

**People & Place:**  
**Humanities-based Pedagogy in Architecture and Planning**

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Presented at the

**The Role of the Humanities in Design Creativity Conference**  
**University of Lincoln, U.K.**  
**November 15-16, 2007**

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Professors Bartholomew and Locher were selected as the 2006-07 University Professors at the University of Utah to organize and teach an introductory level course integrating architecture and urban planning. The result of that effort is the topic of this paper.

## I. Introduction

Planning and architecture are fundamentally based in society. The built environment affects our everyday actions and our understanding of cultural values, social relations, institutions, and the distribution of power.<sup>1</sup> The stories we tell about our everyday lives incorporate these concepts, yet few people in our culture are aware of the continual impact of architecture and planning. Fewer still could articulate general principles that govern decisions regarding the design of our built environment. This lack of design literacy, coupled with the inability of architects and planners to “hear” information in peoples’ stories and to effectively link to community values in their work, is at the core of many urban dysfunctions we observe.

The public’s design illiteracy is comprehensible. The average American understands architecture and planning as having little role in his/her life and as being financially out of reach and intellectually irrelevant. Bell notes his shock at a 1995 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article stating, “only 2% of new homebuyers worked directly with an architect.”<sup>2</sup> With so few homes and other buildings in the U.S. being designed by registered architects, it is clear that the profession has lost contact with the majority of the population. The work historically done by architects now is divided among a number of professions, including planning, engineering, landscape architecture, interior design, environmental design, and construction management.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, urban planners now rarely are involved in real planning, focusing instead on the processing of permits.

The failure of architects and planners to learn from the stories that are part of people’s everyday lives, too, is comprehensible. For the most part, professional schools are the training grounds for planners and architects, and story-telling and -listening are rarely part of the theory- and practice-based academic curriculum. Paraphrasing Neustadt and May,<sup>4</sup> Forester asserts “planning and policy analysts [and here we interject ‘planners and architects’] should not ask ‘what’s the problem?’ but ‘what’s the story’ and thereby find out the problem.”<sup>5</sup>

These disconnections are sobering for academicians charged, as we are, with introducing the principles of architecture and planning to students. We believe that good design can and should be both relevant and affordable,<sup>6</sup> and because architects and planners utilize knowledge from a broad range of disciplines, they are well positioned to provide leadership for the creation of a sustainable built environment. To achieve this, however, architects and planners must be able to identify, understand, and utilize the values inherent in American society. Our observation is that the two disciplines suffer from a disconnection from those values. Building on a foundation of work done by Fischer, Forester, Sandercock, Shellenberger and Nordhaus, Throgmorton, and others, we believe that understanding, acting upon, and communicating the values embedded in the stories we and others tell is the key to re-creating relevancy of the professions to the public.

To understand the disconnections and develop ways of overcoming them, we developed a year-long curriculum for entry-level architecture and urban planning students titled “People & Place.” The course seeks to explore professional and societal values about the built environment in the context of community development service-learning projects. Through an inductive approach, we hope to unravel some of the complexities of connecting two professions and academic disciplines to each other and to the society they serve. Having completed the first year

of a three-year commitment to teach the course, we are just starting to formulate a pedagogic methodology on stories and values.

## II. A History of Divisions

The disconnection of architecture and planning from each other and from society stems from a long history of divisions in the disciplines and professions, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the first academic course in architecture was established, separating academic learning from practice. A division between science and art followed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of separate technical and fine arts universities.<sup>7</sup> Next, industrialization spurred the split of planning from its parentage of landscape architecture, civil engineering, and architecture around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 1930s saw an internal division in planning with the separation of physical and policy planning, leading to the development of a Modernist predisposal toward procedures over outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

The splits within the professions paralleled a split in the academy. In planning, theories and methods once part of traditional architectural training were cordoned off in distinct academic departments that, not infrequently, were housed in non-architectural academic units. Despite a more recent shift toward co-locating planning with architecture, planning programs tend to remain distinct and isolated from architectural programs.

While professional and academic splits are regrettable, more alarming is the division of both profession and academy from the broader community. The value systems steeped in the history of the architectural profession have tended to serve the elite.<sup>9</sup> Though its socially based beginnings were more altruistic, planning, too, suffers from a similar patriarchal past. The continued use of theories and language that reinforce the role of the professions as privileged “clubs” make them even less accessible and understandable to the general public.<sup>10</sup>

The failure of the planning and architecture professions to understand and incorporate community values has led to the creation of projects that neglect to serve those values. Extreme examples of this disconnection, such as the Pruitt-Igoe public housing fiasco, have given rise to a series of minimum standards for public participation in governmental decision-making<sup>11</sup> that have now become commonplace. However, apart from a few noteworthy exceptions,<sup>12</sup> the increase in participation has not led to an appreciable increase in planning and architecture’s connection to community values. Common failings include (1) use of technocratic and adversarial approaches to persuade the public about the legitimacy of a proposed governmental action; (2) engagement of the public after a decision has already been made; and (3) failure to effectively incorporate public comment into decision-making processes in ways that might impact outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, the lack of connection to community values has eroded the public’s general confidence in governmental decision-making, leading to a sense of skepticism, futility, and apathy.<sup>14</sup> Because of the professions’ central role in these decision-making processes, the public’s antipathy easily translates into an aversion toward the professions as a whole. With this level of public disenfranchisement, it is not surprising that few see planning and architecture as relevant.

### **III. A Matter of Values: What Values Matter?**

What are the values to which planning and architecture aspire, both in professional and academic spheres? Although planning's diversity has made the clear definition of a set of values problematic, general themes that have been articulated include: (1) making the conditions for human settlements better meet inhabitants' needs; (2) identifying and engaging linkages between large- and small-scale physical, economic, environmental, and social systems; (3) anticipating future challenges and opportunities; (4) concern for public well-being and the equitable distribution of resources; (5) a desire for effective public participation; and (6) the interactive transmission of information between academy, profession, and community.<sup>15</sup> The standard curriculum in most university planning programs is not at odds with these themes. Using the University of Utah as an example, we see concentration on understanding the history and operation of urban systems, the environmental and societal impacts of policy, the provision of basic human and community services, and the information and decision processes necessary to achieve results that optimally respond to anticipated future conditions.<sup>16</sup>

Along the same line, the American Institute of Architects' list of value-based themes important to the profession include: (1) sustainable, healthy, livable communities; (2) incentives for affordable housing, green buildings, historic preservation, and brownfield renewal; (3) energy and water conservation; and (4) better, safer schools and civic spaces. Again using the University of Utah's curriculum as an example, we can infer that most university architecture curricula incorporate these themes, offering courses that deal with architecture's connections to environmental/resource conservation and sustainability; cultural, environmental, and urban issues; the social and cultural constructs of the built environment; and design and the communication of design ideas.<sup>17</sup>

What are the values that are important to the broader community and do they connect with the values of the planning and architecture professions and the academy? Although the answer to these questions will vary widely depending on environmental, social, and political conditions, researchers preparing for a regional planning process in the Salt Lake City region determined that the values most important to Utahns were self-esteem, family love, peace of mind, personal security, freedom, personal enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and accomplishment.<sup>18</sup> Though these values were connected to a series of community attributes, they indicate a significant disconnect in the way citizens talk about values in the community and the ways in which professionals talk about values in architecture and planning.

### **IV. Objectives & Methods of People & Place**

We created the People & Place course to begin the process of understanding the professional and academic values of architecture and planning, the values important to broader communities, and possible methods of connecting these two "value fields." Targeted at introductory level students, the course facilitates exploration of these issues early in professional education with the hope that lessons learned here can frame subsequent explorations in theory and method.

The course revolves around a series of community development projects that the students, working together in small groups, complete over a 16-week period. Each group is mentored by a local professional architect, planner, or designer, and each has a community organization as a client. In 2006-07, the students focused on a series of issues in Salt Lake City's downtown, including affordable housing, civic space, economic development, historic preservation, neighborhood planning, small business development, social services, and transportation.

The classroom curriculum incorporates readings from multiple perspectives, disciplines, and theories, including environmental history, landscape and urban design, law, art history, music theory, literature, political science, and sociology. We challenge students to explore the values represented in each discipline and ask them to identify ways in which their group projects might connect with those values. To record their observations, students write papers, maintain journal/sketchbooks, complete pre- and post-project surveys, and participate in focus groups. We also survey the students' mentors and clients.

## **V. Results**

The 2006-07 students in People & Place were strongly oriented toward public service before participating in the class. Out of 24 respondents, only 2 reported not having had significant public service/volunteer service. This confirms other observations in the service-learning literature indicating a fairly strong self-selection bias in the composition of service-learning courses.<sup>19</sup>

In focus group discussions, students indicated that social and environmental sustainability are important values to reflect in the built environment. They also voiced strong approval for respecting and protecting design and land use diversity. Another common theme was the issue of comfort in the design of buildings and urban spaces. They perceived a general disconnection between the values they understand as important and those of policy makers. They also see gaps in the level of understanding most citizens have in how values are (or are not) represented in built structures and civic space.

Students used sketching as a means to point out various physical problems with and attributes of the built environment, initially addressing common problems such as cracks in sidewalks and poor signage and attributes such as street trees and benches. In response to specific assignments, the students began to dig deeper into their understanding of the neighborhood being studied, discovering issues of scale, materiality, and accessibility that either add to or detract from the ease and comfort with which people inhabit the neighborhood. Although the students were charged with critically observing the built environment, their observations served to reinforce and record what the residents of the neighborhood already understood.

Like the students, the People & Place mentors entered the course with a high degree of orientation toward public engagement and service. Though mentors were paid an honorarium for their time, most listed a sense of personal and professional commitment to service as a primary motivation for participation. Mentors indicated agreement "to a moderate extent" as the median

response to assertions that they were involved in the project out of a “sense of duty to contribute toward the cultivation of a responsible and engaged citizenry” and a “desire to improve or cultivate the profession’s image in the community.”

The clients/community partners for whom the students worked had only moderate confidence in the ability of architecture and urban planning to incorporate values they felt were important. Clients who completed a survey (4 out of 8) indicated that the promotion of ethnic culture, a sense of history, social and economic inclusivity, and “a feeling of community” were important values that should be reflected in the built environment. They felt, however, that these values are “somewhat” to “not very well” reflected in the built environment. They felt the same way about the incorporation of those values in the current practices of architecture and planning.

Overall, the responses indicate that having core values reflected in the structures and civic spaces of our communities is important, but that the current built environment only moderately succeeds in this objective. Moreover, a gap exists between the values articulated by the architecture and planning professions (e.g., “engaging linkages between physical, economic, environmental, and social systems”) and those articulated by members of the broader community, such as those involved in the regional planning research mentioned above (e.g., “self-esteem,” “family love,” “peace of mind”) and the People & Place client surveys (e.g., “sense of history,” “feeling of community”). Interestingly, the People & Place students used neither the quasi-scientific terms of the professions nor the emotion-based values of citizens, focusing instead on community based attributes (e.g., “cracks in sidewalks,” “poor signage,” “street trees”).

While these three language positions—professional, community, student—seem disconnected, they are not necessarily incongruent. It seems plausible to have a planning initiative constructed to engage system linkages, focusing on sidewalks and signage, and resulting in an increased sense of community. The gap, it seems, is not one of conflicting values, per se, but is based more fundamentally in communication and language. Only after the profession, academy, and community are utilizing rhetoric that is understood and validated across boundaries can those boundaries be bridged and issues of value congruity be intelligibly engaged. To take this step, we propose the use of storytelling as both a method of analysis and the basis for pedagogy.

## **VI. Telling Stories**

Most public decisions are motivated or informed by a storyline.<sup>20</sup> Because of their influence in defining the physical form of communities, the processes and products of planning and design are particularly underlain and influenced by stories. Narratives provide structure for understanding how the world operates. In the case of planning and architecture, the narratives are enacted and future-oriented. Their validity is determined by their coherence—whether the story deals with the issues presented—and their fidelity—whether the story conforms to the audience’s sense of truthfulness and reliability.<sup>21</sup> The persuasiveness of a story, however, is framed, in part, by the degree to which the story resonates with the audience’s values.<sup>22</sup>

Architecture and planning stories influence the shape of a future reality.<sup>23</sup> For example, a proposal for a new freeway not only initiates a process that may ultimately result in the new highway, but also can inspire land development in the same area, well in advance of the road's construction. Given the potential level of influence on communities, planners need to engage in dialog with their audiences—to hear their stories—and to be open to transformation as a result of that dialog.<sup>24</sup>

Although the sources cited here are primarily focused on planning-related storytelling, we observe that many of the arguments apply to architecture as well. Both architects and planners “narrate the city”<sup>25</sup> in that their work defines space and policy. Buildings, themselves, are “both storyteller and story, both a vehicle for its narration and an element in it.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the public and private processes behind the decisions about a building's construction and design incorporate and mirror many of the same story-laden processes of planning. Sometimes the “tropes” used to tell stories vary, with planning using quantitative analysis and architecture using design, structure, and materials, but often the two professions overlap in their rhetorical repertoire.

One component common to both professions is the incorporation of values in storytelling processes. Satterfield and Slovic note the importance of narrative to expressions of value;<sup>27</sup> however, stories are not merely metaphorical but also reflective of personal perception and understanding, which themselves are framed by values.<sup>28</sup> The emotional elements of stories usually reveal the beliefs of authors and audiences by indicating what is important and what is not<sup>29</sup> and can be persuasive if they communicate values the audience shares.

Unfortunately, professionals have largely failed to incorporate into their stories values that reflect the broader community, and this is at the heart of the professions' disconnection to society. Professional storytelling is usually like academic storytelling: dry and emotionless.<sup>30</sup> “Emotion has been rigorously purged, as if there were no such things as joy, tranquility, anger, resentment, fear, hope, memory and forgetting at stake in these analyses.”<sup>31</sup> This lack of emotion bolsters the myth of professional objectivity and technical expertise, both of which increase the divide with the community.

To close that gap and make the professions more relevant, planners and architects need to become better storytellers and better story-listeners. In addition to coherence and reliability, professionals need to tell stories that have (1) an esthetically satisfying arch of conflict, crisis, and resolution; (2) interesting and believable characters; (3) a carefully delineated context; (4) an appropriate and easily identifiable point of view; and (5) imagery and a rhythm of language expressing a preferred attitude toward the situation and the characters.<sup>32</sup>

Making intelligent choices about these elements requires knowledge of values important to community based audiences. This is why story-listening is just as important as storytelling. Architects and planners must learn to elicit, listen to, and properly evaluate individuals' and communities' stories, as these stories “reflect their tellers' ongoing search for value, for what matters, for what is relevant, significant.”<sup>33</sup> One method that seems particularly well-suited to identifying the values nested within stories is laddering.

Laddering is an interview process aimed at teasing out the higher-order values that people associate with more prosaic life attributes.<sup>34</sup> Through a process of recursive questioning, interviewers probe why it is that a respondent feels the way they do about some characteristic. The process begins with one of several methods designed to draw out some distinction in an aspect of daily life. Once identified, the respondent is asked to articulate why she sees the distinction the way she does. Using her answer as the basis for the next question, the interviewer repeats the same line of questioning until the respondent identifies superordinate constructs that reflect basic existential themes relating to, for example, meaning, morality, and identity. In this way, the interviewer leads the respondent from an opinion about an everyday attribute, through a series of consequences derived from that attribute, to a basic value. The following example, taken from marketing literature, illustrates:<sup>35</sup> A respondent makes distinction about brands of snack chips, identifying the strong taste of her preferred brand (an attribute) as the reason for the distinction. When asked why that is important, the respondent indicates that the strong flavor leads her to eat less (a consequence), which is important because she does not want to get fat (another consequence), which in turn is important because she wants a better figure (another consequence). Finally, she identifies self-esteem as the value she connects to the preferred chip brand.

Though most laddering applications are in psychological and business contexts, there has been at least one use of the method in a planning process—as part of the regional planning exercise noted above. In that process, researchers interviewed 83 individuals to elicit opinions about community attributes and tie those attributes to physical and emotional consequences and, ultimately, to basic values. The first questions asked subjects their opinions on attributes related to community economic and social health and the challenges and opportunities related to growth and the future. Subjects then were asked to specify functional and emotional consequences connected to those attributes. They were then asked to articulate the basic values associated with those consequences. The key values respondents indicated—self-esteem, family love, peace of mind, personal security, freedom, personal enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and accomplishment—were connected to community attributes that included cost of living, crime, population growth, education, outdoor recreation and beauty, climate, air quality, and traffic.<sup>36</sup> The study's sponsor used the output of this research to engage hundreds of citizens in a visioning and planning process that is viewed by many as a successful model for effective public engagement.<sup>37</sup>

This example illustrates one method that planners and architects might use to align the languages of community and profession. Employing techniques such as laddering, professionals can begin the process of identifying important community values and the links those values have to attributes more commonly associated with planning and architecture processes. This then can provide the basis for assessing value congruity between profession and community and a framework for crafting planning and design processes in ways that are responsive to core values of people living in the community. It can also create a foundation for storytelling as effective two-way communication for professional architects and planners and the communities they serve.

If this is the ideal we envision in professional-community communication, we as educators are obliged to adapt planning and architecture pedagogies so that students can implement that ideal. This requires integrating a number of topics into planning and architecture

curricula, including narrative theory and analysis, rhetoric, dialogical listening, and methods of value assessment. Ideally, these subjects would be covered in the introductory phases of a curriculum so they can provide frameworks for understanding the more traditional subjects of the disciplines.

## VII. Conclusion

The results of our research suggest that at least part of the reconnection of architecture/planning with the community can come about through two primary means. First, professionals and academicians need to learn more about what values are important to the members of the communities they serve. Narrative analysis and laddering are examples of two methods to elicit this information. Second, similar techniques need to be used in reverse to frame and translate the content of architectural and planning projects into attributes, consequences, and values that are comprehensible and easily conveyed to laypeople. Logically, this would increase the potential for effective communication by reducing the use of elitist jargon, thereby increasing the potential for effective education regarding the function of design in the making of spaces and communities, while giving voice to those stakeholders who, for reasons of language and politics, have traditionally felt left out of the process.

This paper is our first exploration using narrative to understand values in the professions, the academy, and society. There are many limitations inherent in our work, most notably, the low number of observations. Although data derived through phenomenological approaches are always limited in the degree to which they can be analogized to other contexts (Yin, 1993), this is especially true when the number of occurrences is so low. We expect, however, over the course of our three-year experiment that the data will become richer, more varied, and more meaningful. Overall, we have found this to be an immensely satisfying experience, one which proves the existence of the divide between the professions and society but also suggests that this latest generation of students is aware of the issues and interested and eager to make positive change. We look forward to following the academic careers of the People & Place students to see how the ideas explored in the course, especially those related to values, come into play in their later work.

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## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> Sharon Egretta Sutton, 'Reinventing professional privilege as inclusivity: A proposal for an enriched mission of architecture', in Andrzej Piotrowski & Julia Williams Robinson (eds.), *The Discipline of Architecture* (London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), pp. 173-207.

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- <sup>24</sup> Throgmorton, *supra* note 8.
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