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**Commentary:
Tourism Planning and Traditional Urban Planning Theory – The Planner as an Agent of Social Change**

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Abstract

In terms of community focus, the field of urban and regional planning is much more comprehensive in both subject matter and outcomes than is most tourism planning, as least as each is taught in higher education around the world. Tourism planning, however, draws upon a good portion of urban and regional planning methods, especially in the area known as rational planning. As such, the more narrow area of tourism planning could be considered a subfield of urban and regional planning. One major shortcoming of tourism planning is an apparent lack of attention to the normative issues of (1) how planners should plan and (2) what issues planners should focus on in their planning efforts. These questions address the complexity of data and issues that planners deal with, including questions of what data or information is collected, how it is organized, and how the information will be used to make decisions. Tourism planners could benefit from greater familiarity with these fundamental concepts of planning theory.

Keywords: tourism planning, urban planning, planning theory

When I was a graduate student in urban planning at the University of Oregon over 20 years ago, the study of tourism was one of the last things on my mind. I had received my bachelor degree in geography and planning at the University of Hawaii at Hilo and I had always wanted to get as far from away from “tourists” as possible. That changed, however, due to an unplanned meeting that resulted in my becoming involved in a student consulting project, which eventually evolved into my master’s thesis on the revitalization of older retail districts in the Pacific Northwest (Lew, 1988). While not solely related to tourism, I found that tourism and recreation were a significant part of the transformation of older retail districts that had faced decline following the growth of suburban shopping malls. In the process of doing that research, I came to realize that tourism encompassed the major topics and issues that were drawing my attention in graduate school, including urban design and development, environmental and place perception, and human movement and mobility. And so I continued my studies at the Ph.D. level with a focus on tourism, and pursued a career in academia that started with urban planning, tourism and GIS, but has since come to focus almost exclusively on tourism.

I still have a foot in the urban planning door through a couple of planning class that I teach and my peripheral involvement in the Arizona Planning Association, and I try to bring my urban planning background to bear where possible when teaching tourism and geography classes. One area that has left

me a bit dismayed is that none of the tourism planning textbooks that I am aware of demonstrate a significant awareness of the core theories of planning related to the role of the planner as an agent of social change, as it is commonly taught in the field of urban and regional planning. While I may be opening myself to some criticism here, I believe that most tourism planning is taught almost exclusively as a set of tools for create different types of plans, from site designs for resorts and retail recreation areas to land use and policy plans to encourage sustainable practices and attract developers and investors. What is missing is an understanding of the social and political values that tourism planners represent when they apply traditional planning tools without any thought or reflection of their political and social significance.

For example, one of the textbooks that I recently used in my tourism planning class is *Tourism Planning: Policies, Processes and Relationships* by C. Michael Hall (2000). His brief but well referenced definition of planning focuses mostly on the different types of planning, including developmental planning, economic planning, physical development, and public administration and policy analysis, although he also recognizes that “planning is only one part of an overall ‘planning-decision-action’ process” and “various activities in that process may be difficult to isolate as the planning process and other activities involve such things as bargaining and negotiation, compromise, coercion, values, choice and politics” (Hall 2000: 7). Indeed the role of community or client values and the complexity of the planning process are recognized by most tourism planning textbooks (e.g., Healy 1997; Gunn 1997; Veal 1994; Wilkinson 1997). What is not recognized clearly, or articulated quite as well, is the politics and values of planning practice; of the tools and approaches of planning.

The apparent disconnect between urban planning and tourism planning in this area may be due to the nature of tourism and how it differs from land use planning, physical (facility and infrastructure) planning, and community development. Urban planning usually seeks to serve the broadest community interest, whereas tourism planning is typically focused on the interests of more narrowly defined and specific populations, especially those in the private sector (tourism businesses). Urban planning is more comprehensive in its scope, attempting to consider all of the essential aspects of a community’s development and quality of life (though this will vary from one place to another), while tourism planning is often more narrowly focused on infrastructure and facilities that serve visitors (mostly associated with the hospitality and recreation sectors). Urban planning is a basic social necessity to prevent development chaos in general, and property values in particular, while tourism planning is not an essential public necessity, but is a voluntary process and therefore often less core to the public debate.

In some communities, tourism planning is an acknowledges subset of broader public planning functions, while in others tourism is completely separate and relegated to the private sector (such as a Convention and Visitors Bureau). In almost no instance is urban planning a subset of a broader tourism planning process, though this might have some interesting implications. Because of these differences, the values, perspectives and approaches to tourism planning are different from urban planning, even if the actual tools used in practice may be identical. And perhaps this is why reflections on the role of a tourism planner as an agent of social change may be less recognized.

The one area of tourism where tourism planners are recognized as a participant in social change is sustainable tourism planning. Unlike more traditional business-oriented tourism planning, sustainable tourism is supposed to have a goal of supporting and sustaining environmental and local community values. This potentially activist role is, however, not recognized as such in tourism planning textbooks, most of which now claim to be sustainable development oriented, but continue to view the tourism planner simply as a person who attempts to bring rationality to the economic development process.

Despite their differences, I view tourism planning as a subset of urban planning because tourism planners use most of the same skills and tools as urban planners, and to be ultimately successful must take into

consideration the same politics and community values as urban planners. Urban planning theory should, therefore, have much to inform the tourism planning process. Urban planning theory has been much more considered by the planning discipline than has tourism planning theory among tourism professionals. This is probably because planning theory is an accreditation requirement for graduate studies in urban planning (at least in the US), and because most urban planners work for public sector agencies.

From the urban planning perspective, planning theory addresses the normative issues of (1) how planners should plan and (2) what issues planners should focus on. These questions take into account the complexity of data and issues that planners deal with, including questions of what data or information is collected, how it is organized, and how the information will be used to make decisions. While tourism planning textbooks tend to bemoan the complexity of the planning process (Mason 2003), urban planners have tried to develop theories to address this issue.

Most planning practice attempts to be rational and objective in its analysis. In reality all of these questions are heavily value laden – they require decisions that will inherently benefit some segments of a community over others. As such, they require that planners define their role in the community, including who they are working for, and what are the ultimate goals of the planning process. The answers to these questions may change from one project to another.

Rational Planning

The most common approach in urban planning is known as *rational planning* (Hudson, 1979). Other terms for this approach are *synoptic planning* and *comprehensive planning*, though the latter also has some other connotations. Although the steps in the rational planning process are described in different ways by different authors, I tend to summarize them as:

- 1 - Identify a Problem
- 2 - Identify a Goal (to solve the problem)
- 3 - Collect Background Data
- 4 - Identify Guidelines for Assessing Alternative Plan Scenarios
- 5 - Identify Alternative Plan Scenarios, including Policies and Guidelines to achieve the Goal
- 6 - Assess Alternative Plan Scenarios using the pre-defined assessment guidelines
- 7 - Select the Preferred Alternative
- 8 - Implement the Plan
- 9 - Monitor, Evaluate and Revise the Implementation
- 10 - Identify New Problems and Begin the Process again

Most popular planning procedural models follow this rational approach, including the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS), Zero Based Budgeting (ZBB), and Management by Objectives (MBO), and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA). However, rational planning has also come under considerable criticism based on its underlying assumptions. These assumptions include: (1) predictable rational behavior, (2) unlimited knowledge (synoptic) and problem solving capabilities, (3) the ability to identify all alternative scenarios, and (3) objective variables and facts in a closed system. The approach does not address irrational subjective value systems, the high cost of information collection that results in less-than-perfect knowledge, the politics of implementation, and how to address unforeseeable crisis situations.

In reality, planners almost always face situations of limited knowledge, limited time horizons, limited budgets, and unpredictable influences. Planning in such a setting is incremental, not comprehensive. The *incremental planning* approach (which developed out of the U.S. Peace Corp in the 1960s) intentionally

assumes these limitations, and while issues and goals are kept in sight, political processes and community values are made more explicit, and methods are kept open and flexible to meet changing circumstances (Linblom 2003). Like rational planning, incremental planning still assumes an ability to adequately explain, predict and control, though within limitations.

In practice, some problems can be addressed by a more pure rational planning approach, while others may require a more incremental approach. Rittle and Weber (1973) described these differences as tame problems and wicked problems (cf. Richte, 2003). Tame problems are primarily facility and infrastructure based, and can often be addressed very well by engineering solutions. Wicked problems are often social and are characterized by: perceptions of significant change (the problem is hard to formulate or define); difficult quantification; few methods or rules; uncertainty as to when a problem is solved; no 'true/false' decisions, but rather a 'better/worse' ones; and no opportunity for trial and error. Any mix of these conditions will require a more incremental approach over a comprehensive approach.

When a tourism planner is hired by a developer to simply create a site plan for an amusement park, the result is probably a straight forward, tame situation that lends itself easily to a rational planning process. When a tourism planner is hired to marshal the same proposal through the local land development approval process, the assignment become more wicked, though the degree of necessary incrementalism will vary considerably from one project and community to the next. A major task in this latter situation is to build political support for the project by assuaging community concerns and values. Such a process can be fraught with potential public relations pitfalls. When a tourism planner is hired (or volunteers) to represent local residents in opposing the proposed development plan, then the approach is clearly wicked and incremental, though it also presents a different perspective on the planner's role.

Substantive Rationality

For community planners, sometimes the big problem is trying to figure out what the issues and goals should be for a community. As mentioned above, defining problems and goals is the beginning (and end) of a successful planning process. The planning approaches discussed above (including incremental planning) are forms of *functional rationality*, in which planners focus on the means of attaining goals that are set by city councils and other clients (Sager, 1999). Functional rationality is the approach used in most urban planning and most tourism planning. As an alternative, however, *substantive rationality* argues that goals cannot be separated from means, and therefore, planners must be involved directly in the goal formulation process.

Goal formulation is the expression of community values and is usually accomplished in the public sector through the electoral process. Elected officials normally set the goals for a community. Because planners are not elected, how can they legitimately participate in the goal formulation process? Two approaches have been suggested in response to that question: *advocacy planning* and *transactive planning*. (Other approaches have been suggested, but they often fall under these two broadly defined headings.)

The *advocacy planning* approach came out of 1960s in the confrontational (and often adversarial) approach common in the legal profession (Davidoff, 2003). The role of the advocacy planner is to defending the weak (the poor, the disenfranchised, and environmental causes) in a community against the strong. Planners use their technical knowledge to empower these communities and the approach focuses on the development of plural plans – alternative plan scenarios that represent the values of different sectors of the community. *Radical planning*, which include the different perspectives of Marxism and environmental activism, is another are two forms of advocacy planning. *Sustainable development* is also a form of advocacy planning, though often less confrontational. The advocacy approach has been

criticized for inhibiting efficient planning, though it does bring social equity and environmental sustainability issues to the forefront of the planning process.

The concept of *sustainable tourism*, which applies the sustainable development approach of balancing environment, community and economic values, offers the greatest potential of placing tourism planners in the role of agents of social change. The popularity of the sustainable tourism rhetoric has resulted in some examples of advocacy approaches to tourism planning, especially in relation to indigenous populations and sensitive natural environments in some part of the world. However, the concept has been largely co-opted by the business interests of tourism to a point where advocacy is rarely even mentioned in the sustainable tourism planning literature.

The *transactive planning* approach (also known as *post-rational planning*) developed as a response to perceived deficiencies in the advocacy planning process in the 1960s. It is based on social learning theory and transactive (interpersonal) interaction (Friedman 1973; Healy, 2003). The planner brings *process knowledge* (theory, methodology, skills and larger societal perspectives) to facilitate shared understanding among people or clients, who bring *personal knowledge* (experience and local conditions and needs) to the planning process. A *mutual learning* process occurs as the planner and client are recognized for the equal value and importance of the knowledge they each contribute. The goal is to build self-learning and intelligent institutions that are able to self-adjust to a changing world. This requires a meta-level of planning – “the planning of planning” – and typically results in the creation of community-based development and oversight organizations. In the realm of tourism, an example of this would be ecotourism certifications programs, such as those in Australia and Costa Rica.

The major challenge of the transactive planning approach is the level of time and personal commitment that is required by the planner. As such, tourism planning consultants almost never use the approach, though there are examples of tourism academics who have developed a long-term, multiple-year relationship with a community and place that reflects a transactive interaction.

Conclusions: Tourism Planning

I believe that these perspectives have much to offer anyone in the tourism field who calls themselves a planner, a consultant, or even a marketer. The planning process is essentially the same for all of these professions, though the precise steps may be adjusted and some steps may not be overt. Issues of “who the client is” are present for tourism planners. In most instances, tourism planners are actually working for a variety of clients at the same time. Even when the paying client is a private developer, the planner is often required to consider community diversity and environmental issues to facilitate governmental approvals or develop market segmentations. Growing emphasis on sustainable tourism requires that tourism planners take at least a modest advocacy role that supports the environment and the local community, as well as business interests. Where the political process is a challenge, the need for incremental flexibility should be recognized and implemented.

As governments reduce their regulation of business activities, the private sector is taking on more responsibility for broader issues of social and environmental quality through self regulation and the development of business reputations. Increasingly, the interests of the private sector are less confrontational with those of the public sector and the environment. Because of this, the apparent disconnect between urban planning and tourism planning that I suggested at the beginning may be less of a reality today than it was in the past. If true, then tourism planning needs to more clearly place itself within the broader history and context of urban and regional planning. This could strengthen the theoretical basis of tourism planning, and more clearly define the field, its tools, and its goals. The

ultimate benefit of strengthening the field of tourism planning is that it would also strengthen the role of tourism planners as agents of social change.

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