

# Excellence Through Humanity: Planning's Wobbly Paradigm Shift

## MOVING FROM THE DECLINING RETURNS OF ITERATION TO MEANINGFUL SYSTEMIC CHANGE

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The following is an extended transcript of Rob Horne's presentation, delivered virtually on April 8, 2021, as part of the University of Waterloo's School of Planning inaugural Planner-in-Residence public lecture series.

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*Before I begin, I wish to express my sincere thanks for the privilege of being the Planner-in-Residence for the 2020/2021 academic year. I first came to the University in 1980, fresh out of high school, and stayed for two degrees. Since then, I have had the opportunity to remain involved with the University in a number of capacities. A special thanks to Dr. Markus Moos, Director of the School of Planning, for his humanity, creativity, and wise guidance, and to the rest of the academic leadership team. You should all be very proud of your contributions to our noble profession!*

*Finally, the views presented here are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of the University of Waterloo.*

Where does one start a public lecture in these unprecedented times? Amidst the tragedy of millions of deaths globally, including thousands of Canadian lives, we find ourselves navigating the uncharted waters of a modern-day global Pandemic.

Incredibly, however, we find ourselves with more than one approved vaccine, and in record time. While we struggle to produce and administer the vaccines, we remain so fortunate to have a path to recovery.

Catastrophic times call for immediate shifts in our daily habits, and a re-establishment of what our broader priorities really are. They cause us to pause and reflect on home, work and especially health. There are countless collateral impacts, like disproportionate deaths in more vulnerable populations, but there are also dividends that could accrue, like greater participatory democracy and better community outcomes.

Today, I would like to share some of my reflections about the impacts of the Pandemic on the planning profession itself. In short, I believe that the pandemic has precipitated a “wobbly” paradigm shift in planning, and in many other fields. This unbalanced paradigm shift creates opportunities to devise and catalyze good and lasting changes to our profession and to society, as long as we are consistent and persistent. My father used to call this “plain old grit”. I describe this paradigm shift as a move from endless iteration to meaningful systemic change, and to be clear, my definition of systemic change includes both structural ( i.e. organizational) and cultural ( i.e. attitudinal) transformation.

I would like to talk to you about four related themes today that I believe inform this wobbly paradigm shift in planning. They are privilege, extreme polarization, professional erosion, and shared renewal.

**My first theme is privilege, and I offer it in two contexts.**

First, planners enjoy the privilege of helping to shape the future of individual developments, communities and nations. Our profession is like no other; we consult with people, we collaborate to talk about options for the future, we develop shared visions and strategies, and we help make it happen. Our plans and professional advice will be seen in community landscapes for decades to come, like Stratford’s Tom Patterson Theatre proposal, which I had the privilege to be a part of. That is the very essence and importance of our privilege, and it is especially important in a time of systemic change.

The second context of privilege I offer is about longstanding societal inequities and exclusions. The incredible unrest we have all seen south of the border has many dimensions, but there is one we should all be paying close attention to. In North America (and in fact all over the world), there is a fear of personal power and wealth loss (and redistribution) among some. Others would say it simply boils down to defeating racism, and I cannot dispute that assertion. For the planning profession, and for the rest of society, we must admit that it is going to require a longer-term culture shift. We must also admit that only now are we talking about these important matters in a fulsome way and taking some action. I worry that the initial signs of dealing with diversity, equity and inclusion are token and symbolic in some cases, and not driven by “head and heart”. Time will tell, but planners can and should play major roles in resolving a variety of inequities and exclusions. For instance, let’s not forget our unresolved issues with First Nations.

### **My second theme is extreme polarization.**

I use the term “extreme polarization” in an attempt to connote what I believe society is grappling with today. Witness the growing negativity and rampant conspiracy theories that are posted every day on social media. They appear to be founded on poisonous agendas that want us to think in absolutes. In other words, people are right or wrong; left or right wing; instigators or victims, winners or losers. What’s more, the truth is so often absent in the extremely polarized societal spin, the volume of data so large, and the repetitive messaging so unrelenting, that millions of citizens are readily misled. It is a stark contrast to the many “shades of gray” considerations that planners are weighing every day in support of good planning.

What does this mean for the planning profession? There are several dimensions. One is how we deal with social media, both a helpful and a very dangerous tool. It has become increasingly important for municipalities in particular to monitor social media and to ensure that to the extent possible, facts and analysis are offered, and misinformation is dealt with head on. It is not an easy go, and it requires significant resources. French President Emmanuel Macron was one global leader to seek to regulate hate speech, child influencers and fake news during elections on social media. While success in this type of regulation is a Herculean task, Macron has shone a light on this pervasive problem and has shown global leadership for systemic change in this area.

At a professional level, I would suggest that planning has negativity fences to mend as well. Over the years, I have seen unhealthy tensions between public and private sector planners grow. On our worst days, public sector planners are seen as paper pushers, and private sector planners are viewed as lobbyists. These are harsh words, but it concerns me greatly that the negativity may be increasing beyond healthy tension. Aren't we all as practicing planners supposed to be creative and collaborative community builders? Planners in all sectors have a great deal to learn from each other. Don't get me wrong, either; I can point to many healthy relationships between public and private sector planners, founded on facts, thoughtful analysis, and healthy professional interaction. It is, however, essential, **that we all support** environmental health, economic prosperity and community vitality in a unified way. Have a look at the final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (more commonly known as the Brundtland Commission), published in 1987. Its' messages are still so relevant, and already at that time talked about the need to deal with social, environmental, and economic factors in an integrated and interdisciplinary manner .

**The third theme I would like to share today is around what I call “professional erosion”.**

Let me explain using three examples.

I have seen many cases where planning practices that are no longer centred on the client or the public. I have seen potential investors being sent on their own to three or more offices in separate locations to explore the merits of new community investment. What's more, it seems like planners have lost touch with their diverse or diversifying community fabric. How much public engagement considers matters of language, cultural traditions and meetings in public spaces where people feel most comfortable? Aside from a few communities that have made significant adjustments, I would suggest we have a long way to go.

The second example of professional erosion is the planning appeal process in Ontario. It is my opinion that the legal profession has overtaken the planning appeals process by being permitted to argue their cases over many days and in as many legal contexts as possible. I also bristle when the Tribunal Member, the applicant and the appellants do not or cannot actually visit a site together. That is

where we should match proposals to real world conditions. What's more, not all appellants can afford a lawyer, let alone one with solid planning experience to represent them, which arguably creates inequity from the start. There have been many proposals for reform in recent years, including an extensive report sponsored and released by the Regional Planning Commissioners of Ontario in 2016, and authored by esteemed solicitor Ian Lord and renowned Canadian planner Joe Berridge. Most people will agree that while the solutions are varied, the current process takes much too long, is extremely costly, and the outcomes are very uncertain. There are better ways to enshrine natural justice, and I believe it is time for a systemic overhaul.

Finally, I believe our profession is simply being overtaken by the speed of societal change. The speed with which internet-based accommodation and rides ( e.g. Air BNB and Uber) overtook local regulatory environments is well documented. We need to be more nimble and to use other tools, such as creating more open data, and using less traditional consultative approaches, like human centred design.

**My fourth and final theme is shared renewal, and this is what really matters.**

If you are wondering if my cup is half empty or half full, I can tell you it is brimming to overflowing when I think about the prospects for our profession!

Here are some of the things we can do now:

- Talk openly, candidly and frequently about the issues that challenge us as a profession and societally. What is and isn't the public interest? How are we practically supporting community wellness? What is work? Where is work? It should be rich, honest and productive debate.
- Take the longer view more consistently and practically. Planners need to support our societal decision-makers with initiatives that are more sustainable. This means that capital projects may be more expensive at the front end, and dividends will not always be easily monetized.
- Require apprenticing planners to job shadow in public, private and not for profit planning offices. The Ontario Professional Planners Institute is already exploring this option, and I commend them for doing so;
- Forge different working relationships. For example, directly engage economic development officers in the drafting of new official plans. I have recently worked for a municipality that sees its forthcoming new official

plan as a road map for shaping and communicating new investment opportunities to potential investors. It is also the guiding document that all staff, including planners and economic developers, will be expected to rally around.

- Overhaul the planning appeals process to ensure focus is better placed on planning merits and equitable participation.
- Ensure academic institutions are also aligned with emerging changes in our profession. For example, university cultures should enshrine priorities of diversity, equity and inclusion, and we do see that happening more intentionally. Greater emphasis should also be placed on cross-disciplinary collaboration, like the current discussions happening at the University of Waterloo to create more interaction between the engineering and planning programs. I would also be remiss if I didn't mention the importance of planners to be able to practice verbal presentations and to orally debate issues as part of the academic curriculum. Practicing planners must verbalize their positions, concerns and opportunities every day.
- Invest in our up-and-coming planners, for they are our future. I asked my fourth year planning class why they want to be planners. Here are some of the answers I received: "I want to be a planner so I can design and create something that is tangible, useable and impactful to others"; "I want to be a planner to build meaningful relationships with the public and demonstrate what good civic engagement means"; and "I want to be a planner because I want to give back to the cities and communities in my life that have given me so much in return". Our emerging planners are energetic, ambitious, and focused, and they want to be influencers and agents of change. We should do everything we can to support them.

## **In Closing**

Our past President at the University of Waterloo and former Governor General, David Johnston, most recently released a book called "The Idea of Canada". For me, his simple self reflection on "Who am I, anyway?" should be the starting point for all of us, as we work to better ourselves, our profession and our communities. I encourage you to reflect on those words.

The planning community needs to step up and solidify our wobbly paradigm shift. Systemic change can create great and lasting societal gains, and that is something that planners are well suited, qualified and experienced to support.

Above all, let's strive for humanity, and not the abstract of perfection.

Thank you.

### **References, Web Sources and Contributions**

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Special thanks to *Ontario Professional Planners Institute* President, Justine Giancola, for our brief discussion about potential changes to future planning accreditation.

Special thanks as well to the students in my Plan 403 class who responded to the question "Why do you want to be a planner?"