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Viewpoint
Ethical principles in an increasingly diverse planning profession: the potential impact of different types of planners

Introduction: who do planners work for?

The understanding that planners should act ethically is now so widely accepted as to arguably no longer need to be asserted. Unpacking what this means in practice, and how planners could and should behave ethically, are, of course, far from simple, as we return to below, but we first want to address another understanding that is also widely accepted. One example of this understanding is contained in a helpful recent contribution to this journal by Stefano Moroni (2020, 563), who makes clear that his focus 'will especially be on public planning; that is, planning by public authorities'. In this response to Moroni's Viewpoint, we do not take issue with this focus per se, but use it as a springboard to a broader critique of what is in turn a wider phenomenon – a view, implicit or explicit, that planning is, or should remain, fundamentally a state-led activity, and that consequently we as planning scholars should primarily concern ourselves with the activities of planners who work in the public sector.

Our concern with this assumption is that in certain countries and contexts a large and growing proportion of the planning profession works in the private sector – and we, based on our interactions with many of these professional planners, cannot accept that they are beyond the legitimate interest of planning scholarship. In this Viewpoint we explore the changing nature of the planning profession in such contexts, reflect upon the ethical principles and obligations identified by Moroni as being core to planners working in the public sector, and argue that they are equally relevant to those working in the private sector.

The origins of planning

From our initial explorations of this issue, how planning originated as a modern formalised activity is a significant factor in how it is viewed today. Here, a comparison between the UK, Australia and the USA is enlightening. In the UK, planning rested 'on notions of an extension of public control over private interests in land and property' (Cherry, 1996, 17), hence the legislative beginnings of planning through

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the 1909 Housing and Town Planning Act, when 'statutory town planning became a new function of local government' (Cherry, 1996, 18). In order to deliver on that statutory function, local authorities began to employ planners, and planning was thus conceived as a state-led activity in the UK from its origins. The context in Australia was similar, with planning being introduced to counter untrammelled development in the early twentieth century, and thus conceived of as 'a government-based planning role' (Steele, 2009, 190), one which, like the UK, continued through the mid-twentieth century until, by the 1960s, 'the role of the planner was absorbed almost completely into the public bureaucracy' (Steele, 2009, 191). Conversely, in the early years of formalised planning in the USA, 'Only a few municipalities employed full time planners … the dominant type of planners was the private practitioner' (Birch, 1980, 26). Many of these planners were contracted by local authorities to produce plans on their behalf, but this is not the same as being directly employed by them, setting up a client–contractor relationship which, as we discuss below, can be a source of tension.

Looking now at where planners are employed today, we can see significant changes in the UK, the USA and Australia. Focusing purely on individuals who are members of the respective professional planning organisations, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) in the UK, the Planning Institute Australia (PIA) and the American Planning Association (APA), Figure 1 illustrates how the professions look today.

In the US, the proportion of APA members working in the private sector is now at 21 per cent, whereas in Australia it is 55 per cent, with the UK in the middle at 39 per cent. The latter is a very rapid rise, with previous studies finding that 22 per cent of RTPI members worked in the private sector as recently as 2013 (Koch and Harris, 2014). This change in RTPI membership is driven by two parallel changes in the economy – first, local authorities, subject to ten years of 'austerity' by the UK government, have seen their budgets fall by around 50 per cent and consequently

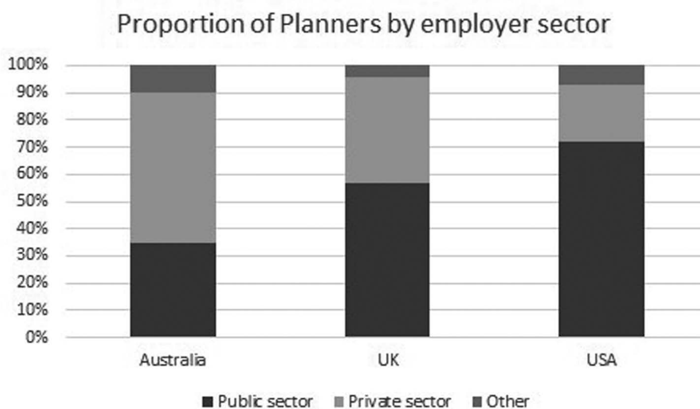

Figure 1 Proportion of planners by employer sector
Source: PIA (2020), APA (2018) and RTPI (2019). RTPI figures are 'primary' employers of planners

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their ability to employ planners fall likewise (Haughton and Hincks, 2013; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016). Simultaneously, the private sector has grown as the increasingly de-regulated development industry has flourished (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2014) and new regulatory processes such as those required by the 2008 Planning Act appear to require substantial expertise and support from consultants, providing a market opportunity for the private sector. There has, according to Raco and Savini (2019, 4), been a 'co-evolution between reforms to make the planning system more entrepreneurial and the emergence of an increasingly powerful and influential consultancy sector'. Further, and, perhaps perversely, local authorities have been forced to contract out planning activity as they no longer have sufficient staff to carry out their statutory functions – so-called 'reluctant outsourcing' (Slade et al., 2019; Wargent et al., 2020). This latter shift is also evident in Australia, with a 'hollowed out, under-resourced and short-staffed' public sector increasingly contracting out core public planning roles (Steele, 2009, 200).

Reimer et al.'s (2013) comparative volume offers some fleeting insight from Europe. Whilst French planning practice is observed for its lack of involvement of 'non-institutional actors', including the private sector (Geppert, 2013, 117), both Italy and Greece are noted for a negotiation-based planning culture in which the private sector is increasingly engaged. In the case of the latter, government downsizing is explicitly noted as a stimulus for private-sector involvement. More revealing, perhaps, is Kunzmann's (2016, 1318) assertion of the need to understand 'the implications for a growing number of graduates from planning schools across Europe taking on professional positions in the real-estate sector', in his piece notably titled 'Crisis and urban planning?'. We have not yet found any data to be able to expand on, or interpret, this European trend in more detail.

The data in Figure 1 suggest that the planning profession in the UK is now very different than it was even five years ago, with only a small majority of planners working directly for the public sector, and others employed by the private sector on work for the public sector as well as for private clients. Recent data also evidences a marginal preference amongst students currently studying in the UK towards future employment in private practice (Hickman et al., 2021). This mix of public and private practice is similar to the origins of planning in the USA, and it is perhaps no coincidence that we find a richer history of literature on what planners and planning should seek to achieve written by American scholars (for example Beckman, 1964; Davidoff, 1965; Howe and Kaufman, 1979; Lauria and Long, 2017), as well as sources explicitly considering the public-versus-private-sector conundrum (Loh and Arroyo, 2017; Loh and Norton, 2013, 2015). Perhaps because planning in the UK remained until recently a predominantly public-sector activity, these sorts of debates have a shorter history. This reflects an assumption that planning as a public-sector activity was by default carried out in the public interest. This assumption, always problematic, has

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been explicitly undermined from at least the 1960s onwards in explorations of the regressive consequences of both processes and outcomes of public-sector planning (cf. Jacobs, 1961; Skeffington, 1969). It is, however, only relatively recently that self-reflection on the public-versus-private-sector issue has emerged in the UK (Campbell and Marshall, 1998; 2002; Slade et al., 2019; Tait, 2016) and Australia, reflecting a shift towards more 'hybridised' roles for planners in these contexts (Cook and Sarkissian, 2000; Steele, 2009).

Many of these contributions reflect upon the issues discussed by Moroni (2020) in his contribution to this journal – politics, ethics and communicative practice. We focus now on the second of these, ethics, and highlight where aspects of Moroni's discussion could be enhanced by adding to it the explicit consideration of planners working in the private sector: planners, we would argue, equally involved in the 'collective management of urban development' that Moroni (2020, 563) describes as the core activity of planning by public authorities.

Ethics for planners in the private sector

Moroni cogently observes, 'Ethical issues concerning the role of planners are those concerning their behaviour in doing their job' (Moroni, 2020, 565). He further identifies three of 'the most important ethical principles for planners … 1 Perform quality work … 2 Adhere to duties of justice such as honesty … and truthfulness … 3 Be always accountable' (Moroni, 2020, 566). We would argue that there is nothing in these principles to suggest that they are inherently only, or more, appropriate for planners working in the public sector. Whilst there is no equivalent of the so-called 'Nolan Principles of Public Life' (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995) for the private sector, Moroni's principles can be found in the codes of practice of the professional bodies for planners in the US, the UK and Australia, regardless of the sector those planners work within. The RTPI, for example, 'requires its Members to adhere to five core principles, namely: Competence, honesty and integrity; Independent professional judgement; Due care and diligence; Equality and respect; Professional behaviour' (RTPI, 2016, 2). Similar principles are included in the US and the Australian equivalents (AICP, 2016; PIA, 2018), and in the 'ethical framework for the global property market' produced by the International Ethics Standards Coalition (2016).

Opinions differ in relation to whether planners might find it harder to deliver on their professional commitment to ethics depending upon who they work for. It is not as simple as a dichotomy with the public interest and the state counterposed against private interests. In the US context, private-sector planners are said to 'face particular difficulties in managing client relationships when client values contradict established planning values' (Loh and Arroyo, 2017, 169). Conversely, Campbell and Marshall

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(2002, 106) found that in public-sector organisations which did not consider planning to be particularly important, 'corporate interests were regarded as directly at variance with the public interest ethic', with some private-sector planners regarding it as their role to challenge and check local authorities.

This client–planner relationship is one which is often highlighted as being a potential ethical challenge for planners, but remains ill-understood. Moroni (2020) and Lauria and Long (2017; 2019) draw upon the distinction between different ethical approaches to elucidate these challenges and, in the case of Lauria and Long, to explore how planners deal with them in practice. Moroni's distinction between consequentialist and deontological ethical approaches is helpful with respect to the client–planner relationship – 'Loyalty to a client may be considered absolute and unconditional from a deontologic viewpoint, while it may not be absolute from a consequentialist viewpoint (in other words, there could be cases where unconditional loyalty would lead to undesirable consequences)' (Moroni, 2020, 567). For planners who have signed up to a code of conduct such as those discussed above, there is no doubt that unconditional loyalty to a client would conflict with requirements such as the duty to act 'for the benefit of the public' (RTPI, 2017, 5). How private-sector planners, particularly, balance these conflicting drivers in practice is as yet relatively underexplored, as indeed is the whole question of ethical behaviours for such planners. In the final section of this Viewpoint we discuss the normative question of planning in the private sector.

Can planners in the private sector behave ethically?

There remains a strong tendency amongst scholars of planning theory, particularly those working in Europe, to equate 'the market', and in turn the private sector, with a purely profit-driven approach. Planners in turn are described as 'willing collaborators in the capitalist project' (Tomaney and Ferm, 2018, 3). Others categorise them as either 'profiteer planners, who conform' or 'struggling planners, who resist market dominance' (Taşan-Kok and Penpecioğlu, 2018, 113), seemingly ruling out a middle ground. In the context of planning education, it is suggested that students should ask themselves, 'will they be profit-driven and make compromises for profit, or will they choose to be impact- and value-driven and always give priority to this impact which they aim to realise?' (Taşan-Kok et al., 2016, 637). Setting up profit and impact in opposition with each other is not, we argue, necessarily helpful: it may not reflect an accurate characterisation of the reality of the private-sector planner's experiences. An approach which acknowledges the need for development to make a profit yet retains a focus on impacts and values is not considered. Similarly, Albrechts (2018, 291), as part of an argument that planners should be activists, identifies the types of roles they could perform: 'For planners working in the system (government planners),

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an equity type of planning … seems suited. For planners working outside the system (non-governmental organizations [NGOs], community organizations), only a radical type of planning [is appropriate]'. Albrechts does not appear to consider the possibility that planners working in neither the public nor third sectors can be activists. The absence of the private-sector planner from this suggests, perhaps, that they are not perceived as planners at all. Whilst Moroni (2020, 563) was clear that his focus was on the public sector, in so doing he acknowledged that 'professional urban planners are not the only ones who "do" planning'. With no mention of private-sector planners, we question how their role as planners is perceived.

These narratives fail to explore the idea that the private-sector planner may be able to simultaneously pursue profit and act in a progressive way, or even – and perhaps more radically – the idea that the private-sector planner may, in some contexts, be better placed to pursue notions such as 'the public interest' from outside the strictures of the political and regulatory state setting. Perhaps the assumption that all work carried out by the private sector has a profit imperative could also be challenged, allowing to emerge the possibility for a narrative about private-sector planners engaging in planning work that could be characterised as activist.

There are some sources, based on robust empirical data, which suggest that there are few differences between the values adopted by planners in different sectors – Loh and Norton (2013) spoke to public- and private-sector planners in the US, and whilst each group thought they behaved more ethically than the other, in fact there was 'a remarkable degree of convergence in the professional values of practicing planners' (Loh and Norton, 2013, 146), regardless of employer. A recent study of planners in the UK, focusing particularly on private-sector planners working on consultancy projects for public-sector clients, likewise noted that in that context there were few sectoral differences in how planners tried to behave (Slade et al., 2019). This might suggest, therefore, that it *is* possible to serve the public interest, be an activist planner, someone concerned with impacts and values, whatever sector you work in. Our experiences, including with some of our recent graduates and the practising planners we regularly encounter, suggest that some planners in the private sector perceive themselves as acting as the conscience in developer discussions, able to push agendas around social value and climate change as much, if not in a more impactful way, as their public-sector counterparts.

We do not wish this Viewpoint to be seen as an attack on our fellow planning scholars – rather we raise the question whether traditional approaches to considering ethics and planning theory and practice have adapted sufficiently to the contemporary state of the planning profession. The same may apply to professional institutes – some of the private-sector planners in the US spoken to by Lauria and Long (2019, 402) felt that the AICP's code of conduct did not fully reflect 'the ethical dilemmas they face in their professional practice'.

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Much of what planners do remains hidden – particularly, we believe, the work of planners in the private sector who work for private-sector clients, for example developers, but who nevertheless consider it possible to behave ethically in a setting where profit is also an inherent driver. How do these 39 per cent of planners in the UK try and work towards conceptions such as the public interest? Is that an accepted part of their company values? How do they strike a balance between the ethical requirements of their profession and the demands of their clients? What factors contribute to their decision making? We know that a range of 'obligations' affect how people, and therefore planners, decide what to do (Campbell and Marshall, 2000) – including their family, their identity, their workplace and their education. In order to cast light on such obligations, we are embarking on research to better understand the interactions between these, and other, drivers of planners' behaviour and to seek to address the 'limited understanding of the nexus of professional figures currently active in planning' (Raco and Savini, 2019, 5). In this, we are not seeking to deny the worries expressed by Sager (2016) and others about the impact of neoliberalism on development and planning practice and the complicit role of some private-sector planners – rather we are seeking to understand private practice in a more nuanced way, allowing for multiple ideas of the private sector to emerge. We look forward to further debate with colleagues on this topic.

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