

Planning Theory & Values Commentary

What

A commentary written for a Planning History & Theory course at UIC. I criticized the aspirational principles of the AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct and called for activists, planners, and researchers to expand the concept of “the public interest.”

Work Performed

- Wrote the commentary in full.
- Responded in a positive manner to concerns.

Why

- Report & proposal writing
- Planning theory
- Professional Ethics and Responsibility
- Equity and justice

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Towards an Insurgent Planning Ethic

Introduction

While the AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (Code of Ethics) endorses serving the public interest and social justice, the weak structure behind aspirational principles and the debatable nature of both concerns still permit a wide range of interpretations that may not realize these concerns. However, defining the public interest and social justice as a concept open to debate can be considered advantageous because it allows varying interpretations over time. Because of the epistemological nature of these concepts within the AICP, what is ethical (regarding the public interest and social justice) can be redefined by insurgent research, professional practice, and debate within professional settings.

Aspirational Principles within Planning

The AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct begins with a set of aspirational principles; these principles form the spirit of the profession and the values it should maintain. The Code of Ethics also invokes the American Planning Associations (APA) goal of “building better, more inclusive communities” (AICP, p. 1). The first aspirational principle is a “primary obligation ... to serve the public interest;” this public interest is defined as a “conscientiously attained concept... formulated through continuous and open debate” (AICP, p. 2). The second aspirational principle is to serve “our clients and employers.” However, this is clarified to be conditional upon and “consistent with out faithful service to the public interest” (AICP, p. 2). The third and final principle is a planner’s responsibility to the profession and their colleagues.

One major concern with aspirational principles is that AICP-certified planners cannot be held accountable for the failure to uphold them; a planner can only be disciplined for violations of professional conduct in Section B of the Code of Ethics. These principles, while meaningful on paper, are difficult to translate into practice as Barrett relates (Barrett, 2001). How the public interest is defined, by whom, and in what context can vary and is not a uniform standard by which to hold planning work. Social justice similarly lacks a definition and can be open to interpretation. Barrett's hypothetical planning case of 1) increasing employment opportunities or 2) preventing pollution (and accompanying public health concerns) can be construed in the public interest, and planners and activists on both sides may argue in favor or against. The AICP aspirational principles fail to create a strong set of guidelines by leaving the definition of both social justice and public interest to open debate. A codified definition of both concepts would provide a stronger set of guidelines for planners to follow.

Insurgent Epistemology

However, the open-ended nature of both concepts in the Code of Ethics can be used to the advantage of planning activists. While lacking a codified definition of the public interest fails to provide planners with stronger guidelines, the definitions are then flexible to debate within the profession. Activists, researchers, and practicing planners can shift the profession's understanding of the public interest and social justice through politics, advocacy, research, and practice. Planning research should challenge or expand our conceptions of the public interest and bring attention to innovative projects advancing social justice. Practicing planners should bring up concerns about people of color, women, people experiencing poverty, and other underprivileged populations at commissions and in staff discussion. Activist groups can challenge developers over unfair circumstances or a lack of community involvement. These

activities challenge current circumstances and invoke the Code of Ethics, allowing planners and the communities they represent to reconsider their own conceptions of justice and public interest. The flexibility of the current Code of Ethics and aspirational principles lends itself to an insurgent, activist epidemiology the public interest and social justice influencing the profession.

Sources

AICP (2016) “Code of ethics and professional conduct,” American Institute of Certified Planners

Accessed 21 November 2019: www.planning.org/ethics/ethicscode.htm.

Barrett C (2001) “Introduction,” in *Everyday Ethics for Practicing Planners*. Washington, DC:

American Institute of Planners, American Planning Association.