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Becoming an Urban Planner: What Planners Do

URBAN PLANNING IS A PROFESSION that offers a wide range of opportunities for people with many different talents and aspirations.

Yet, unlike the occupations of doctor, architect, lawyer, or engineer, the work of the urban planner is not well known to people outside the profession.

The name of the profession, “urban planning,” is straightforward and descriptive. Urban planners plan for the future of urban areas. But this literal description of the work of an urban planner only scratches the surface of the role of urban planners. Planners work to ensure that cities have what they need to grow and prosper, including:

- Places where people can live

Planners estimate the number of households that will need to be housed in the coming years and recommend where within the community land should be set aside for homes to be built. In the process, planners work with communities to determine the proportion of homes that will be single-family houses, duplexes, or multi-family housing and the proportion that will be targeted for home ownership versus rental. Planners also work on policies affecting the price of housing in a community, to ensure that low-income and moderate-income residents (like store clerks, restaurant staff, nursing assistants, and teachers) have comfortable and affordable housing available to them.

- Places where employers can build shops, offices, and factories

In addition to working to identify the best places within a community for locating factories, shopping areas, and offices, planners also work to attract jobs to communities. Economic development planners study the local economy to identify needs and create programs to fill those needs. For example, planners work with employers and local educational institutions to make sure that the students receive training in the skills required by local industries or by the industries that the community would like to locate there.

- Transportation facilities (roads, rail, airports, and seaports)

Planners study transportation systems to determine when additional transportation facilities are needed, where they should be built, and the mix of transportation options that should be available. Planners collect and analyze information to find out whether the growth and prosperity of a region is hampered because the transportation network does not provide sufficient access to some locations in the community or because congestion is creating excessive delays in getting from one place to another. Planners know that industry needs an efficient transportation system for moving raw materials in and manufactured products out. While the number of cars per person has steadily increased since the nineteenth century, planners work to create a balanced transportation system in which residents can choose to live in areas that are designed to make biking, walking, and transit (buses, light rail, and commuter rail) more successful.

- Clean water for drinking and washing and systems for managing wastes

Planners work with civil engineers to ensure that basic urban infrastructure—sewer and water—will be available as a community grows. How a community grows can have a dramatic effect on the cost of providing sewer and water services. For example, laying out a neighborhood with large lots served by sewer and water requires more spending on pipes and requires more maintenance by the city in the future. Planners work with communities to understand the effects of land use decisions on the cost of providing sewer and water services and to modify land use policies as needed. Planners also work with hydrogeologists and civil engineers to develop plans for the sustainable use of sources of drinking water, to ensure that the supply of water will remain sufficient in the future.

- Places where people can recreate

Planning for parks, open space, and community facilities like ice rinks, athletic fields, and community centers is important to any community. Planners study the age distribution of the population as it is today and as it will be in the future. A city with a growing number of school-age children requires a different mix of recreation facilities than a city with an aging population entering retirement. Planners seek a fair distribution of parks and open space across the community.

- Places where people *want* to be

Planners know that it is not enough simply to meet basic needs for housing, shopping, working, and recreation. People choose where to live, work, and play based on many factors, and the physical design of urban places is one of those factors. Urban design considerations—how tall should our buildings be, how far should they be set back from the street, where parking for cars and bikes should be located—are an important aspect of the urban planning puzzle. Decisions and rules regarding the physical design of the community determine the appearance and character of the place and can either attract or repel people and investment in the community.

■ Community development

Some planners focus on community organizing and community development, seeking to increase social justice, reduce poverty, and “build vital and thriving under-resourced communities” (National Congress for Community Economic Development, 2009). Most planners working on community development work in areas with high levels of poverty and low levels of education, employment, and income, whether in central city neighborhoods, suburbs, or rural areas. They provide assistance to small businesses, bring resources to the community for improving the quality of affordable housing, and develop programs for increasing the skills and job readiness of residents.

■ Supplies of energy

Planners have always worked with energy utilities to predict future energy demands and to locate sites for new energy facilities, such as power plants, natural gas pipelines, or petroleum storage areas. Today, increasingly, planners are at the forefront in identifying ways in which communities can reduce their energy needs and plan for the future of renewable energy resources.

Employment in Planning

Planning is a relatively small but growing field. In 2006, the Department of Labor reported 34,000 jobs held by urban and regional planners (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). This compares to 132,000 architects, for example.

U.S. News and World Report rated Urban and Regional Planner as one of the “Best Careers” in 2009 (U.S. News, 2009). The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 15 percent increase in the number of planning jobs between 2006 and 2016—faster than average for all occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009).

Two-thirds of planners work for the government. Usually, planners work for city or county governments, but they may also work for a metropolitan planning board or regional planning agency. Some planners who are publicly employed work for state or federal agencies, such as the National Park Service, the Federal Emergency Management Administration, the Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency, or Housing and Urban Development.

The fastest growing segment of the planning job market is in the private sector (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Twenty-five percent of the planners surveyed by the American Planning Association said that they worked for private consulting firms, and 2 percent worked for private developers. Planning consultants work in the private sector, but frequently their clients are local governments. That is, although the planner works for a private firm, the firm is hired by a city to do planning on the city’s behalf. Even when planners work for private developers or when their consulting client is in the private sector, planners’ code of ethics calls upon them to take the public interest seriously in all of their work (American Institute of Certified Planners, no date).



Many planners work for government agencies. Planners who work for cities, villages, and towns work with elected officials (the mayor and city council members) and the planning commission, helping them to understand the community's planning needs and opportunities and to make good decisions about the community's future. CITY OF PIEDMONT.

Planners work in all kinds of cities—from large cities with millions of residents to small rural hamlets with fewer than a hundred homes. In addition, whether a planner works for an individual city, for a regional planning agency or for a private client, planners are always thinking about the connections between the place where they focus their work and other places beyond those borders. Roads and train tracks extend in every direction from the city where a planner works. People live in one city, but they may work in another and shop in dozens of other cities. People buy goods and services that come from around the globe. Political boundaries, such as city limits, define a city planner's main focus, but the skillful planner is always looking at how the place where the planner is currently focused is connected to other places near and far.

SIMCITY™

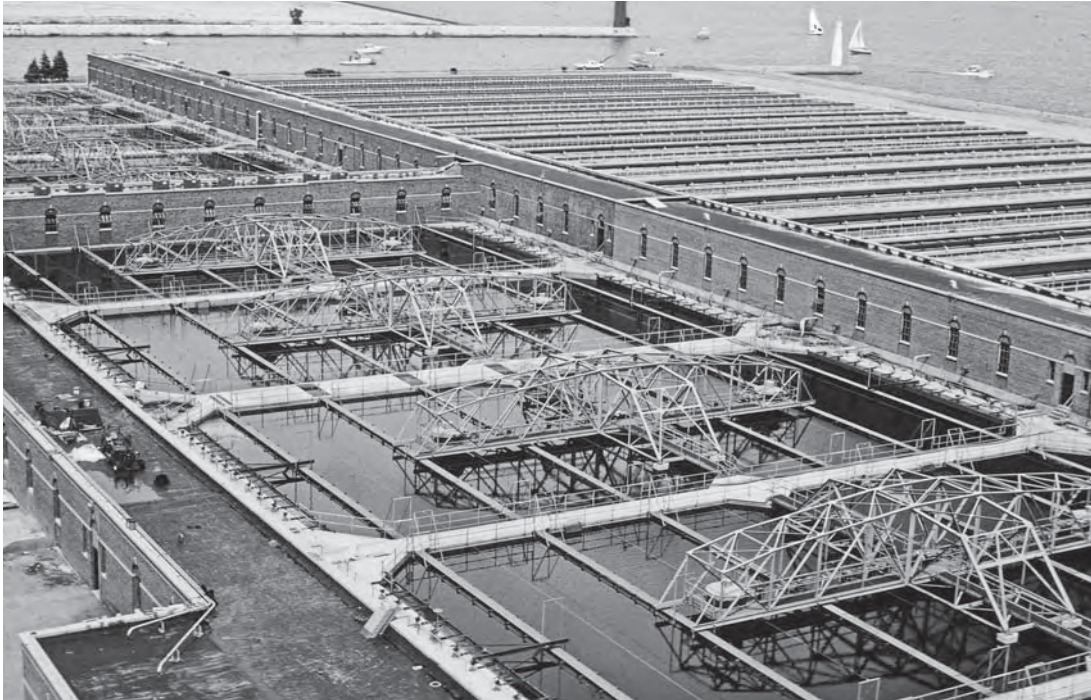
Since 1989, scores of children and adults have been introduced to the field of urban planning through the computer game SimCity. Players take on the role of urban planner (though officially designated “mayor” in the game), deciding how much land to devote to housing, industry, and commercial buildings (offices and stores), building roads and rails and heliports, and setting aside land for parks, zoos, and police stations. As the game unfolds, players see how their decisions affect the number of people who want to move to the city, the taxes generated from houses, offices, and factories, the level of traffic congestion, and the amount of pollution. When taxes get too high or traffic congestion becomes too intense, people move away, looking for less expensive places to live or places with a higher quality of life. The game also teaches that planners need to expect the unexpected, as a host of natural and human-caused disasters can suddenly descend upon the city. SimCity has done more than dozens of books like this to interest people in the work of planners.

This book picks up where a game like SimCity leaves off, showing you not only what planners do, but also how to prepare for a career in planning and the opportunities within the field.

A Young Profession: Planning Emerges in the Late Nineteenth Century

Planning is not only a small profession; it is also a relatively new profession. It emerged out of the urban crises at the end of the nineteenth century. Rapid population growth combined with a laissez-faire economic philosophy created multiple challenges for cities: water supplies fouled by human and animal waste, air choked by smoke from coal-burning industries and wood burning in homes, and a chaotic streetscape with telegraph, telephone, and electrical wires strung erratically above an underground tangle of pipes and tunnels. Jon Peterson (2003) describes the elements that led to the establishment of city planning as a separate profession in 1909. First, the public health movement in the late nineteenth century recognized the relationship between land use and disease. Until the germ theory became well accepted in the late 1890s, medical science did not always understand why people who lived in certain parts of the city were more likely to become ill. One theory was that wet ground, vapors from swamps, and bad smells carried disease. As a result, public health professionals and civil engineers advocated for well-planned sewer and water systems, drainage of wet areas in cities, and the creation of city parks where people could enjoy fresh air away from the smoke and dust of the city streets.

led (PE)



Sewage Treatment Plant. Planners worked side by side with public health professionals and engineers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to promote sewage treatment. Initially, sewage systems were designed to merely move filth-laden water out of homes and off of streets. During the early twentieth century, new methods of treating sewage evolved, so that it became less dangerous to people and less harmful to the environment. This plant, first built in 1925, was one of the first in the United States to use microorganisms to break down the contaminants in sewage. Planners create sanitary sewer service area plans to make sure that the city does not develop too fast, outpacing the sewage treatment plant's available capacity. FROM THE AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE LIBRARIES.

AN AGE OF IDEALISM IN DESIGN

Concerns about the urban environment also led to utopian efforts to build model towns. Some plans were designed by self-trained visionaries, like Ebenezer Howard, who designed a utopian plan for “garden cities of tomorrow.” Other plans were commissioned by landowners seeking to create an idyllic place for the “wealthier classes,” such as Riverside, Illinois. And others were the result of the visions of industrialists like George Pullman, who commissioned a town plan with housing and shops for the workers in the company’s railroad car factory.

A key event in the development of the planning profession was the work of architects, landscape architects, and engineers in the design of the grounds for the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Later dubbed the “White City,” the fair introduced the idea of master planning and caught the public’s imagination. Following the fair, the architects and landscape architects who had designed the White City were commissioned to create plans for cities across the country.

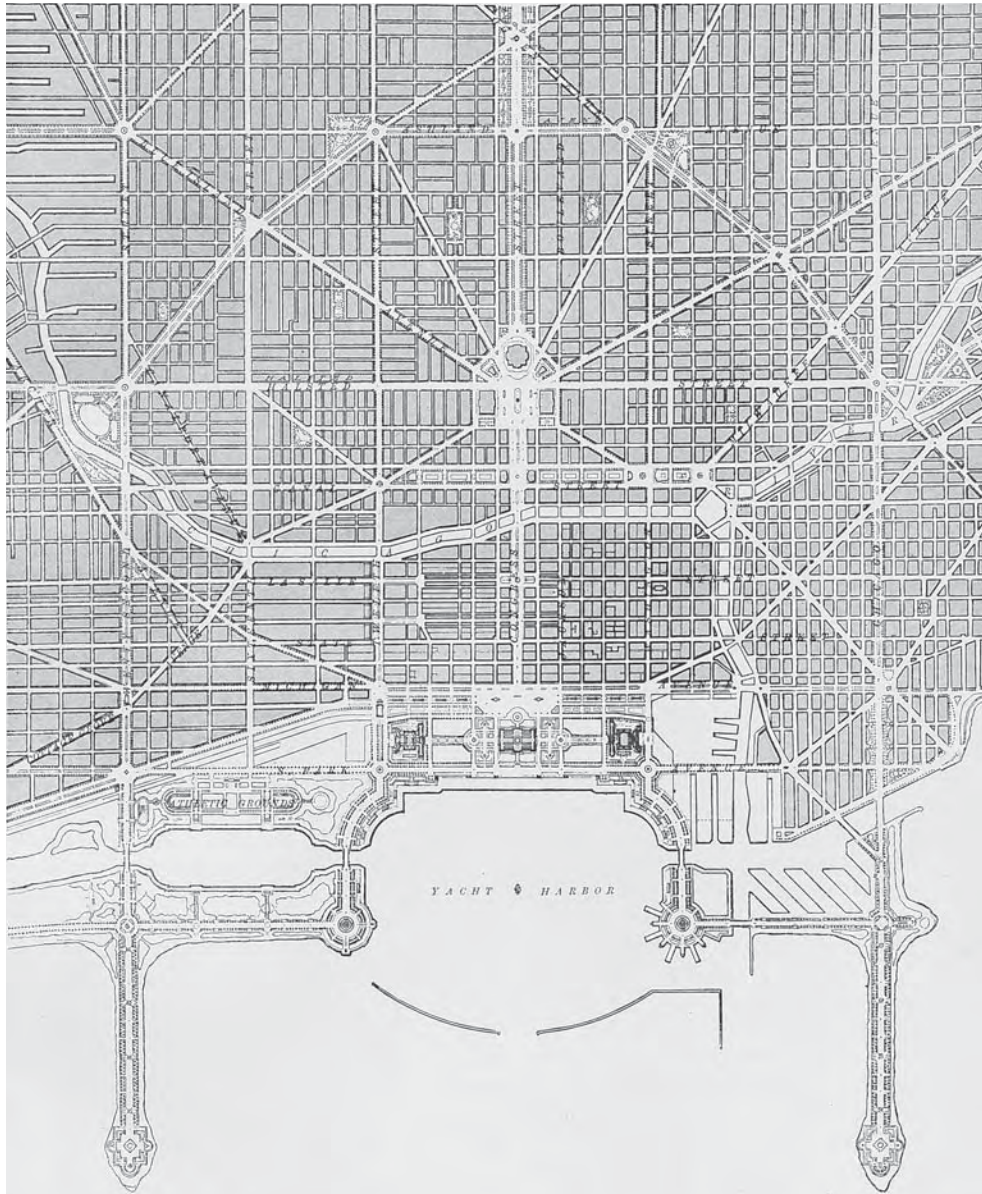


The World's Columbian Exposition (1893), also known as the Chicago World's Fair, brought the first Ferris wheel and the birth of city planning in the United States. Key figures in the development of planning as a profession led the planning for the exposition, including Chicago architect Daniel Burnham and the "Father of Landscape Architecture," Frederick Law Olmsted. Decades would pass before these three professions—planning, architecture, and landscape architecture—became distinct fields and much overlap continues today. CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM, ICHI-02524, 1893.

DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY

Erik Larson's book, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*, is an entertaining look at the creation of the "White City" and some of the notorious activities that accompanied the fair. The *New York Times* lauded Larson's fusion of history and entertainment, noting that "truth is stranger than fiction." The book is a good read that teaches much about the early pioneers in urban planning—and the times in which they worked.

Planning in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and Washington, DC, all showed the imprint of the Chicago World's Fair. In 1909, the first National Conference on City Planning was held in Washington, DC.



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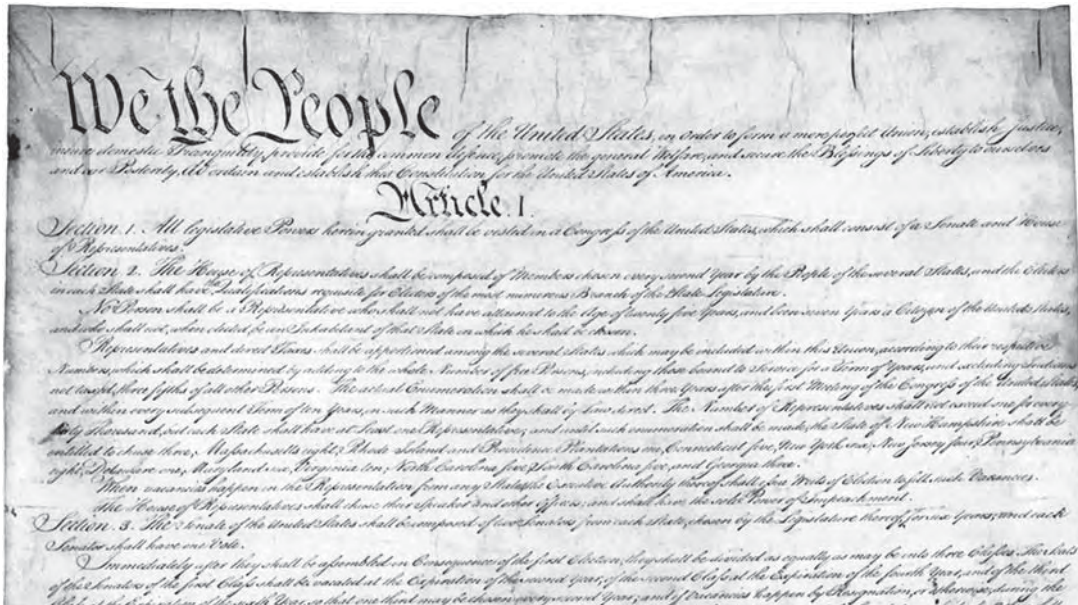
CX. CHICAGO. PLAN OF THE COMPLETE SYSTEM OF STREET CIRCULATION; RAILWAY STATIONS; PARKS, BOULEVARD CIRCUITS AND RADIAL ARTERIES; PUBLIC RECREATION PIERS, YACHT HARBOR, AND PLEASURE-BOAT PIERS; TREATMENT OF GRANT PARK; THE MAIN AXIS AND THE CIVIC CENTER, PRESENTING THE CITY AS A COMPLETE ORGANISM IN WHICH ALL ITS FUNCTIONS ARE RELATED ONE TO ANOTHER IN SUCH A MANNER THAT IT WILL BECOME A UNIT.

Plan for Chicago (1909). CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM, ICHI-39070, 1909.

THE ADVENT OF ZONING

At this stage in its development, planning had reached a new level. It was not about merely designing a single park or a housing district. It was about taking the scope of an entire city and understanding the relationship among the elements of a city—moving people from place to place, providing a lively and inviting atmosphere, keeping people safe and healthy, and creating a canvas on which commerce could prosper.

This expansion of the scope of planning posed challenges, however. When planning was undertaken for a single site—whether for a new housing district like Riverside, a new town like Pullman, the civic center in Cleveland, or the Chicago World’s Fair grounds—the designers had only to worry about persuading the client to agree to the ideas set forth in the plan. Typically, the land was entirely under the control of the client. If the client liked the plan, it simply had to be built. Moving to the scale of an entire city, encompassing an area of 40, 50, or 60 square miles was another matter entirely. Multiple landowners could not be corralled into agreeing to a single plan. If the plans were to become more than grand ideas on paper, some means of implementing them—within the context of democratic government—had to be found.



U.S. Constitution. Planners are required to limit their activities to doing things that are consistent with the U.S. Constitution and the powers that each state government allows municipalities to exercise. Enabling statutes are the state laws that allow local governments to regulate land use. Those regulations must also conform to the requirements of the U.S. Constitution. When zoning-enabling statutes were first created, some property owners believed that the state and local government had infringed upon the owner's right to property, in violation of the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court, the final authority on what is constitutional, frequently rules on the constitutionality of planning laws and actions. U.S. ARCHIVES.

While those trained in the design professions continued to put together grand ideas about how places should look, others tackled the problem of channeling urban growth and development through the hundreds of private decisions made by landowners about their real estate. The regulation of land use was not new, and municipal officials were inventing new kinds of regulations as the challenges of urban life continued to mount. Restrictions were placed on locations where certain activities could be carried out. For example, slaughterhouses were relegated to one part of the city. Restrictions were placed on the heights of buildings even as engineers invented new ways of making buildings taller. Outside of the downtown area, the restrictions on the height of buildings were even stricter. These restrictions led cities to identify specific zones within the city where some activities were allowed and others restricted.

In 1916, New York City was the first city to adopt a comprehensive zoning code that covered all property within the city. In 1924, the federal government completed a draft of a model zoning-enabling statute, encouraging state legislatures to empower municipalities to exercise zoning powers. In 1926, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the zoning code of the city of Euclid, Ohio, as a proper exercise of local government power.

The advent of the era of land use regulation also meant that a new category of government bureaucrats would be needed to administer these new codes. In 1914, Newark, New Jersey, became the first city in the United States to hire a planner on its staff rather than relying on consultants.

After the 1920s, planning continued to develop along two separate tracks. One track focused on the design of urban spaces. These planners, who often had some training in architecture or landscape architecture, envisioned how a space would be used and how it would look, and they communicated those ideas through drawings and maps. The second track in planning focused more on the skeleton of the city, mapping out the major areas for shopping, housing, and factories, and putting into place the local ordinances that would govern how property owners might use their land and the size and scale of buildings that might be erected on a site.

POLICY PLANNING EMERGES SIMULTANEOUSLY

A third track within planning—policy planning—also has its roots in the late nineteenth century. In 1907, the Russell Sage Foundation completed detailed studies on the employment and living conditions of workers in Pittsburgh. The authors recommended a new kind of policy response, beyond the tenement regulations that had been in place for at least 20 years prior to the study. The authors focused on public policies aimed at the working conditions within factories, including the long hours and lack of financial security of workers. They recommended legislation to end the 12-hour workday. This recommendation reflected a growing understanding that many urban issues are interrelated.

Policy planning became an increasingly prominent component of the profession throughout the twentieth century, especially at the federal level of government. Planners helped develop policies to meet the needs for jobs and housing during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and then to deal

with commodity scarcities during World War II. In the postwar era planners helped create policies to meet the surge of demand for housing and transportation, especially the interstate freeway system. In the 1960s planners helped combat poverty as part of the Great Society movement spearheaded by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

PLANNING AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

The ferment of the 1960s also alerted planners to issues of social justice and participatory democracy. Planners entered an era of self-reflection and saw many things about the profession that they did not like. Planners had ignored the needs of poor and minority communities. Spurred by visions of urban renewal and gleaming freeways cutting across city neighborhoods, planners had been blind to the unjust negative effects that such policies had had on poor neighborhoods.

Planners redefined their role. Prior to the 1960s, most planners would have identified themselves as experts whose opinions on matters relating to the development of cities should be accepted by the public and community leaders as they would accept the opinions of an attorney or doctor in their respective fields of expertise. After the 1960s, a growing number of planners accepted the idea that planners need to consult with the people who live and work in communities and to apply their expertise to assist the community in achieving its goals. At the same time, planners recognized that the values and interests of the most vocal participants in the planning process may not be shared by other segments of the community.

Public participation is now a staple of almost every planning process. Planners reach out to all segments of the community to hear their views on how the city meets their current needs and what their vision for the future looks like. In the 1960s, this approach focused largely on including racial and ethnic minorities that had been left out. Today, planners also seek to ensure that the voices of the physically disabled, children, the elderly, and single parents are included in the planning process. COURTESY OF DAN BURDEN, GLADDING JACKSON.



PLANNING IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The 1970s awakening of environmentalism resulted in a wave of federal regulations and initiatives to curb pollution, and planners engaged in work to protect watersheds, reduce air pollution, and protect the habitat of endangered species. The interest in environmental protection was a major influence on the development of the Smart Growth movement in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Factory closings during the 1970s and 1980s drew many planners into local economic development efforts. As this process continued and accelerated in the 1990s and 2000s, planners helped pursue similar efforts at a regional scale. Policy planners continue to work in all of these areas. An increasing number of policy planners work on issues related to energy and climate change.

Today, the three major approaches to planning (design, land use planning, and policy planning) are coming together in a more integrated way. While individual planners may have specialized skills in one or two of these areas, planning is carried out in teams that include all of these skills, and few plans are created that do not touch upon all three areas in some way.



Abandoned factories became a common sight in cities across the United States beginning in the 1970s. Initially, employers moved their factories to new locations with better access to truck transport on the edges of cities. Later, many industrial operations moved to locations in the south. More recently, employers have moved operations to foreign countries to lower their costs of producing goods. Often, when factories moved out, they left behind deteriorating buildings and underground contamination that hampered reuse of the sites. FROM THE AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE LIBRARIES.



EA.

Here an old rail yard has been redeveloped for new industrial facilities and park space, honoring the area's heritage by preserving two smokestacks, providing visual interest and symbolizing the prior use of the site. NANCY FRANK, 2009.

Plans envision the future. The comprehensive plan for Kona, Hawaii, envisioned the future through both words and pictures. Over 1000 participants attended public workshops where they shared their ideas for how the community should grow. Planners took that information, along with technical information about trends and needs, to create a plan for moving toward the future that participants said they preferred. ACP VISIONING+PLANNING



Urban Planning Is about the Future

One of the distinguishing characteristics of urban planners, no matter what their approach to planning, is their focus on the future. The future is always shrouded in a fog of uncertainty. No one can predict what the future will bring. But planners are in the business of attempting to anticipate the future and recommend strategies to help cities thrive as the future unfolds.

Planners work with elected officials, businesses, and residents to create a vision of the future. Then, by studying current conditions and trends, the planner develops suggestions for actions that will allow the city to achieve its vision. Planners collect information about population, the economy, and the environment. This information allows planners to understand whether the city is growing in population or shrinking and whether employers are moving into the city and creating new jobs or moving away because of suburbanization or globalization. Planners look at whether the supply of houses is likely to be sufficient to meet the needs of residents over the next 20 years, whether the existing transportation system allows people to get to jobs, shopping, school, and recreational activities without safety problems, unacceptable delays, and increasing pollution. Where problems are identified, planners then strategize ways the city government can work with residents, businesses, and other units of government to solve those problems and achieve their vision for the future.

LOW-INCOME SENIOR HOMEOWNERS:
TOTAL HOUSEHOLDS & COST BURDEN (1990 VS. 2000)

Measure	1990	2000	% Change
Total households	19,153	15,042	-21%
Cost burden > 30% of household income	4,135	6,043	45%
Cost burden > 50% of household income	1,897	3,367	78%

Source: City of Seattle Comprehensive Plan, 2005.

Urban Planning Is about Place

Google the word *planning* and one comes to realize how planning relates to every part of life. One finds retirement planning, wedding planning, and health system planning—and many others. All planning shares an orientation toward the future. “Urban planning” is different from the others because of its focus on “place.” This focus on place is even deeper than the profession’s focus on urban places. Urban planning focuses on shaping the nature of places, including the built environment (houses, stores, offices, and factories) and the natural environment (fields, forests, waters, and wetlands). Planners shape the built and natural environment in many ways.

Why did you become a planner?

➤ As a kid, I was always fascinated by buildings, places, maps, and the world around me in general. This led me to pursue a career as an architect. However, after studying architecture in college for two years, I found that my interests were less in designing individual buildings and more in the morphology of places and the dynamics of regional transportation networks, as well as how these relate to one another. This realization led me to change majors from architecture to urban affairs and geography.

Upon graduation into a tough job market and still not exactly sure what I wanted to do with my life,

I took a job at a consulting firm in the Washington, DC, area as a cartographer, primarily drafting and editing FEMA flood maps.

While it wasn't what I wanted to do, and the pay was quite low, I knew that it would help me get some practical experience and serve as a stepping-stone towards something more suitable. Several months into the job, I was given the opportunity to transfer into the company's planning group, doing more challenging professional work, where my career as a planner began in earnest.

Stuart Sirota, AICP, TND Planning Group

Land use planners shape how a community uses the land and spreads out across the land as more and more people move to the city. Transportation planners shape the built environment by increasing the ease with which people can travel to some places rather than others. When transportation planners design streets for cars moving at 45 miles per hour, pedestrians are unlikely to walk



Shopping areas along roads that are designed entirely for moving traffic quickly are no place for pedestrians. Few people will hazard crossing the street on foot. As a result, areas like these—so common in suburbs built in the second half of the twentieth century—increase the amount that people drive, pollution, carbon emissions, and energy consumption. Many suburban communities are rethinking how to plan for shopping areas, and planners are helping them to find ways of making their shopping areas more pedestrian-friendly. NANCY FRANK, 2009.

between places along the street, and developers design their sites to accommodate people arriving by car. Economic development planners may focus their efforts on attracting new businesses to office parks built on former farm fields or, instead, they may focus on cleaning up former industrial sites and attracting new businesses to locate on these recycled lands. In each case, the focus is on developing plans, policies, and programs for a specific place.

You are invited to help
Build a Better Neighborhood
Please come and learn how you and your neighbors can



Take Back the Streets

**Neighborhood Meeting!
Traffic Calming Charrette**
With Walkable Communities Expert, Dan Burden

Friday, April 16 – 6:30 PM to 9:00 PM
Saturday, April 17 – 9:00 AM to 12 Noon
Sunday, April 18 – 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM

Meet at Burtness Auditorium
Cottage Hospital Pueblo and Bath Streets

Questions? 897-2509
¿Preguntas? 564-5385

info@OakParkTrafficManagement.org
Neighborhood Traffic Management Program

▲ Traffic calming refers to a set of techniques communities can use to slow down traffic to allow pedestrians to travel more safely and more efficiently in areas where high speeds and high traffic volumes have made walking difficult. COURTESY OF DAN BURDEN, GLATTING JACKSON.

► In newly developing areas, planners and urban designers design narrower streets, on-street parking, and other visual cues to reduce traffic speeds and give pedestrians and bicyclists a safer and more comfortable environment. COURTESY OF DANA BOURLAND

