

# PLANNING THE MIRAGE: LESSONS FOR PLANNING EDUCATION FROM ABU DHABI

Surajit Chakravarty<sup>a</sup>, Abdellatif Qamhaieh<sup>b</sup>

(Received 17 September 2018; revised version received 17 February 2019; final version accepted 28 April 2019)

## Abstract

Throughout the 1980s planning educators disagreed on the appropriateness of Western planning education for poor countries' students, and on the question of whether training of students from developing countries should be based on "general principles" or "contextual material specific to poor countries" (Sanyal, 1990, p.8). Today most planning programs in North America (and in the West in general) offer courses in 'international development', 'world cities', 'urbanization in the global South', or closely related topics. However, as 'the other' becomes more mainstream in Western planning education, the belief that Western planning education is robust enough to accommodate global differences (the 'one world' model of planning education), becomes more entrenched. Further, an unspoken assumption goes unquestioned – that planning curricula, too, just like planning skills, can be transferred internationally.

Over the last three decades or so, the advent of the age of interconnected economies and the networked society, has had a profound impact on global trends of development and urbanization. This paper argues that the question of appropriate planning curricula ought to be revisited especially from the perspective of education in developing countries.

Scholars educated in the West, who are teaching in developing countries, are in a unique position to assess the utility of bringing Western planning education to less developed parts of the world. This paper is based on the authors' observations and experiences over seven years, teaching Urban Planning at undergraduate level at a private university in Abu Dhabi. During this period the authors were involved with program design, course design, accreditation and quality assurance, mentorship, along with university service, teaching, and research.

The paper evaluates the practices and circumstances of urban planning in UAE and the implications for planning education. It is argued that there is a fundamental disconnect between the profession's ethics, and the reality of planning practice in the region. This gap has not been considered in depth in either program design or in accreditation standards. The paper concludes with recommendations for planning education in the Gulf region.

### *Keywords*

*Planning education, UAE, Gulf, Global South, one world planning*

---

a (Corresponding author) Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, India. E-mail: schakrav@iimcal.ac.in

b American University in Dubai, UAE. E-mail: aqamhaieh@aud.edu

## 1. An Evolving Debate on the 'One World' Approach

The "dualism-versus-universalism" (Burayidi, 1993, p.223) debate in planning education was mainly concerned with adjustments in US curricula in response to various changes occurring in the 1980s and 1990s. Those in favour of the 'one-world' approach to planning education pointed to early trends in the intensification of global capital mobility, along with internationally roving consultants, and a growing number of international students in North American planning programs, to argue that planning education in North America had to make space for the international context. Those opposed to this position argued that not only was it impossible to do justice to the diversity of planning contexts within one program, but that US planning was also not always the best fit for contexts around the world. By the early 1990s the consensus seems to have been that the most appropriate way forward would be to provide a strong grounding in universalist planning principles together with a degree of flexibility allowing 'third world students' to take courses more appropriate to their "special needs" (Burayidi, 1993, p.229). Although we are referring mainly to the US experience here, similar concerns were also felt in Europe. For example, in the UK, there was also a call for the greater internationalization of planning education, though "significant questions were raised about the transferability of theory and methods across countries and cultures" (Morphet and Nadin, 1989, p.iv).

Burayidi (1993) and Sanyal (1990) have summarized the arguments comprehensively. For the sake of brevity and to avoid repetition, another review is not attempted here. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the debate remained centred around US curricula. This paper attempts to see the same problem from the other side. Over the last 25 years or so, since the peak of discussions on the subject, several significant changes have occurred that make it necessary for the issue to be revisited.

First, planning curricula in the US (and in the West in general) have found a stable balance, having made space for course options related to 'planning in developing countries' or 'international development'. Moreover, a number of programs have incorporated international labs and studios (Abramson, 2005; Goldstein et al., 2006; Dandekar, 2009; Klopp et al., 2014) in the spirit of "collective inquiry and learning" (Banerjee, 1985, p.36) with developing country students and scholars. The conversation regarding how both 'planning' and 'the world' ought to be approached from the perspective of developing countries, however, is only just beginning. In terms of planning education, what does it mean to see "from the South"? (Watson, 2009, p.2259). The question is critical for planning education in developing countries. Moreover, it becomes a source of dissonance for the growing number of educators in the field, who have been trained in the West and are teaching in the global South, particularly in non-democratic contexts.

Secondly, terms like "poor countries' students" (Sanyal, 1989, p.139) and "third world planners" (Burayidi, 1993, p.224) have gone out of fashion, and not just for the sake of political correctness. Developing countries, and cities within them, are growing rapidly in a complex ecology of core-periphery geographies arising from variegated relations with global capital. Many 'poor countries' have isolated districts that feature impressive skylines, advanced transit infrastructure, glittering financial centres, and exclusive gated communities. Writing on African countries, Odendaal observes that

[t]he disparities between rich and poor are vast in many circumstances, underpinned by infrastructure failure where privatised enclaves of wealth deeply contrast the slum condition that typify large tracts of urban space (2011, p.175).

Planners in these countries simultaneously deal with poverty and informality on the one hand, and rapid growth, fuelled by market integration and speculative pressures, on the other. All the while existential issues, such as resource shortages, conflicts, and weak institutions, linger close by. Then there are the countries of the Gulf region, the focus of this paper, that are not poor by any measure but, on account of several factors (including deficits in democratic processes, human rights and political freedoms), are still thought to be 'developing'.

Thirdly, there is a case to be made for including the flipside of globalization in coursework. The same processes of globalization that contribute to making the world 'flatter' also cause serious disruptions – and not just in

developing countries. As developing countries import know-how from, say, the US (since that is the context with which we are most familiar), they should also be informed that sometimes the US knows-not-how. Particularly sobering are the experiences of cities such as Detroit, Flint and other communities of former manufacturing hubs; of inner cities more generally – first relegated to crime and squalor and then ‘cleansed’ through waves of gentrification; and of the underprivileged in places like downtown LA. Frightening, too, was the apathy faced by the low-income neighbourhoods of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. Certainly, the processes of introspection, inquiry, and improvement are robust in the United States. Moreover, both scholarship and practice in the field of planning have long been committed to making positive changes on the ground. However, multiple disasters during the period of globalization have pointed to entrenched systemic issues. It might be time for the developing world to reimagine planning education with an even greater emphasis on ethics – including social justice, inclusion and environmental responsibility – a cause being argued for also in the developed world (Martin and Beatley, 1993; Campbell, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Lowe and Ehrenfeucht, 2017).

Fourthly, there are new crises facing the planning profession, even as the old crises have not been fully resolved. As long ago as 1985, Kunzmann noted that “planning education is always in a state of crisis, has been in crisis since its existence and will be in a crisis for the foreseeable future” (1985, p.443). He did go on to commend the profession for tormenting itself over its roles and tasks. But despite sincere efforts, some of the long-standing challenges to the profession, including allegations of selling out (Harvey, 1978), crossing over to the “dark side” (Flyvbjerg, 1996, p.383), and being too generalized as a field (Wildavsky, 1973), are still relevant. In addition, Friedman (1994) recognized postmodern challenges to planning at the end of the twentieth century. While planning is still grappling with these charges, new challenges are emerging. In the field, landscape architects and real estate specialists are displacing planners and gradually usurping their roles. Meanwhile, in scholarship, the social sciences have claimed much of critical space within urban studies. Scholars outside the field of planning are often quick to blame planners, in toto, for the inequitable urban outcomes observed around the world. The idea of ‘urban practice’ is being redefined, specifically to exclude planners, if not explicitly in opposition to their work. This may not be as evident in the developed world where institutions are efficient and responsive. Nevertheless, this change is seen clearly in many developing countries where the reach of plans and planning institutions is uneven and ineffective.

It is important to make a note here about Abu Dhabi as a case study, and the authors as observers. In terms of wealth and power, neither Abu Dhabi nor the Gulf region represent the ‘global South’. That said, countries in the Gulf region are still considered ‘developing nations’ for good reasons. In at least two ways Abu Dhabi does serve as an instructive case. First, like much of the global South, Abu Dhabi is still figuring out its governance structures and institutions. Secondly, it follows that education in the fields of planning and public policy remain uncomfortably located within the educational landscape, which itself is in a state of experimentation. It is not the intent here to underplay the diversity that exists within the Gulf region. Further, we are fully cognizant of the diversity in politics, education and place-making that exists between the various parts of the Arab World. To be clear, the point is not to generalize the specifics of this case to other parts of the Arab World, or to the Global South. The argument, rather, is that Abu Dhabi demonstrates the existence of certain challenges, and also certain trends in terms of urban management, that might be faced by all developing societies, as well as by developed countries. In all contexts the contestations will be mediated by local circumstances, and so will the responses.

The authors are citizens of India and Palestine. Both authors completed their doctoral work in universities in the United States. The authors, both citizens of developing countries, approach this study with concerns for sustainable, sensitive and equitable urban planning in Abu Dhabi (as anywhere else). There is no question of attempting to impose a ‘Western’ view upon planning education in Abu Dhabi. On the contrary, we want to insist on innovation in planning education to better suit local circumstances, without undermining the values and ethics on which our field is based.

## 2. Research Questions

The foregoing discussion establishes the need to address emergent complexities especially from the perspective of developing countries. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ in the context of planning education are no longer

discrete categories, but have become diffused, nested, and intertwined. Afshar's call for interaction between planners working in developed and developing countries is relevant here. "Dialogue between planners and planning educators—North and South—must be intensified. There is likely not one global approach for all but a myriad of approaches, each fashioned for its own context" (Afshar, 2001, p.350).

This study is motivated by the following questions. What challenges do institutions and values of the state, in developing countries, present to planning education? What do these challenges mean for the 'one world' approach to planning education, especially in view of programs taught in developing countries?

This paper is based on the authors' observations and experiences over seven years (2010-2017), teaching Urban Planning at undergraduate level at a private university in Abu Dhabi.

In the next section we discuss some of the peculiarities of Abu Dhabi's polity, as these are particularly relevant to urban planning. This is followed by an account of the challenges faced by educators in the field of planning in Abu Dhabi and the region. This is not an exhaustive list of issues. The objective is to provide an idea of the kinds of problems planning education in the Gulf region can throw up. As mentioned earlier, there is considerable internal diversity within the Gulf region, and attitudes are far from homogenous. That said, a degree of generalization can be sustained. It is argued that these challenges arise due to the existence of a fundamental mismatch between the values and attitudes that inform the governance of Abu Dhabi, and those that are needed for good planning of places and communities. The paper concludes with suggestions for new avenues of research.

### 3. A City by Any Other Name

At the outset it is important to consider how political culture affects the essential nature of a city, and what that means for planning and planning education. On the surface Abu Dhabi looks like a 'normal' city, and one that has seen long-term economic growth based on its oil revenues. The city boasts top quality infrastructure, high-rise housing enclaves, glittering shopping malls, and numerous megaprojects aimed towards building a recognizable brand for the city. However, a city is more than the sum of its visible tangible pieces. Aspects of the political economy, sustainability, and urbanism of Abu Dhabi have been critiqued extensively. Current literature on planning and urban design in Abu Dhabi has noted problems with several aspects of the city's urbanism. In particular, the role of state-based developers in directing city growth, the importance of image in city building, the abject condition of low-wage labour, the absence of a sense of place, and the lack of democratic institutions have consistently been highlighted (Sharpley, 2002; Elsheshtawy, 2008; Davidson, 2009; Ponzini, 2011; Mohammad and Sidaway, 2012; Crot, 2013; Cugurullo, 2013; Caprotti, 2014; Chakravarty and Qamhaieh, 2015; Chakravarty, 2017; Qamhaieh and Chakravarty, 2017; Chakravarty, 2019)

It is important to keep in mind that though the cities of the region share some features of political economy, their development trajectories are unique. For example, even though Dubai and Abu Dhabi are in the same country, and even though both appear to be overrun with skyscrapers and shopping malls, their specific growth patterns are not the same, neither are the imperatives driving successive waves of investment (Davidson, 2007; Sharpley, 2008).

Summarized in the next section are some of the key points of Abu Dhabi's urbanism that are most relevant to the focus of this paper. This review is organized under three categories – (i) Public, (ii) Place, (iii) Planning. These broad themes are fundamental to urban planning and to planning education, and provide context for the pedagogical issues discussed in subsequent sections.

#### 3.1. Public

The idea of the 'public', found in all dimensions of planning, is a contested term in Abu Dhabi and the wider region. The peculiarities of the region's polities are well understood. These include, most significantly, (i) a lack of democratic institutions (ii) there being upwards of 80% foreigners amongst the residents of major cities

(often referred to as 'expats') towards whom the state assumes little welfare responsibility, and (iii) power concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy individuals. In this setup, the various ideas associated with the term 'public' are either distorted or rendered meaningless. For example, in Abu Dhabi, ideas important to planning - such as the public sector, the public sphere, public interest, public-versus-private, and, not least, the public, (i.e., the public that participates, pays taxes, uses and produces space, and for whom the city exists) - are but apparitions of their normal selves. The absence of any real notion of public is absolutely disorienting - not only for teaching and understanding the idea of planning, but also for creating institutions that can substantively approach the goals of planning.

### 3.2. Place

The nature of contemporary place-making in Abu Dhabi accurately reflects the tensions of its political economy. To begin with, the city is dominated by megaprojects - particularly in the shape of shopping malls, tourist attractions, government buildings and large housing projects. Residential segregation across socio-economic lines is stark. Segregation of everyday life along class lines is common. For example, Al Maryah Island, an entirely new downtown area (also referred to as a 'lifestyle destination' in promotional materials), was created on a greenfield site, featuring up-market facilities, retail, and office space. Al Maryah Island is effectively an enclave for the affluent classes of Abu Dhabi. Meanwhile older blocks of the city are being gentrified fast with few alternatives being offered to the low-income individuals and families who live there. The middle- and low-income residents of the city are never consulted when these plans are made. Unsurprisingly, recent efforts of placemaking do not resonate with the population and have little to do with their needs and aspirations.

In the cities of the region, the interests of a vast majority of the residents are not represented in any way in the processes of urban planning and nor does the state consider itself accountable to them. How, then, should we interpret the spectacular placemaking that we see in Abu Dhabi? Invented places and megaprojects constitute a sequence of props and images that help the city fulfil a performative function. The city, in turn, helps keep up the grander pretence, while avoiding important questions such as labour relations and the ecological footprint. So, what do the tools and practices of planning look like in this context? What are the objectives of planning and how are they accomplished?

### 3.3. Planning

The first and main function of planning in Abu Dhabi is to maximize the rent yield from land. This is both a welfare function for locals, and a profit-making venture for locally-owned development agencies. The projection of an image of wealth, power and 'world class' status may be considered a component of this overall mission.

A second function is that planning helps give Abu Dhabi the appearance of being normal - in an ontological sense - a place like any other, a city amongst cities. In other words, planning joins other branches of government in manufacturing international acceptability and legitimacy, an important aspiration for a polity that faces scrutiny on various social and environmental issues.

Planning endeavours are ultimately subservient to the two functions described above. Meanwhile, planning, as the term is understood in liberal democratic societies, with its ambitions towards social justice and sustainability, is quite redundant in Abu Dhabi. The city, however, does value code enforcement, following standards (typically 'world class' standards), installing physical infrastructure, and building real estate, along with beautification and ornamentation.

## 4. Teaching Planning in Abu Dhabi

The foregoing overview of Abu Dhabi's urbanism illustrates some of the specificities of the city and region. In this section we discuss the implications of this for planning education. The next section collates an account of classroom experiences accumulated over a period of seven years.

#### 4.1. Socialized Attitudes, Disciplined Voices

Local outlooks and attitudes towards existing social structures and hierarchies inform students' classroom behaviour. Students have been socialized to accept, as normal, the values that operate UAE's growth machine; a system in which they are winners and the dominant class. This applies to both local and non-local students, all of whom are from wealthy backgrounds.

Sometimes discussions in the classroom revealed certain attitudes that were disturbing. For example, some of the students found it challenging to confront the notion that human beings are born with equal dignity and basic rights. Although only a small minority of students voiced such opinions, they were visibly uncomfortable at the suggestion. One student quietly pointed out that "some of us are born wealthy". Students were also quick to categorize society as 'locals and expats', 'workers and professionals', 'Arabs and Westerners' and so on. These divisions informed students' attitudes towards basic questions such as whose city we inhabit, whom we plan for, how resources and benefits should be allocated, who should participate in planning, which voices matter and so on. This is a far cry from the attitudes of planning students in other parts of the world (Harris, 2015).

Whereas local students were confident in taking the position that, as citizens, their needs had to be prioritized, non-local students (mostly children of long-term expatriates from neighbouring Arab countries), were unsure of their stance on most issues, and not comfortable stating their opinions. Non-local students would usually speak in well-worn clichés, often supporting the locals' claims of priority, out of a fear of offending the local students.

A vast gap separates the upper-middle classes of Abu Dhabi, to which most expat students belong, from 'workers', and local students usually come from even wealthier families. Even so, local and expat students alike were usually apathetic towards causes such as providing greater affordable housing, increased public transport, the provision of inclusive public spaces, and undoing segregation. Various narratives were employed to justify the situation. For example, "this is the natural order of things", "the labour system rewards merit", "anyone can make through work hard", and (probably the most popular) – "low-wage workers are better off in UAE than the countries they came from, so they are already doing quite well". Discussions regarding segregation, labour regulations and hardships faced by low-income groups in Abu Dhabi seemed little more than academic to some students.

Problematic opinions on privilege, class position, prejudice, exploitation and labour are only a part of the reason why classroom sessions are difficult. Religious beliefs further complicate matters. All subjects and topics have to be examined from the perspective of religious acceptability. While most planning subjects can be discussed in a manner that does not offend religious sentiments, some are proscribed by hard lines that cannot be crossed. Hence, women's rights, LGBTQ issues, and the inclusion of religious minorities and the likes are not available for open candid discussion in the classroom. Such discussions create a great deal of discomfort because they call into question fundamental beliefs grounded in key facets of identity. The situation is particularly serious for planning and policy-making because of the importance of inclusion, representation, and participation in these fields (Sen et al., 2016).

Further, criticizing state policies in class is difficult. Students exercise self-discipline because of an awareness that criticizing policies could get them reported to the authorities. This applies to both nationals and expats. For those trained in liberal democratic contexts, the point of criticism is to build a better society. At times such critiques may be pointed towards an ideological position – but always in the spirit of debate and improvement. In Abu Dhabi, criticism of state policies is often taken as a slight towards the individuals who run branches of government. Most critiques of planning and policy-making, one can be thankful, are not misconstrued as attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the state. Nevertheless, not all scholarly criticism is tolerated equally. Certainly, some of the students were open to discussing all topics, and allowed themselves to set aside their own biases for the sake of dialog. Although this was the exception rather than the rule, the willingness of some students to engage new ideas in conversation was heartening.

## 4.2. Problematic Data Sharing

Data released by the Statistics Centre of Abu Dhabi (SCAD) are scant and conspicuously silent on important socio-economic variables. For example, data on income and ethnicity are not revealed, with details of labour and industry being, similarly, not available. GIS data that are shared are limited to shapefiles without associated datasets and attribute tables.

As a consequence, planning had to be taught in the absence of any real data. In studios, for example, population size and income mix had either to be estimated, or assumed. Similarly, the Location Quotient technique, along with demographic analysis, were taught using the US Census website. GIS courses, too, were mostly taught using US datasets. Even though the students were able to learn analytical techniques with imported data, other learning outcomes – for example, the ability to draw conclusions from data, the ability to apply techniques to address real-world challenges, and the ability to develop new research questions – were hampered by the fact that the datasets were from an unfamiliar context.

The discomfort with data has to do with a sensitivity to criticism – in a generalized sense, and is also a consequence of the fact that objective analysis might disrupt the narratives that have been internalized by society. It follows that the control of data seems to create more value for the state's bureaucracy than its use to solve problems and make plans.

Despite this, in some cases, local students working within government agencies were able to access data that were off limits to all other people. The same data could not be shared with faculty for independent research. There is reason to believe that state agencies are willing to share limited datasets, through trusted individuals, if there appears to be a sufficient chance that valuable analysis might emerge at the other end, or if the individual will have a chance to learn a skill or analytical technique. This seems to satisfy the “what do we get out of it?” question for those who are in control of data. That said, in these cases too, a few key elements of the data were usually withheld.

It is also important to mention here that security personnel in plain clothes (carrying identification) shadowed faculty and students when they attempted to collect data using surveys and interviews. Though there was no harassment, on numerous occasions students and faculty members were asked politely what they were doing and how the data would be used. On several occasions, within days of a data collection drive, a government agency announced intentions to make improvements related to the object of the study.

## 4.3. In a Land Far Far Away

The problem of having to use foreign data was mentioned in the previous section. Importing concepts and substantive knowledge is even more fraught. Urban planning is a field inherently produced by local contexts. For example, North American social structures, law, political values, and economic framework, have deeply informed how planning has evolved in that part of the world. Some ideas travel and translate well across societies, others do not.

When teaching planning in a liberal-democratic context, even in the developing world – for example India (Chettiparamb, 2006), Sri Lanka (van Horen et al., 2004) or Botswana (Cavric, 2011) – an instructor could freely use terms such as ‘social justice’, ‘citizen rights’, ‘democratic principles’, ‘market competition’, ‘due process’ or ‘free speech’. These ideas may be contested, but their meanings are well understood. In contrast, these terms mean very little to students in Abu Dhabi (both locals and non-locals). Discussions based on these ideas are often met with scepticism. Even when students make the effort to study the concepts and engage in dialog, they are not convinced of the relevance of these ideas to their own societies. It is important to keep in mind that students in Abu Dhabi's universities are the haves of society. They do not belong to the class that would see personal or social benefit in questioning the status quo. Due to both vested interests and decades of conditioning (through social practice and shared narratives) most students struggle to develop a true appreciation of the ideas of liberalism, humanism, and environmentalism.

Students are, however, quick to get on board with those ideas that are considered relatively benign, or not conflicting with the basic structure of society. For example, while there is likely to be little tolerance of

discussions on LGBTQ issues (as mentioned earlier), and raising these issues in class may lead to much distress, the causes of 'accessibility' and 'special needs' are embraced quickly and wholeheartedly. Further, in a few cases, creative repackaging of ideas can lead to positive results, even if these ideas are not absorbed in quite the same way as elsewhere in the world. For example, while 'public participation in local planning' presented as a necessary component of democracy may find little traction, the same idea framed within the provisions of Islamic law, becomes far more palatable (Chakravarty et al., 2013).

Textbooks, too, contribute to the sense of distance and disconnect. There are few books examining the current pace and nature of planning in UAE, and not all are suitable for use as course textbooks. In the present case, instructors supplemented readings with recent articles on the region, but even so, many lessons (positive and negative) about planning seemed to students to be from faraway places, and not just in terms of distance.

While many local students had travelled extensively, for most non-local students, some of the places being discussed in class (for example, Dutch 'woonerfs', Italian piazzas or LA's ethnic neighbourhoods) were too far removed from their imaginations. This is not to suggest that local aspects of place-making were not discussed or underplayed. The souq (market), fareej (neighbourhood), baraha (open space), falaj (irrigation system in oases towns), burjeel (wind tower) and other aspects of local traditional urban design were discussed at length and encouraged in studio projects. However, equally important elements of planning and design from around the world were also included in the curriculum to ensure thorough training and ease of operation within an international professional workforce. Poignant, in this regard, is the situation of students from countries such as Syria and Iraq, for whom traveling abroad is particularly difficult. Being distanced from cases in this manner, meant that the students found it difficult to relate to the social norms and political values that underpin the character of these places. In view of the widespread fallacy, particularly in developing countries, that copying urban forms could lead to social development, instructors compensated with appropriate critiques and caveats.

Agencies working in the fields of planning and development do not seem to understand the fact that spaces are socially produced, and that copying elements of architecture and urban design cannot magically recreate successful urbanism in different cities if the rules and values therein are radically different. We used every opportunity possible to explain this to students and make them think critically about what makes places successful.

The same also applies to urban disasters – sprawl, abandoned city centres, cities destroyed by deindustrialization and so on. The situation will be remedied, to an extent, when more textbooks become available that critically examine urbanization in the region. It is less clear how the planning profession will address the fundamental changes occurring in the very meaning of 'a city'.

#### **4.4. The Fate of History and Theory**

Students seemed to invest less time and effort into courses dealing with history and theory. Their perceived lack of interest may stem from several factors, some of which are not unique to the UAE. For example, students, particularly undergraduates, are able to focus on theoretical subject matter for shorter periods of time. Electronic distractions are all too easy to reach for when working through difficult material. Moreover, these courses require significant amounts of reading, which is considered an onerous task by far too many young people, and was a challenge for all courses with a significant reading component.

Another reason students lack motivation in these courses is because of the perception that these courses lack practical utility. Students are not sure how history or theory will help them in their everyday work as planners, as pointed out by Beauregard (1995). In addition, at least two local factors play an important role. The first has been discussed briefly above. Planning theory is embedded in political economic contexts that are alien for UAE students. Similarly, few studies have dealt specifically with the urban history of UAE, because urbanization is a very recent phenomenon in this part of the world, and the state is invested in maintaining certain versions of its history. If critical historical work is tolerated, future scholarship will have much to contribute to planning history. At the moment, however, theory and the history of urban planning seem to be from somewhere else.

The second factor affects non-local students staying in UAE. For these students, their residence in UAE – the country where most non-local students were born and raised and where their family resides – depends on getting a job. Many of these students have no life to return to in their countries of origin. Some are from cities that have been levelled by war. Moreover, the prospect of getting jobs has become all the more difficult with the ongoing Emiratization project, which prioritizes nationals for employment in the public sector, and also imposes a quota on the private sector for employing nationals. Hence there is an unusually high pressure on college students to get jobs immediately after graduation so that their residence visa can be renewed. We have discussed already how planning in Abu Dhabi is increasingly becoming ornamental. In such a job market – where employers, state, and society are all not looking for critical thinkers – it becomes extremely difficult to convince students of the relevance of studying theory and history. Students, fixated on ‘hard’ skills, invariably show greater interest in techniques or methods (GIS, studio, documentation and the likes). Even within that small set, courses in research methods seem to be less attractive.

It is unfortunate that the value of planning theory is not understood. Not only are these courses rich in knowledge that informs planning practice and decision-making, but they also promote critical thinking, reasoning and self-education. Education in history, Peterson (2006) argues, trains planning students to think of plans, documents, and narratives as being socially constructed. It also encourages students to view maps, photographs, and other artefacts as repositories of knowledge.

Neuman (2005) has identified four roles, “explanation, prediction, justification and normative guidance” (p.123), through which theory guides professional practice. As Fischler (2012) puts it

[p]lanning curricula should include at least one course in planning history and theory, in order to introduce students to the field and profession they are about to enter, its origins and its evolution over time... Such a course gives students models with which to frame their thinking and their actions (from theoretical concepts with which to put a name on their ideals to design precedents for use in actual plans), puts their individual work in historical perspective, and can, in so doing, instil in them both pride and humility (p.112).

These skills and attitudes may be less appreciated because they are not tangible, but they are critical for higher education, and education in the field.

Teaching history to planners... means making them realize that they can be instrumental in fostering change but that change comes slowly, under popular pressure. It means giving them a sense of modesty as well as a sense of identity, a sense of caution as well as a sense of ambition (Fischler, 2006, p.288).

When the ability to make good decisions has been replaced by the imperative of making profitable decisions, what a planner can ‘do’ is quickly reduced to clerical tasks and uncritical preparation of maps and graphics. A diminishing interest in the history and theory of planning – on the part of both students and employers – will lead to planning that lacks a commitment to the field’s values and ethics.

#### **4.5. Studio Issues**

One lingering problem, particularly in design-related work, has to do with aesthetic preferences following from social practices. In site planning and design studios, one may find that preferences for inclusive public spaces, urban design at the human scale, or walkable, children- and elder-friendly neighbourhoods are not shared enthusiastically. Public life has moved almost entirely to shopping malls where segregation is enforced by purchasing power. The human scale has long since been eschewed for skyscrapers, megaprojects and wide streets. Walkability has also fallen by the wayside, as the old form of pre-oil settlements have been overrun by big-and-fast modernism. Indeed, people who take the bus are stigmatized (Qamhaieh and Chakravarty, 2017).

It is difficult to argue the importance of sustainability to the beneficiaries of state welfare that includes deep subsidies on gasoline, and free distribution of large residential plots, that are located in suburbs fitted with

their own shopping malls. Cars and parking rule the imagination of policy makers. Not only are these practices and urbanism the current status quo, they are also part of the city's self-image and the state's narratives of development. Planning and policy-making reinforces these ideals. One of the questions that agencies are now dealing with is that of where to moor boats that are not left in marinas. The matter becomes even more complicated when narratives tie the way of life to local culture, bypassing the fact that this way of life was unheard of only a few decades ago.

We have already mentioned the problems arising from the reluctance to share data. Even though we did our best to simulate projects, often with input from professionals working in state and private agencies, we believe the lack of real data is a serious loss for students. Similarly, the lack of real 'clients' for most studio projects meant that the projects lost a degree of "wickedness" (Balassiano, 2011, p.449). For example, students did not have adequate exposure to working with actual constituents with diverse interests. Lang (1983) argues that studio training gives students a feel for the "argumentative nature of the planning process" (p.126). Similarly, Nemeth and Long (2012) point out that working with clients is one of the key aspects of studio-based learning. We tried to compensate for this deficiency by bringing in external experts for midterm and final evaluations. This gave students an opportunity to get feedback from new perspectives, and also a feel of working with clients. It is also worth noting here that several students were able to work with real clients for their capstone projects.

In this situation, how does one approach the design studio? Do we teach a purely compliance-oriented planning studio where a site is simply divided into plots and provided with facilities according to a checklist? Or do we engage the community in a diverse and contentious part of the city? Do we stress marketable skills? Or do we aim for social awareness, environmental sensitivity, critical thinking and creative problem solving? These 'deep skills' seem not to sell as well as the knowledge of techniques and codes.

#### **4.6. Unusual Internship Situations**

Internships are another source of anxiety for planning educators, as well as for students. At least four problems are worth mentioning in this regard. First, as mentioned earlier, locals are given priority in all government hiring. This applies also to internships. Second, no other government agency accepts urban planning as a valid field of study. Although urban planning students could be useful as interns in agencies related to, for instance, economic development, labour, and the environment, their choices are effectively restricted to the Urban Planning Council, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Transportation, and private sector developers and consultants. As expected, this problem affects non-local students disproportionately. Third, (and ironic when contrasted with the point above) students who are already working tend to undertake internships with their employers which are sometimes quite unrelated to urban planning. A separate planning internship is a difficult proposition for students with families and fulltime jobs (from which they take time off to study). Such students are allowed to show management work, or site-planning or facilities-related assignments at work, as an alternative to a planning internship. Fourth, some students work for security agencies that are not allowed to discuss their work at all. In some cases it has proven difficult to get an official letter on a letterhead simply verifying the situation. Such cases can put the department in a very difficult situation.

#### **4.7. Response to Challenges**

We take pride in the fact that we tried to change the status quo wherever possible. In terms of research, we worked on local issues, and published studies that questioned gentrification, the exclusion built into transit options, and the weaknesses of current sustainability policies. We took students on field trips to 'labour villages' where they got to see first-hand, for the first time, the dormitory facilities where the faceless nameless numbers live. We took students on bus rides that pushed them out of their comfort zones and got them to see how the other 80% live. Interviews, life histories, and urban documentation were worked into courses and assessment schemes.

We also conducted live public participation exercises with our students, a first in the country. In one such exercise a woman could not hold back her tears as she told us that no one had ever asked for her opinion on

the neighbourhood where she lived and raised her children. The participation exercises were held with the permission of local authorities (including the police) and were helpful in generating useful information for local planning agencies.

Theory courses were aided with multimedia materials and assessments of an applied nature were utilized where possible. We encouraged critical thinking in the classroom and through assessment tools. Issues of sustainability and social justice were discussed at length. As a result of our efforts, at least some students, we believe, developed an appreciation for perspectives other than those into which they had been socialized. We hope they will remember these lessons when they are in decision-making positions.

Helping non-local students find internships and jobs remained a heart-breaking challenge. While some students succeeded in finding employment with consultants, several good students remained in the job market for far too long. Some had to take up jobs unrelated to their training, and some had to begin with clerical or secretarial work; posts for which they were overqualified.

We designed a sequence of four compulsory studios, which yielded multiple benefits for the students. The studios offered students increasingly complex planning issues. The first studio dealt with a small greenfield site and a straightforward brief. The main deliverable was a site plan with facilities and social infrastructure developed according to standards and needing to conform to basic urban design guidelines. The site got bigger and the brief more complicated for the second studio. The second studio involved design at multiple scales. Further, street sections and a land use plan were required as deliverables. For the third studio a special element (such as a waterfront, transit station, environmentally sensitive area, or historic site) were used to make the planning problem more challenging. The third studio got students to think about trade-offs and innovative approaches to the individual special site with which they were concerned. Urban design details (or other details as relevant) were added to the deliverables. The fourth studio called for a community planning exercise in an inhabited area with multiple stakeholders. The focus, for example, could be revitalization. Students were encouraged to create grounded workable plans that would bring benefits not only to the elites of the area but also to less privileged constituents. Cumulatively, the four studios afforded students the opportunity to make mistakes, learn from them and improve their skills, work in teams, work individually, and apply diverse theoretical knowledge to planning problems. Unfortunately, however, the planning authorities in Abu Dhabi seldom undertake this kind of work.

Thereafter, many students wrote their graduation projects on topics such as 'affordable housing', 'worker living conditions', 'public transit', 'gender and planning', 'accessibility planning', 'multiculturalism in the city', 'public participation', 'access to parks', 'public space designed by users' and so on. We have big hopes for these students.

## 5. Conclusions

Two avenues for future debate and scholarship emerged from the experiences recounted in this paper. The first relates to the idea of a 'one world' curriculum, and the second relates to the role of accreditation agencies.

### 5.1. The 'One-World' Curriculum

We entered the discussion of the 'one world' curriculum based on our experience in Abu Dhabi. Proponents of the 'one world' approach to planning education point to globalization and market integration as evidence of the large-scale convergence of economic values and development goals. While this may be true to an extent, convergence in the sense of trade and market regulation policies does not automatically lead to convergence in terms of political values and/or socio-economic structures. If we are to maintain that our field involves something more than code enforcement and ornamentation, not least concern for social and environmental justice, then we have to acknowledge that the cities of our planet do not exist in one world. Further, aside from the matter of politics and culture, convergence in terms of economic rules and attitudes has had an uneven effect on societies and places. In the developing world both urban processes and outcomes (Christensen, 2015)

have not improved concomitantly with market integration. If cities have become segregated, stressful, rife with inequities in mobility and housing, environmentally damaged, and overrun with surveillance, then these conditions have been reached by the perpetuation of violent and inhuman rules and regulations.

The outlook of governance, which privileges technology and profit at the cost of citizens and the environment, has not changed with globalization. Indeed, it may have become more entrenched. Even as the gap between countries in terms of absolute wealth slowly narrows, we are seeing a widening gulf in terms of rights, capabilities and development – not just between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but also between groups and communities within all countries. Meanwhile, dystopia covered over by a tapestry of faux urbanity is becoming the new normal.

A one-world approach is needed but not in terms of curricula. We need more universalization in terms of the ethics and values of planning, but not so much with regard to courses and program structures. We also need more universalization in terms of learning together across North-South divides, while also understanding that separate lessons might emerge from such interactions. Both pedagogy and research should “promote interdependency and shared responsibility” (Amirahmadi, 1993, p.538). This brings us to the issue of accreditation.

## 5.2. Role of Accreditation Agencies

The experience from Abu Dhabi shows that, procedurally, following a curriculum that passes successive external reviews does not guarantee that the values and ethics we consider to be part of the identity of planning will be passed onto students. If the profession wants to remain true to its own ethical guidelines it will have to rethink accreditation standards in developing countries, particularly in the Gulf region. The standards to which we hold planning programs in Gulf countries, affects not only the fate of planning in those countries, but also the identity of the professional globally. Experts who are invited to consult on accreditation and licensure must consider the wider repercussions of their decisions and recommendations. There has not been sufficient dialog on how accreditation of planning programs ought to be approached in contexts where planning does not operate under the assumptions which we take for granted, and where professional ethics of planning are radically different.

It would be necessary, in such a discussion, to recognize the aspirations of the younger generations and to take a longer view on the role of the profession in these countries. One approach could be to require planning programs to show evidence of the following four outcomes: (i) critical research in the region by faculty members, (ii) research by students on local issues, (iii) collaboration with local governments for studying urban issues, and (iv) university-community partnerships to benefit underprivileged groups. The latter will require flexibility on the part of state authorities in the region – at least in tolerating socially beneficial work without fearing calamitous outcomes. Pursuing these outcomes does not require changes to the basic nature of the political economy of the region. The goals, however, are achievable, and can bring the benefits of urban planning to underprivileged communities. Furthermore, these requirements reflect our shared values as planners, and will go a long way to protecting the integrity of the field.

## References

- Abramson, Daniel B. (2005) The “Studio Abroad” as a mode of transcultural engagement in urban planning education: A reflection on ten years of Sino-Canadian collaboration. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 25 (1), pp.89-102.
- Afshar, Farokh (2001) Preparing planners for a globalizing world: The planning school at the University of Guelph. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 20 (3), pp.339-352.
- Amirahmadi, Hooshang (1993) Globalization and planning education. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 20 (5), pp.537-555.
- Balassiano, Katia (2011) Tackling “wicked problems” in planning studio courses. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 31 (4), pp.449-460.

- Banerjee, Tridib (1985) Environmental design in the developing world: Some thoughts on design education. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 5 (1), pp.28-38.
- Beauregard, Robert A. (1995) Edge critics. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 14 (3), pp.163-166.
- Burayidi, Michael A. (1993) Dualism and universalism: Competing paradigms in planning education? *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 12 (3), pp.223-229.
- Campbell, Heather (2012) 'Planning ethics' and rediscovering the idea of planning. *Planning Theory*, 11 (4), pp.379-399.
- Caprotti, Federico (2014) Eco-urbanism and the eco-city, or, denying the right to the city? *Antipode*, 46 (5), pp.1285-1303.
- Cavrić, Branko (2011) Evolution of Botswana planning education in light of local and international requirements. *Spatium*, 25, pp.30-38.
- Chakravarty, Surajit (2019) Un-cities: The urbanism of rapidly growing cities in the Gulf Region. In Banerjee, Tridib and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (eds) *New companion to urban design*. New York: Routledge, pp.83-94.
- Chakravarty, Surajit (2017) Buying (into) sustainability: Technocratic environmentalism in Abu Dhabi. In Caprotti, Federico and Li Yu (eds) *Sustainable cities in Asia*. London: Routledge, pp.135-145.
- Chakravarty, Surajit and Abdellatif Qamhaieh (2015) City upgraded: redesigning and disciplining downtown Abu Dhabi. In Lees, Loretta, Hyun, B. Shin and Ernesto Lopez-Morales (eds) *Global gentrifications: Uneven development and displacement*, Bristol: Policy Press, pp.59-80.
- Chakravarty, Surajit, Meera Al Mansoori and Meera Shehadeh (2013) *What's Arabic for charette? Public participation in the Baniyas neighborhood of Abu Dhabi*. [Conference paper]. Presented at the 49th ISOCARP conference in Brisbane.
- Chettiparamb, Angelique (2006) Bottom-up planning and the future of planning education in India. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26 (2), pp.185-194.
- Christensen, Karen S. (2015) Both process and outcome are essential to planning. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 35 (2), pp.188-198.
- Crot, Laurence (2013) Planning for sustainability in non-democratic polities: The case of Masdar City. *Urban Studies*, 50 (13), pp.2809-2825.
- Cugurullo, Federico (2013) How to build a sandcastle: An analysis of the genesis and development of Masdar City. *Journal of Urban Technology*, 20 (1), pp.23-37.
- Dandekar, Hemlata C. (2009) Commentary: A multiuniversity planning studio at the World Planning Congress: An opportunity for international planning education. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 28 (3), pp.382-390.
- Davidson, Christopher (2007) The emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai: Contrasting roles in the international system. *Asian Affairs*, 38 (1), pp.33-48.
- Davidson, Christopher (2009) Abu Dhabi's new economy: Oil, investment and domestic development. *Middle East Policy*, 16 (2), pp.59-79.
- Elsheshtawy, Yasser (2008) Cities of sand and fog. In Elsheshtawy, Yasser (ed) *The evolving Arab city*, London: Routledge, pp.258-304
- Fischler, Raphaël (2006) Teaching history to planners. *Journal of Planning History*, 5 (4), pp.280-288.
- Fischler, Raphaël (2012) Fifty theses on urban planning and urban planners. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 32 (1), pp.107-114.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent (1996) The dark side of planning: Rationality and 'realrationalität'. In Mandelbaum, Seymour J., Luigi Mazza and Robert W. Burchell (eds) *Explorations in planning theory*, New Brunswick: Center for Urban Policy Research Press, pp.383-394.
- Friedmann, John (1994) Planning education for the late twentieth century: An initial inquiry. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 14 (1), pp.55-64.
- Goldstein, Harvey A., Scott Bollens, Edward Feser and Christopher Silver (2006) An experiment in the internationalization of planning education: The NEURUS Program. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 25 (4), pp.349-363.
- Harris, Kirk E. (2015) Understanding the disposition of urban planning students toward social justice and equity themes. *SAGE Open*, 5 (3), pp.1-15.
- Harvey, David (1978) On planning the ideology of planning. In Burchell, Robert and George Sternlieb (eds) *Planning theory in the 1980s*. New Brunswick, NJ: CUPR, pp.213-233.
- Klopp, Jacqueline, Jonathan Chanin, Peter Ngau and Elliott Sclar (2014) Globalisation and the urban studio: Evaluating an inter-university studio collaboration in Nairobi. *International Development Planning Review*, 36 (2), pp.205-226.
- Kunzmann, Klaus R. (1985) Educating planners in Europe: Trends and requirements-an international perspective. *Town Planning Review*, 56 (4), pp.442-457.
- Lang, Jon (1983) Teaching planning to city planning students. An argument for the studio/workshop approach. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 2 (2), pp.122-129.

- Lowe, Kate and Renia Ehrenfeucht (2017) Derailed values: Planning education, external funding, and environmental justice in New Orleans rail planning. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 38 (4), pp.477-489.
- Martin, Evelyn and Timothy Beatley (1993) Our relationship with the earth: Environmental ethics in planning education. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 12 (2), pp.117-126.
- Mohammad, Robina and James D. Sidaway (2012) Spectacular urbanization amidst variegated geographies of globalization: Learning from Abu Dhabi's trajectory through the lives of South Asian men. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 36 (3), pp.606-627.
- Morphet, Janice and Vincent Nadin (1989) Viewpoint: setting the planning agenda for the 1990s: Planning education. *Town Planning Review*, 60 (4), pp.iii-iv.
- Németh, Jeremy and Judith G. Long (2012) Assessing learning outcomes in US planning studio courses. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 32 (4), pp.476-490.
- Neuman, Michael (2005) Notes on the uses and scope of city planning theory. *Planning Theory*, 4 (2), pp.123-145.
- Odendaal, Nancy (2012) Reality check: Planning education in the African urban century. *Cities*, 29 (3), pp.174-182.
- Peterson, Sarah J. (2006) Priming the historian in all planners. *Journal of Planning History*, 5 (4), pp.289-300.
- Ponzini, Davide (2011) Large scale development projects and star architecture in the absence of democratic politics: The case of Abu Dhabi, UAE. *Cities*, 28 (3), pp.251-259.
- Qamhaieh, Abdellatif and Surajit Chakravarty (2017) Global cities, public transportation and social exclusion: A study of the bus system in Abu Dhabi. *Mobilities*, 12 (3), pp.462-478.
- Sanyal, Bishwapriya (ed) (1990) Breaking the boundaries: A one-world approach to planning education. Plenum Press: New York.
- Sanyal, Bishwapriya (1989) Poor countries' students in rich countries' universities: possibilities of planning education for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 8 (3), pp.139-155.
- Sen, Siddhartha, Karen Umemoto, Annette Koh and Vera Zambonelli (2017) Diversity and social justice in planning education: A synthesis of topics, pedagogical approaches, and educational goals in planning syllabi. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 37 (3), pp.347-358.
- Sharpley, Richard (2002) The challenges of economic diversification through tourism: The case of Abu Dhabi. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 4 (3), pp.221-235.
- Sharpley, Richard (2008) Planning for tourism: The case of Dubai. *Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development*, 5 (1), pp.13-30.
- Thomas, Huw (2012) Values and the planning school. *Planning Theory*, 11 (4), pp.400-417.
- van Horen, Basil, Michael Leaf and Sisira Pinnawala (2004) Localizing a global discipline: Designing new planning programs in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 23 (3), pp.255-268.
- Watson, Vanessa (2009) Seeing from the South: Refocusing urban planning on the globe's central urban issues. *Urban Studies*, 46 (11), pp.2259-2275.
- Wildavsky, Aaron (1973) If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing. *Policy Sciences*, 4 (2), pp.127-153.