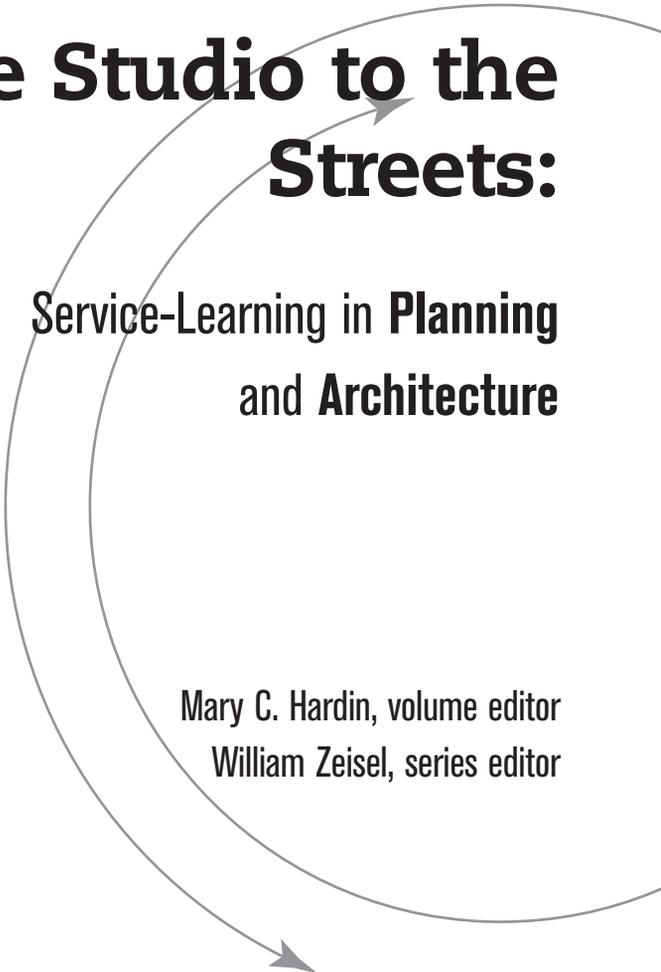


# **From the Studio to the Streets:**



**Service-Learning in Planning  
and Architecture**

**Mary C. Hardin, volume editor**  
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# A Core Commitment to Service-Learning: Bridging Planning Theory and Practice

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## Introduction

A longstanding and common criticism of planning education is the persistent gap between theoretical and practical modes of instruction (Perloff 1957; Rich et al. 1970; Schön 1970; de Neufville 1983; Sawicki 1988; Tyson and Low 1987; Garcia 1993; Friedmann and Kuester 1994; Baum 1997; Shepherd and Cosgriff 1998; Birch 2001). However, service-learning, especially when embedded in the core curriculum, offers a bridge for connecting theory-based instruction, where students study or conduct research on the planning process, and practice-based instruction, where they participate in the planning process.

This essay begins with an historical synopsis of the theory-practice divide in planning education and a detailed description of how and why the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) crafted a new service-learning model for the Master in City Planning (MCP) curriculum. Midway through, the focus shifts to a case study of one practicum to demonstrate how mutually advantageous university-community partnerships can occur and the benefits to be realized by community organizations and residents. The final part describes how MIT's service-learning model encourages students to integrate planning theory and practice, and considers the many challenges associated with institutionalizing service-learning.

## The Theory-Practice Divide

Although MIT offered planning courses in the School of Architecture as early as 1921, it took more than 15 years for the nation's second independent MCP program to officially materialize (Garcia 1993). For the next three decades and in tandem with schools like Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, MIT's planning curriculum emphasized planning practice above theory, as evidenced by the volume of studio courses offered during this time. The 1960s proved to be both a promising and a turbulent time for planning schools (Ozawa and Seltzer 2000). First, planning education became more popular. For example, between 1960 and 1970, the number of planning programs increased by 50 percent (Birch 2001). Second, to further define the field and ensure that future professionals possessed the requisite skills, many schools adopted a core curriculum consisting of three parts:

basic knowledge, basic methods, and problem solving — a pedagogical paradigm that remains intact today. By contrast, this was also a time when schools of planning, including MIT's, experienced growing tensions between theory and practice.

The divide emerged as the value systems in universities shifted, and planning schools hired new faculty who were well-trained in the social sciences but had very little experience with planning practice (Sawicki 1988). Thus, a norm was established: planning professors were expected to conduct research and create planning theory, while planning professionals outside the walls of academia were responsible for its application. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the divide deepened, as the curriculum of most planning schools diverged from a focus on professional practice to a more theoretical orientation. For example, in 1967, MIT eliminated its core curriculum, which included a series of studios. A new set of core subjects, put in place by the mid-1980s, did not require studio courses (Rich 1970). The decision to exclude studios from the core accentuated the department's steady movement away from practice-based instruction. This trend continued in planning schools across the country, despite the cohort of educators who argued for the value of engaging students in professional settings to prepare them for the day-to-day reality of planning practice (Schön 1970; Schön et al. 1976; Tyson and Low 1987; Hemmens 1988).

For the past four decades, planning schools, like all academic professional schools, have faced the dilemma of teaching the art of practice within a system largely concerned with the advancement of theory. Nevertheless, many planning educators remain engaged in planning practice and committed to offering courses that expose students to professional planning practice. Some of these instructors provide opportunities for students to participate in service-learning, which is a type of practice that enables students to work with a client, confront place-based problems, and reflect on the consequences of their actions (Shepherd and Cosgriff 1998; Ozawa and Seltzer 1999; Frank 2002). Difficulties notwithstanding, the planning education literature shows that service-learning not only benefits students but also empowers community organizations and residents by building capacity and supplementing their efforts with additional resources such as information technologies (Grant and Manuel 1995; Dewar and Isaac 1998; LeGates and Robinson 1998; Rubin 1998; Baum 2000). Moreover, a movement to bridge the theory-practice divide via service-learning instruction is apparent in the contemporary literature on planning pedagogy (Grant and Manuel 1995; Dewar and Isaac 1998; Ozawa and Seltzer 1999; Baum 2000; Frank 2002).

This essay expands the burgeoning conversation by offering a more comprehensive approach, namely, the institutionalization of service-learning courses into the MCP core curriculum. What follows

is one department's struggle to assemble a service-learning model that emphasizes the relationship between theory and practice and prepares students for the transition from the academy to the world of professional planning.

## **Crafting the Blueprints for a Bridge**

In fall 2000, MIT's MCP Committee, led by Dennis Frenchman, a planning professor and practitioner with more than 25 years of experience, made a commitment to examining the core curriculum and revitalizing the MCP degree program. To confront the task of changing a curriculum that had been in place for nearly 20 years, the committee members designed a comprehensive and participatory planning process that included regular meetings with students, alumni, and instructors. After carefully reviewing their contributions and considering the requirements set forth by the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB), committee members decided to craft one educational experience for all incoming students and recommended that the new core curriculum focus on four basic competencies. It restructured the core so that each student would experience a common gateway course, take a course in an area of specialization, and acquire basic computing and quantitative skills. As the fourth competency, and for the first time in nearly 40 years, students would be required to advance their knowledge and skills by participating in a field-based practicum (Sanyal 2003). The committee quickly adopted "practicum" instead of "studio," because it is a term used by a wide range of professional programs to describe the experience of a professional-in-training and it accentuates the art of a profession, thus placing an emphasis on synthesis above analysis (Wetmore and Heumann 1988).

The notion of a required practicum surfaced (or resurfaced) for two reasons. First, urban design studios, which had been expanding from the early 1990s, began to attract students in other areas of planning — such as community development, environmental policy, or regional planning — who desired to gain real-world experience prior to professional practice. Second, some of the students had a different approach to planning that included an interest in working with community members, engaging in collective decision-making processes, and directly confronting issues of race, class, and gender (Kirschbaum 2003). Frenchman placed the idea of a required practicum experience on the core agenda, and argued that a professional planning education should require that students develop important leadership skills and learn how to synthesize innovative solutions to the complexities of real-world problems. In his mind, the practicum was the most appropriate way to meet these objectives (Frenchman 2003).

At the second MCP Committee meeting, Frenchman suggested that the department implement several practica, in a variety of national and international contexts. At this pivotal moment, Bishwapriya Sanyal, then department chair, deliberately guided the conversation toward a model of service-learning. For example, he pointed out that the faculty ought to strengthen relationships with institutions in nearby Boston. The practicum experience, he contended, would be more meaningful for students if the department pursued a model whereby university-community relationships were built on trust. A multi-year commitment, he added, would be the best way to foster such a relationship (Frenchman 2003).

## **Building the Bridge**

In fall 2001, Frenchman launched and chaired the MCP Core Practicum Committee. Composed of faculty and student representatives, the group first focused on the development of course selection criteria and later managed the course selection and implementation processes. To ensure that the practica met essential pedagogical goals, the committee members identified and defined a distinctive set of requirements that each of the practica would be required to meet. Ultimately, they adopted six, which characterize the service-learning model adopted for MIT's MCP students.

The first criterion, "Involve Constituents and Issues at a Particular Place," draws attention to the intrinsic connection between service activity and learning. This requirement emphasizes the importance of establishing a long-term commitment with a client, such as a sponsoring agency, organization, or community group. In this framework, students build on the work done by their predecessors, achieving goals that have greater impact and more meaning to the community. Moreover, when students work within a community, the committee concluded, they need to balance the interests of a diverse set of stakeholders and confront issues related to diversity and planning. (Throughout this essay, the rubric "diversity and planning" includes confronting issues of race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, and social exclusion.)

The second criterion, "Provide Opportunities for Reflection and Appraisal," encourages responsible civic participation by requiring students to examine their beliefs and assumptions and how past experiences affect their actions. The committee determined that each practicum course would require students to confront deep biases and assumptions about people and communities. Reflection takes place through class discussions, journaling, and self-learning assessments, thus creating a forum where faculty can guide students to become more conscientious citizens and planners.

The third criterion, “Include Opportunities to Put Theory into Practice,” explicitly stresses the nexus between planning theory and practice. Student work that draws on experience with similar issues in other places, as well as the relevant literature, will facilitate the formulation of new theory. Moreover, faculty who are selected to participate must investigate linkages between the project and the development of theory, beyond the scope of the practicum, by supervising student involvement with community-based internships, research projects, and theses.

The fourth criterion, “Encourage Exploration and Innovation,” is consistent with the spirit of MIT, an environment where students are encouraged to explore and take risks. Practica represent an opportunity to develop new tools and approaches for addressing problems. The expectation is that such an approach nurtures creativity and potentially introduces a wider array of solutions to the community.

The fifth criterion, “Address Cross-Cutting Issues and Involve Allied Disciplines,” recognizes that planning practice involves interdisciplinary teamwork as well as the consideration of many perspectives and interrelated issues. Practica, therefore, must integrate different planning disciplines and involve faculty with divergent interests. In some instances, faculty invite outside specialists to offer expertise beyond what is available in the community or the university.

The final criterion, “Make and Test Proposals,” reinforces the objective of giving students the experience and skills to develop proposals in the face of incomplete information and conflicting points of view. Such proposals become tools of decision making and consensus building as well as ways to engender constituent feedback for evolving plans and projects; they reinforce direct and meaningful client involvement. Finally, upon completion of each practicum, both the student and the client will have a tangible product that represents the culmination of their joint efforts.

After the adoption of the practicum criteria, the MCP Core Practicum Committee, now chaired by Karl Seidman, focused on course selection and implementation. To begin, Seidman conducted personal interviews with individual faculty members. The interview data enabled him to identify faculty members interested in developing a new service-learning practicum course. Simultaneously, committee members formed small working groups to tackle administrative concerns associated with computing, classroom space, funding, and matching students to classes, as well as pedagogical matters such as devising methods for incorporating reflection. To acquire additional feedback, the committee sponsored a student meeting and distributed a seven-page survey to faculty experienced in teaching studio courses.

In January 2003, the MCP Core Practicum Committee began a review of courses against the selection criteria. The committee prepared

an instrument consisting of questions for each criterion that facilitated the review practicum proposals (Seidman 2002):

**1. Involve Constituents and Issues at a Particular Place**

Is there a long-term relationship with a specific client? Is there a process to engage students with constituents as part of formulating the plan?

**2. Provide Opportunities for Reflection and Appraisal**

How do students examine their assumptions and their engagement with the community? What approaches and tools for fostering this reflection are being used?

**3. Include Opportunities to Put Theory into Practice**

How does the course content relate to planning theory? In what ways does the course project allow students to apply these theories?

**4. Encourage Exploration and Innovation**

Does the course apply new tools to understanding problems and developing solutions? What new tools or approaches is it incorporating?

**5. Address Cross-Cutting Issues and Involve Allied Disciplines**

Do the course content and project address cross-cutting problems and issues? Does the course expose students to expertise from multiple disciplines?

**6. Make and Test Proposals**

Does the course project involve formulating specific plans and proposals? Is there a process to incorporate client feedback in the final plan?

Rather than require instructors to undergo an application process, the committee held a series of focused interviews to evaluate each proposal, and this instrument was helpful in structuring a two-way exchange of information with faculty, especially those who were less familiar with the selection criteria (Seidman 2003).

In March, committee members convened to choose a subset from the 11 courses presented. Beyond ensuring that the courses met the criteria, they attended to the emerging interest in diversity and planning articulated by both the faculty and the study body. Committee members established a complementary collection of three courses in diverse inner-city settings in Boston, Springfield, and Lawrence. (Practica courses in international as well as suburban contexts were recently introduced into the core curriculum.)

## **Destination: Lawrence, Massachusetts**

The Lawrence practicum demonstrates one way that university-community partnerships materialize, and how service-learning not only prepares students for professional practice but also results in sophisticated and useful products for community organizations and residents.

Also, it sets the stage for describing how MIT's service-learning model supports a connection between theory and practice, and the difficulties with integrating service-learning into the core curriculum.

For nearly two decades, Lawrence has functioned as an urban laboratory for MIT planning faculty and their students. Faculty have taught planning studios with deliverables ranging from the development of commercial revitalization plans for the city's Office of Economic Development to a spatial analysis for Lawrence Community Works, Inc. (LCW). Moreover, at least 10 MCP students have written theses requiring intimate involvement with the city and its inhabitants, and countless others have participated in summer internships with nonprofit organizations and public-sector agencies throughout the city. A professional network has resulted from these ad hoc arrangements as evidenced by the number of MCP alumni who work and live in Lawrence. For example, several former MCP students work at LCW, while others hold key positions at the city's Planning Department, Groundwork Lawrence, and other local organizations.

Today, the Lawrence practicum, Information and Communication Technologies in Community Development, is the cornerstone of MIT's multi-year partnership with LCW, a community-development corporation dedicated to organizing, planning, and community building. This practicum presents a unique learning opportunity for students, residents, and instructors because it creates a single and continuous point of entry for MIT. Furthermore, through the alumni network, MIT forges a true partnership with the community, founded on trust and mutual respect (LeGates and Robinson 1998).

Lawrence is an ideal context for a service-learning-oriented planning practicum because it is a readily accessible, intensely diverse, and spirited community. Located approximately 25 miles north of Cambridge, Lawrence is easily accessed by bus, train, or automobile. Physical proximity permits students to attend community meetings and public hearings and work hand-in-hand with LCW staff and their constituents. This model of service-learning, although time-consuming, asks students to function as participants rather than consultants, so they can better understand the role of relationships in community building and neighborhood development. Furthermore, Lawrence, long known as the "Immigrant City," is a setting where issues of diversity and planning — a field explicitly supported by MIT's Planning Department — naturally converge.

Lawrence was established in 1847 as a highly planned industrial town and initially attracted immigrants from Canada, England, Germany, and Ireland. By the early 1900s, migrants from Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Syria were living in Lawrence's company boarding houses and working in the textile mills along the Merrimack River. The next wave of newcomers, mostly from Puerto Rico and the Domini-

can Republic and some from Vietnam and Cambodia, arrived shortly after the United States changed its immigration laws in the 1960s. According to the 2000 Census, 60 percent of Lawrence's total population self-identifies as Latino, up from 3.5 percent in 1970. Like many older cities in the Northeast, Lawrence has experienced an exodus of manufacturing jobs. As a result, newcomers have fewer employment opportunities than did their predecessors. Anglo-Latino tensions, unemployment levels, and issues of bilingual education aside, the collective Lawrence spirit is hopeful. One explanation is the presence of the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative (RGI), one of the largest economic development projects in the Commonwealth. Reviviendo, "return to life," represents a long-term and resident-led strategy to redesign the entrance to the city from Interstate 495 and transform the surrounding neighborhoods.

## Traversing the Divide

During the eight-month RGI strategic planning process, which included more than 350 residents, LCW identified the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information as an integral component of the project, yet lacked the means to implement the latest information and communication technologies. I was interested in exploring the role of information and communication technologies in community development, and recognized that there was a mutually beneficial way to solve the problem.

While LCW was eager to benefit from the technical support that MIT's faculty and students could deliver, they perceived the proposed practicum as more than a one-way flow of technical assistance. After some deliberation, MIT and LCW concluded that the practicum represented an opportunity to advance beyond an impromptu working relationship and embark on a focused, multi-year partnership. The practicum enabled students and faculty to become integral parts of the RGI vision by infusing the process with information and communication technologies. In broad terms, the partnership follows a participatory action-research model, whereby LCW members actively contribute to the design and implementation of a Web-based planning tool. In contrast to the conventional model of theory-based instruction and the most prevalent type of practice-based instruction, organizational members do not function as passive subjects, nor do the researchers act as experts whose principal responsibility is to deliver a specialized product (Whyte et al. 1989). In particular, LCW expressed an interest in working with youth to acquire data and develop a Web-based system, with mapping and other capabilities, that would enable the organization to share information, perform analyses, and foster greater community involvement in the RGI. This agenda, as depicted in Figure

1, constitutes the dominant framework for the partnership as well as the practicum. (Additional information about the MIT-LCW partnership is available at [www.urbanrevitalization.net](http://www.urbanrevitalization.net).)



**Figure 1. MIT students and LCW working in Lawrence**

## Looking Back

In October 2003, the Lawrence City Council voted unanimously to pass the Reviviendo overlay district proposal, which went into effect immediately. The RGI's first initiative, the overlay district, represents an historic modification to the zoning code that streamlines the approval process for developers and property owners interested in building or expanding structures. This victory is meaningful to the MIT faculty and students who worked to promote the overlay district.

MCP students and LCW staff designed a Web-based neighborhood information system, or "sistema de informaci3n sobre el vecindario," to publicize information pertaining to the RGI and the overlay district project. The site, which is fully accessible to the public and located at [www.avencia.com/lcw/](http://www.avencia.com/lcw/), consists of two parts. "Tell Me More about My Neighborhood" (Digame M1s Sobre Mi Vecindario) allows users to explore neighborhoods with visual aids such as photographs, sketches, bar charts, and maps. For example, data from the U.S. Census Bureau

enable LCW staff and residents to see how the population has changed over the past 30 years. Moreover, site visitors can view photographs of severely dilapidated as well as newly rehabilitated structures within the overlay district area, collected by youth who participate in LCW’s Young Architects program. The other section of the site, “What Is Reviviendo?” (¿Qué es Reviviendo?), disseminates information about the working committees and tells residents how to get involved. It also offers access to the zoning overlay proposal and demonstrates how it will affect different groups, including homeowners, small businesses, mill owners, and artists.



**Figure 2. RGI homepage**

The most dynamic aspect of the site, the interactive address-mapping function, helps users understand the geographical scope and potential of the overlay district. For example, to determine if a property falls within the boundaries of the district, users simply enter a street address. As shown in Figure 3, the system responds by exhibiting a map along with the public information pertaining to the property, such as district status, size, deed date, deed book and page number, land value, building value, tax abatement, tax delinquency, and addresses of adjacent properties.



**Figure 3. Interactive address mapping function**

## Maintaining the Connection

Although MIT has embraced service-learning, many challenges remain. Bringing the classroom into the community creates an occasion for faculty to explore the nexus between theory and practice. MIT's new service-learning model explicitly requires faculty to inform planning action with theory ("Include Opportunities to Put Theory into Practice"). In the Lawrence practicum, for example, students are expected to complete readings on the theoretical aspects of power relationships and the literature on collaborative planning; they are also expected to apply this knowledge as they work on the project in the field. Rather than passively accept how LCW staff and Lawrence residents interact, students rely on theories of planning to call into question the process by which stakeholders identify problems and build consensus; they test and expand planning theories. Furthermore, the second criterion, "Provide Opportunities for Reflection and Appraisal," encourages them to function as reflective practitioners, that is, practitioners who refine their practice by examining how their beliefs guide their decisions and actions (Schön 1983). This process often entails a synthesis of theory and practice. For example, each of the inner-city

practica places a strong emphasis on working within diverse communities, which gives students an opportunity to compare a theoretical understanding of racial and ethnic discrimination with what they observe and experience on the site. It is important to note that while MIT planning instructors were eager to integrate methods of reflection into the practica, few possessed such skills, and most sought training through MIT's Center for Reflective Community Practice.

Despite MIT's recent success with introducing a service-learning model into the MCP core curriculum, there are several logistical and pedagogical challenges worthy of discussion. For example, continuity — maintaining relationships and momentum with community organizations within a discontinuous academic framework — is a formidable challenge. University-community partnerships are often difficult because meaningful relationships require students and faculty to spend a considerable amount of time at the site. Graduate students, with a two-year tenure that is interrupted with exams and long breaks, are often unable to engage fully with off-campus clients. However, service-learning that is part of the core curriculum and that obliges faculty to work with a community organization for several years (“Involve Constituents and Issues at a Particular Place”) produces several opportunities. A multi-year schedule gives faculty ample time to acquire funding and conduct long-term research projects grounded in the community. Support from the department and assured external funding enable faculty to hire research assistants who work continuously with the community organization, including summers. In this way, the service-learning practicum is more than a teaching obligation for faculty; it is an important part of their long-term intellectual agenda. Moreover, students have a wider range of prospects for applying theory to practice within such a framework. For example, students may take the Lawrence practicum in their first year at MIT, work as research assistants during the second year, and construct master's theses that examine information technologies and community development in both practical and theoretical terms.

As mentioned earlier, the criterion “Address Cross-Cutting Issues and Involve Allied Disciplines” requires faculty with different interests to co-teach practicum courses. The intent is to engage students in interdisciplinary work; however, this is difficult because students possess divergent perspectives, abilities, and skills. However, this mandate also presents an opportunity to couple practice-oriented instructors with theory-oriented instructors and produce a classroom environment where students and instructors work together to bridge the seemingly dichotomous paradigms. Similarly, while MIT students have the ability to select a practicum that best matches their interests, the instructors review final enrollment to ensure that each course contains students with a wide range of expertise. This enables

instructors to balance those students who prefer practice and those who subscribe to a more theoretical approach.

Other logistical hardships include the coordination of participant (faculty, student, and community member) schedules and agendas. For example, to produce meaningful products (“Make and Test Proposals”), participants must work to organize individual schedules both within and among practica offerings.

However, there are intellectual and economic benefits to coordinating multiple service-learning practica. For example, by deliberately focusing on a single substantive theme in the planning literature, participants can share their service-learning experiences. Although students are working on different projects, with different constituents, in different places, cross-cutting conversations can occur because a critical mass of MCP students and faculty coalesces around a common theme — namely, diversity and planning. Because the theme also reflects the department’s broader agenda, other opportunities surface. For example, throughout fall 2003, the department sponsored weekly lunches with guest speakers who addressed questions like, “How Do Immigrants, Minorities and Excluded Groups Build Institutions, Power, and Networks?” Moreover, departments enjoy economies of scale when they synchronize service-learning initiatives. MIT’s service-learning model urges faculty to “Encourage Exploration and Innovation.” This may involve the use of technologies like the Web and GIS. Faculty members benefit from sharing both equipment, like laptop computers, network servers, and digital video cameras, and an administrative assistant. Instructors can direct their energies toward curriculum and research development (such as practice-theory connections) rather than becoming overburdened with administrative tasks.

The most formidable barrier to institutionalizing service-learning exists at the university level. Today, most universities reward planning faculty who participate in traditional research projects and publish work in refereed academic journals. The payoff for service-learning instruction has yet to materialize. Unlike schools of architecture or the fine arts, where practice-based teaching is essential to success, junior faculty in planning have yet to observe such activities as an effective strategy for advancing within the academy. However, the increasing demand for service-learning, and growing recognition of its benefits, may enable faculty to rally departmental support and challenge university-level policies, thus advancing the discipline. As Donald Schön and other renowned planning theorists have argued, city planning cannot advance solely on the basis of academic ruminations or analysis. Planning is a profession in action that must synthesize solutions, and therefore practice is the most legitimate route to planning theory.

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