



FORWARD PLANNING:

Finding our way together as planners in the 21st century



by Leela Viswanathan PhD, RPP, MCIP & François Lapointe FCIP



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INTRO

Forward Planning is a special initiative of the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP), as the Institute celebrates its 100th anniversary and enters a second century. In order to assist the CIP to contemplate the future of the profession, conversations were held with 12 professional planners who live in different regions in Canada and who are at different stages of their professional careers.

These moderated conversations took place on four occasions starting in January 2019 and culminating at the CIP Centenary Conference in Ottawa in July 2019. Panelists shared their experiences in public and/or private sectors and with local, regional, and international communities and networks.

As two planners who were involved with facilitating the Forward Planning conversations, we have gathered key messages from the stories that emerged and have delved further into the details of each conversation to tease out key threads that tie the details into a vision for the future of planning in Canada.

The richness and depth of the conversations can be viewed online and are the source of inspiration for this summary article. The stories that have emerged from Forward Planning are contributions to the legacy of existing and upcoming generations of planners.

This article is written in honour of the CIP's centenary and the 70th anniversary of World Town Planning Day (November 8, 2019).

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UNCERTAINTY: A STARTING POINT FOR MOVING FORWARD

All four Forward Planning conversations started firmly in the present, drawing some linkages to the past century of planning in Canada and then delving into where planners, as a collective, ought to be in the future.

The stories that emerged showed how planners, while arriving at honest judgment of achievements and legacies, including unintended consequences, have also developed expertise in managing uncertainty. They remain aware of the forces of inertia that conventionally have favoured a safe reliance on existing practices – the status quo – over risk taking. However, planners also reflected on their confidence in local and traditional knowledge that allows for applying technical expertise, such as geotechnical practices and policy analysis, alongside or in combination with learnings passed on by Indigenous Elders (1). The panellists expressed their desire to investigate more experimental solutions to planning problems within contexts of uncertainty. These solutions included rethinking procedural timeframes and just going ahead with

implementing initiatives that have no precedents, while integrating the potential risks, as well as benefiting from opportunities that are not always predictable (2, 3). Each conversation showed how we, as members of the CIP and as a collective of planners, can reimagine the planning profession and can address the forces that may keep us “stuck in the past” or immobilized by the uncertainty caused by climate change, economic, and environmental fluctuations, social inequities, demands of an impassioned public, and political change.

Emerging across the four conversations was a rationale for moving the planning profession forward, with an understanding that planning contexts are dynamic and that the trajectories that planners take are not necessarily linear. The transformation of the experience of community life – from a territorial expression to an increasingly virtual landscape – came to mind. It was understood that tensions will continue to exist when engaging with the public, yet as diverse members of the public become more sophisticated about planning issues, professional

planners must keep up by remaining engaged with the public. Approaches are needed that put people at the centre of planning, that enable planners to listen with all voices, and to seek knowledge from the public in order to guide or influence decision making, the implementation of plans, and the ongoing development of pertinent, viable solutions to problems.

Over the course of the four conversations, planners affirmed the complex realities of their practices and served to chart the broad

outlines of empowering pathways and aspirations for the future evolution of the profession.

At times the boundaries between public and private sectors were blurred, as practitioners shared their experiences across sectors, giving further credibility to the suggestion that the future of planning must be collaborative, cooperative, and committed to innovation in order to contend with emerging 'wicked problems', for which there are no precedents, no existing solutions, and possibly no end in sight (4).

WAYFINDING: WHERE WE ARE GOING AND HOW WE FIND OUR WAY

If wicked problems, complexity, and transitions have become more the norm than the exception, then planners must adapt to the changing terrain. Planners are both catalysts of change, as well as leaders in their service to the public (5, 6). As planners, our collaborative strengths, our reliance on policy and procedures, and our skills and competencies will continue to be foundational to how we problem solve. However, in order to tackle complexity, the paths we take to finding solutions will not be straightforward. 'Wayfinding' is a

more appropriate term to reflect how planners in varied contexts and capacities will find their way through the planning landscape. It is clear that no planner can address this complexity on their own. Planning requires cooperation.

Three interrelated aspects of planning practice were emphasized in each conversation; these were policy, procedural, and professional. These aspects can act as lenses by which different frontiers of planning are explored to enable the profession

to reach new heights. First, striving for greater creativity to plan, regulate and design policies, and deliver programs will require planners to find inspiration both inside of and outside of professional planning circles. Over time, the planning profession will benefit from seeking advice and knowledge from multiple sources, other professions, and people who have knowledge about the everyday goings on within the spaces that planners design or seek to maintain, people like snowplough operators, police, groundskeepers, and public health practitioners, as well as youth, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous peoples across the country. These diverse sources of knowledge can feed innovative policies and practices (7).

Panel participants agreed that while planners cannot solely rely on other planners for insights, it was clear that planners needed to depend on each other to remain resilient and to ensure they hold compassion for themselves when everything does not go as planned or as they had hoped. Panel participants also spoke to how new meaning must be given to the term 'reflective practitioner', as it feeds humility, a recognition of one's entitlement as professionals and/or as individuals, and a commitment to building a more inclusive profession. Some planners spoke about bringing all of themselves to their practice, and the struggles associated with building

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more equitable environments, such that inclusivity is a personal commitment that further upholds a professional obligation to equity at all stages of one's career (8).

Second, procedurally, conducting planning activities requires new ways to inform decision-making processes and to engage with diverse members of the public, including people who have been previously left out, as well as Indigenous communities.

Technology - in all its forms - was noted as paradoxical; it is restrictive in that it fosters dependency on infrastructure to support it, and yet it can also be liberating for how information sharing can facilitate wayfinding (9). The psycho-social aspects of living with each other across cultures and regional differences within a nation or across boundaries of reserve and city, or bridging the profession and the public, all heighten the importance of improving the development of diverse communication strategies to connect planners and the public. The need for planners to embrace emerging information and communication technology was highlighted, in order to support an evolving planning practice.

The evolution of information technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR), can contribute to transcending cultural barriers and linguistic barriers too, and can enable our government representatives to expand services that adapt to changing needs of different groups. The costs and benefits of new technologies are not always clear and evident up front, and caution is recommended when making technological choices. Nevertheless, planners must raise their comfort threshold in terms of coping with uncertainty and, to the extent that they can absorb some risks in their professional work, technology may help or hinder in the process (10).

Third, proactively expanding professional skills and competencies was identified as a means for planners to enter into more sophisticated collaborative arrangements. These arrangements could allow for inter-professional coordination, promoting and encouraging convergence between domains of practice; and thereby, enabling greater capacity for planners to play a catalyst role in the public sphere. Expanding the range of knowledge and experience of planners, by borrowing from disciplines not closely connected to planning, can provide novel sources for creativity and innovation and can encompass a greater diversity of life experiences (11). At the same time

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foundational skills and competencies such as listening, facilitation, relationship building, capacity-building, and negotiation remain crucial for inter-professional collaboration. Creating conditions for the profession to grow new roots and expand the ground for planning practice can encourage greater authenticity in the work that planners do, such that practice thrives in both rational thought and in an emotional connection with the public and with each other. In turn, accepting that the trajectory of planning in the 21st century involves wayfinding, rather than merely following an established, regulated, and systematic linear path to achieve planning outcomes, will enable planners to remain both practical and aspirational into the next centenary.

PLANNERS' ASPIRATIONS: A VISION OF WHERE WE NEED TO BE

Aspiring for a better future for the planning profession, and for communities with whom planners work, were key contributions made by all panellists. Aspirational statements and suggestions for fostering changes to the profession into the next century revisited themes of leadership, reframing policy and planning regulatory frameworks, a commitment to future generations, and providing accountability for the work done by planners with the understanding that planning is a value-driven, ethical profession. Planners are leaders and we lead by serving the public. By stepping forward to assume a leadership role and to coordinate responsibilities in collaborative endeavours, planners can help build connections among diverse members of society – all of whom are needed to tackle complex problems. Planners are also needed to reimagine the cities in which they live and work, recognizing that the content of planners' work contributes to the evolution of 21st century societies.

Mobilizing communities with the knowledge and appreciation that they know their own circumstances the best, and that they are best positioned to guide and champion the response to their own needs, are crucial components to community development. Updating and upgrading planners' planning and regulatory frameworks will allow for greater fluidity, flexibility, and adaptability in all dimensions of planning practice, including grappling with time and physical space constraints. Streamlining regulatory approval processes, fostering innovative perspectives and approaches that are adapted to rapidly evolving contexts, and cycling back to lessons learned and not shying away from experimentation in the design of planning instruments are all aspired to. Such changes could facilitate regulatory frameworks that are more proactive, responsive, and resilient to the dynamics of contextual uncertainty, thereby recognizing that tools that served planners well in the past are likely not to meet all their requirements in the future.

As planning practitioners, we owe to youth, as well as young planners entering the profession, to remain hopeful as they inherit our legacies. In facing the future, young planners may find themselves isolated, feeling quite alone in the context of uncertainty, and we must remind young planners that the future is open-ended, rich with possibilities, and that it is worthwhile to advance and test one's ideas.

Upholding professional accountability to the public requires that planners develop a deeper understanding of the connections that they make with the public and how long a process might actually need to take in order to maintain public commitment and foster sustained public engagement through implementation planning stages. In creating more inclusive communities, can planners uphold the importance of the future development of communities along factors such as form, density, and overall well-being? If the answer is yes, then planners will need to build more awareness of, and skills in, addressing various experiences in planning processes, such as appreciating often harsh realities facing an aging population, expanding outreach to ethnically diverse populations, and gaining knowledge in all matters of accessibility and affordability (12, 13).

How can planners capture the different linguistic nuances, shifting priorities of a diverse population, and take hold of existing resources to best facilitate open dialogue between them and the public? In part, many change management strategies are needed, but one stands out: that planners and their allies develop a knowledge and sensitivity for the particulars of communities. And, more specifically, that planners be seen as present within their own communities, engaging with the public before expecting that the communities are fully versed and aware of, if not involved already with, planning processes (14).

Ultimately, accountability remains a part of what embodies planning practice – accountability to ourselves as a self-regulated profession and as an overall part of a compassionate practice that upholds our own self-care and supports ethical practice in our work with the public. As a way of expressing pride for the profession and our agency as planners, the Forward Planning conversations repeatedly delved into the heart of planning as both technical and emotional. As planners, we will continue to be confronted with the challenge of bringing all of ourselves to our work, nurturing both our personal and professional resilience into the next century.

Additional Reading

The Plan Canada centenary issue offers an excellent touchstone for the conversations that link planning's past to the topographies and textures of the present and the future landscapes of planning.

References

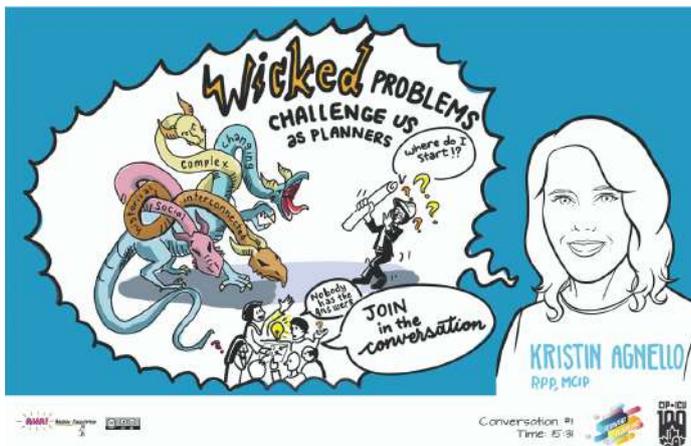


[1] **Tonii Lerat RPP, MCIP**
 Conversation #2, Time: 30:55
 “And I love when you talk about creativity, because in a lot of Indigenous communities our lawmakers are our artists and they’re our storytellers. And I love the idea of building a policy that’s a narrative, that is something that’s robust, that will resonate with a child and their relationship within their community and an Elder and their relationship in a community [...] and I get really jazzed up about bringing a social lens to creating new governance models.”



[2] **Eleanor Mohammed RPP, MCIP**
 Conversation #4, Time: 47:17 “The world is changing and we need to be quick, and we need to be nimble, and we need to be less bureaucratic...”

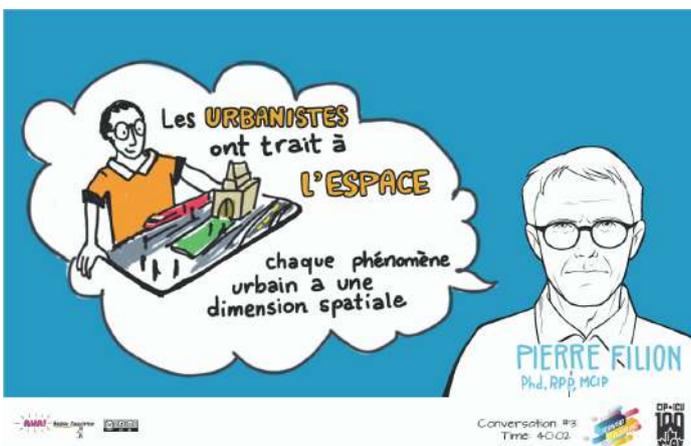
[3] **Alain Miguez RPP, MCIP** Conversation #1, Time: 52:00 “At large, [in] our profession, we’ve bureaucratized ourselves a lot. We need to clear the cobwebs and we really need to find our voice [...] What should we plan? What should we not? What should we be touching? What should we not be touching? When you’re talking about human communities, there’s a lot of things that are better off left chaotic, unplanned. What should we regulate and what should we not? What should we have frameworks for and what should we leave for other platforms and arenas? I think this is an interesting challenge for us.”



[4] **Kristin Agnello RPP, MCIP**
 Conversation #1, Time: 15:31
 “Wicked problems really challenge us as planners [...] It’s easy to become overwhelmed and not know where to start. What has really struck me, is that nobody has the answers, and so it comes from joining the conversation.”



[5] **Alain Miguez RPP, MCIP**
 Conversation #1, Time: 32:31
 “You know if you’re the head coach of a football team, you would not hand the ball to anybody else than the quarterback, and what I’d like for profession in this century is to reclaim the quarterback position, because I think that’s what it should have been all along.”



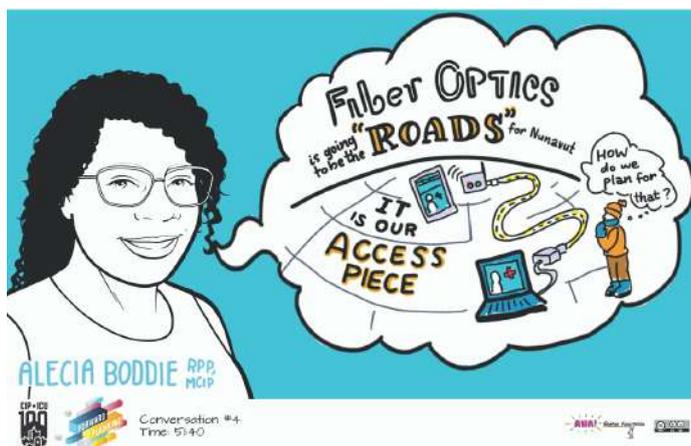
[6] **Pierre Filion PhD, RPP, MCIP**
 Conversation #3, Time: 40:02
 << Ce qui distingue les urbanistes des autres professions, c’est que ce qu’ils font à trait à l’espace. C’est eux qui s’occupent de l’espace et chaque phénomène urbain a une dimension spatiale. >>



[7] **Dianne Himbeault RPP, MCIP**
 Conversation #3, Time: 44:40
 << Qu’est que j’espère pour la profession, c’est que qu’on devienne des leaders dans la transformation de nos communautés et la transformation vers des communautés plus inclusives pour tous. >>



[8] **Jason Syvixay** Conversation #1, Time: 31:23 “Over the next decade, I’d like to see more diversity in planning, top down.”



[9] **Alecia Boddie RPP, MCIP** Conversation #4, Time: 51:40 “Fibre optics is going to be the roads for Nunavut. So in other places you build subways and roads and what-not; I think information technology is going to be our road and our access piece [...] As planners, we’ll have to start to think about how we plan for that - what do those lands look like in a place like Nunavut? So, it’s super exciting...”



[10] **Larry Beasley CM, RPP, FCIP** Conversation #4, Time: 53:11 “All the different technologies for mobility and then the technologies to connect and interconnect mobilities are going to fundamentally reshape what our cities look like [...] So we’re going to have to be more careful than we’ve ever been.”



[11] **Samantha Murphy LPP, MCIP**
Conversation #2, Time: 18:39

“There’s a lot of art in how we communicate ideas and how we engage other people. If you don’t say something or present it right, people don’t engage, and you don’t get what you need to know from them or get them involved. So I think being able to really promote that [creative] side of my life helps me remember not to be formulaic...”



[12] **Catherine Marchand urbaniste**
Conversation #3, Time:

11:34 << J’ajouterais qu’un autre critère auquel on pense moins comme urbaniste, c’est celui de l’équité. Parce que les choix que nous allons proposer ont des impacts, soit au niveau de différents groupes sociaux, mais aussi au niveau, de l’équité intergénérationnelle. Ne pas prendre de décisions aujourd’hui, c’est créer des impacts sur les générations futures. >>

[13] **Catherine Marchand urbaniste** Conversation #3, Time: 33:08 << ... je pense que là on a un devoir de mieux comprendre comment les changements technologiques (vers la) ont un impact sur la diversité culturelle, le fait que les gens sont très mobile aujourd’hui, comment (sur) ça change notre relation à l’espace commun? L’espace devient pour beaucoup un bien de consommation [...] Il faut rebâtir cette notion d’identité, d’appartenance au lieu qui est un facteur qui va (être aidant) aider dans l’adhésion à (des indications) plus d’inclusion. Si on veut passer du nimby (not in my backyard) (ou) au yimby (yes in my backyard) [...] (et) il faut passer par cette obligation de comprendre et de réconcilier [...] les enjeux liés à la diversité de toutes les types de clientele. >>



[14] **Dana Anderson RPP, FCIP**
Conversation #4, Time: 1:06:50
“Engage yourself in the community before you start engaging the community in your process [...] By understanding the concerns, by understanding the community that you’re working in, and also by understanding their expectations and their needs before you start any of that process.”