

Paul Wack: Teaching is Fun... An Interview with the Editor

They say all good things come to an end. Not for Paul Wack, one of the most popular instructors in CRP's history, whose love for planning and for teaching are unparalleled. In this interview, Paul talks to Vicente del Rio about his professional and academic career, his inspirations, and his thoughts for future planners.

Question: How did you get interested in planning?

I started my life in San Luis Obispo County on our family walnut and almond ranch west of Paso Robles. I had an early connection to the land, which was reinforced as an Eagle Scout. I was a conservationist. There was no "environmentalism", as we know it now, in those days.

I loved maps. On car trips with my family, my mother knew how to keep me under control by giving me a map to read and connect to the passing landscape. Maps got me interested in geography. In junior college my first class was Geography 1 and on the third day I asked my professor, "What does a geographer do?" He answered, "Well, you either teach geography, pump gas, or become a planner". "What's a planner?" I asked. He gave me some literature and I read that planners worked with maps, and I thought, that's it! So, by my third day in college I made up my mind. I wanted to become a planner, and I never regretted it, even on bad hair days.

In college, I maintained my conservationist worldview. I was interested in agricultural land conservation and learned about New Towns from reading Ebenezer Howard's "Garden Cities of Tomorrow". I was inspired by all of the planning concepts related to the land, including William Whyte's "The Last Landscape", for example. I was not into the policy part of planning at that time, but more connected to maps, land use, and the physical setting, which would lead me to zoning and plan implementation.

I embraced planning and conservation, and decided to take my first graduate degree in geography while at Cal State Northridge, thinking that I was preparing to save the world. During my second day on the job as a planner trainee in Ventura County a citizen visited the public counter asking permission to build a simple carport for a single-family house in Piru. He needed a zoning clearance. So my first official act as a professional planner was to prepare a zoning

clearance for a carport and I thought, "Well, you want to save the world, so I guess this is the first step".

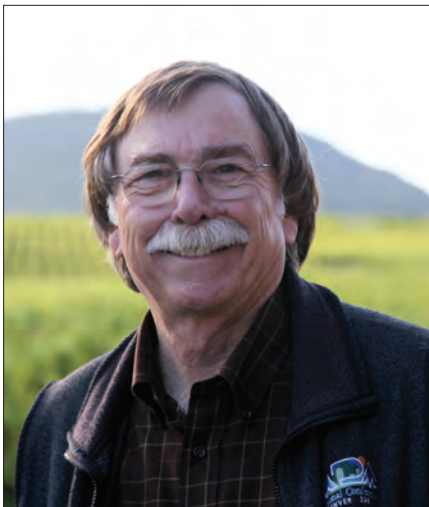
Question: Given your ethics, were you ever part of the student movements of the late 60s and early 70s?

No, but I was part of the Kennedy generation that wanted to make a difference. President John Kennedy really inspired many of us. Working full time, it took me six years to earn my bachelor's degree. So I didn't have time for any protest efforts. And besides I realized that they were fighting a system that was heavily armed. I thought, "Okay, the way you change the system is from within", being inspired by the book "Guerillas in the Bureaucrac". And that's one of the reasons I went into public service. I knew that positive change had to happen inside existing government structures. That got me interested in planning as well because planning was about the future. The people involved in the profession appeared to share my values and, I would discover, were wonderful to work with.

Question: Can you talk about your work from "within" the system?

I started my career the Monday after my 25th birthday, and the following week the first Earth Day was celebrated, which was very symbolic to me. But I was so wrapped up in my new job and graduate school that I didn't fully appreciate what Earth Day would mean in the future, especially related to my ultimate interest in teaching. I knew it was a significant event but I didn't participate. Earth Day has become symbolic to me because whenever I want to recall how long I've been a planner, I merely celebrate my anniversary during Earth Day.

I soon was put in charge of the Ventura County Land Conservation Act (LCA) Program, which became my dream job. My conservation ethic (thank you, Aldo Leopold!) and my interest in agriculture had connected. I enthusiastically promoted the program, but at the same time I was very pragmatic. It was a volunteer pro-



gram; farmers were interested in it because there was a benefit for them (lower taxes), and it was the only tool we had to protect agricultural land from premature development. I was very aggressive in promoting it for mutual benefit. I used my love for maps as a strategy, which I've done my entire career. Whenever I've been in charge of a major planning study I would want to know land ownership patterns in the study area. That's what geography gave me, a spatial relationship with the land. While my strategies were spatial, my colleagues were mostly policy or design oriented. They didn't understand property ownership and all of that, which worked for me. We complemented each other. In fact, in those days we didn't have open space-conservation easements or other planning tools we take for granted today. All we had was zoning, which didn't work very well in rural areas.

During my field visits to determine eligibility for the LCA Program, I could quickly assess the agricultural viability of property, especially hillside land, which was clearly not developable, but valuable as watershed. For instance, I visited a 160-acre parcel northwest of Fillmore. While walking the land with the owner I asked him, "Have you ever had animal grazing on the property?" He said, "Well, yeah. I think my neighbor's cows come over to my land every once in a while, you know." I said, "Well, that's good enough for me. If a cow periodically crosses the land, grazes a little bit, and leaves some proof, this is ag land." I knew it really wasn't agricultural land in a commercial sense, but it was important as watershed and needed to be protected. I picked up a reputation in running the program that way. One of the jokes at the time was that when I went out to look at these sites, I would toss out a couple of plastic cow pies and say: "See, there's a cow pie, therefore a cow has been here." True? Only the cows know for sure.

Later I became the project manager of the Ventura County Coastal Study. This was a real adventure because it was before the California Coastal Act. Coastal planning before 1972 was challenging because I had to use existing state planning laws that did not recognize the uniqueness of coastal resources. I started proposing "new" ideas such as viewshed protection. Along the south coast of the Ventura County portion of the Santa Monica Mountains there was a 2 ½ mile long narrow strip of private property between the highway and the ocean in which a tentative tract map had been filed for 600, 25 foot wide lots, all on septic tanks. When I started mentioning viewshed protection, some people charged "You're a Communist! We've got property rights!" In response, I said "Well, you know, there's also property responsibilities... and, by the way, never call a Republican a Communist, it's not a good idea." I have been a lifelong registered Republican, which provided me with a balanced view between property rights and public interests. I have a fiscally conservative side, although environmentally and socially I am more progressive in my worldview. I'm very respectful of nature and natural systems because I know that if you respect the power of nature, it will pay the favor back. After working with agricultural land preservation and coastal



Paul as an Eagle Scout in Camp Woverton, 1961.

planning issues, I advanced into supervision and eventually became a deputy director in Ventura County's Resources Management Agency within four years of my first day on the job.

In 1976 I became the Santa Barbara County Assistant Planning Director and my first task was to reorganize the department. At the time I was also working on a second graduate degree, a Master's in Public Administration at the University of Southern California, in an attempt to balance my planning and management skills. As part of my planning tasks in Santa Barbara, I headed major projects, such as the 150,000-acre Lompoc Valley Agricultural Rezone Study. About one-third of the study area was designated with outdated "unclassified" zoning, which was not only agriculturally unfriendly, but also mixed in with large tracts of land under LCA contracts, thus creating potential land use compatibility issues. As project manager, and a John Denver lookalike, I was able to convince most property owners that their land was either not suitable for development, or too isolated from services. I was very pragmatic and honest in working with landowners, and as a result, it turned out to be a very successful rezone program.

I became chair of the Santa Barbara County Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Siting Task Force because the State of California had passed a law in 1977 when Jerry Brown was Governor, to place an LNG facility at Point Conception. The state had already made up their minds on site selection. The County fought back and won! Locating an LNG plant there would have been disastrous because the Santa Barbara Channel is a very sensitive environment. There would have been dangerous, gas filled tankers crossing paths with container ships passing through the channel, not to mention the potential impact on whales and other sea life in the area. Adding to the mix, the native Chumash considered Point Conception the gateway to their heaven and filed a protest, then occupied the site. They built a sweat lodge and other temporary structures, and were getting national media attention. Representing the County, I had to go out there and inform them that their camp was a zoning violation, while FBI helicopters were flying around monitoring the scene! Some of the Native Americans were people

I had hired to help conduct site studies in various parts of the County to protect cultural resources. So, I knew these guys and was friends with a couple of them, and there I was informing them that they were in violation of county zoning. With all the chaos and media attention, it was hard for us to keep a straight face when the term zoning was mentioned. The facility was not built, because a fault line was discovered under the site as a result of digging a massive trench.

Question: Were you also involved in teaching at the time?

Yes, by then I had discovered teaching. I had been an instructor in the Boy Scouts, as a trained junior leader. I also had the opportunity to do guest lectures at UC Santa Barbara, and sponsor County internships. I started teaching a planning class for the Environmental Studies Program in 1978. There were 64 students in the class, some still practicing planning today and almost ready to retire. I remember thinking, "Teaching is fun, and you get paid to do this?" The following year, acting department chair Joe Kourakis called to invite me to teach CRP 212, along with Paul Crawford. For four or five years Paul and I taught most of the 212 classes; there were six sections a year because Architecture, Construction Management, and Landscape Architecture students were required to take it. By then we had both were assistant county planning directors. I had an opportunity to expand my teaching thanks to Cal Poly.

By then Proposition 13 had passed and devastated local government budgets. After nine years in local government it was time to move on, and I resigned from Santa Barbara County. At the time I was quoted in the local newspaper as saying, "Working for the government is like walking through a stream of bureaucratic peanut butter, trying to get things done." I realized that I had reached the point where in order to get things done I now had to work outside the system. Well, it was good that I knew how the system worked, which is why I tell our students that they should get a couple years experience in the public sector first so they understand how government operates: get into the belly of the beast, understand what's happening, and then you'll be more effective when you're out in the private or non-profit sector, trying to make a difference.

I realized that I wanted to get out of government for awhile but also that I didn't want to go into the private sector and push development. Immediately after I left Santa Barbara County, the first person to contact me was an industrial developer to represent his company and I said, "No, I'm not going to change from one side of the public counter to the other; that's not what I'm about." I would have earned very good money, but I was not interested. That led me into teaching full-time and starting our consulting firm, Jacobson and Wack in 1980. It's been 32 years and the firm is still going. My business partner and dear friend, Bruce Jacobson, graduated from CRP and worked with me in Ventura County, and had been Deputy Planning Director for San Luis Obispo County. Although teaching is not his focus, Bruce enjoys teaching adult education courses with UC

Extension, which is another thing I created with Bruce and Paul Crawford. We set up extension courses on how to revise zoning ordinances at UC Davis and UCLA, and they are still going.

Our consulting firm does not do development, we only work with local governments. What has made us effective is that we both worked in government and know the art of zoning, and we know how planning departments operate. For example, when we win a new contract and conduct the kickoff meeting with the planning staff, we ask them a key question: "Okay, where is it?" And they look at us like, what do you mean "where is it?" But we know there is usually a "secret" binder containing all the desired changes staff hopes to make to the existing zoning ordinance when they get the time, which they seldom do. We kept one while in government. That's how it works. The zoning ordinance always has problems and so there's usually a three ring binder in which staff puts in "post-its", memos, and the like to help interpret the provisions. When they want to clarify a zoning interpretation, staff refers to the binder, which is usually electronic these days. And that's why we ask about the binder right off the bat and they are usually surprised that we know about it. This helps build their confidence in our ability to understand their zoning needs.

I became passionate about teaching because I felt strongly about building a constituency for planning. Over the years as a county planner, I began to realize most people are unaware of what planning is, and a number of citizens wanted to get involved and express their views, but didn't know how to do it. I viewed this as an opportunity for getting a future generation, or two, interested in planning. My goal wasn't to convert everybody into planners, but to build a public constituency for planning and, if interested, pursue a career. As an educator I also have learned a lot because I design all my classes so that my students also teach me. All my assignments are designed to provide feedback, learn new things, and I learn as well.

Teaching is great; it's fun and I love it, especially combining teaching and practice in the classroom. I enjoy teaching implementation, because it brings theory and practice together. That's my main game. After 34 years of teaching about 20,000 students at Cal Poly, UCSB, and Sonoma State, I feel like it's a goal accomplished, in building a constituency for planning. Over the years I have promoted the MCRP program to my UCSB students interested in planning as a career.

Teaching Environmental Studies (ES) at UC Santa Barbara and planning at Cal Poly has made me more interdisciplinary. That's one thing I've always enjoyed about environmental studies because it broadened my relationship to the world in terms of connecting with different professions. We built the ES planning program concentration at UCSB by creating a series of courses and an internship program.

Question: How have you built a diverse and interdisciplinary constituency for planning?

I started getting involved in non-planning organizations. For instance, a group of us got together from all over the country and the world because we had a shared interest in sustainable community indicators, which was becoming a hot ticket item in the 1990s. So we formed the International Sustainable Indicators Network (ISIN). I wanted to make cool t-shirts that read “I SIN for the environment”, but no takers. There were engineers, scientists, environmental policy people, people from the public sector, from NGOs, and I was the only planner representing the profession at the time. We held our first international conference in Toronto and people came from South America, South Africa, from all over the planet. That initial effort evolved into a group called CIC, Community Indicators Consortium, which is very successful now. Other groups I got involved with were the West Coast Education for Sustainability that formed out of an organization called Second Nature. That early group is now thriving as AASHE, The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. I was initially the only planner involved in the beginning of that group, as well.

I guess my goal of building a constituency for planning took on a new dimension by networking with other professions and to introduce them to planning. I spent a lot of time working with nonprofits, plus expanding my role with the American Planning Association (APA). I served as vice-chair of the International Division, and represented the APA division at the World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 2006, which generated my interview for an article in *Planning Magazine* about global warming. I also expressed my interest in the ecological footprint concept. The ecological footprint quiz is a very important part of my teaching because it's a simple way for people, on a personal level, to assess the general impact they are having on the planet through their lifestyles and consumption patterns. My purpose for using the quiz is not to make students feel guilty but to inform them of their relationship to the planetary resources and how to properly use them. By the way, in the article I warned: “Keep an eye on Greenland!” which is proving to be valid.

Part of my participation in the APA includes the California Planning Foundation (CPF) Board, which gets back to my idea of building a constituency for planning. I have been involved with CPF for 19 years, because its main goal is to sponsor a scholarship program that invests in the future of planning by helping students who seek a planning career. I have always found the effort very enjoyable, and I sponsor a \$1,000 scholarship as well.

I've managed to integrate my environmental and planning worlds into a very interdisciplinary theme. At this stage of my life, career-wise, it's gotten me very interested in climate change. That's what my recent trip through the Rocky Mountains was all about: the kick-off of a new segment of my life in assessing the impact of climate change on the western United States. And one of the first things I noticed is how dry the West is. What drove the Anasazi Indians out of Mesa Verde, where they had established a complex culture, was a long term drought, and now it appears that we are entering another one of these episodic droughts. It is alarming when viewing mil-

lions of acres of trees dying because of bark beetle infestation, caused by increasing temperatures not cold enough to control the larvae embedded in the trunks. Wildfires are intensifying and increasing because of the growing mass of dead trees.

What I tell my students about climate change is that they don't have to believe whether climate change is human caused, but respect the fact that the climate is changing. It's getting drier, storms are getting more intense; it's a pattern that people who live in a place for a long time have noticed and they're not quite sure what to do about it. This was the theme of many people I spoke with during my journey. Glacier National Park may have to sponsor a name change contest given the rapid pace the glaciers are disappearing. The locals are nervous.

We are at a very interesting point in history, and I'm very motivated to connect the planning dots. Most people I talk to in my travels have no idea what planning is, which concerns me because with climate change almost all the impacts in some form are related to how we use the land. Planning has a big responsibility involving the future. What other profession's job description explicitly embraces the word “future”? Planning about the future, whether next week or seven generations from now. When I talk with Environmental Studies students they are tired of professors standing before them and focus on the “doom and gloom” theme, with little discussion about solutions. But I tell them point blank, “Well, I'm a planner. I represent a profession that's about the future. We don't have time for all this doom and gloom crap... what we need to do is identify the issues and get on with addressing them. That's what planning should be doing.”

Question: What are your thoughts about the CRP department? Do you think that we are going in the right direction?

Well, it's interesting that you ask because I've been involved with this department through good times and bad. There was a time in the mid-1990s when I thought the department was going to fold because we were down to perhaps one tenure track person and mostly lecturers, like me, at the time. Linda Dalton was the department head, and she was fighting to keep CRP together.

Still, exciting things were happening in CRP. Back then, as a lecturer, I was one of the co-founders of CAED's Sustainable Environments Minor. Since the beginning I was pushing for interdisciplinary education and for building a constituency for planning, by bringing in students from the other departments in the college and at least making them aware and think in comprehensive terms when dealing with the three “Es” of sustainability.

Now, I think CRP is in the best shape it's ever been for many reasons. It has achieved a balance that I think is very important. The only thing that I worry about a little is if we lose more professionals on the faculty and don't replace with them with practitioners. If we ever get into a situation where the department loses the practicing professional component it will take



Paul Wack (last on right) and the California Foundation Board at the APA Conference in Santa Barbara.

away from our tradition as a hands-on, learn-by-doing program. I think the academic side has really been enhanced and it's never been stronger: our publishing record, the grants, etc. We need to credit the effort of Linda Dalton for what she did to initially build the MCRP program, and the energy and leadership of Bill Siembieda to enhance the academic integrity of the CRP program overall. I'm very proud to be part of a faculty and staff blessed with so much talent and commitment. They are like family to me.

After living through those tough years in the mid-1990s I think it is important to see how collegial our faculty is. Everyone has their diverse interests and differences of opinion but when it counts I see the faculty as being collaborative and very supportive. If someone in the CRP program needs help the rest come to his or her aid; CRP has become kind of a family if you will. We embrace the lecturers and there's a mutual respect for one another, and I think this is important. The department is in good shape but the issue is how do you maintain that? How do you keep the energy going? Because it's easy to get comfortable, but the technology and conditions are changing so fast, forcing us to be very agile and able to respond quickly, with fewer resources. But I think the department has been doing a pretty good job. So I'm very happy with the department but I am also concerned about where it's going because of the continual budget cuts... I'm not concerned on a personal level. I'm concerned about the department. If it gets too small we will become very vulnerable. If the university starts cutting programs, they will be looking around at the smallest departments, regardless of the great work our faculty, alumni, and students are doing to address the issues of our times.

I know that the alumni appreciate the great work the department has been doing. I participate in many conferences, and one of the first questions alumni and colleagues ask me is how is the department doing? CRP is very well-known and we have

a lot of graduates out there doing a lot of interesting work, not necessarily in planning. Many get their CRP degree and do not go directly into planning but the thing is: they have that planning knowledge and, for me, it gets back to building the constituency that I care about. I ask the current students and at least a third say they have no interest in being a planner but like what they are learning because they are acquiring a body of knowledge and skill sets they can use in many profession, or as citizens interested in their community.

Question: Can you tell us how you got your first job?

I interviewed many people for my geography senior project on new towns --Laguna Niguel, Valencia, Irvine, Westlake Village. Most projects were barely beginning construction when I started my study. I interviewed a planner in Ventura County about Westlake Village. When I started my graduate program the following year I was one of the three finalists for a planner trainee position in Ventura County. When they held their staff meeting to make the final decision one of them said, "Well I know that Wack guy. He interviewed me for his senior project. He would be a good fit with our department." So my first job happened because of connections I built through my academic work. It gets back to implementation on a personal level.

Question: Since you are an expert in zoning, what's your perception of form-based codes? They became like a fashion and perhaps that's not really good.

Well, it's like many planning ideas. We've experienced growth management, new urbanism, smart growth, sustainable development, and more. When a new concept comes along it can be a flavor of the month, or a force for change. Form-based coding could go either way, and are getting a lot of buzz now. New ideas generate debate, and good can result. I've been critical of new urbanism as a marketing concept, but it energizes many to look at land use issues in a different way. Form based codes could go down the same path. We have come along way since the days of Euclidean zoning, but change has been painfully incremental. Every new idea is initially seen as the silver bullet to resolve problems that were not resolved by previous silver bullets. Form based codes are no different. The Form Based Code Institute has done a remarkable job educating our profession about this evolving tool. I appreciate the excitement for it from local planning staffs seeking a way to achieve desired development with more certainty. However, city council members and planning commissioners are politicians, and want flexibility in dealing with zoning related issues affecting their various constituencies. Form based code standards may box in their desired flexibility, generating conflict. I am hopeful that form based codes will become an important part of the planning tool kit, but more time is needed to properly assess future success. More projects built with form based codes will be needed to determine its long term viability as either a cutting edge game changer, or another hybrid planning tool generating incremental improvement.

Question: Planning is a good discipline to prepare us for life. What would you recommend for planning students? I know that one of your mottos is one has to have fire in the belly.

That's right. You've got to have fire in your belly about something to make it matter in your life or career. I ask our students: What are you really interested in doing with your life? For example, I asked a student recently, "What really interests you?" She said, "I'm interested in promoting suburban agriculture, but nobody's doing it." I said, "Well I'd call that an opportunity. If no one is doing it and you've got the fire in the belly about it, you can build your own career niche by building from what others are doing in related fields (urban agriculture)." The student replied, "Oh. Okay. That's good." A seed of an idea has been planted.

That's one of the reasons I love teaching implementation. I know zoning and planning among others things, but I also like helping implement their career goals. What I like about teaching CRP 412 (Planning Implementation) is I get undergrads in the spring quarter of their junior year before they begin their internships and senior projects. I talk about what they can do with their senior project and that they should do something that builds toward their desired career. I ask them, "What's your priority? What are you really excited about?" That's what you should be relating to in your academic efforts. It can be very motivating and energizing. Do not only use only field work for your senior project; interview people who are doing what you want to do and use them for your connection to the real world you seek. You're not

contacting them for a job, but interviewing them to gain knowledge, and for them to get to know you. When the senior project is completed go back to your contacts on that subject and say, "Okay here's what I did and I have built this expertise and commitment to pursue this career path. What do you think I should do next?" They may have contacts that can be helpful, or just might say, "Well, I've may have a position opening in our organization (public, private, nonprofit) or, I know somebody that might be interested in talking to you about career opportunities." I remind them that they need got to build bridges while expanding their knowledge through education.

Question: Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

Yes, it has been a wonderful 42 year adventure in planning for me, and I look forward to the next 42 years. I will be receiving the Distinguished Service Award at the California Chapter American Planning Association Conference this month. To say that I'm deeply honored is an understatement, especially given those that have preceded me. I wish to express my deep appreciation to all that have contributed to my mission over the years to build a constituency for planning, especially those former students that became planners or active citizens participating in the planning process. I would not be receiving this award if it were not for them. In closing, I wish to offer a toast to all for helping me attempt to make a difference in this world. I am a truly blessed planner.

