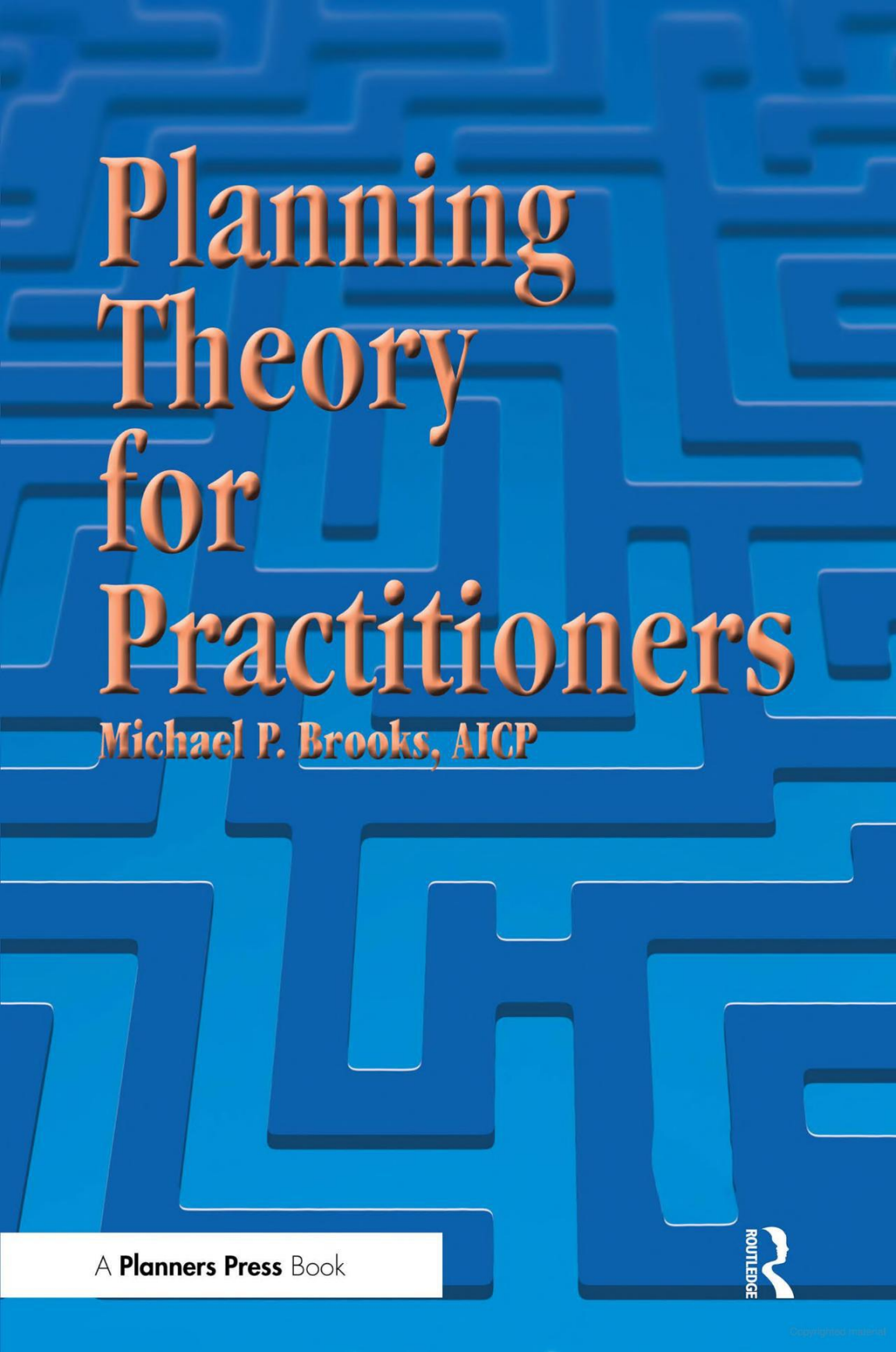

Planning Theory for Practitioners

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Preface

This book is intended primarily for two audiences: those who currently practice in the planning profession, and those who intend to do so in the future—that is, students in planning degree programs. The book deals with two topics that tend to be viewed with trepidation by those two audiences: theory and politics. (If several readers should reach this point in the book simultaneously, the collective shudder would probably be audible.)

The book is first and foremost about the relationship between planning practice and planning theory. The take on theory, however, is decidedly applied—that is, the book deals with a number of issues central to the planning theory literature, but focuses on the ways in which those issues affect the role performance of professional planners. Planning theory, I will argue, is extremely important to the profession's sense of identity and purpose, and thus should not be ignored. If it is to engage the attention of practitioners, however, it must speak to the issues and challenges they encounter on a daily basis—and that, too, is a major purpose of this book.

The book is also about the relationship between planning and politics. I will argue that planners need not be fearful of, or dismayed by, the political processes that they frequently encounter—that in fact there are ways in which these processes can be harnessed to planning's benefit.

Having become firmly ensconced in the last few years of my career, I am keenly aware of the extent to which my thoughts about the planning profession have been influenced by hundreds—in fact, probably thousands—of encounters with others, both in person and through their writings. It is therefore difficult to know where to begin in acknowledging my substantial intellectual debts. I'll resolve the matter by mentioning the people who probably had the greatest impact on my professional development: Arnold Sio, Colgate University sociologist and teacher *extraordinaire*, who first exposed me to a host of urban issues—and to the existence of a profession bent on addressing those issues; Martin Meyerson, an early and compelling role model; Jack Parker, who knew better than anyone else how to build a community among the students and

alumni of a university planning program; Larry Mann, who challenged me to think more clearly about planning theory; and Paul Davidoff, who was my only professional hero. There have been many others whose ideas have mattered a great deal to me, of course, but these five make up my all-star team.

The book probably would have remained forever in the idea stage without the semester's leave of absence granted to me by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I am grateful, as well, to my colleagues in VCU's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, who covered for me during my absence and have provided support in countless other ways.

Finally, I thank my family—present and past—for their patience and cooperation during periods of intense professional activity. Most of all I am deeply grateful to my wife, Ann, who has made dozens of contributions, both tangible and intangible, to this book—not the least of them being her frequent prod: "Mike, you're never going to write that book!" I think it worked.

PART

1

Introduction

CHAPTER

1

Planning Practice and Political Power

PUBLIC PLANNING

This book is about planning—which I define, quite simply, as the process by which we attempt to shape the future. The future, in this definition, refers to anything beyond the present; the purpose of planned action may be as short-run as one's projected activities for the rest of the day or as long-run as the conservation of an important natural resource for the benefit of future generations. Defined in this manner, planning is clearly a pervasive human activity. Each day of our lives features a sequence of locations, actions, and outcomes that have been, at least in some measure, planned in advance. It is undoubtedly true, of course, that our lives are also enriched by those occurrences that are entirely unplanned. A totally planned life is rather dreadful to contemplate, as would be a totally planned community or a totally planned society. Fortunately, history suggests that there is little risk of encountering such phenomena.

Just as each of us must do at least some planning in order to function on a daily basis, so must the institutions and organizations of which we are a part. Any organization that has a purpose or mission, along with some resources to expend, must plan how it will use its resources to achieve that purpose or mission. The opposite of planning is aimless drift, and few individuals or organizations would want to entrust their futures to such a process when other options are available.

This book does not deal, however, with the plans made by individuals and organizations in the course of their daily activities. Rather, it focuses on the planning that is done in the public sector by those who are responsible for helping to guide the future development of particular jurisdictions—typically cities or towns, counties, metropolitan areas, or other substate regions. While many of the principles discussed in this book are potentially relevant to planning at higher levels (the state or nation) as well, it is primarily at the local and metropolitan levels that a profession has emerged to carry out the planning process—a profession variously referred to as urban planning, city planning, community planning, regional planning, or some combination of these terms (for example, urban and regional planning).[1] The book's focus, then, is on the planning processes carried out by the members of this profession.

Many, though not all, planners who engage in public sector planning are employees of local governments. Others operate as private consultants, working for firms that provide professional services to jurisdictions on a contractual basis. Still others—an increasing percentage of the profession, if anecdotal accounts from planning school professors are indeed accurate—work for private nonprofit organizations focused on housing, economic development, environmental quality, and other community issues. Regardless of where they are employed, however, most of these planners are engaged in public planning as the term is used in this book—that is, they are dealing with matters of public concern and relevance.[2]

I have referred here to planning as a profession, but does it really deserve that label? This question was vigorously debated in previous decades, but—blessedly—appears today to have been consigned to the trash heap of irrelevant issues. To be sure, if one defines a profession in terms of required training, tightly controlled membership criteria, and the restriction of practice to those who have earned that membership (as is the case, for example, with attorneys and their state bar associations), then planning hardly qualifies. On the other hand, many other characteristics commonly associated with professions—discipline-specific graduate degree programs, national organizations, journals, conferences—are indeed in place. Thousands of people work for planning agencies, organizations, or firms; carry out planning tasks; and interact with their peers in a community of planning activity. Whether we refer to that community as a profession, or simply as a discipline or field, is of little consequence. I have chosen to use the term *profession* throughout this book.

Numerous efforts have been made, through the years, to define the central purposes and themes of the planning profession.[3] Should planners restrict their efforts to matters of land use and the physical environment, or should their purview include a broader array of social and economic concerns? Most planners subscribe intellectually to the latter view even while dealing primarily, on a day-to-day basis, with land use matters. Are planners distinguished by the processes they employ or by the phenomena to which those processes are applied? "Yes" is a reasonable answer to both. Should the planner possess in-depth expertise in a particular area—know a great deal about transportation or economic development, for example—or a comprehensive grasp of the relationships among many such issues? Again, both alternatives merit a "yes," though individual planners are apt to identify with only one or the other of these approaches; that is, the profession includes, to its benefit, both specialists and generalists.

In 1997, the Strategic Marketing Committee of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning issued a discussion paper listing the "generic themes" that have characterized planning thought and practice in the second half of the twentieth century.[4] The committee suggested that the field had focused on (1) the "improvement of human settlements"; (2) "interconnections" among the various facets of the community (again, the "comprehensiveness" theme); (3) "pathways of change over time," referring to the processes of goal formulation, forecasting, and plan-making for the future; (4) "the diversity of needs and distributional consequences in human settlements," reflecting concerns about social and economic equity; (5) "open participation in decisionmaking," involving concerns for citizen participation and representation, negotiation and dispute resolution, and clear communication; and (6) "linking knowledge and collective action," which refers to recognition of the interdependence between the practice and academic branches of the profession, and the importance of the knowledge generated by both. I consider this a useful list.

In more applied terms, of course, planners today confront a variety of pressing issues—the proper use of land, downtown survival, neighborhood revitalization, suburban sprawl, growth management, inadequate transportation systems, a shortage of affordable housing (and outright homelessness for some), air and water quality, decaying infrastructure (roads, bridges, sewerage

systems, public buildings, and so on), and inadequate or outmoded parks and recreation facilities, to name just a few. Other planners roam farther afield, depending on their organizational affiliations, and find themselves addressing issues related to crime, public health, hunger, economic development, the location and quality of public schools, and other matters of broad societal concern. Quite simply, the scope of the planning profession is as broad as the array of problems confronting today's cities and regions.

It would be delightful, of course, if we were able to claim that such problems are regularly and routinely resolved once they have been subjected to planners' ministrations. Alas, this is not the case. One reason stems from the nature of the problems themselves. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber proposed the term *wicked* to describe the problems typically addressed by planners. Wicked problems, they suggest, are ill- and variously defined; often feature a lack of consensus regarding their causes; lack obvious solutions—or even agreement on criteria for determining when a solution has been achieved; and have numerous and often unfathomable links to other problems.[5] Why have we been unable, thus far, to solve the problems of homelessness, or crime, or inadequate schools? The simple answer is that these are indeed wicked problems, as are most of those within the planner's purview. Rarely do planners complain of professional boredom![6]

In addressing such issues, planners do not operate in a vacuum; on the contrary, they are subject, at any given time, to a number of external forces beyond their control. The political economy of the nation—capitalist democracy, in our case—does much to shape the planner's sphere of action. Location matters; planning for an inner-city neighborhood is a different experience from planning for a rural county. The regions of the nation are characterized by differing political cultures, which in turn generate unique orientations toward the role of planning; it does indeed matter whether one is doing planning in Phoenix or Birmingham or Buffalo or Minneapolis. Economic cycles have a great impact on development trends, which in turn affect the planner's role, as does the local jurisdiction's current rate of growth or decline.[7] The locality's power configuration matters a great deal; Francine Rabinovitz's classic study of planning in several New Jersey cities illuminated the different planning styles most likely to succeed in communities with identifiable "power elites" versus those with more diffuse systems

of political power.[8] These and other factors comprise a bundle of characteristics often referred to as the "culture of planning" in a particular city or region, and they are characteristics that job-seeking planners should take seriously in making their employment decisions. (See Chapter 12 for further discussion of this point.)

Planners address the most important, and often most visible, issues confronting their communities; these issues tend to be wicked problems for which definitions, causes, and solutions remain elusive; and planners are subject to numerous external influences that assist in shaping their roles and responsibilities. Another way of saying all this, of course, is simply to note that planning is a highly political undertaking—a matter to which I shall now turn.

PLANNING AND POLITICAL POWER

Spend fifteen minutes with a planner, inquire about the project on which she or he is currently spending the most time, and you will very shortly be hearing about the politics of the situation. Recent issues addressed by planners in my own region, for example, include these:

- One city's planning staff has tried for several years to update the city's comprehensive plan but has been thwarted by a ward-based political system that renders difficult the task of acquiring consensus on citywide issues. Extensive citizen participation has highlighted widespread differences of opinion on major issues. The update will eventually be accomplished, but it has taken far longer than anyone anticipated at the outset. Politics.
- County planners undertook the task of developing a corridor plan for a busy street that connects two major commercial thoroughfares. The street is now largely residential (at points, even rural)—but, because of the heavy traffic volume, there are strong pressures to "go commercial." Property owners along the street, anticipating major windfall profits, strongly support such development; the residents of adjacent neighborhoods are opposed, however, and have formed a citizens' organization to do battle. The planners propose a compromise: permitting nodes of commercial development at key intersections while retaining the residential character of the remaining land. The result: no one is happy (except for landowners at the intersections), and the battle intensifies. Politics.

• A regional planning organization spearheads a highly participatory "goals for the region" project. On a pleasant day in March, over six hundred people, representing all walks of life, convene on a local university campus to listen to speakers, participate in focus groups, and identify key issues for inclusion in the project. The day is considered a rousing success, and soon the second step is initiated: a round of neighborhood-based meetings throughout the region. Along the way, however, an unanticipated phenomenon begins to emerge—namely, the people who opt to participate at the neighborhood level tend to be those most interested in significant change. Many are impatient with talk of regional cooperation; instead, they want changes in the region's governmental structure. Not surprisingly, this approach does not sit well with the commissioners of the regional agency, who are elected officials of the constituent jurisdictions. As a result, the project simply fades into oblivion over time. Politics.

• In the face of severe budgetary pressures, the president of a state university decides to initiate the preparation of a strategic plan for the school. The plan is to focus on programs rather than on facilities, for which other planning mechanisms already exist. A small staff is created, as is a twenty-three-member Commission on the Future of the University (in effect, the planning board for this project), which consists of faculty members, students, and administrators. At first the members of the university community are skeptical about the project and pay it little heed; they've "been through this before," and "nothing ever comes of it." This attitude changes, however, when a first draft of the plan is given wide circulation. At the heart of the plan is a list of programs to be given additional resources, the "enhancement list," and another list of programs scheduled for reduction or termination, the "diminution list"—which quickly comes to be known as the "hit list." Suddenly the campus is a hotbed of frenetic activity, with projected winners supporting the plan and projected losers devising numerous strategies (enlisting the involvement of prominent alumni and donors, for example) to have it altered. The plan is eventually approved and adopted, but only after many changes have been made to the first draft. Politics.

• A major entertainment corporation attempts to locate a history-based theme park in a wealthy residential county to the west of the nation's capital. The state's governor, the county's business

community, and most of the county's elected officials are strong supporters of the project; a number of citizen, environmental, and historical interest groups, however, are opposed. Both sides pull out all the stops in furthering their positions; expert studies, the media, nationally prominent organizations and individuals, and vast sums of money are brought into play. Meanwhile, the county's planners have a challenging assignment. Given the support of local elected officials, opposing the project is not an option, but the planners are allowed—even encouraged—to work with the corporation to ensure that the project does minimal damage to other aspects of life in the county. As time passes, however, the battles between supporters and opponents become increasingly intense—until, to nearly everyone's surprise, the corporation announces its withdrawal from the project.[9] Politics.

Other examples could be cited—zoning battles pitting developers against residents, churches that want to provide food for the homeless encountering opposition from the residents of the surrounding middle-income neighborhoods, "adult" book and video stores wanting to operate anywhere they can, and so on. Any reader of this book could undoubtedly provide a similar list of recent planning issues in his or her own jurisdiction. Virtually all of them would have a significant political component.

Earlier in the profession's history, the prevalent view of planning held it to be a technical endeavor and the planning process an exercise in applied science, with rationality as the key operating principle for practice (see Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of this concept). By the 1970s, however, it had become impossible to ignore the intensely political nature of the planning process.[10] In Nigel Taylor's words, "planning action can significantly affect the lives of large numbers of people, and since different individuals and groups may hold different views about how the environment should be planned, based on different values and interests, it is therefore also a *political* activity."[11] The essential requirement of political support for the acceptance and implementation of plans had also become obvious. As Alexander Garvin observes:

> By themselves, urban planners cannot accomplish very much. Improving cities requires the active participation of property owners, bankers, developers, architects, lawyers, contractors, and all sorts of people involved with real estate. It also requires the sanction of community groups, civic organizations, elected and appointed public officials, and municipal employees. Together they provide the financial and political means of bringing plans to fruition. Without them even the best plans will remain irrelevant dreams.[12]

While the political nature of planning is indeed widely recognized today, many planners continue to display ambivalence on this matter.[13] Acceptance is one thing; acting upon that acceptance is quite another. Too often, planners are ill-prepared to act upon the political content of their work; they may lack understanding of the political system (ignorance), or lack knowledge of the techniques needed to function effectively within it (inadequate education), or feel overwhelmed by political forces (despair), or even reject the notion that they—in their particular roles—are subject to the play of political power (denial). It is clear, of course, that planners differ in their affinity for the hurly-burly of the political arena. Some thrive on it ("politicals," as Elizabeth Howe and Jerome Kaufman have referred to them); others prefer careers spent primarily at the computer or the drafting table ("technicals"); and still others combine both roles ("hybrids").[14]

One reason for planners' ambivalence toward their political role is their inherent vulnerability. As Charles Hoch has noted,

> official public planning holds a subordinate organizational position at the local level. Planners are pushed to the margins of civic life and public culture in the United States. This lack of institutional authority handicaps professional planners when they offer advice from their governmental offices. When planners expose the conflicts between private purposes and the public good, they receive little institutional support. Planners are left to cope on their own with the conflicts that public planning engenders when it tackles some of the paradoxical problems of a liberal, capitalist society.[15]

Given the widely recognized political constraints on planning, then, coupled with the planner's vulnerability in the political system, why would anyone choose a career in this field? Indeed, there is reason to be concerned that the political nature of the profession might be discouraging some young planners from entering public sector employment.

In 1997 I taught Virginia Commonwealth University's Planning Internship Seminar, in which students in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program were encouraged to reflect on their internships and to relate them to their future career aspirations. Based on some of their comments about public service, I conducted an informal poll of the students in the class. Of the twelve present on that day, nine said that they intended to make their careers in the

private practice of planning (that is, with planning consulting firms, private nonprofit organizations, or architectural or engineering firms that take on planning assignments); three said that they were not yet sure. None expressed a preference for a job in the public sector. Surprised by these results, I initiated an ongoing (and admittedly not very systematic) conversation about the reasons behind their views. Included among the issues they raised were these:

- Our planning program frequently invites practitioners to serve as guest speakers in our various courses and special programs. The students said that they were hearing too many tales of frustration and failure: projects that didn't pan out, plans that didn't get adopted or implemented, unsuccessful efforts to hold off ill-conceived developments, compromises that undermined a project's basic purpose, and so forth. Only rarely, the students complained, did they hear success stories. (One irreverent wag suggested that I could solve this problem by no longer inviting practitioners to the classroom. I did not consider that a good solution.)
- A second, and closely related, problem cited was the high degree of controversy that seemed to characterize most major planning issues—and the frequency with which such controversy tended to turn genuinely nasty. This was daunting to the students, leading them to conclude that the political process is too frustrating; some noted that they would rather do their technical work for clients, and let those clients worry about the politics of the situation.
- The students were concerned that public planning seems to lack clout. Plans, zoning ordinances, and other planning mechanisms appeared to be too fragile, too easily circumvented by those with sufficient resources or political power. Planning commissions and city councils that are based on ward or district representation, they observed, seem to function primarily as vehicles for the protection of constituents' interests at the expense of the larger city, county, or region.

In sum, the students seemed to be saying, "Give me the tools I need to do a good job of rational analysis and plan-making, then point me in the direction of a private firm that wants to hire someone with those tools." I have no basis as yet for determining how representative that particular group might have been; indeed, several members of that graduating class are now working for public planning agencies. I wondered, of course, whether other

planning schools were observing similar student aspirations; informal conversations with colleagues elsewhere suggested that many of them are. A faculty member at one of the nation's most highly visible planning schools, for example, reported that many of his program's graduates now go to work for private nonprofit organizations, viewing these as the best vehicles for creative and value-based planning of the sort that first attracted them to the profession.

Public sector planning practice might be less daunting, however, if students were given more instruction and hands-on experience designed to familiarize them with the nature of such practice. Howell Baum argues that planning students in graduate programs have a natural tendency to internalize the roles modeled by their professors rather than those played by the practitioners with whom most of them will soon be interacting:

> New planners often expect their work to involve more or less rational analysis to solve relatively well-defined problems. Instead, they find complex relationships with other professionals, bureaucratic managers, elected officials, and community groups. Many have difficulty making or affecting decisions under political conditions; many wish for securely technical roles. Apparently, such planners expect to conduct research, but are not prepared for interaction and intervention.[16]

Clearly, this situation needs some attention; planners do indeed need to be prepared for that interaction and intervention. One step toward doing so is to stop thinking of the political system as a dysfunctional external disturbance—something that keeps us from being effective—and to identify and employ planning strategies that are integrated with, and make creative use of, that political system.

That is a major theme of this book. I suggest that there are indeed strategies available to planners for enhancing the likelihood of effectiveness in the face of political power. Parts 4 and 5 of this volume describe the strategies and attitudes that are most likely to prove effective. First, however, we will examine, in Part 2, some of the fundamental issues involved in the relationship between planning and politics. Part 3 features an examination of a number of other strategies that have been proposed for planners in the course of the profession's history; these will be evaluated through the filter of their relevance to, and feasibility for, planning practice in a political environment.

By now it should be clear to the reader that the focus of this book is on the process of planning rather than on the substance of specific planning issues. This is not the place to learn more about the New Urbanism, or suburban sprawl, or Smart Growth, or sustainable cities, or any other topic related to what it is that planners—yesterday's, today's, or tomorrow's—are attempting to accomplish. Instead, this book addresses the very nature of planning as a distinct form of professional activity. Other professions deal with many of the same substantive issues and problems that planners confront; what sets us apart from those professions, I suggest, is our focus on the processes by which we endeavor to resolve those issues and shape a more desirable future—that is, our focus on *planning*.

Many of the matters discussed in this chapter are central to the body of issues and scholarship that constitute the planning theory enterprise. The next chapter examines the role of planning theory in offering insights and guidance to the practitioner.

NOTES

1. Since urban planners—present and future—are the primary intended audience for this book, I make no effort here to provide a history of the planning profession or to define it more precisely. Readers interested in such matters might want to consult Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Donald A. Krueckeberg, ed., *Introduction to Planning History in the United States* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1983); Krueckeberg, ed., *The American Planner: Biographies and Recollections*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1994); and Edward J. Kaiser and David R. Godschalk, "Twentieth Century Land Use Planning: A Stalwart Family Tree," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 365–385.

2. Since private organizations also plan, they too have employees who carry out this function, though usually without the word *planning* in their titles. Sound planning capabilities are considered, in fact, to be among the most important attributes of upper-level managers in the private sector. I will be gratified if any of the points made in this book are deemed useful to private planners, but they are not the book's primary audience.

3. A major vehicle for this discussion has been the accreditation program operated by the Planning Accreditation Board, a joint undertaking of the American Institute of Certified Planners and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. Early efforts to identify a definitive set of knowledge and skills, mandated to be taught by every accredited planning program, have softened through the years in the face of the diversity that characterizes these programs. The current approach is more a matter of asking each school to explicate its specific educational goals, then assessing the extent to which those goals are being achieved.

4. See Dowell Myers et al., "Anchor Points for Planning's Identification," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Spring 1997), pp. 223–224. For a related discussion of this

issue, see Michael P. Brooks, "A Plethora of Paradigms?" *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 142–145.

5. Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4 (1973), pp. 155–169. For an interesting discussion of the "wicked problem" concept, see Hilda Blanco, *How to Think about Social Problems: American Pragmatism and the Idea of Planning* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 21–22.

6. For a useful—and, under the circumstances, reasonably upbeat—discussion of planners' effectiveness as problem solvers, see Jill Grant, *The Drama of Democracy: Contention and Dispute in Community Planning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

7. For a related discussion, see Nigel Taylor, *Urban Planning Theory Since 1945* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 108.

8. Francine Rabinovitz, *City Politics and Planning* (New York: Atherton Press, 1969).

9. See Michael P. Brooks, "Getting Goofy in Virginia: The Politics of Disneyfication," in *Planning 1997: Contrasts and Transitions*, proceedings of the American Planning Association National Planning Conference, San Diego, Calif., April 5–9, 1997, ed. Bill Pable and Bruce McClendon, pp. 691–722.

10. Early arguments for a more political view of planning included those made in Dennis A. Rondinelli, "Urban Planning as Policy Analysis: Management of Urban Change," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 1973), pp. 13–22; and Anthony James Catanese, *Planners and Local Politics: Impossible Dreams* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1974).

11. Taylor, *Urban Planning Theory*, p. 83.

12. Alexander Garvin, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), p. 2.

13. For perceptive discussions of this ambivalence, see Howell S. Baum, "Politics in Planners' Practice," in *Strategic Perspectives on Planning Practice*, ed. Barry Checkoway (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1986), pp. 25–42; and Karen S. Christensen, "Teaching Savvy," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 202–212.

14. See Elizabeth Howe and Jerry Kaufman, "The Ethics of Contemporary American Planners," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (July 1979), pp. 243–255; and Elizabeth Howe, "Role Choices for Planners," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (October 1980), pp. 398–410.

15. Charles Hoch, *What Planners Do: Power, Politics, and Persuasion* (Chicago: Planners Press, 1994), p. 9.

16. Howell S. Baum, "Social Science, Social Work, and Surgery: Teaching What Students Need to Practice Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Spring 1997), p. 182.

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