

# HESP

Higher Education in Spatial Planning. Positions and Reflections

von  
Bernd Scholl

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POSITIONS AND REFLECTIONS

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Bernd Scholl *(ed.)*

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## Preface

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Universities and technical schools educate today for the tasks of the future. Ideas about what tasks will be meaningful for spatial planning and development in the future must therefore be the central starting point of a university education. Research and education thus stand in close interaction.

Spatial development in Europe and abroad is now facing unprecedented major challenges. As before, the expansion of settlement areas continues to draw on valuable cultural land, the overload from large infrastructures keeps increasing and, under tight financial conditions, the development of major transportation infrastructures can no longer keep up with the desired economic development.

Especially in numerous Eastern European countries, there are still extensive environmental protection problems to be solved, in other countries, a change of energy supply will offer new possibilities, but could also create big conflicts.

Among the challenges are the development of a comprehensive approach to the spatial impact and the con-

sequences of change in society, climate, and technology. The core task of spatial planning is the orderly, sustainable design of our living spaces. For about a half-century, spatial planning has been embedded in the law as an institutionalised public function and is therefore part of the function of public administration and decision-making. The various levels of spatial planning have, depending on the respective countries, a variety of regulations and quite different jurisdictions. The planning culture in interaction with spatially relevant actors is likewise quite different. Spatial planning is a discipline that is deeply bound to language, culture and paradigm.

Although worldwide usable models for the acquisition and testing of solutions can offer valuable insights and foundations, seldom can they replace real space as a learning laboratory. That is especially true for the understanding of social, legal and political interactions. Therefore, cooperation with leading actors in practice is of central importance in a high-quality education.

University education is in an upheaval. Far-reaching changes in the field of education (for example, the Bologna reform in Europe), new possibilities for learning that are independent of time and place (e-learning), expanded possibilities for experiments using tailor-made

models, and additional demands on graduates have led to new study programs and educational concepts.

In times of rapid change, it is necessary to get the overview and deeper insights about the state and perspectives of higher education in our field. Therefore, the Chair of Spatial Development took the initiative to invite colleagues from different countries and continents, from universities and practise to start a dialogue and discourse about future demands, challenges and perspectives of Higher Education in Spatial Planning (HESP).

In a sequence of HESPs, as we are calling the respective symposia of 2009, 2010 and 2011, positions and arguments were developed and strengthened. By the middle of 2011, instead of only talking about the education of our students, we invited them to present results from their studios and projects. This was an exciting moment and created an interesting and inspiring discussion among the group. And even more important, it encouraged us to collect our results, observations and experiences in a publication on this topic.

We hope this book will stimulate discussions and debates in the various countries and, most important, that

it will help establish studio and project-based learning as a top-quality common core of university curricula of spatial planning.

Our thanks go to all the contributors to the HESP symposia, most especially, the authors of the individual contributions, the editors' group, the Director of Studies of the MAS Program in Spatial Planning ETH Zurich and the Coordinator and Secretary of the events.

Prof. Dr. Bernd Scholl

Chair for Spatial Development, ETH Zurich

Zurich, September 2012



## Introduction

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### Bernd Scholl

The initiative, Higher Education in Spatial Planning – HESP, took shape over the three years between 2009 and 2011 as a series of international symposia at ETH Zurich. The idea behind this initiative was to stimulate the debate about higher education in our field.

In this undertaking, we could also bring in earlier deliberations and initiatives from colleagues and institutions.<sup>1</sup>

We had the opportunity to discuss the first results of our initiative on different occasions, for example, at relevant national institutions and a round table at the World Congress of Planning Schools in 2011 in Perth, Australia. Discussions with colleagues showed that

there is a strong concern to keep the quality of education up in a time of economic crisis. It seems that universities are facing far more formal regulations on one hand and reduced budgets for education on other. As we will demonstrate in this book, in a globalised world with limited natural resources – where land plays a key role – the challenges of severe changes in world population and climate will increase the demands on the quality of education in our field.

We have to take into consideration that spatial planning, even in a more globalised world, is still very strongly tied to language, culture and the local patterns of thinking, acting and decision-making. This is and has to be reflected by the various curricula. Nevertheless, we were confronted with a more or less common understanding that guided and explorative learning-by-doing, using the best available knowledge, is essential for academic discourse and progress in our action-oriented academic domain.

### Principles of Learning

Usually there are two principle alternate foundations for academic study. First, a defined knowledge packet is communicated to the students and, second, assistance

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<sup>1</sup> The following contributions deserve special mention: Core Requirements for a High-Quality European Planning Education, AESOP Working Group on Planning Education, p. 23, AESOP 2008; Global Report on Human Settlements: Revisiting Urban Planning, Chapter 10: Planning Education and Challenges of Urban Areas, 2009; Policy Statement of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), London 2004.

is offered in an open, critical and inspiring environment and the students learn to use their own minds in various areas of knowledge.

In the first, schools and its teaching approach are based on a defined knowledge package. Such a packet is based on known problems and their known and applied solutions. In Europe, the Matura degree was originally the end of this kind of schooling. As a result of the Enlightenment, the existence of true, permanently established knowledge was denied. What had once proved true could become false. New knowledge could replace theories, models, methods and routines that had been deemed correct for centuries. The never-ending search for enlightenment, otherwise known as research, is indispensable for a strong society with responsible members.

Academic study should not be led by any current ruling concept, rather it should allow the unsolved problems to lead the process, the small as well as the large, theoretical as well as practical. This approach yields the connection between research and education. The special task of academics is to examine the world with open questions and to remain learners throughout their entire lives: in practice, in education and in research.

If the study of unsolved problems is introduced to the academic program, it would bring in aspects that are difficult to teach theoretically, but are easier to learn through experience. For example: the selection of assumptions and tools, the processes of discovering and testing, making mistakes, learning from them and moving on, encountering and recognising fragments of knowledge always presumed to be imperfect, practicing new skills and organisations. These resist being put into clearly definable knowledge packets. Academic educators should therefore report and lecture on how they have tried, and are trying, to solve difficult real-world problems, whether they failed or succeeded. This then belongs to the knowledge base of what is accepted today as proven knowledge.

Academic teaching designed in such a way would also be of the highest practical importance. Academics have an obligation to act where proven routines are missing or unusable. This is why there is varied and often contradictory partial information. Academics should be ready and capable of independently filling the gaps in their knowledge and skills with new tasks.

If defined knowledge packets are what is communicated, then testing is simple; one establishes whether

the content can be reproduced. For academic studies, in contrast, the capability to think over and systematically engage with unsolved problems is central, both inside and outside one's discipline, theoretically and practically, large and small, and, to be able to report clearly about them. To evaluate the quality of these capabilities in a student requires that the educator has experienced them – and continues to experience them – as a lack of actual experience will cause problems in the attempts to clarify or explain both the problem and the solution.

Difficult questions are linked up with a mass of information and thus recede from full visibility. Without using abstraction and hypotheses or theories for simplification, large or small, known or self-designed, one runs around blindly. However, abstraction consistently hides the danger of things being distorted. It is an important speciality of academic studies to learn to construct and employ abstractions correctly and purposefully. If it concerns a problem in the area of visibility, the pictorial, the tangible, or the concrete, then other educational methods are more appropriate.

The students from the fields where knowledge appears to be secure will be thrown into a world of incomplete

knowledge, parts of which are simply conflicting shards. This is what is offered to the student, the rigor of an incessant, independent study and the burden, even the hardship, of documenting his knowledge and his capabilities in extensive interdisciplinary papers. This makes acquiring a truly academic education a challenge and, depending on devotion and dedication, a gift and an obligation for one's entire life.

### Enabling Exploratory Learning

Using unsolved problems with real connections to actual practice must be the core of learning. Here teaching is more about coaching students to open their minds to various solutions and about being able to evaluate suggestions from the students through experimental knowledge drawn from one's own practice. Learning the required knowledge is achieved in this method not through the reproduction of presented information, but mainly through the first-hand experience of exploratory learning.

For many academics, this kind of learning is unusual because the outcome of each process is open and brings with it the adventure of exploring unknown territory and it makes teachers into a supervising partner for stu-

dents as well as a partner in collaborative learning. This route is lined with many questions, and can develop into a culture of enquiry. Since Socrates, we have known about the importance of asking critical questions before giving any answers. In some cultural circles, open questions are seen as a sign of a lack of knowledge, so questioning does not occur, much to the disadvantage of the students who are thirsty for knowledge. As researchers, and even more as practicing planners, we are very aware of the significance of the interplay of critical questions and answers. As part of our responsibilities, setting the game of questions and answers in motion is a key task, along with ensuring that all the conflicts and difficulties do not get lost – we do not know of any difficult task in which someone was in possession of the solution in advance, i.e., the ultimate truth and wisdom. Potential solutions must be robust and capable of holding up over the long haul in order to survive the laborious wrestling with critical arguments that take place on the road to a decision.

University learning and education can and must prepare for this reality.

### How to use this book

Given this knowledge, we have not tried, or better said, we have resisted the temptation to develop a role model for a curriculum for planning studies. It appears more important to us to formulate a common and thereby cross-nation and cross-culture position for higher education in spatial planning. We regard this to a certain extent as a guideline for a high-ranking education. Several working groups were formed at the symposia for this purpose:

- Missions, Goals and Features
- The Core of the Planning Discipline
- Demands of Practice
- Current Practice of Planning Education
- Future Directions of Planning Education

The discourse that follows the publication of this HESP book should show whether these positions can be condensed at a later point in time to a manifest for higher education in spatial planning. Those who participated in this initiative are ready to do that.

Independent of the joint positions represented in this publication, we want to use the chance to introduce the personal experiences and thoughts of the university

teachers and experts from practice who participated in the HESP symposia. We have called this part Reflections. Naturally, these thoughts and ideas have quite a different focus, for example, some are dedicated to education in spatial planning or to the current state of education in various regions and their perspectives.

Between the contributions of the first part, Positions, we have inserted double pages with a picture on the left. On the right side, you will find some statements about spatial planning that the authors have agreed upon. There are five groups (Mission, Needs, Principles, Movement and Profession and, finally, Learning). These could be the basis for the above-mentioned manifest.

The double pages in the second part, Reflections, contain a series of important maxims to observe when it comes to implementation.

The layout of this book makes it possible, independent of the information of the joint positions, to initially go deeper into the personal reflections. Of course, it is also possible to follow the given sequence. In any case, we wish you enjoyment and new knowledge gained from the following contributions.