

Depth and Breadth

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I am often asked by planning students whether they should start in the private sector or public. I tell them different things each time I answer. But there is a theme. If I had to boil the difference down to simple words, they would be Depth and Breadth. And the answers are really just stories.

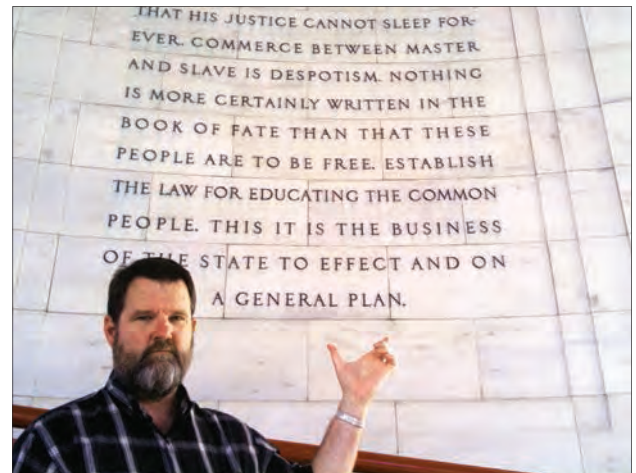
So, for example, I will tell them about Platforms. That's what jobs provide. A stable position for carrying out one's work. For planners, there are many platforms. We can work for cities and counties and states and even the federal government. We can work in engineering firms, or with architects, or huddled together in private companies, all with a common mission. The work we do is the most important thing, but there are important differences between the platforms, and each provides advantages. Oh, and disadvantages. Let's explore some.

The most common locus for a practicing planner is in a local government. Why so? That's where the police power resides with respect to land use. States do some land use, and the feds do a little bit. But towns and counties do the bulk. They divide the land and develop it, and preserve it. They provide the city-scale infrastructure that makes things work.

I have spent most of my career as a consulting planner, working for and with planners in that public sector at the local level. While I have worked with many at the state and federal levels, I don't think I understand them so well. So I'll stay local.

A long time ago in Barnstable, Massachusetts I sat down with a planner to go over a subdivision proposal. Planner Bill had been working on Cape Cod for over a decade. He came from Ohio. When I rolled out the land division plan, he immediately rolled tracing paper over the top of it, pulled from his drawer a box of markers and went to work redrawing the road and the lots. I couldn't speak. In about three minutes there was a new road, a new configuration of housing sites, a change in the main access location. There hadn't been a chance to explain the layout, prepared by an engineer after consultations with soil experts, drainage analysts, the fire department and even . . . the owner of the property. In my calmest lawyerese I began to explain that the more appropriate tact would be to hear my little presentation. He just raised his hand and said, "Take it back to your client." Couldn't argue with that.

I showed the colorful and crinkly trace to the engineer. He got a bit huffy, then looked at it some more, and then he said, "This actually looks pretty good. I can clean this up and make it work."



Chris Clark at the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC pointing out the importance of the General Plan.

Well that wasn't what I wanted to hear. This planner should be taught not to mess with the work of somebody with a professional stamp. Bill's job was to accept or reject, and eventually to recommend something to the Planning Commission. The arrogance of assuming his design skills were a match for an engineer. But later the client agreed to the changes, and they prepared a revised submittal, which Bill loved.

Many years later I came to understand what was going on. Bill was a good planner. From a great breadth of experience, he could quickly absorb new information, then revamp it to better fit into a larger community context—which he knew quite well, certainly better than an engineer from out of town. So while the engineer's plan was technically faultless, the planner's plan took it up a notch, literally, so that the subdivision would work better given its surroundings.

Who else but a planner is going to do that?

Malcolm Gladwell set the bar at 10,000 hours for mastering a trade. That's five years at a job (40 hours x 52 [minus 2 weeks vacation] x 5 years). We might consider the time spent working for a city to be working towards mastery. Learning the nuances of decision-makers, the streets, the weaknesses of infrastructure, the strengths of our residents, where that memo is that was written nine years ago explaining why the park has a retired fire engine in it. A million bits of data, assembled to help us plan. A million bits of data, any number of which we will draw upon to solve a yet to be articulated problem.

And there are gold watches. At the end of a career in one place is the appreciation of all the time that was spent there. Valuable.

The consulting planner gets no watch. They move, from city to city as needs arise. There are two reasons to hire a consulting firm to help with a city's planning. They either lack labor or expertise.

Crawford Multari and Clark served both needs. All work, like planning, knows its ebbs and flows. When the economy gets dry, fewer building projects are coming in, fewer permits going out, and the need for planners is reduced. When budgets go bad at the municipal and state level, then the funding for the eternal needs of a city are drained.

Given such, it is bad form in the public sector to hire employees to fit squarely with the level of work; laboring up when times are busy, laying off when they are not. (It is bad form to do this in the private sector, but there are often no options.) When someone is hired at a city, they come under the umbrella of civil service. Without going into much on labor law, suffice it to say that it becomes difficult to let them go. Quite difficult. So cities are cautious about hires, and have a considerable process for bringing in new people, and especially creating new positions. The more prudent approach for a city is to hire contract labor, often supplied by consulting firms, to cover the work needed during the boom times. It is understood that the contract is for a short duration. The contractor is usually more expensive than an employee, but the short hire makes it more economical.

These consultants behave just like the city employees. They have an office (actually a cubicle) and show up at 8:00 and leave at 5:30 and dress just like everybody else. They become part of the municipal planning team and are brought into the organization for the purposes of management and efficiency. But the other employees are not allowed to get attached to the consultants. Maybe a cupcake on their birthdays, but no party. And they most certainly get no watch.

The other type of consulting does not increase staff, it increases expertise. It provides a group of specialists to a city to fix a problem, develop a plan, or make people love something that they might otherwise miss the chance to. Take the general plan. This is the long-range document that by its necessary nature is rarely updated comprehensively. There are certainly perennial amendments, but few overhauls. So while the tune-ups can be done in the garage, it is best to send the big repairs off to the shop. This is also what my firm did. We worked on big plans. We were hired for two reasons.

First, like with the contract planning demand, cities would not staff up for an intense project that might last a year or two, and then would not be repeated for another twenty. Nothing worse than general plan employees sitting idle for a couple of decades. The other reason is that, because it is not done very often, there are no real experts on a city's staff. Now that is not to say they have no expertise. All planners learn about general

plans in school, and then work with them every single day. They know the local plan and the locale far better than the consultants (certainly initially anyway).

The planning consultant works with general plan updates all the time. These are big projects, with sizable budgets and long schedules. The last one we did was \$1.4 million and took two years. Managing them is difficult at best. Wheels slipping sideways off their axles is a common metaphor in this business. Predicting the cost and timing of a general plan is voodoo. Which we would do, routinely. And I am proud to say there was no general plan that I was unable to lose money on.

I complained to myself about this work from time to time. Yes, I was doing what planners were really trained for, high level management of the developable resources of a region and community. Still, I could find room for complaint. They were complicated and political. And every town I worked in had someone who told me that their town was utterly unique. And in every town there was a measure of townsfolk who stood ready to loathe any idea we put forward, ready long before the idea was formed. So bitter sounding!

But honestly, this was great work. Travelling to different cities, taking them in, solving problems, using ideas from one to develop solutions for the next. Meeting great people, great planners. Working with overworked city managers upon whose shoulders all of this rested, and public works directors whose job it would be to build all of this, and city planners who would have to convey this into development, and citizens who would have to live there after the plan came to fruition. Really great work. (Though no watch, mind you.)

But a watch is just a metal reminder that time is passing. More precious were the handshakes. There is a moment, everyone knows it when it comes, when the job has met its success. Often on the final vote of the City Council, with many staff reports yet to be written, but the realization that the plan is approved, that discretionary milestone achieved. As the chair bangs the gavel, the room full of supporters and their counterparts stand to leave. When the planning director acknowledges her staff, then turns to you, reaches out and shakes your hand, mouthing a silent thank you. Worth its weight in gold watches. They will head off to the cocktail party, while you take the long drive home.