

**Megatrends driving planning education:  
How do we future-proof planners?**

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Planning is for the future. But are planners equipped to see into the future? Are the current sets of tools we provide planners with adequate for visualising the future and do we sufficiently evaluate and understand the emerging trends and forces and their implications for our planning actions? This paper discusses the art of scenario planning and examines driving forces and trends which will have an impact on planning education in particular and higher education in general. It is exploratory in nature, intended mainly to alert planning educators about the emerging scenarios and tools which may be useful to planners in facing the challenges of the millennium.

**Introduction**

It is impossible to predict the future. Yet, as planners we are expected to (re)solve the problems of the future before they occur through the activity called planning. But planning is a very slow activity and it will take many years for results to be felt. More than one hundred years ago when Henry Ford brought the car to the masses, I am sure no planner could have foreseen the huge impacts brought about by urbanisation in terms of urban sprawl, pollution, congestion, fatalities from accidents, global warming, depletion of non-renewable resources, loss of agricultural land and habitats, flash floods, depletion of ground water, loss of community and more. Planning has been reduced to solving today's problems rather than creating a vision of the future. The problems of the world have become more complex and imprecise while the methods, techniques and tools used by planners to forecast the future are predictive and deterministic but do not offer imaginative or creative solutions. In most Asian countries, planning is still seen as being clinical, viewed as a professional-technical activity devoid of politics, social or culture influences. The plans are unreadable to the average citizen and are intended as legal documents to curb illegal activities rather than inspire a vision for the future of the city. Politicians should be kept at bay because they often disrupt the carefully laid out efforts of the professional planners, usually for the benefit of vested and personal interests.

**Scenario planning**

Scenario planning has been around since the 1960s, when it was used initially for military applications. Scenario planning requires serious research work to look for

evidence pointing to alternative futures, especially alternatives which we are either not willing to consider or are not within our normal line-of-sight. These alternative futures are not prognoses, forecasts or predictions. They are possible futures which could emerge given the direction or trends observed over an extended period of time. Scenario planning helps us to *reperceive* by challenging assumptions. It helps us to change our view of reality. Scenario planning is about changing mind sets of decision makers. It is not to help us to get a more accurate picture of tomorrow. Its power lies in the ability to allow us to see different perspectives in a systematic way.

Most scenario planning efforts start from one or a series of focal questions to which an organisation is seeking answers. The driving forces and trends are examined, evaluated and then narrowed down to 2 or 3. Tools can be used to generate the scenarios but it is not a straightforward or mechanical process. It requires reshaping and regrouping of the ideas as they are developed, presented to stakeholders and further refined. Different plots can be used to bring life to the alternative futures which can be considered as myths of the future with a catchy title capturing the heart of the story. The scenario planning team must then assist in understanding the implications should any of the scenarios or parts become reality. Signs or indicators have to be monitored so that, as the future unfolds, we will recognise which of the scenarios is the closest to reality and then take the appropriate actions to stay in the game. Schwartz's (1996) *The Art of the Long View* provides one view of how scenario planning can be carried out while Sohail (2008a) provides another.

### **What are the megatrends?**

Analysing and tracking global trends and emerging issues are the tasks of professional futurists. The National Intelligence Agency (US) (2004) is one such expert agency, which has identified globalisation as being largely irreversible but likely to be less westernized in future. Populations in the developed countries are aging but will paradoxically become 'younger', demanding the same quality of life as when they were young. Environmental and ethical issues will be significant, but it is uncertain how technology will resolve these dilemmas. Futurist Canton (2006 and [www.futureguru.com](http://www.futureguru.com)) tracks the top 10 trends of the "extreme future". For instance, the future economy will be driven by innovation and talent – knowledge alone will not cut it. Education will benefit most from the innovation economy through the "creation of immediate, portable, transferable, on-demand knowledge sources" equivalent in scale to the Library of Congress. The future is about the individual whose invention and innovation will drive the economy creating millions of millionaires but individual privacy, freedom and security will become an issue. In education, people will learn to design their own electronic learning programs which will enhance their understanding, skills, creativity and career choices. Learning will be virtual, self-paced, self-directed and individualised. People will live longer, healthier lives aided by biotechnology and genomics. Global warming, pollution and loss of biodiversity will present opportunities for new business opportunities in clean technology. The depletion of fossil fuels will spur alternative

energies such as hydrogen, hybrids and biofuel and spell the death of the internal combustion engine.

### **The futures of higher education**

Can we imagine that the university as we know now will not exist at all in the not too distant future? Sohail (2008b) has elaborated on the existing images of the university which will pull it into the future. The classical image of the university is that of a community of scholars where we acquire knowledge for knowledge's sake and university education is to produce people of culture and good grace whose duty it is to promote civil society and democratic governance. This required academics to be autonomous and free from political influences. That image was challenged in the industrial era with expectations that graduates should fit neatly into the assembly line, able to do their jobs from day one without the need for further training. The emphasis was on skills rather than knowledge. The university sector continues to be challenged by the forces of corporatisation, globalisation, virtualisation, digitalisation, sustainability and demographic shifts. Out of these driving forces, some emerging issues include the creation of a truly global higher learning experience where the student and professor are not satisfied with being associated only with one or two universities. The student will demand to pick and choose from the best in the world – their degree will be awarded by multiple universities (the truly global student). The professor has no institutional loyalty and will work for and receive salaries from multiple universities. Other emerging issues relate to the learning experience, from the way the courses are conducted or delivered (e.g. via gaming) to individually customised curricula (design your own degree; just-in-time learning).

### **What do we have to do to future-proof planners?**

Planning educators must keep their eye on the emerging 'digital natives' (persons who have grown up in the age of digital technology) - not just on their high expectations in terms of the use of technology for learning but in terms of the instructional models we adopt. The era of the industrial university with its objectivist approach must make way for a new learning model which is student-centred, constructivist and facilitative. But so-called professional bodies will want to protect their turf insisting on a rigid curriculum with well-defined knowledge sets and toolkits.

The second important issue for planners relates to our role in solving the problems of sustainability and global warming. Though most schools of planning include sustainability in their curriculum, I speculate that most are talking more about the problems than the solutions. And these solutions cannot come from planners alone. They require us to break down the silos of disciplines and professions. The way we train professionals to tackle the problems of the city is to make them experts in their respective fields and then expect that they can come together to solve problems of sustainability and climate change including inputs on physical design, political, social,

cultural and technological innovations. When students learn to “design” the city of their dreams they must be put in a study environment where the complexities of the city (and beyond) are brought forth. Students from other disciplines such as biology, chemistry, mathematics, city management, public policy, engineering, environmental technology, architecture, clean energy and waste management must be put together to learn how to solve the city’s problems. The planning studio should not primarily comprise planning students. For the professional bodies, they have to expand their horizons to include people who are not within traditional scope of definition of a town (or city) planner – a biologist should have as much right to be a member of the planners institute.

Scenarios are by definition fictions – they are not reality. They are stories created to stimulate imagination of possible futures. Out of these stories, we can then decide our desired future state. We know that we cannot continue to build cities in the way they exist now because they are the major source of unsustainability. We need to imagine cities which are walkable, where food is not transported from thousands of kilometers away, where buildings and appliances are energy efficient, where the excess clean energy generated in buildings is sold to the grid during peak periods, where a circular (instead of the current linear) system is employed to ensure that wastes are returned to the soil as nutrients, and where the building footprint is substantially smaller to alleviate the loss of agricultural land and forests. Size does matter – small and compact is a key to sustainability.

The planning system has often been described as rigid, unable to respond to rapidly changing social, economic and demographic changes. The plans are legal instruments to provide certainty and to enforce compliance, not to accommodate rapid changes. But plans need to change quickly as scenarios unfold. The value of scenario planning lies in the alternative scenarios which could emerge when obscure forces converge. Signposts must be identified which will give advance signals that an alternative scenario is emerging so that the planning system can respond appropriately. Though most planning systems have built-in periodic reviews and monitoring, the process is cumbersome, weighed down by legal procedures as well as excessive studies and analysis and pressures from opposing interests.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Planning needs to move away from being overtly design-based to tackle issues of sustainable development and climate change. Design skills must be married with social and cultural perspectives aided by technology, politics and science. We need to breakdown the silos in our universities in how we teach and research.

Scenario planning offers a useful tool to assist planners to keep an eye on the horizon and on what is emerging so that they are not merely solving problems of the day. It is a creative tool which helps to create visions, build consensus and makes us future-ready

by changing perceptions about the future as being predetermined. As planners, we must be equipped to constantly have our fingers on the pulse to engage and resolve the pressing issues before they become problems.

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