



COMMENTARY: WHAT DO FUTURE- READY PLANNERS LOOK LIKE?

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the humdrum of daily lives, upended plans of urban development, and challenged the veracity of predictive models to tell us how best to plan. It was an unprecedented world crisis of the 21st century and it made urban planners reexamine the premises of urban livability, particularly of population density, work and home arrangements, public transportation, and access to outdoor recreation. The pandemic underscored the complexity of urban systems in material ways, as we realize that each urban dweller's life is ever more intricately bound to another.

In these times, the desire to secure a stable future is ever more present; yet ever more elusive. People look to beacons of light that can offer glimpses of a hopeful future and means to work through the problems of the present to make progress towards that good future. The figure of the urban planner looms large: a role that straddles the visionary and the practical; one that stands in the gaps between the past, present, and future. Planners are time travelers with a social reformist DNA who are suited to take on this important role in the making of an urban future, which is fragmented yet coupled and thus, complex. It raises the question: *what are the values and skills needed for planners to navigate the murky waters of the 21st century?*

We asked our young and pioneer planners this question: *"What makes a good planner from your point of view?"* Drawing on their responses for this question and from questions about what is good planning and what are the important aspects for planning in Singapore, we identified the following qualities of a good future-ready planner (not in order of importance) (Table 2).

Reflecting on these qualities raised by our young and pioneer planners, they bring to mind two well-known planning theorists – Leonie Sandercock and John Forester – who have written about the sensibilities needed in urban planners if they were to cultivate the competences to handle multiple publics and diverse interests.

Planning Sensibilities and Senses for a Cosmopolis

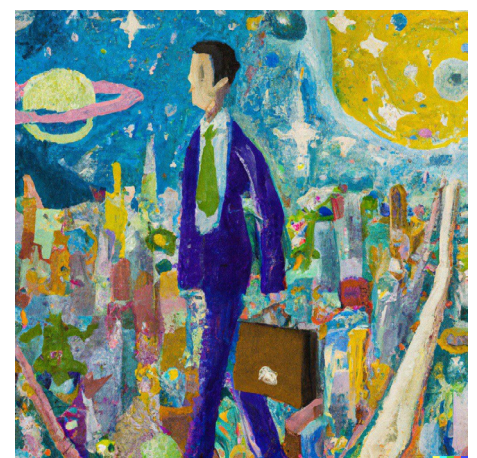
In Sandercock's book *Towards Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st century* published in 2003, she discussed the demographic and cultural diversification of cities and their concomitant issues of social, cultural, and environmental justice in the 21st century. Responding to the emerging socially diverse context arising from global immigration among other societal changes that are challenging the mode of top-down technical rationality of the 20th modern city planning, she identified five sensibilities of a planner that are critical to navigate the 21st urban century: political, therapeutic, audacious, creative, and critical. Planners need to reframe planning as a political process that allows for competing interests



Above: AI generated image using the prompt, "Abstract painting of an urban planner travelling through a universe of cities"



Above: AI generated image using the prompt, "A synthwave style sunset featuring Jane Jacobs in front of diverse cities, digital art"



Above: AI generated image using the prompt, "Abstract painting of an urban planner travelling through a universe of cities"

Young Planners

1. **Empathetic to the people whom we design for**
2. **Visionary with courage to try out bold ideas**
3. **Adaptable**
4. **Creative and Critical thinker**
5. **Persuasive**
6. **Cost-savvy**
7. **Resilient in the face of critiques**

Pioneer Planners

1. **Sensitive to public and clients' sentiments and Timing-savvy in rolling out future plans**
2. **Knowledgeable about the relationship between humans and land, and that people react to spaces in an emotional way**
3. **Socio-Spatial thinker**
4. **Technically trained**
5. **Scenario thinker and developer**
6. **Vested in socially equitable and optimal outcomes**
7. **Committed to inclusive participatory planning**

Table 2: Qualities of a good future-ready urban planner

to be worked into consensus that serves the common interests and good. Planners also need to have therapeutic skills toward resolving conflicts because urban conflicts are emotional issues. Planners should also be audacious to introduce new ideas to adapt to the changing times. Creativity is needed to have “the capacity to imagine a different story, a different outcome” (p.218). Lastly, planners should also have a critical awareness of how they practice their craft and the power relations they produce so that they will not unwittingly advocate for social exclusion through their plans.

In Forester's article, *Planning in the Face of Conflict* published by the American Planning Association Journal in 1987, he focused on the conflictual scope that urban planning often works in. Due to competing interests in the urban realm, he discussed the need for planners to have good practical judgment and role-playing skills to navigate land use conflicts successfully as mediators and as negotiators all in one. These roles must clearly be held in tension with each other as the neutrality of the mediator is at odds with the vested interest of a negotiator for a certain preferable land-use outcome. In these circumstances, Forester outlined four key practical traits of an effective planner in the face of conflict:

1. Offers clarity and predictability of the planning process for all stakeholders.
2. Discerns the circumstances and timing of discussing a plan.
3. Juggles multiple tasks because of the multiple parties and issues.
4. Exercises keen discretion on how to conduct planning processes – who to invite, when to do so, how to negotiate.

Future-Ready Trait 1: Be Sensitive to timing, circumstances, and the Emotions of stakeholders

What strikes me as a common trait of a future-ready planner raised by Sandercock, Forester, our young and pioneer planners is this: planners need to develop a sensitivity to timing, circumstances, and the emotions of stakeholders. Drawing on his long professional experience, Mr Foo Chee See emphasized the need to strategically pace the change that planning interventions introduce. He explained that being fast is not always the right thing to do because when you move too fast, you can anger the public and clients who are not ready for the change. Timing is so critical. In relation to that, our young planners pointed out that having empathy for the people you are designing for is important. Good planners are those who care about the needs and constraints of the users.

The empathy goes beyond what is now commonly identified as design-thinking to a recognition that “*People react to spaces in an emotional way,*” quoting Mr Tan Cheng Siong. These thoughts echo Sandercock's call for planners to adopt a therapeutic approach rather than relying on pure technical rationality, and Forester's emphasis on practical judgment in planning matters.

Future-Ready Trait 2: Be Creative in Developing Planning Alternatives

Another major trait: Planners need to become creative in developing alternatives so that good collective decisions can be made. The pace of change in our contemporary world has heightened; societies are evolving and

- FORESTER, J. 1987. Planning in the face of conflict: Negotiation and Mediation Strategies in Local Land Use Regulation. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 53, 303-314.
- SANDERCOCK, L. 2003. *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century*, London; New York, Continuum.

diversifying; environmental risks are increasing. Our urban futures require planners to develop audacious yet adaptable scenarios that are shared and discussed with stakeholders. One of the young planners said this, *"You need that creativity to try to do things differently. You don't always have to do things differently but if there is a possibility to do things better, then creativity is important."* Creativity is also having, as Forester identifies, a keen discretion in navigating and negotiating planning processes that are political and relationally complex. Knowing who to include and when to do so in mediation and negotiation matters to the outcomes. Quoting another young planner on the challenge of practicing creativity in planning, *"We are thinking inside the box, but at the same time, we have to think outside the box!"*

Future-Ready Trait 3: Be "Multi-versed"

The third important trait of a future-ready planner is this: Planners must become "multi-versed." As our urban futures become more socially, culturally, and politically diversified, planners need to have the skill to negotiate the multiple social and cultural universes in a city. Whether that means learning new languages, new mediums of community outreach, or being open to new sensibilities, planners if they are to be effective time travelers of the past, present, and future, they need to swim comfortably in multiple urban realities.

Concluding Thoughts

The future-ready urban planners, in addition to having economic savvy and socio-spatially adept skills, need to refine their time consciousness. Planning interventions have to be sensitive to the interdependencies of urban past, present, and future so that social cohesiveness and place belonging will not be undermined as a city undergoes change. The anticipated urban future is one that can be discombobulating for many, and planners need to understand these interdependencies and enable the multiple urban realities to co-exist in the same space in an organized, empathetic, equitable, and inclusive manner.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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