



Rethinking the Public Interest as a Planning Concept

by Jill Grant

Summary

Planners traditionally turn to the public interest as a way of legitimating their advice and activities. Is that appropriate? Some authors say the concept is an illusory ideal. Some suggest that the public interest has typically been linked to the concerns of the powerful. Others believe that experts can define it. A few argue that meeting the needs of the most vulnerable serves the common good. What are planners to do?

Sommaire

Traditionnellement, les urbanistes invoquent « l'intérêt » public pour légitimer leurs conseils et les activités. Est-ce convenable? Selon certains auteurs, la notion même est un idéal illusoire. Certains laissent entendre que l'intérêt public a typiquement été lié aux préoccupations des puissants. D'autres sont d'avis que les experts peuvent le cerner. Quelques-uns affirment que la satisfaction des besoins des plus vulnérables sert le bien commun. Que doivent faire les urbanistes?

Our professional *Code of Practice* says that planners “acknowledge the inter-related nature of planning decisions and their consequences for individuals, the natural and built environment, and the broader public interest.”¹ When prospective members of CIP take the oral entrance exam, they often face questions about the public interest. As planners, how do we understand and use the concept?

While the question is fundamental to our profession, the answer is far from simple. In the early years of modern town planning, we enjoyed considerable consensus about the common good. We no longer find such certainty. Today we recognize and embrace diversity. The realities of contemporary practice make us rethink our understanding of the concept of the public interest. We increasingly see the public good as an abstraction: necessarily fluid, tenuous and context sensitive. Our conceptualization of the public interest is inevitably framed by a particular space and time. It reflects cultural, professional and personal values. What one generation

defines as “the common good” may not hold for subsequent generations.

The Public Interest in History

Formal definitions describe the public interest as the objective of duly authorized governments carrying out activities necessary to the welfare of the community. Closely associated with the professionalization of the civil service, the term gives those working for government an ideal to serve. Although critics argue that government aims too often reflect the interests of capital or social elites, the machinery of the nation state alleges that decisions reflect the common good of all classes.^{2,3,4} The public interest means more than the sum of competing interests, or even some way of “balancing” competing interests. It provides the ultimate ethical justification for the demands of the state on the individual. The public interest becomes a unifying symbol and social myth.

By the 1960s, the profession faced challenges to particular definitions of the public interest. In recent years, we

ask questions about the merits of the concept itself. Yet, in practice, the public interest remains rhetorically significant. Used in discourse and debate as a way to explain and justify recommendations and outcomes, the concept provides a theorem for expert advice, and a calculus for the distribution of benefits and costs. Unfortunately, we cannot demonstrate the public interest through any straightforward formula.

The public interest is an essentially contested concept: people agree on its significance, but dispute its meaning and content.⁵ Some argue about how to identify the public interest while others claim it does not exist.

The Public Interest as Myth

Conceptualizations of the public interest appear within a particular constellation of values in time and space. In the 1950s, a broad popular consensus saw the public interest as growth and progress. Planners helped to redesign cities to accommodate rising affluence. We advised governments to tear down blighted neighbourhoods, rebuild civic

centres and accommodate the poor in upgraded public housing. We separated pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Our profession praised the resulting projects. Today we recognize that those solutions spawned new problems: urban sprawl, traffic gridlock, sterile landscapes. The failure of urban renewal and public housing projects exposed the fallacy of the post-war conceptualization of the public interest. Values change.

Since Paul Davidoff introduced the idea of advocacy planning, planners have acknowledged multiple interests.^{6,7} The civil rights and feminist movements helped planners recognize the political context of our work. Advocacy planning involves the radical assertion of difference. It denies a single “public” interest while illuminating political choices. Each decade brings new players with their own views about what serves the public.

Although at one level planners accept competing interests as equally valid, we continue to appeal to the public interest when we need to offer advice or make decisions. As conventional conceptions of the public interest floundered, planning theory turned increasingly to examining the planning process. Mainstream planning theory worked toward developing a framework for articulating options that could serve the common good. If planners could no longer claim to have the skills to ferret out the public interest, then we would focus on helping community members to define it.

The Public Interest as Process

John Friedmann⁸ shifted attention to planning as a form of mutual learning where the process is as important as the outcome. Others have extensively developed and refined these ideas through the last three decades. Forester⁹ argues that planners serve the public interest by open, honest and transparent communication in their dealings with the public and decision makers. Planners have the responsibility to inform, illuminate and listen—to help people achieve their own ambitions, and to speak truth to power.

In recent years, collaborative planning theory has gained adherents.¹⁰ It suggests that stakeholders work together to define the public interest. Planning involves finding open and productive ways to resolve differences and find win-win scenarios. In this view, the consensus outcome represents the public interest.

Process views of the public interest define the role of the planner as facilitator. Strategic planning initiatives built on the concept as governments redefined their approach. However, in recent years we see concerns raised: if planners are merely facilitators, then what is our independent professional expertise? Planners’ desires to strengthen professional standing through title restriction and licensing has brought renewed concern about clarifying the public interest.

The Public Interest as Substance

Substantive theories assume that the public interest exists and that trained experts can recognize it. Such theories expound planning principles that promise good communities or healthier futures. As experts, planners define the public interest through applying the preferred planning principles.

The most popular of these normative planning theories are new urbanism and smart growth.^{11,12} They define good urban form as a common benefit. They see the public interest as served by designs that include mixed use, compact form, reduced concentrations of poverty, transit orientation, and pedestrian-friendly and connected streets. Such principles currently dominate new planning documents in Canada.

Substantive normative theories are popular with planners because they offer clear formulae for professional expertise and authority. As history has proven, however, they are subject to debate and displacement. Even where consensus makes them popular at one point, as times change they lose favour. Unexamined normative theories promote particular values as if they were universal values. In so doing, they elevate some interests while demonizing other views.

The Public Interest as Process and Substance

Planning has had a small radical theory movement within it for decades. Radical planning defines the public interest as overcoming the hegemony of the powerful by putting the needs of the most disadvantaged to the forefront. Creating a just society, some say, serves the public interest.^{7,13} Good communication and good form are not enough to overcome unequal power. The radical planner’s role is a controversial one: a guerrilla in the bureaucracy, fighting oppression. That few practitioners select this option is not surprising.

The Public Interest in Practice

Can planners serve the public interest? As community advisors, we must make our values explicit and illuminate the ethical choices embedded within planning outcomes. Planning involves political choices about the disposition of land, facilities and resources. The outcomes are not necessarily win-win. Consensus is not always possible. Resources are increasingly limited. Our role involves exposing issues and options for those who make decisions and to those affected by the decisions. Our professional credibility depends on openness about our assumptions and transparency in process. We do not serve anyone’s long-term interest by presuming that we know the formula for the good community.

Does this mean that planners cannot be leaders or visionaries, that we are stuck being process technicians? Not necessarily. But if we seek to implement a personal or professional agenda, then we are ethically obliged to do so explicitly, not behind a cloak of imputed “public interest”. We must be clear about why we believe particular strategies are timely to achieve explicit community aims—and we must prepare to have history prove us wrong.

Players in the planning process often advocate their own normative positions as the public interest. Ultimately, however, outcomes are political choices. Tearing down poor neighbourhoods for redevelopment seemed a popular political choice in 19th-century Europe and again in 20th-century North America. Planning organizations have recently awarded prizes to those who designed

new urbanist schemes to rejuvenate public housing projects by mixing in market housing. In the United States, new urbanist planning principles have created beautiful new districts while facilitating the net loss of some 60,000 public housing units.¹⁴ It is clear that neighbourhood renewal serves some interests, while hurting others. Planners who define the public interest in physical terms without considering the social repercussions of actions reap the whirlwind.

Feel free to debate the public interest with community members and colleagues, but recognize the challenges inherent in using it to defend any particular position. ■

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