

Conflict: Good, Bad, and Conflicting?

Good

The great urbanist Lewis Mumford said “Silence is the sound of a dead city but worse is everyone repeating same words and ideas in complacent conformity, devoid of dialectic opposition or intelligent conflict” (1961). Conflict opens our eyes to new ideas and new perspectives. It is an effective mechanism for generating solutions, gaining trust, and developing deeper agreements. Conflict only exists where there is something important to both sides of a dispute and working through a conflict well demonstrates to others your commitment to the relationship. This increased mutual understanding and trust may reduce future conflicts. Flyvbjerg and Richardson say conflict in society is not something to be suppressed, contained, or resolved, rather engaging in conflict is part of freedom, “indeed the more democratic a society, the more it allows groups to define their own specific ways of life and legitimizes the inevitable conflicts of interest that arise between them” (2002).

Bad

Some cities’ conflict is so deep and problematic it transcends the usual socioeconomic dimension seen in most liberal democratic cities. Bollens calls these ‘polarized cities’ and their planners must contend with not only the day to day planning issues but also with broad ideological conflict (Bollens, 2002). Bollens’ article provides a glimpse into the planning departments of some of the world’s most polarized, conflict-ridden cities. In Belfast, planners adopted the “neutral” urban strategy. Here planning acts in an ethnically neutral or “color-blind” mode. This unbiased, rational, objective, and dispassionate model allowed planners to distance themselves from issues of ethnic identity, power inequalities, and political exclusion. In the words of the planners themselves “our regulatory role is our reason for being”, “changes have to come from within the people; government cannot change people’s minds”, “planning works quite well behind the scenes”, and perhaps the most ludicrous comment of all “planning does not want to say how the society or economy should change.” Is not the whole purpose of planning to bring about change to further the welfare of residents? The neutral planning model has led to project-based actions rather than area-based, ad-hoc tactics rather than strategic acts, and reactive not proactive policies. Ignoring differences or pretending that none exist is a policy doomed for failure.

Conflicting

What happens when the constituency we serve has cultural practices that are at odds with either our society’s or our personal perceptions, beliefs, and norms? Sandercock broaches these subjects in her article *Managing Cities of Difference* (2000). Our Western cultural norm

assumes equality of all members of the community, but this is not the case in different cultures. How are we as planners committed to the acknowledgement and respect of cultural differences to navigate these tricky dilemmas? I thought this article was really enlightening and helped me understand how deeply Western culture and ideals are embedded in our legislative frameworks of planning and regulation, laws of land use, property ownership and also embodied in our attitudes, behavior, and practices as planners. It provided insightful ways to respond to the challenges of cross-cultural situations. She explained why there exists 'fear of the Other' from a historical and almost biological-psychological perspective. Understanding this fear is important in moving toward a dialogical or therapeutic approach to resolving cross-cultural conflict and away from the rational bureaucratic regulatory methods. The therapeutic method embraces conflict in order to resolve conflict. Emotional involvement is necessary, "told to be rational, people assume they have been told not to be themselves", embracing the conflict is necessary for grieving and healing (Sandercock, 2000). The goal of this planning process is to create a transitional space where participants can imagine stepping away from past memories without feeling they've lost their identity and obtain true transformation.

Each week as I engage in the readings I am bombarded with characteristics and skill sets that the effective planner should have "in their toolkit". This week's articles talked about so many that it was mind boggling. But one skill turns up over and over again, week and after week, regardless of the specific type or aspect of planning and that is to *listen*. To listen to each other carefully and critically with sensitivity, self-possession, and conviction. "In listening (...) we can express concern and build relationships. We can pose problems to uncover interests, fears, and new possibilities. We can explore ambiguity rather than shun it. We can respect difference and look for ways to go on together" (Forester, 1989). I think listening is definitely one of the most important skills a planner can have.

References

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Sam Hetherington, UP844, Fall 2022

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