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## Jane Jacobs and the Death and Life of American Planning



"Construction Potentials: Postwar Prospects and Problems, a Basis for Action," *Architectural Record*, 1943; prepared by the F.W. Dodge Corporation Committee on Postwar Construction Markets. [Drawing by Julian Archer]

And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
— T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

During a recent retreat here at Chapel Hill, planning faculty conducted a brainstorming session in which each professor — including me — was asked to list, anonymously, some of the major issues and concerns facing the profession today. These lists were then collected and transcribed on the whiteboard. All the expected themes were there — sustainability and global warming, equity and justice, peak oil, immigration, urban sprawl and public health, retrofitting suburbia, and so on. But also on the board appeared, like a sacrilegious graffito, the words "Trivial Profession." [1] When we voted to rank the listed items in order of importance, "Trivial Profession" was placed — lo and behold — close to the top. This surprised and alarmed a number of us. Here were members of one of the finest planning faculties in America, at one of the most respected programs in the world, suggesting that their chosen field was minor and irrelevant.

Now, even the most parochial among us would probably agree that urban planning is not one of society's bedrock professions, such as law or medicine or perhaps economics. It is indeed a minor field, and that's fine.

Nathan Glazer, in his well-known essay "Schools of the Minor Professions," labeled "minor" every profession outside law and medicine. Not even clerics or divines made his cut. Moreover, Glazer observed that attempts on the part of "occupations" such as urban planning to transform themselves "into professions in the older sense, and the assimilation of their programmes of training into academic institutions, have not gone smoothly." [2] But minority status by itself is not why "Trivial Profession" appeared on the whiteboard. It was there because of a swelling perception, especially among young scholars and practitioners, that planning is a diffuse and ineffective field, and that it has been largely unsuccessful over the last half century at its own game: bringing about more just, sustainable, healthful, efficient and beautiful cities and regions. It was there because of a looming sense that planners in America lack the agency or authority to turn idealism into reality, that planning has neither the prestige nor the street cred to effect real change.

To understand the roots of this sense of impotence requires us to dial back to the great cultural shift that occurred in planning beginning in the 1960s. The seeds of discontent sown then brought forth new and needed growth, which nonetheless choked out three vital aspects of the profession — its *disciplinary identity*, *professional authority* and *visionary capacity*.

It is well known that city planning in the United States evolved out of the landscape architectural profession during the late Olmsted era. Planning's core expertise was then grounded and tangible, concerned chiefly with accommodating human needs and functions on the land, from the scale of the site to that of entire regions. One of the founders of the Chapel Hill program, F. Stuart Chapin, Jr. (whose first degree was in architecture), described planning as "a means for systematically anticipating and achieving adjustment in the physical environment of a city consistent with social and economic trends and sound principles of civic design." [3] The goal was to create physical settings that would help bring about a more prosperous, efficient and equitable society. And in many ways the giants of prewar planning — Olmsted Jr., Burnham, Mumford, Stein and Wright, Nolen, and Gilmore D. Clarke — were successful in doing just that.

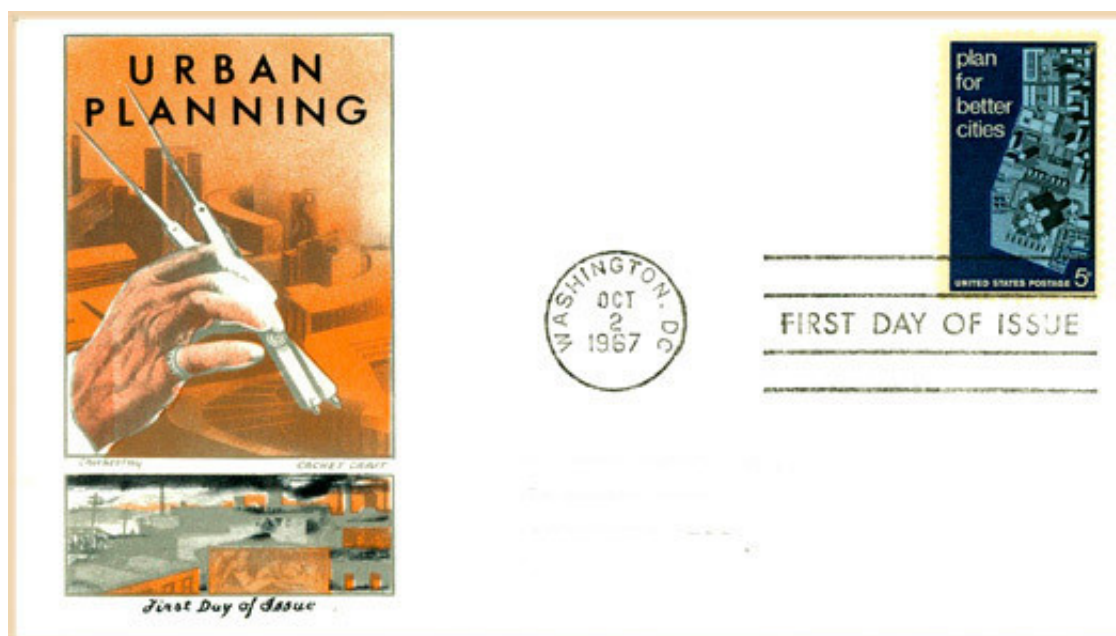


"Construction Potentials: Postwar Prospects and Problems, a Basis for Action," *Architectural Record*, 1943; prepared by the F.W. Dodge Corporation Committee on Postwar Construction Markets. [Drawing by Julian Archer]

The postwar period was something else altogether. By then, middle-class Americans were buying cars and moving to the suburbs in record numbers. The urban core was being depopulated. Cities were losing their tax base, buildings were being abandoned, neighborhoods were falling victim to blight. Planners and civic leaders were increasingly desperate to save their cities. Help came soon enough from Uncle Sam. Passage of the [1949 Housing Act](#), with its infamous Title I proviso, made urban renewal a legitimate target for federal funding. Flush with cash, city redevelopment agencies commissioned urban planners to prepare slum-clearance master plans. Vibrant ethnic neighborhoods — including the one my mother grew up in near the Brooklyn Navy Yard — were blotted out by Voisinian superblocks or punched through with expressways meant to make downtown accessible to suburbanites. Postwar urban planners thus abetted some of the most egregious acts of urban vandalism in American history. Of course, they did not see it this way. Most believed, like Lewis Mumford, that America's cities were suffering an urban cancer wholly untreatable by the "home remedies" Jane Jacobs was brewing and that the strong medicine of slum clearance was just what the doctor ordered. Like their architect

colleagues, postwar planners had drunk the Corbusian Kool-Aid and were too intoxicated to see the harm they were causing.

Thus ensued the well-deserved backlash against superblock urbanism and the authoritarian, we-experts-know-best brand of planning that backed it. And the backlash came, of course, from a bespectacled young journalist named Jane Jacobs. Her 1961 [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#), much like the paperwork Luther nailed to the Schlosskirche Wittenberg four centuries earlier, sparked a reformation — this time within planning. To the rising generation of planners, coming of age in an era of cultural ferment and rebellion, Jacobs was a patron saint. The young idealists soon set about rewiring the field. The ancien régime was put on trial for failures real and imagined, for not responding adequately to the urban crisis, and especially for ignoring issues of poverty and racism. But change did not come easily; the field was plunged into disarray. A glance at the July 1970 *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* reveals a profession gripped by a crisis of mission, purpose and relevance. As the authors of one article — fittingly titled "Holding Together" — asked, how could this well-meaning discipline transform itself "against a background of trends in the society and the profession that invalidate many of the assumptions underlying traditional planning education"? [4]



Plan for Better Cities, first day cover, Charles R. Chickering/Cachet Craft (1967). [Courtesy of Thomas Campanella]

One way was to disgorge itself of the muscular physical-interventionist focus that had long been planning's *métier*. King Laius was thus slain by Oedipus, in love with "Mother Jacobs," as Mumford derisively called her. [5] Forced from his lofty perch, the once-mighty planner found himself in a hot and crowded city street. No longer would he twirl a compass above the city like a conductor's baton, as did the anonymous planner depicted on the 1967 stamp Plan for Better Cities (on the First Day Cover illustration, he even wears a pinky ring!). So thoroughly internalized was the Jacobs critique that planners could see only folly and failure in the work of their forebears. Burnham's grand dictum "[Make no little plans](#)" went from a battle cry to an embarrassment in less than a decade. Even so revered a figure as [Sir Ebenezer Howard](#) was now a pariah. Jacobs herself described the good man — one of the great progressives of the late Victorian era — as a mere "court reporter," a clueless amateur who yearned "to do the city in" with "powerful and city-destroying ideas." [6] Indeed, to Jacobs, not just misguided American urban renewal but the entire enterprise of visionary, rational, centralized planning was suspect. She was as opposed to new towns as she was to slum clearance — anything that threatened the vitality of traditional urban forms was the enemy. It is largely forgotten that the popular United Kingdom edition of *Death and Life* was subtitled "The Failure of Town Planning." How odd that such a conservative, even reactionary, stance would galvanize an entire generation.

The Jacobsians sought fresh methods of making cities work — from the grassroots and the bottom up. The subaltern was exalted, the master laid low. Drafting tables were tossed for pickets and surveys and spreadsheets. Planners sought new alliances in academe, beyond architecture and design — in political science, law, economics, sociology. But there were problems. First, none of the social sciences were primarily concerned with the city; at best they could be only partial allies. Second, planning was not taken seriously by these fields. The schoolboy crush was not returned, making the relationship unequal from the start. Even

today it's rare for a social science department to hire a planning PhD, while planning programs routinely hire academics with doctorates in economics and political science. Indeed, Nathan Glazer observed that one of the hallmarks of a minor profession is that faculty with "outside" doctorates actually enjoy *higher prestige* than those with degrees in the profession itself. [7] They also tend to have minimal allegiance to planning. [8]

This brings us to the first of the three legacies of the Jacobsian turn: *It diminished the disciplinary identity of planning*. While the expanded range of scholarship and practice in the post-urban renewal era diversified the field, that diversification came at the expense of an established expertise — strong, centralized physical planning — that had given the profession visibility and identity both within academia and among "place" professions such as architecture and landscape architecture. My students are always astonished to learn just how toxic and stigmatized physical planning — today a popular concentration — had become by the 1970s. Like a well-meaning surgeon who botches an operation, planners were (correctly) blamed for the excesses of urban renewal and many other problems then facing American cities. But the planning baby was thrown out with the urban-renewal bathwater. And once the traditional focus of physical planning was lost, the profession was effectively without a keel. It became fragmented and balkanized, which has since created a kind of chronic identity crisis — a nagging uncertainty about purpose and relevance. Certainly in the popular imagination, physical planning was what planners did — they choreographed the buildings and infrastructure on the land. By the mid-1970s, however, even educated laypersons would have difficulty understanding what the profession was all about. Today, planners themselves often have a hard time explaining the purpose of their profession. By forgoing its traditional focus and expanding too quickly, planning became a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. And so it remains.

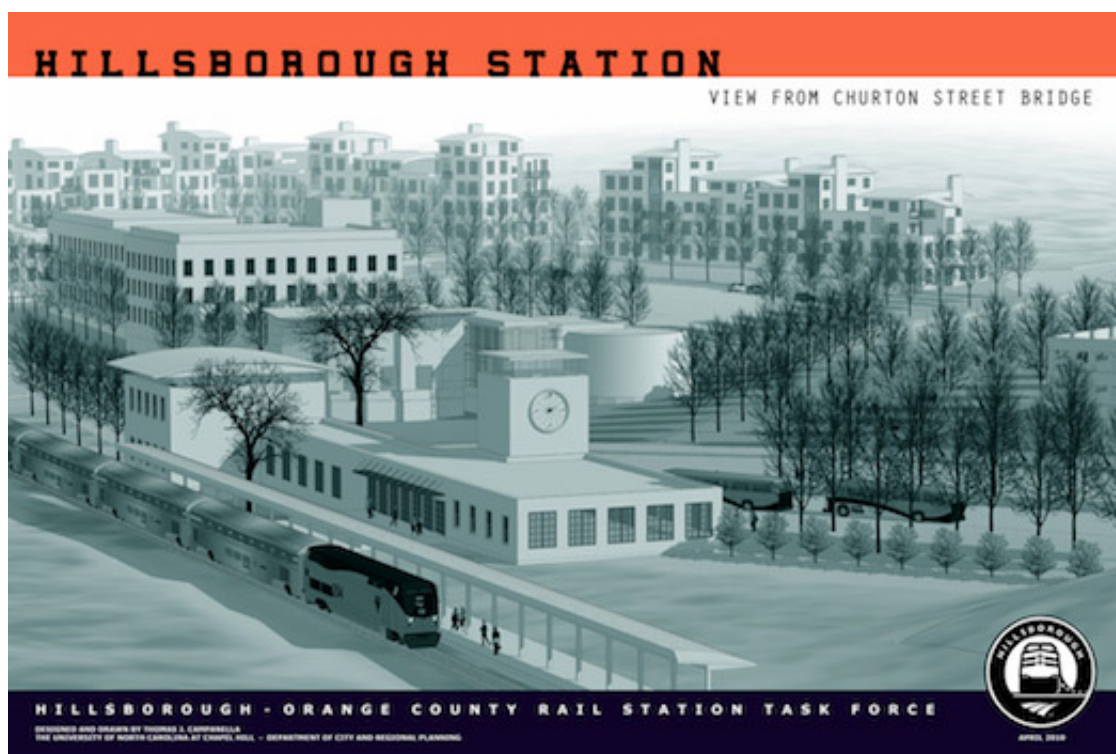
The second legacy of the Jacobsian revolution is related to the first: *Privileging the grassroots over plannerly authority and expertise meant a loss of professional agency*. In rejecting the muscular interventionism of the Burnham-Moses sort, planners in the 1960s identified instead with the victims of urban renewal. New mechanisms were devised to empower ordinary citizens to guide the planning process. This was an extraordinary act of altruism on our part; I can think of no other profession that has done anything like it. Imagine economists at the Federal Reserve holding community meetings to decide the direction of fiscal policy. Imagine public health officials giving equal weight to the nutritional wisdom of teenagers — they are stakeholders, after all! Granted, powering up the grassroots was necessary in the 1970s to stop expressway and renewal schemes that had run amok. But it was power that could not easily be switched off. Tools and processes introduced to ensure popular participation ended up reducing the planner's role to that of umpire or schoolyard monitor. Instead of setting the terms of debate or charting a course of action, planners now seemed content to be facilitators — "mere *absorbers* of public opinion," as Alex Krieger put it, "waiting for consensus to build." [9]

The fatal flaw of such populism is that no single group of citizens — mainstream or marginalized, affluent or impoverished — can be trusted to have the best interests of society or the environment in mind when they evaluate a proposal. The literature on grassroots planning tends to assume a citizenry of Gandhian humanists. In fact, most people are not motivated by altruism but by self-interest. Preservation and enhancement of that self-interest — which usually orbits about the axes of rising crime rates and falling property values — are the real drivers of community activism. This is why it's a fool's errand to rely upon citizens to guide the planning process. Forget for a moment that most folks lack the knowledge to make intelligent decisions about the future of our cities. Most people are simply too busy, too apathetic, or too focused on their jobs or kids to be moved to action over issues unless those issues are at their doorstep. And once an issue is at the doorstep, fear sets in and reason flies out the window. So the very citizens least able to make objective decisions end up dominating the process, often wielding near-veto power over proposals.

To be fair, passionate citizen activism has helped put an end to some very bad projects, private as well as public. And sometimes citizen self-interest and the greater good do overlap. In Orange County, part of the Research Triangle and home to Chapel Hill, grassroots activism stopped a proposed asphalt plant as well as a six-lane bypass that would have ruined a pristine forest. But the same community activism has at times devolved into NIMBYism, causing several infill projects to be halted and helping drive development to greenfield sites. (Cows are slow to organize.) It's made the local homeless shelter homeless itself, almost ended a Habitat for Humanity complex in Chapel Hill, and generated opposition to a much-needed transit-oriented development in the county seat of Hillsborough (more on this in a moment). And for what it's worth, the shrillest opposition came not from rednecks or Tea Party activists but from highly educated "creative class" progressives who effectively weaponized Jane Jacobs to oppose anything they perceived as threatening the status quo — including projects that would reduce our carbon footprint, create more affordable housing and shelter the homeless. NIMBYism, it turns out, is the snake in the grassroots.

NIMBYism has been described as "the bitter fruit of a pluralistic democracy in which all views carry equal weight." [10] And that, sadly, includes the voice of the planner. In the face of an angry public, plannerly wisdom and expertise have no more clout than the ranting of the loudest activist; and this is a hazard to our collective future. For who, if not the planner, will advocate on behalf of society at large? All planning may be local, but the sum of the local is national and eventually global. If we put parochial interests ahead of broader needs, it will be impossible to build the infrastructure essential to the long-range economic viability of the United States — the commuter and high-speed rail lines; the dense, walkable, public-transit-focused communities; the solar and wind farms and geothermal plants; perhaps even the nuclear power stations.

The third legacy of the Jacobsian turn is perhaps most troubling of all: *the seeming paucity among American planners today of the speculative courage and vision that once distinguished this profession*. I'll ease into this subject by way of a story — one that will appear to contradict some of what I just wrote about citizen-led planning. I have served for several years now on the planning board of Hillsborough, North Carolina, where my wife and I have lived since 2004. Hillsborough, founded 1754, is a charming town some 10 miles north of Chapel Hill. It's always reminded me of a grittier, less precious version of Concord, Massachusetts. It has a long and rich history, progressive leadership, and a thriving arts and culture scene. It is also blessed with a palpable genius loci: "If there are hot spots on the globe, as the ancients believed," writes resident Frances Mayes, author of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, "Hillsborough must be one of them." [11] The town is also located on one of the region's main rail arteries, and has been since the Civil War. Every day several Amtrak trains — including the Carolinian, the fastest-growing U.S. passenger line — speed through on their way to Charlotte and Raleigh, Washington and New York. But a passenger train hasn't made a scheduled stop in Hillsborough since March 1964, when Southern Railway ended service due to declining ridership. After a century of connectivity, Hillsborough and Orange County were cut loose from the nation's rail grid.



Hillsborough Station master plan (2010); rendering by Thomas J. Campanella. [Courtesy Orange County Rail Station Task Force]

In late 2007 a group of residents in our local coffee shop, a classic Oldenburg "third place" named Cup-A-Joe, got to talking about reviving rail service. Soon a petition was drafted, and within months several hundred had signed it. [12] At the same time, I had students in my urban design and site planning class develop schemes for a station-anchored mixed-use development close to downtown. I invited town officials to the final review. The local newspaper did an article. Six months later the town purchased the parcel and set about appointing a task force. Amtrak, unprompted, produced a study showing that a Hillsborough stop would be profitable. The North Carolina Railroad Company, owner of the right-of-way and long a Kafka's Castle of impenetrability, suddenly got interested. Task force members were treated to a corridor tour in the railroad's track-riding Chevy Suburban; we were invited to conferences and seminars. The North Carolina Department of Transportation submitted a request for funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The station was, after all, a poster child for the sort of infrastructure President Obama's stimulus package was ostensibly

intended to support.

And all along I kept wondering: Why did this have to come out of a coffee shop and a classroom? *Where were the planners?* Why didn't the town or county planning office act on this opportunity? A moment ago I argued that the public lacks the knowledge and expertise to make informed decisions about planning. If that's the case, what does it say about our profession when a group of citizens — most with no training in architecture, planning or design — comes up with a very good idea *that the planners should have had?* When I asked about this, the response was: "We're too busy planning to come up with big plans." [13] Too busy planning. Too busy slogging through the bureaucratic maze, issuing permits and enforcing zoning codes, hosting community get-togethers, making sure developers get their submittals in on time and pay their fees. This is what passes for planning today. We have become a caretaker profession — reactive rather than proactive, corrective instead of preemptive, rule bound and hamstrung and anything but visionary. If we lived in Nirvana, this would be fine. But we don't. We are entering the uncharted waters of global urbanization on a scale never seen. And we are not in the wheelhouse, let alone steering the ship. We may not even be on board.

How did this come about? How did a profession that roared to life with grand ambitions become such a mouse? The answer points to the self-inflicted loss of agency and authority that came with the Jacobs revolution. It's hard to be a visionary when you've divested yourself of the power to turn visions into reality. Planning in America has been reduced to smallness and timidity, and largely by its own hand. So it's no surprise that envisioning alternative futures for our cities and towns and regions has defaulted to nonplanners such as William McDonough and Richard Florida, Andrés Duany and Rem Koolhaas, and journalists such as Joel Kotkin and James Howard Kunstler. Jane Jacobs was just the start. It is almost impossible to name a single urban planner today who is a regular presence on the editorial pages of a major newspaper, who has galvanized popular sentiment on issues such as sprawl and peak oil, or who has published a best-selling book on the great issues of our day.

Late in life, even Jane Jacobs grew frustrated with the timidity of planners — Canadian planners this time. In an April 1993 speech — published in the *Ontario Planning Journal* — she lamented the absence of just the sort of robust plannerly interventionism that she once condemned. Jacobs read through a list of exemplary planning initiatives — the Toronto Main Street effort; the new Planning for Ontario guidelines; efforts to plan the Toronto waterfront; and plans for infill housing, the renewal and extension of streetcar transit, the redevelopment of the St. Lawrence neighborhood, and on and on. And then she unleashed this bitter missile: "Not one of these forward looking and important policies and ideas — not ONE — was the intellectual product of an official planning department, whether in Toronto, Metro, or the province." Indeed, she drove on, "our official planning departments seem to be brain-dead in the sense that we cannot depend on them in any way, shape, or form for providing intellectual leadership in addressing urgent problems involving the physical future of the city." This, I hardly need to add, from a person who did more than any other to quash plannerly agency to shape the physical city. [14]

Well, what can be done about all this? And what might the doing mean for the future of planning education? How can we cultivate in planners the kind of visionary thinking that once characterized the profession? How can we ensure that the idealism of our students is not extinguished as they move into practice? How can we transform planners into big-picture thinkers with the courage to imagine alternatives to the status quo, and equipped with the skills and the moxie to lead the recovery of American infrastructure and put the nation on a greener, more sustainable path?



"Construction Potentials: Postwar Prospects and Problems, a Basis for Action," *Architectural Record*, 1943; prepared by the F.W. Dodge Corporation Committee on Postwar Construction Markets. [Drawing by Julian Archer]

It was the Jacobsian revolution and its elimination of a robust physical-planning focus that led to the diminution of planning's disciplinary identity, professional agency and speculative courage. Thus I believe that a renewed emphasis on physical planning — the grounded, tangible, place-bound matter of orchestrating human activity on the land — is essential to refocusing, recalibrating and renewing the profession. By this I do not mean regression back to the state of affairs circa 1935. Planning prior to the grassroots revolution was shallow and undisciplined in many respects. Most of what was embraced post-Jacobs must remain — our expertise on public policy and economics, on law and governance and international development, on planning process and community involvement, on hazard mitigation and environmental impact, on ending poverty and encouraging justice and equality. But all these should be subordinated to core competencies related to placemaking, infrastructure and the physical environment, built and natural. I am not suggesting that we simply toss in a few studio courses and call it a day. Planners should certainly be versed in key theories of landscape and urban design. But more than design skills are needed if planning is to become — as I feel it must — the charter discipline and conscience of the placemaking professions in coming decades.

Planning students today need a more robust suite of skills and expertise than we are currently providing — and than may even be possible in the framework of the two-year graduate curriculum. [15] Planners today need not a close-up lens or a wide-angle lens but a wide-angle zoom lens. They need to be able to see the big picture as well as the parts close up; and even if not trained to design the parts themselves, they need to know how all those parts fit together. They need, as Jerold Kayden has put it, to "understand, analyze, and influence the variety of forces — social, economic, cultural, legal, political, ecological, technological, aesthetic, and so forth — shaping the built environment." [16] This means that in addition to being taught courses in economics and law and governance, students should be trained to be keen observers of the urban landscapes about them, to be able to decipher the riddles of architectural style and substance, to have a working knowledge of the historical development of places and patterns on the land. They should understand how the physical infrastructure of a city works — the mechanics of transportation and utility systems, sewerage and water supply. They should know the fundamentals of ecology and the natural systems of a place, be able to read a site and its landform and vegetation, know that a great spreading maple in the middle of a stand of pines once stood alone in an open pasture. They need to know the basics of impact analysis and be able to assess the implications of a proposed development on traffic, water quality and a city's carbon footprint. And while they cannot master all of site engineering, they should be competent site analysts and — more important — be fluent in assessing the site plans of others. Such training would place competency in the shaping and stewardship of the built environment at the very center of the planning-education solar system. And about that good sun a multitude of bodies — planning specialties as we have long had them — could happily orbit.

We are far from this ideal today.

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