

# Planning a Planning School: Reflections from MIT

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In the fall of 1994, I cut short my first sabbatical by a half-semester and returned to my position as associate professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) because we were expecting our first child in December. My wife, also an academic, was teaching in New York, and we were planning to commute between Boston and New York even after the child was born. Then in November, suddenly and without any time to prepare, I was asked to replace the chair of the department, Philip Clay, who had been appointed associate provost of the university. This was not an opportunity I anticipated at this point in my career, and it came under difficult circumstances. The fact that I was not fully aware of what lay ahead may be one explanation for why I agreed to take on the responsibilities of being department chair. Another is that these responsibilities presented an important planning task, which I was being asked to lead. Having been educated as a planner, I assumed that I would have the opportunity to test planning theories in practice, albeit in the relative microcosm of a private research university.

To understand my challenge, it is necessary to understand something of the institutional setting. The Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT is one of the oldest and among the leading planning schools in the world. DUSP is a large department comprising 30 full-time and three to five part-time faculty (academic staff) members. It admits between 60 and 65 students for the master's program, 10 to 12 doctoral students, and only a handful of undergraduates each year. Strong in both domestic and international planning, the program has a long tradition of physical design as well as public policy orientation, with both scholars and practitioners among its faculty. The broad range of faculty expertise, apparent in the large number of course offerings per semester, is certainly a strength; yet it can also present problems in crafting an intellectual consensus and achieving a sense of a coherent intellectual community.

MIT is first and foremost a university for science and engineering, and it is appropriate for DUSP's intellectual agenda to complement the university's dominant intellectual attitude of exploration and problem solving. Problem solving is also a central element of planning, and there is a natural affinity between engineers and planners. Yet engineers, somewhat less trained in social sciences than planners, are often less appreciative of the "soft side" of planning, which differentiates it from engineering and provides the rationale for its intellectual autonomy. For the average engineer, it is not difficult to identify with the goals and methods of an architect—indeed, Architecture was among the four founding departments at MIT, along with Civil, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering—while a planner without an engineering

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or architecture background is still an unknown entity to some degree. I distinctly remember being asked repeatedly, by both senior administrators and other department heads, what exactly we did in the Planning Department. In response, I sought to convey both the similarities and differences between planning and engineering: we are not rocket scientists, yet we can be of use in making decisions about how rocket science should be pursued in environmentally and socially responsible ways.

Aware of the institutional characteristics unique to DUSP at MIT, I have conceptually filtered my experience as department head into three lessons that may be of use to others even in different institutional settings. Although not necessarily the most important lessons I learned, they highlight insights about planning which surprised me at first, and influenced my planning style to a degree I could not have predicted when I accepted the responsibilities of department head without much time to think about the challenges I would face.

### **Lack of Vision as Strength**

After serving for eight years as the department head, I stepped down voluntarily.<sup>1</sup> Many of my colleagues and some of MIT's top academic administrators applauded my leadership in strengthening DUSP's position as a leading planning school. Needless to say, I was pleased, but also intrigued by the result given that I had started without any preconceived "vision" of what I wanted to accomplish.

I never really wished to be a department head. In 1994, I was glad to be a tenured faculty member in DUSP, a department I did not even apply to as a student because of MIT's formidable reputation for competitive admissions. My doctoral education in planning at UCLA had cultivated in me some distaste for "people in power". The art of administering from the top, which is the essence of education in, say, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, was not encouraged at UCLA. On the contrary, when I was a student there, the dominant theme was "critical planning", which encouraged criticism of formal authority as representative of hegemonic ideas.

However, my education at UCLA did provide familiarity with a broad set of issues—domestic and international—related to physical design and public policy, professional practice and academic discourse. Lacking a vision for the department, I had to converse with a wide range of individuals to construct one, and that process was aided by this breadth of knowledge. My intellectual enthusiasm for planning was also helpful. This was cultivated first at the University of Kansas, where Tom Galloway had just started the planning program the year I joined as a master's student. Later, under the guidance of John Friedmann in the doctoral program at UCLA, deep intellectual engagement with planning also inspired me to think about the distinctive qualities of "planning imagination".

This enthusiasm for planning, and the supporting knowledge of a broad range of planning issues, was the key to my ability to create an environment in which students, faculty and staff considered their daily efforts meaningful. The individualized nature of their research often isolates academics intellectually, and the level of isolation is even higher in top ranking research universities with intense competition for research dollars and prestige. This problem is heightened further in departments with faculty and students from varied academic backgrounds, which must be subsumed in the central mission of the department. Under such circumstances, the challenge is to cultivate a shared sense of meaning among smart people who are constantly questioning the relevance of their work and therefore are appreciative when the department head expresses curiosity about their

teaching style and research results. Conversations that begin with such recognition can provide understanding of the faculty's, intellectual preferences, and concerns of the department members, out of which a vision may eventually emerge, if the department head is able to connect the individual dots of scholarship into a coherent story that draws on the history of the department and is fair in its assessment of past efforts.

Even more important in crafting a vision is that the department head not claim personal credit for positive outcomes, or ownership of ideas, even though he/she may have sown the seeds of an idea and, more importantly, will have to nurture it to its full bloom. I learned on the job that property rights of good ideas do not have to be enforced: most colleagues are observant enough to note how ideas were generated, and are happy to be acknowledged as one who played a role, however small and even as contrarians, in the shaping of ideas that ultimately affected the quality of life of the department. Hence the art of leadership is to detach oneself from one's own initiatives and let others take credit, particularly in public, because this broadens the legitimacy of the ideas and increases the chances of their implementation.

Crafting a vision on the job is a labor-intensive process involving many one-on-one meetings. Because there is no one "game plan" it requires the organization of many exploratory initiatives. Some of these exploratory initiatives have to be abandoned eventually, or combined, so as not to overburden the faculty with too many activities and meetings that deter them from their primary responsibilities of teaching and writing. Starting numerous initiatives, although financially expensive, can be justified to some extent by the learning opportunities they provide for the department to determine its real priorities. However, abandoned initiatives can begin to build up resentment unless they are assessed impartially and their lessons are incorporated in the next round of activities.

In other words, a department head needs to acknowledge mistakes openly; as long as they have attempted to be unbiased, fair, and open to constructive criticism, the faculty and students are usually forgiving. The issue of fairness is paramount because the vision of a department head who is viewed as unfair will not be trusted as representing "the public interest". Gradually, he/she will lose legitimacy, lowering the department's morale, and damaging the positive sense of meaning that faculty and students need to engage actively in departmental activities.

### **Old Resources, New Uses**

In 1994, MIT was in the midst of serious financial problems, which had required the reduction of the department's general budget by \$60 000 per year for three years, starting in 1992. So, one of my first challenges as a department head was to reduce DUSP's budget by yet another \$60 000 without seriously hurting its academic mission. The tenured faculty proposed that DUSP give up one faculty slot that would become available when a senior faculty member retired. Reducing the relatively large faculty by one member was not viewed as threatening to the department. This decision, although the least painful choice at the time, sent a signal to MIT's higher level administration that the department could absorb a cut in faculty size without much opposition. It came to haunt DUSP a few years later when I asked the provost to increase student fellowships. To meet that request, the provost suggested that the department reallocate funding available for unfilled faculty slots to student financial aid! Underlying this advice was the notion that the faculty size was too large.

To challenge the notion that DUSP had too many faculty, we compared ourselves to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and University of California (UC),

Berkeley, both of which had separate planning and public policy programs, whereas at MIT, public policy-related courses were offered by faculty in the planning programs. To demonstrate the importance of public policy course offerings to MIT as a whole, we joined with the Department of Political Science to offer a new sub-specialization on public policy at the undergraduate level. We also provided an institutional home for MIT's Teacher Education Program, which trains undergraduates to teach mathematics and science in high schools. We demonstrated to the administration that the relatively large faculty was necessary for the mission of the department, and the administration backed away from seeking cuts in faculty size until I returned in 1998 with a new request for student fellowships.

The administration continued to frame the debate in either/or terms: keep the large faculty size or reallocate resources to student fellowships. To get out of the trade-off, we sought the help of the chairman of the visiting committee, Hank Spaulding, who had donated generously to start MIT's Center for Real Estate. We provided evidence that DUSP's master's students had to borrow, on average, \$42 000, close to their starting salary in 1998. We proposed a loan forgiveness program for graduates who sought employment either in the public sector or with non-governmental organizations. If the Institute really cared to encourage public service, we argued, it should support the creation of such a program (as Harvard Law School had done to encourage graduates to opt for careers in public service). Hank generously contributed the first \$1 million of the \$7 million needed to create the fund.

Although the Institute did not openly discourage DUSP's effort, it pointed out that administratively it is more difficult to manage a loan forgiveness program than to offer fellowships at the very outset. In the process of requesting that DUSP's loan forgiveness program should be included in its capital campaign, I gained two insights about planning. First, I learned that private donors do not like to donate funds to solve old problems or pay old debts: they prefer to ally themselves with exciting new initiatives. Second, I learned that it is very difficult to generate new resources. What from the outside may look like "new" resources are often old resources used for new purposes.

However, from efforts to use old resources in new ways institutional innovations may emerge; such shifts also signal that the institution is flexible and adaptive to change. One way to put old resources to new use is to connect previously unconnected activities and publicize the connection as the new twist to the old story. Such initiatives are not only easier to implement because they are built on existing practices, but also convey a sense of institutional coherence that senior administrators appreciate. When one is able to achieve such a result, it may be the appropriate time to remind the senior administrators of old nagging problems, which is what we did with the problem of inadequate fellowships. Fortunately, in 2000, MIT was beginning to enjoy a significant increase in returns to endowment, the pressure for budget cuts and restructuring had subsided, and the provost offered to match \$3 to every \$1 the department was willing to set aside for fellowships. Ultimately, DUSP did agree to reallocate the funds from yet another faculty slot, but the funding for student fellowships increased dramatically, sharply enhancing DUSP's competitive advantage in attracting the best students.

### **Respect as Resource**

When I was appointed rather hurriedly to be the chair, my first decision was to meet with not only the faculty and students, but also with the (non-academic) staff. I was warned

that they were a rather difficult group of individuals, mostly women, who were generally unresponsive to any effort to enhance their efficiency. In the first meeting with the staff, I mentioned that the department was continuing to face annual budget cuts, and that I was seeking their support to enhance its operational efficiency. The staff responded gradually, one by one, in ways that shaped my thinking beyond what I had expected; and as I write this article, I remain deeply grateful to them for giving me an institutional insight that I now consider almost an axiom of good planning.

The staff's response began when one member congratulated me for becoming the department head. She mentioned that I had not changed much since I arrived at MIT in 1984, except for steady balding, commenting that I had kept my friendly and accessible demeanor, even after being promoted. I mentioned that although I had no time to envision specific goals, I had heard that the staff were not happy and wondered what kind of mistakes I should avoid in order to gain their trust.

A second staff member responded spontaneously: "Bish, we know that you cannot increase our salaries, which are quite low, but what you *can* do is to at least treat us respectfully". "How so?" I asked. This evoked an immediate response from almost all the staff members in the room. "By simply acknowledging that we exist", said one staff member, who went on to describe how the faculty member she worked for barely looked at her as he hurriedly dumped work on her table, on his way to a meeting or a class. As these types of comments followed one after the other, I came to realize that the staff were deeply aware of the contrast between themselves and the faculty, particularly successful women faculty, who seemed to avoid socializing with women staff members in order to emphasize their own academic and professional status within a male-dominated environment. Many staff members complained that though the faculty got upset if the staff members were not at their desks when the faculty needed their assistance, the faculty themselves rarely mentioned their daily schedule. In other words, the flexibility of time that the faculty enjoyed (although usually put to good use) was in sharp contrast to the working schedule of staff members who were expected to be at their desks from 9 am to 5 pm.

The relatively low salaries of the staff, particularly vis-à-vis those of senior faculty members, strained this relationship further. The staff members were keenly aware of the institutional constraints influencing their low salaries, and none asked for a salary increase in my first meeting with them. Instead, they asked why the Institute was charging the same parking fee for faculty and staff when their salaries varied significantly? And why the Institute had changed its policies with regard to college tuition support for the children of staff members? One commented that she was grateful to the Institute for providing opportunities to learn new skills through specialized courses, but that learning new skills without having access to jobs at higher levels within the Institute made her question the purpose of the courses.

Among the points made that day, the one that stayed with me—and is still with me, even after 12 years—was the need for more respect among apparently unequal members of DUSP. I have come to realize, thanks to my colleague Richard Sennett's (2004) wonderful book, *Respect in a World of Inequality*, that the notion of social respect deserves more intellectual scrutiny from planners. No one would disagree that a little more social respect for one another would be good for the human condition, but how to cultivate such respect, particularly at a time of deepening social inequalities, is a matter which has not received the kind of intellectual attention it deserves.

Sennett has argued that not all well-intended public policies aimed at improving the quality of life of disadvantaged citizens contribute to a sense of social respect. On the

contrary, some well-intended public policies, such as provisions of public housing, may hurt the cultivation of social respect if they do not take into account the emotional groundings on which the personal and social meanings of disadvantaged groups rest. I had been familiar with this particular angle of reasoning, in part because I have had the opportunity to work with Peter Marris (1974), who too had argued, before Sennett, regarding this important role of social meaning, and how planners must help reconstruct such meaning at times of rapid change. But, I had not understood the complexity of the issue until my meeting with the staff, who provided many examples of how they were disrespected even by faculty members who made a career of studying inequalities. The examples were surprising in their simplicity: faculty members coming to and leaving their offices without a schedule around which the staff could organize their time; faculty leaving the office abruptly, in a state of anxiety, without saying a word to the staff member; faculty not acknowledging the significance of Administrative Professionals' Day until they are reminded by the department's administrative officer; faculty travelling around the world to give talks, on trips planned by staff members whose contributions were rarely acknowledged, then returning with a large backlog of work for the staff; and so on.

By the end of the first meeting with the staff members, I had been deeply affected by their comments, particularly as they stressed that they were not asking for more salary because they knew the department had to reduce its annual budget by \$60 000. Needless to say, they were anxious about who among them were to lose their jobs; some staff members had lost their jobs in the first round of budget cuts that my predecessor had to implement. By the time I had become head, the faculty had realized that good administrative assistance was crucial for their productivity, and were more willing to reduce the number of faculty than to further reduce the support staff. The staff wanted to know my position on this issue, and all I could tell them was that I was very new to the job, and had yet to develop an overview of the department before making any major decisions. I also sought their assistance and patience as I learned on the job. And that sign of respect was the main thing they wanted.

### **Anticipating Scepticism**

This brief article highlights only three lessons among many others I learned on the job as chair of MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning. To summarize, I discovered that lack of vision need not be a problem under all circumstances, that institutional innovations require the use of old resources in new ways to address persistent problems, and that social respect is crucial for the cultivation of social harmony even in the microcosm of a planning school. I realize that others may have drawn different conclusions from these experiences; and if this article evokes such disagreements, I would consider that an accomplishment. However, the issue of social respect is too important to be ignored or marginalized. One might ask, to put it bluntly, whether social respect as I describe it in this article is merely a form of window dressing in the absence of social fairness. This is a crucial question because fairness and equity are principles which many planners, myself included, consider central to their professional mission.

Social respect is not a replacement for social equity, and I am not advocating social respect in lieu of social equity. What I describe in this article are instances of asymmetrical power relationships which must first be acknowledged as such; and since such power asymmetries can rarely be equalized without radical changes in the governance structure of institutions, planning administrators may give some thought to how individuals at the bottom of the institutions cope with power asymmetries. The type of social respect I refer

to here requires no material resources but can help create a sense of meaning among people at the lower end of organizations, which is essential for coping with the uncertainties and humiliation often inflicted by power asymmetries. This does not mean that social respect by the powerful minimizes the claims of social equity by the relatively powerless. What I learned is that social respect creates a more open organizational environment, one that evokes reasonable claims in a context in which they can be appreciated and addressed.

#### Note

1. I am the only Department Head in DUSP to have served two consecutive terms of four years each.

#### References

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## Planning at the University of California, Berkeley

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Planning schools and departments are purposeful organizations, usually focused on training and preparing students for professional life in the diverse fields of city and regional planning through master's degree programs. In many cases, they also prepare doctoral students to teach and carry out research through PhD programs, and they educate undergraduate students through majors in fields such as urban studies. All of these are now part of the program of the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, where they have evolved through a long process of planning and trial and error over the past 56 years. As organizations, planning schools are also embedded within universities and must also respond to the changing imperatives of that larger institutional environment, with serious risks if they make poor choices. At a still larger scale, because of their concern with practice and policy, planning schools must necessarily relate closely to the world outside the university, both in their immediate urban context, and in relation to real changes in the larger world and to new knowledge in the form of theory or as shown by empirical research. Furthermore, planning schools consist of groups of human beings—mostly of the sub-species *homo academicus* or *homo professionalis*—with all the variety of temperaments, objectives, personal styles and quirks that we might expect. Not surprisingly, planning schools are neither simple nor easy to plan.

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