Review


Questions:

1. What do you think of the idea that wicked problems are best addressed with abduction rather than rational approaches?
2. What do you see as the relative strengths and weaknesses of the role of planner as technical advisor rather than as radical advocate for social change (given that these are intentionally selected as opposite ends of a spectrum).

Issue: Exposition of planning theory in light of semiotics

Biography: Prior to joining our faculty in Autumn 1996, Hilda Blanco was Associate Professor in the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College. Her teaching areas include courses in Land Use Planning, Urban Design, Sustainable Communities, Local Finance, Planning Theory, and the Planning Studio. Dr. Blanco earned her Ph.D. in City and Regional Planning and her M.C.R.P. from the University of California at Berkeley. She holds a BA in Philosophy from the City College of New York. Outside academia Dr. Blanco has worked as a planning consultant to the cities of San Francisco, Oakland and New York. She has evaluated land reform efforts in China, led workshops on growth management for Puerto Rico, and been Manager of Policy and Research for New Jersey Office of State Planning where she was principle author of early versions of New Jersey's first statewide growth management plan. Dr. Blanco's research interests range from planning theory to expert systems. She has written on pragmatism and planning theory, planning ethics, mixed use land use, state growth management and the new urbanism, and the importance of neighborhood commercial activities for sustainable communities. Professor Blanco serves her academic and urban communities in many ways. She was founder of the Berkeley Planning Journal and public member of the New York City Rent Guidelines Board. She recently served as a founding member of the Strategy/Action Council of West Siders Together, a member of the Board of Advisors of Cuban National Heritage, and a member of the Technical Advisory Committee for New Jersey Transit's M.L.K. light rail station planning in Jersey City.

Theoretical context: Pragmatism

Summary: In this paper, Blanco investigates semiotics – the formal study of signs and symbols – in modern planning theory.

She begins with a common definition of “planning,” focusing on the rational as defined by Meyerson and Banfield, exemplified by the master plan (formalized by Kent in 1964) and the EIS (1975). Urban planning developed from Progressive social philosophy at the turn of the 19th century, whose practitioners were concerned with urban blight. The planning response to unsafe and unsanitary urban conditions was to focus on spatio-physical aspects of planning, which ultimately proved to be too narrow of a focus to encompass the greater concerns of managing the urban environment. Planning later developed as a profession to deal with urban issues from a comprehensive standpoint, dealing with both social and physical components of the urban environment. Planners became viewed as objective, unbiased technical advisors to decision makers and were therefore insulated from the decision making process. Planners used rational methods and simplified representations of reality (maps and statistics).
In the 1970s, planning, as an idealized rational process, came under criticism for its inability to deal effectively with complex problems. Furthermore, planning was exposed as a process which itself was not strictly rational. What planning is, what planning means, and what planning should be concerned with can be elucidated by viewing planning under a microscope of semiotics. Rather than focusing on the traditional objects of planning, we can understand the planning process by understanding its symbologies, mythologies, and significances.

In a break from understanding the urban environment as a conglomeration of physical objects, Lynch viewed the city as a series of “performance dimensions” which focus on the functional characteristics of what the city can or should provide, rather than on the structural characteristics more often studied by planning theorists. Lynch argued for evaluation and action, where signification is mediated by personal interests.

How and what planners choose to represent reveals ideological attitudes. Planners should be circumspect in deciding how to represent the world as the objects of planning, as well as how they represent themselves to society at large. As a case in point, Blanco refers to Peattie’s analysis of Ciudad Guayana. Planning failures occurred mainly because the planning was functionally bereft with respect to a human element; as mere technical advisors, the planners voluntarily or unconsciously ignored localism, existing land use and structures, and existing populations. As a “blueprint” rather than a “process,” planning can frequently fall short. Revealing of ideologies can be revealing; reductionism of a complex situation to a series of amorphous goals in this case showed planners biases toward preconceived notions rather than attempting a solution to a long-range and potentially wicked problem (after Rittel and Webber).

In addition to ideology, use of metaphor and mythology can serve to limit the outcomes of planning as well as to undermine social support for planning activities or the planning profession. Schön and de Neufville are critical of the tacit use of metaphor and myth in fundamental social philosophies related to planning.

Given this framework, how, then are planners to proceed in the face of wicked problems? Wicked problems are not simply complex, but are inherently intractable due to basic problems of interpretation. Indeed, wicked problems frequently have multiple divergent goals, which by their nature cannot be addressed with a rational planning framework. Blanco proposes that the best approach to dealing with wicked problems, such as formulation of a master plan, is not the use of traditional rational methodologies, but by a combination of the process of abduction (Peirce, Eco), effective and responsible use of social indicators (de Neufville), and communicative practice (Forester).

By applying these approaches, planning can begin to reinvigorate the public realm. According to Forester, planners should speak comprehensively, truthfully, legitimately, and sincerely. The goal of planning, as argued by Marris, is to support our primary and personal attachments, to stabilize our lives in the face of social, political, and environmental uncertainty. By understanding and addressing the underlying symbologies of the planning discipline, planners can support the meaning of personal and social life by “linking explicit goals to plausible strategies” (p. 230).

**Data used:** Data used are summaries of notable works by planning/social theorists and several examples of planning practices

**Methods:** Logical encapsulation and synthesis of planning/social theorists

**Counter-arguments:** The author does not explore counter-arguments.