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## Viewpoint

By Frank Popper

Few American planners doubt that climate change and energy costs will force us to change our national way of life over the next decades. But is American planning ready for the shifts? Can planners help us work through them? I am uneasy on both counts. I want my fears to be baseless, but cannot persuade myself that they are.

The present challenges are fundamental, but American planners — the profession as a whole, in fact — don't seem to grasp how deep they go. It is not simply a matter of higher costs for food, fuel, materials, and health care (and in many cases higher land and building costs as well), nasty though these are. The challenges reach into our very structure as a society — not the sort of issue that most planners are comfortable dealing with.

The problem is that our basic planning tools don't necessarily fit the scale or type of problem we will meet in coming years. Our measures are mainly local. Zoning, environmental impact statements, growth management plans, new urbanist codes, subdivision ordinances, sewage requirements, and public health laws — these familiar land-use devices come from the America and Britain of a century ago, even if their current language didn't emerge until later. New urbanism, for example, has deep roots in the British Garden City movement. Large parks, planned developments, open space schemes, and other kinds of land preservation techniques that by happy accident turn out to sequester carbon mostly date back to the late 19th century.

Many of our devices, while reformist in their day, actually impede further reform. Installing solar panels, reintroducing native plants, or creating new retention ponds frequently can be a surefire way of running afoul of zoning's permitted uses. Wind farms can amount to LULUs (locally unwanted land uses) for their neighbors, who point to the violation of environmental laws: witness the well-publicized Cape Cod case, which stirred the protests of numerous celebrities.

In short, one generation's innovation may eventually become another generation's obstacle — a planning device turned against the very idea of anticipating the future.

Our troubles are increasingly regional, national, and global, but we have not been able to do much about planning's persistent land-use localism. Decades after the Quiet Revolution was supposed to install state land-use planning throughout the country, only about 15 states have seriously adopted the idea. We do next to no multistate regional planning, even as large parts of the country — for instance, the Great Plains and the Lower Mississippi Delta — continue their generations-long depopulation. We do little national land-use planning, don't want to admit it when we do, and don't recognize its environmental purpose. Cross-national land-use planning seems beyond anyone's ken, in the U.S. or elsewhere.

**Does this mean that planners will end up on the wrong side of history?** Like most American commuters, we at heart favor public transportation for other people. We have few ideas for undoing the national devaluation of working-class life, especially in big cities and rural areas. We preside over and often hasten the new reverse metropolitanism, where the rich move to downtowns and nearby in-town neighborhoods and the poor are displaced to the outlying, and often inaccessible, suburbs. We can't conceive of alternatives to conventional growth even as it repeatedly harms us. We don't act on even our quarter-loaf commitment to regionalism, let alone truly embrace globalism.

In truth, planning is a field that, like many American professions, has a high-tech gloss of competence but finds it hard to make the imaginative leap to the future and its emerging prospects. It would be sad if the fine tradition of progressive, forward-looking urban and suburban reform turns into an impulse that is unknowably more reactionary and backward-looking.

A new world is coming, but I'm not absolutely convinced that we can adapt to it. Tell me why I'm wrong.

*Frank Popper is a two-time former APA board member who teaches land-use planning at Rutgers and Princeton universities.*

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