects, events, qualities, and so forth—in order to generate predictions about phenomena not yet observed. Once the hypotheses derived from such theories have been tested, the theories may be verified, refuted, or modified. This is the stuff of scientific investigation—of carefully designed, conducted, and controlled research projects. (2) *Normative* theories, on the other hand, prescribe what the relationship between the variables in question should be in order to produce results that are deemed desirable. In short, positive theories attempt to explain *how* things operate, while normative theories tell us how they *should* operate.

Normative theories can be further divided into two subtypes. (a) An *ethical* normative theory prescribes a given relationship because of its "rightness" in view of some external principle; one should undertake action *X* because it will produce outcome *Y*, which is the desired outcome from the perspective of principle *Z*. The principle, *Z*, may be a value (equity, justice, fairness), or simply a decision criterion in current use (increase employment opportunities, control sprawl, reduce automobile congestion). (b) A *functional* normative theory, on the other hand, is complete in itself and thus requires no external principle. A particular way of doing things is prescribed simply because it is deemed a good way (more workable, more productive, more efficient) to proceed; one should do *X* because it is a good way to achieve any *Y*, regardless of the reasons for wanting to get to *Y*.[5]

The planning profession has provided numerous examples of these various types of theories. Positive theory-building is at play, for example, in researchers' attempts to create urban development models that can predict the impact of alternative transportation

patterns on a range of other variables (such as population density, residential and commercial development, and land values). Planning research has become increasingly sophisticated during the past several decades, and planners have formulated and tested numerous positive theories in an effort to heighten our understanding of the processes by which cities and regions develop and function. Such theories relate, of course, to the *subject matter* or *content* of planning; these are differentiated from theories pertaining to the *process* of planning, here referred to as normative theories.

Ethical normative theories have often been troublesome for the planning profession. One problem has been the unfortunate durability of many so-called sound planning principles that turn out to be based on little more than tradition ("Everyone knows this is right," or "This has always been a basic tenet of planning"). For example, planners long held to the principle that land uses should be rigidly separated so as to protect property values and ensure the efficient performance of urban functions (movement of traffic, conduct of commerce and industry, and so forth). Thus, in the terms introduced earlier, the planner might prepare a zoning ordinance *(X)* that achieves a strict separation of land uses *(Y)* so that the "separation of land uses" principle *(Z)* can be satisfied. In more recent years, the validity of this "sound planning principle"—as well as that of many others—has been scrutinized and challenged.

In reality, most "sound planning principles" are quite amenable to empirical testing, and thus belong more appropriately to the realm of positive theory. Indeed, whether a particular proposition reflects positive or normative theory will often depend on how that proposition is conceptualized and presented. For example, the statement that citizens should be involved in the planning process *(X)* because this will give them a voice in decision-making *(Y)*, which is an essential feature of a democracy *(Z)*, is not an empirical proposition. Given a commitment to democratic participation, there is nothing to be tested; the statement simply reflects allegiance to a particular value. If, on the other hand, it is asserted that citizens should be involved in the planning process *(X)* because this will give them a voice in decision-making *(Y)*, which is essential to the successful implementation of a project *(Z)*, then the proposition can be tested—for example, by comparing the rates of successful implementation in high-participation versus low-participation projects—

and we find ourselves in the realm of positive theory. The "separation of land uses" example mentioned earlier is also open to empirical testing; in fact, research on this issue through the years has contributed to the principle's demise.

The critical point is simply that we should take care, in our professional lives, to distinguish between those propositions that are essentially expressions of our values or ethics, on the one hand, and those that are subject to empirical testing, on the other. In short, we should maintain clear distinctions between our positive theories and our normative theories.

There is a second way in which ethical normative theories have been problematic for the planning profession. Much of the work being done by today's planning theorists is strongly "ethical normative" in character, reflecting and building upon particular social and political values. Planners reading the resulting literature are typically urged to carry out their professional activities in a manner that manifests those values. Regardless of how one feels about a particular set of values, however, some important questions are thereby suggested: *Is* there a set of values that are fundamental to the planning profession and that should therefore be held by all planners? If so, what are those values, and how is their possession to be enforced? If not, how do we decide which values should prevail in any given instance? These and other value-related questions will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The other type of normative theory, the functional, has also been prominent in the planning profession, though perhaps somewhat less so in recent years. The so-called rational model of planning (see Chapter 6), at one time the dominant paradigm in planning theory and practice, serves as a good example; it was typically presented as the best *X* for achieving any *Y*. No external value or principle was at issue; one behaved rationally simply because it was the best way to plan. Our entry into the postmodern era (discussed later in this chapter), however, has been accompanied by serious questions about the utility of that approach. Values are indeed central to all planning—and it is not surprising, therefore, that most current planning theories are of the ethical normative variety.

Approaches to planning theory can also be differentiated on the basis of their intent. Here I distinguish between (1) theories *about* planning, which focus on its role in a particular milieu—the community, nation, society, or political economy; (2) theories *of*

planning, which seek to explicate characteristics of planning practice (for example its communicative effects, discussed in Chapter 9), and are sometimes—but not always—accompanied by suggestions for improving that practice; and (3) theories *for* planning, which propose models or strategies for consideration by practitioners.[6]

The second of these three approaches is most closely aligned with ethical normative theorizing, and is the most prevalent today. The other two approaches remain potentially useful, however, and should not be ignored. Indeed, the strategy proposed in Part 4 of this book incorporates both the second and third approaches.

IS THERE A THEORY-PRACTICE GAP?

Whether a gap exists between theory and practice depends on how the issue is conceptualized. On the one hand, it is true that much contemporary planning theory focuses on what planners do; in that sense, then, there are indeed bridges between theory and practice. On the other hand, however, there is relatively little traffic on those bridges. For the most part, planning practice and planning theory constitute two distinct communities of interest, each with its own membership, forums for interaction, modes of communication, and other internal dynamics.[7] There is, in fact, little incentive at present for genuine communication between the two realms.[8]

Part of the problem, of course, has to do with the often-described historical transition in the nature of the planning professoriate. The early university planning programs were staffed largely by "master practitioners" who taught planning practice as they had experienced it. In time, however, it became apparent that such programs would enjoy little status or success unless they became more academically respectable—that is, hired faculty members with "proper academic credentials" (Ph.D.'s), developed high-quality programs of research and theory building, and generated admirable publication records. It was inevitable, then, that the primary "reference group" for most planning educators would come to be their fellow academics rather than those who practice in the field.[9]

Another source of difficulty is the differing languages employed by the two groups. Nigel Taylor traces the theory-practice gap to the 1960s, attributing it to the "abstract, highly technical (and frankly abstruse) language of systems theory, with its talk of mathematical

modelling, 'optimisation' and so on.... Planning theory concerned with much broader systemic considerations tended to be seen as irrelevant by the everyday local planner with a heavy case-load."[10] Indeed, drop your local planning director into one of the planning theory sessions at the annual conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (the largest annual gathering of planning educators), and he or she is apt to feel that an alien tongue is being spoken.

Nor, ironically, do theorists and practitioners necessarily focus on the same set of issues. Writing from his perspective as a theorist, Beauregard perceptively observes: "My ideal practitioner would consider the epistemological underpinnings of action, the broad sweep of history, the tensions within a capitalist democracy, the elusive qualities of space, and unresolvable societal conflicts. I expect, however, that most practitioners would be satisfied with making one aspect of the community work better."[11]

The theory-practice gap is hardly unique to the planning profession; I suspect, in fact, that most disciplines experience tension between their practice and theory-building wings. Beauregard's point is echoed, for example, in a 1988 *New York Times Magazine* article by novelist and attorney Scott Turow. Law school, Turow complains, is not "lawyer school"; except for clinical programs focusing on practice skills, there is little emphasis on what it means to practice law. Instead, he charges, law school is "about training legal scholars," about teaching students to "think like law professors."[12]

> Practicing lawyers rarely think first about the grand sweep of the law and its rational development. They think about the needs of their clients and how the law can be applied or shaped to accomplish certain aims.... [M]ost law professors don't practice, some never have practiced and don't ever want to. Their focus is on scholarship: cutting-edge changes in the law, law-review articles, complex analyses of vexing legal problems. And law school is a world made in their image.[13]

Turow concludes that what "can and should be commonly instilled" in law school is "a sense of mutual enterprise, a vision of the worthy, if complicated, ambitions of the profession, and the freedom to take pride in this difficult and venerable calling."[14] Many practicing planners would have no difficulty substituting planning school for Turow's law school.

Other causes and/or effects of the theory-practice gap can be posited. Throughout the 1970s, the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) held its annual conference in conjunction with (usually on the weekend preceding) the annual conference of the American Institute of Planners (AIP), at that time the nation's principal organization for professional planners. The ACSP conferences were attended primarily by the administrators of university planning programs; a turnout of twenty to forty of them was considered successful. Early in the 1980s, however, the ACSP developed its own conference, widening its format to include all faculty members and transforming it into a major forum for the presentation of scholarly papers (often publications in progress) by academics to other academics. By the turn of the century, the conference was being attended by as many as eight hundred people, and registration in excess of one thousand planning educators was deemed to be just around the corner. The ACSP's divorce from the AIP conference, then, was a strong contributing factor in the organization's growth and maturation. On the other hand, there has also been a price to pay—namely, reinforcement of the inevitable distance between educators and practitioners, who no longer meet together. Few would advocate a return to the arrangements of the 1970s—the conferences of both the ACSP and the American Planning Association (APA), the AIP's successor organization, are far too successful to "need" the other group—but the separation of the conferences stands as yet another symbol of the theory-practice gap. To be sure, a fair number of planning educators do attend the annual APA conference, though I suspect that the ranks of planning theory specialists are rather thin at these gatherings. Very few practitioners attend the ACSP conference unless they have been invited to participate in a particular panel, program, or committee meeting.

The two wings of the profession tend to rely on separate vehicles for the communication of their interests and ideas. One of my tasks in preparing to write this book was to review the content of the profession's major journals and periodicals over the past fifteen years—a process that gave me some rather strong impressions about authors and audiences. *Planning,* a monthly publication of the APA, is written largely by practitioners (or professional writers who are strongly oriented toward planning practice) for practitioners; its articles are practical and accessible. Both the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (published by the ACSP) and the *Journal of*

Planning Literature are written, for the most part, by and for academics. The *Journal of the American Planning Association (JAPA)* is, in some ways, the closest to a hybrid; while most (but not all) of its articles are written by academics, the topics tend to be somewhat more applied, and many of the authors make an effort to communicate across the theory-practice divide. Occasional complaints by practitioners that *JAPA* is too theoretical or esoteric continue to be heard, however.

Not all of the complaints are directed by practitioners toward academics. Planning theorists occasionally complain that practitioners lack appropriate values, or technical and political skills, or analytical depth, or thoughtful introspection, or proper appreciation for the fruits of academic research and theory building. Indeed, one contemporary school of planning theory—the (aptly named) critical theorists—is devoted to a systematic critique of planning practice in capitalist societies (see Chapter 3).

However wide the gap between theory and practice sometimes appears to be, it would be highly erroneous to conclude that planning theory and planning practice are ultimately irrelevant to one another. On the contrary, as noted earlier, theory provides the essential foundation on which the profession is built. Much of today's theory, moreover, is indeed focused on practice. At the same time, it is clear that the ideas of planning theory have not always been articulated in a way that *engages* practitioners constructively, in terms that have comprehensible and practical meaning for them. Much planning theory talk occurs within the theory community—that is, among theorists who are communicating their ideas to others who share their interests. Certainly there is nothing wrong with this process; it is, in fact, a crucial element in the ongoing development of a sound body of theory. More ways should be found, however, to widen the conversation on occasion so that those whose work is being analyzed can actively participate, rather than serve merely as the objects of research and publication.

PLANNING THEORY TODAY

What are the major characteristics of current planning theory? For one thing, it is less concerned than it has been in the past with presenting models and strategies that prescribe how planning should be carried out—that is, with functional normative theories. The rational model, in its many forms, was clearly such a theory.

But rationality has been discredited (at least in the theory literature) as a workable paradigm, and nothing has emerged to take its place. Attention has shifted, instead, to theories *about* and *of* planning. The authors of a recent planning theory reader, for example, view the

> central question of planning theory as the following: *What role can planning play in developing the city and region within the constraints of a capitalist political economy and a democratic political system?* The emphasis is not on developing a model planning process but rather on finding an explanation for planning practice based on analyses of the respective political economies of the United States and Great Britain. Our effort is to determine the historical and contextual influences and strategic opportunities that shape the capacity of planners to affect the urban and regional environment.[15]

Practitioners may or may not find this "central question" meaningful. Judith Innes argues, however, that they should. Despite having become—in her view—more "grounded in the realities of practice" in recent years, planning theory ironically "less often purports to say how planning ought to be done and more often tells us in a nuanced way how practice of various kinds has worked, permitting readers to draw their own lessons for their own situations. Planning theory is now much more about helping planners to see themselves and what they do than it is about providing prescriptions."[16] To which one must respond by asking: how often are those lessons being drawn, and are planners indeed feeling helped by such planning theory?

A second characteristic of contemporary planning theory is its grounding in an explicitly "postmodern" world view. Definitions of this term vary widely (as do its applications in various professions), but the central ideas are reasonably clear with regard to their relevance to planning. The modernist era was one of order, comprehensibility, rationality, and predictability; it was characterized by the optimistic notion that science and technology could readily be harnessed to solve our major problems, and it was the heyday of rational planning. With the 1970s and 1980s, however, came the growing recognition that our communities (as well as other societal levels) simply did not function in accordance with the precepts of the rational planning model. Instead, planning problems were proving to be "wicked," characterized by unpredictability, irreconcilable differences between interested parties, a lack

of discernible solutions, and a general sense of chaos. Meanwhile, new forms of social, economic, and political organization were emerging, featuring new voices, skepticism toward expertise, new demands for meaningful participation, and increased expectations regarding the results of governmental action.[17] Much of today's planning theory, then, deals with the implications of postmodernism for the planner's role.

One major theme of postmodern planning theory has been its emphasis on the communicative effects of the planner's words and actions; this approach will be discussed in Chapter 9. Another theme has been the purported ills—ineffectiveness, injustice, and so on—of the planning profession, this from the above-mentioned critical theorists who focus on the "dark side" of planning (see Chapter 3). Still another theme has been a desire to infuse planning theory with new voices, particularly those of women and people of color.[18]

Are the dominant themes of today's planning theory relevant to planning practitioners? Yes and no. Yes, because these themes embody issues of genuine relevance to the nature and quality of planning practice, and its role in improving the quality of life in our communities. No, because most planning theorists—despite their focus on planning practice—tend, in the final analysis, to be talking primarily to one another. As noted earlier, the theorist must more effectively engage the practitioner in a two-way flow of communication if the benefits of theory are to be shared by those outside the academy. Jill Grant states it well:

> In building a theory of practice, we will need to articulate an understanding of what happens in community planning. Explanations should be clear both to practitioners and to academics. Theory must make sense of practice. A theory of practice should account for the role of the planner, the citizen, and the politician in community planning. It should clarify the nature of decision-making and illuminate the values and meanings transacted through planning activities. It should reveal the context in which planning occurs.[19]

This book is intended to satisfy Grant's criteria. Its purpose is to bridge the theory-practice gap—an ambitious undertaking to be sure, and one, as we shall see, in which others are participating as well. Because planning theory is fundamental to our professional purpose and identity, the chapters that follow examine a great deal

of theoretical material. This material is viewed, however, through the filter of practice. When considering a particular body of theory, the critical question will be: to what extent does this approach assist the practicing planner in carrying out his or her role in the intensely political environment of the local community?

NOTES

1. Michael P. Brooks, "A Plethora of Paradigms?" *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Spring 1993), p. 143.

2. Robert A. Beauregard, "Edge Critics," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Spring 1995), p. 163.

3. John Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 137.

4. Brooks, "Plethora of Paradigms," p. 143.

5. It might be argued that efficiency, say, can be viewed as an "external principle" in the light of which a given *Y* is judged, thus rendering my distinction invalid. Note, however, that I have used efficiency as a criterion for assessing the quality of the way in which we move from *X* to *Y*, not for assessing the quality or value of *Y* itself. Functional normative theories care little about the nature of *Y*; it is the means of getting to *Y* that counts. Ethical normative theories focus on the end result; often, alternative means are evaluated solely in terms of their ability to produce the result desired.

6. Numerous other categorizations of planning theory have been suggested; see, for example, Leonie Sandercock and Ann Forsyth, "A Gender Agenda: New Directions for Planning Theory," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 49–50; and Ernest R. Alexander, *Approaches to Planning: Introducing Current Planning Theories, Concepts, and Issues*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), p. 7.

7. Many planning educators belong to an electronic mail network called PLANET, which serves as a useful vehicle for the exchange of information and views. A recent request for assistance, issued by an assistant professor in a major planning program, was worded as follows: "Can anyone recommend to me a source of planning case studies? I am trying to identify cases that can introduce to students the types of problems planners face." The objective here is commendable, but it does illustrate the gap that I am describing.

8. An early and perceptive treatment of this issue is found in Judith Innes de Neufville, "Planning Theory and Practice: Bridging the Gap," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Summer 1983), pp. 36–45.

9. Sociologists use the term *reference groups* to indicate those groups to which we look for acceptance and approval—and, conversely, whose disapproval or rejection would concern us most deeply.

10. Nigel Taylor, *Urban Planning Theory Since 1945* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 64.

11. Beauregard, "Edge Critics," p. 164.

12. Scott Turow, "Law School v. Reality," *New York Times Magazine*, September 18, 1988, p. 71.

13. Ibid. Howell Baum makes similar points in "Social Science, Social Work, and Surgery: Teaching What Students Need to Practice Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 179–188.

14. Turow, "Law School," p. 74.

15. Scott Campbell and Susan S. Fainstein, eds., *Readings in Planning Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell

Publishers, 1996), pp. 1–2. Emphasis in the original.

16. Judith E. Innes, "Challenge and Creativity in Postmodern Planning," *Town Planning Review*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (April 1998), pp. viii–ix.

17. For discussions of postmodernism and planning, see Innes, "Challenge and Creativity," pp. v–ix; Allan Irving, "The Modern/Postmodern Divide and Urban Planning," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 474–487; Robert A. Beauregard, "Between Modernity and Postmodernity: The Ambiguous Position of U.S. Planning," in Campbell and Fainstein, *Readings in Planning Theory*, 213–233; and George Hemmens, "The Postmodernists Are Coming, the Postmodernists Are Coming," *Planning*, Vol. 58, No. 7 (July 1992), pp. 20–21.

18. See, for example, Leonie Sandercock, "Voices from the Borderlands: A Meditation on a Metaphor," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 77–88.

19. Jill Grant, *The Drama of Democracy: Contention and Dispute in Community Planning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 219.