

The Internet, Conversational Communities, and the Future of Planning

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Summary

This paper finds that "conversation" will soon become the killer application of the internet. With the emergence of more local community networks will come whole electronic villages. Planners must, according to the author, take advantage of this technology and change the way they practice.

There was a time in American history when the idea prevailed that every sector of society could solve its problems by implementation of something like the scientific method. This idea did not come out of the pure science disciplines, like astronomy, biology, chemistry or physics. Rather, it came out of the engineering professions, the particular American system of manufacturing, and the Industrial Revolution itself.

Popular culture often finds it difficult to make distinctions among the terms science, engineering, and technology, and that is no great wonder. In corporate, government, and even university research facilities the positions occupied by degreed scientists are often interchangeable with colleagues with degrees in related engineering fields, and the general public has even greater difficulty assessing endeavors concerned with applications of known principles and excursions into the unknown. At a philosophical level, this question of distinction remains. And, in general, things technical generally get thrown in a box that the layperson calls "science."

This can be an interesting matter for cultural

historians and historians of science, but even mentioning this debate would have little practical importance except that there is an important lesson embedded in this history of these professions. There was a time when everyone in the Western world DID know what an engineer was, and probably even knew a few of them by name. The grand period of engineering, roughly from the mid-nineteenth century through the first few decades of this century, saw some of the most magnificent undertakings that changed the physical world, in a scale and scope unlike anything seen, and so impressive to appear almost magical.

This was the time when monumental (in every sense of the word) public and commercial enterprises riveted the world's attention, and drew encomiums from authors, journalists, and politicians that were truly epic, even religious, in tone. Buildings defied gravity and dashed the hubris we were supposed to have learned from the Tower of Babel. Dams really could be constructed to hold back the mightiest of rivers. The western hemisphere could be cut in half by a canal, linking entire oceans. A transoceanic cable could allow contact across the Atlantic in a fraction of a second. Rail-

roads crossed America, Europe, and Asia, linking (in transport) the world with a speed and efficiency impossible by any other means. In 1904 New York City, the greatest commercial city in the world, opened its Interborough Rapid Transit system, the subway, to the public. That act forever changed New York and its environs, but beyond that the very existence of this subterranean system drew millions of riders who thrilled at the very act of hurtling through the earth.

Those who led these enterprises were olympian figures in popular culture. These chief engineers, these heroic engineers, as historians would later categorize them, were seen as wizards who remade the world for the benefit of humanity.

Given the times and contexts, it would be surprising if these stunning reconfigurations of the physical world, or, as an anthropologist might say, "these facts on the ground," did not inspire entire populations to think that absolutely nothing was impossible, so long as there were sufficient will, resources, imagination, and great technical leaders who would not quail in the face of the greatest challenges. And if these heroic engineers were indeed wizards, their art was not occult, but it was based upon reason and knowledge. Most important, it represented the most exquisite facility in futurism, or as we may call it: planning.

When the Industrial Revolution began to reveal its more insidious effects upon human beings, both among the workers and the population at large, there was a great hue and cry to do something, anything, before it was too late. Even at the time of Jefferson's administration, Manchester, England was seen as the most miserable shadow-side of the factory era. Squallor, disease, crime, broken families, and environmental pollution were blatantly apparent to all who visited this hotbed of the incipient industrial age, and the great politician-philosophers of the day wondered if any com-

promise could be struck between the city and the wilderness. That compromise, known as the pastoral ideal, was not assured to be a stable entity as by some law of nature, but was premised upon a constant vigilance by a nation's ENTIRE population to keep industrialization and the resulting urban blight at bay, while at the same time assuring economic viability in the Industrial Revolution.

This philosophical debate became all too real as America entered the last decades of the nineteenth century. What was once an academic discussion of society's futures, by the 1890s, had become a chorus of shrill voices demanding immediate action. And so, at the turn of the century, we entered one of the most fascinating periods of American political, cultural, and social history, which we call the Progressive Era. Historians have wrestled mightily with this period. At first blush it seems highly enigmatic. Nearly every sort of initiative arises during these first few decades of the twentieth century: major political reform; women's suffrage; religious movements turned toward social movements; child labor laws; prohibition; Jane Addam's Hull House; sanitation standards; government activism in industrial efficiency; natural resources management; immigration reform; and even the American eugenics movement!

When viewed through the lens of contemporary socio-political events (perhaps the biggest flaw in trying to understand the Progressives) it is difficult to find a common thread among all this commotion that could, in 1910, be embraced within the platform of one party. By today's lights, many of these movements would seem antithetical to each other. Some would be characterized as today's left wing agenda, while others look more like fascism. A few scholars have concluded that, indeed, there is no binding thread except for the qualities of motion, action and reaction, and reform as a newly-discovered, universal cause.

There is something binding these various and, at times, centrifugal activisms. That “something” is the grand and strenuous visions and accomplishments of the heroic engineers. From the most breathtaking of civil engineering feats to the productive power of the assembly-line, the industrial age was creating facts and artifacts both unimaginable and undeniable to entire cultures. One of the early signatures of the symbolic power of the engineering mentality was the conviction that human beings could be similarly engineered, that it was not materiel only whose processes could be maximized. When we look today at Frederick W. Taylor’s “Principles of Scientific Management,” we are at once impressed, and also chilled by the efficiency methods for regulating labor that were so revolutionary, and, so indifferent to the object of management: human beings. Taylor’s disciple, Frank Gilbreth, expanded on these ideas with minute “time and motion” studies of manual labor that, indeed, make the worker literally no more than a cog in the machinery of production.

But let us not make the mistake of seeing these innovators as extremists in their own time. The symbols of industry, factory, production, and the shadow of the grand engineering projects infected the entire culture. It was, after all, Frank Gilbreth and his wife Lillian who wrote “Cheaper by the Dozen,” a book extolling the efficiencies of a large household. In fact, these were the years that brought forth such school subjects as “home economics.” Popular magazines were filled with articles for maximizing efficiency in the home, in the school, and everywhere else.

It is also during this time when the process of public government was largely reconstructed as a technocratic exercise, best understood and run by teams of experts. This was the time when the National Bureau of Standards (now, the National Institute for Standards and Technology) was inaugurated and grew to be the world’s largest federal research laboratory

in the physical sciences and engineering. Herbert Hoover, our first President professionally trained as an engineer (and our only engineer-President until Carter) moved aggressively to make the federal government a player in science, engineering, and industrialization at large. Needless to say, this was also the time when urban planning, by teams of proper government experts, rose to prominence. The first National Conference on City Planning was held in 1909.

Problems with the Revolution

The 1960s witnessed major blows against the establishment of the experts. Urban Planning, and its more aggressive stepchild, urban renewal, saw challenges both philosophical and physical. Every sort of social interest and unrest found focus in the political rhetoric of the “slum,” “ghetto,” or the later overarching rubric, the “inner city.”

While presidential candidates stood behind microphones decrying the plight of urban centers, cities burned. The response was an intensification of the application of expert knowledge not far removed from the vision of Frederick W. Taylor and the engineered order for efficiency on the factory floor. The “Projects” as these solutions are cumulatively known, are often far more dehumanizing and poisonous than the disordered array of substandard housing they replaced.

In 1971 Robert Goodman, planner and professor of architecture at MIT, published a trenchant, revolutionary manifesto called “After the Planners.” In this monograph Goodman recounts personal experience, as a planner/social-advocate in Boston, the harrowing experience of trying to promote the interest of citizens in redevelopment projects, and he uses this launching point to describe just how powerful is the combination of entrenched design by expert panels, and the built facts on the ground. It is written in the social revolution-

ary language of the day, and in his last chapter Goodman advocates “guerilla architecture” as one means to break the cycle of oppressive planning without regard to the wishes of the citizens.

There is a gaping question that remains after reading Goodman, however. How does one democratize planning in a world of multiplying technical concerns? For Goodman, the method he and others used in the mid-1960s was a lot of hard footwork. There was the walking through neighborhoods and knocking on doors, and the neighborhood mass meetings. Goodman’s job (acting as both planner and social advocate and activist) was achingly difficult, and so would any planner trying to follow in those footsteps. He or she had to try to connect with all the inhabitants, understand and find themes in the concerns of those people, use all the technical skill of the professional planner to both schematize these felt needs and make the outcomes comprehensible to the layperson, and continue this complex and exhausting dialogue with bureaucrats and technocrats operating under the old mentality of outside experts, all the while working with no hope of actually having more humane solutions accepted. Even the strongest and most altruistic soul would soon wither under such a crushing mental, psychic, and physical demand.

Two years before Goodman’s book, west coast planner Lawrence Halprin published “The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment.” Halprin’s technique for planning combined data acquisition and display on a very human scale. In fact, his diagrams look very much like choreography (the work of his wife, noted San Francisco choreographer Ann Halprin is used in developing the method), or the graphical musical scores of the Bauhaus experimentalists. The acronym, RSVP, stands for “resources,” scores” (process leading to performance), “valuation” (analyzes the results of action and possible

selectivity of decisions), and “performance” (the result of scores and the expression of process). Halprin considered this method to be useful to the layperson, and even had a class of grade school children use it for a local planning exercise. He also emphasized, and this is most important, that this method was a PROCESS, not a simple reductive method for quickly hitting on one, inevitable and static, solution for planning. This method is heuristic. In short, it is a dance.

The problems of dissemination and appropriation still remain. How would one (or many) get ANY method for involving great numbers of American citizens to take part in thinking about their desires for future built environments out to the populace? Planning, by definition, means thinking about the future, and that is an exercise requiring intelligence, technical skill, imagination, and most of all vision. This kind of thinking is most difficult, and it is one reason why professional planning, despite its antidemocratic potentials, has been indispensable to our culture, and always will be.

Indeed, it is much more natural (and popular) for people only to notice their physical environment when it exhibits radical and rapid change, rather than to respond to any inherent qualities that have existed for some time. As a result, the most likely kind of interplay between the act of professional planning and the public is reactionary on the part of the public. Laypersons are much more likely to respond negatively, with what they don’t want (change) than they are to participate in forward-looking envisioning. This is understandable, given our history of imposed fiat by technical experts and the anonymity of twentieth century citizenship. This reactionay, incoate fight-or-flight response is easy grist for town hall meetings, but it will no longer do for our society or others.

Real Visions and the Future of Planning

As we near the turn of the millenium an essential mentality has emerged. It goes under many

titles, not all identical in scope. Sustainable futures, global society, and the postmodern world are a few of the operant names. We live in a time of epochal transitions. What is certain is change. As the information economy continues to permeate (and in areas supplant) production economies of the second and third worlds, the physical locality of producers and markets becomes first blurred and then irrelevant. Yet we all are still left with the very real questions of where and how we will live. We all no longer have the luxury of considering local solutions in vacuo. Instead, the imperatives of our physical environment come as both unparalleled opportunity and threat. For those who see the world as something to be frozen in time, with intractable social and environmental problems, that is, for those with a fortress-mentality, the coming years approach with dread. For those who have faith that we, as a species are open to creative inspiration, our futures are palettes and canvases for elaborating new visions.

One of keys for enabling the positive visions to be made manifest, and indeed the key without which no other keys can work, is communication. That is, communication in the deepest and richest sense, not just a proliferation of noise for those with access to the most powerful presses and transmitters. And now, just at the time it is most crucial, we have in our hands such an instrument. It is in early development, to be sure, and its ultimate evolution is beyond anyone's grasp at the present, but even now the society-changing potential of computer-mediated communication (CMC) cannot be underestimated.

Just about a decade ago, companies like IBM and Apple were trying to sell the idea of a home computer to a wide public. The personal computer had already established a strong and irreversible beachhead in business. The personal computer was indispensable for empowering a broad workforce with such dedicated applications as spreadsheets, just-in-time manu-

facturing inventories, word processing, and desktop publishing. But the market for the home was lacking a truly needed application, except for taking work home from the office. The advertisements now seem beyond quaint, and rather ridiculous. I should buy a home PC to store recipes and balance my check-book? Even the computing intensive applications like video games never stood a chance when faced with the much cheaper and more impressive single use gaming machines connected to the family television.

Then, in the late 1980s, something began to happen. The PC became a communications device. E-mail had been around since the Internet emerged as a servant of the Defense and University research alliance in 1969. By the mid-1980s the advent of the local area network (LAN) emerged as a message-transfer tool without precedent in corporations and various institutions throughout the U.S. We often hold dear the idea of the garage tinkerer creating an invention that would only be recognized for its social significance years later. But this story, of the emergence of the desktop computer as the first "many-to-many" communications instrument in history grew out of people, many people, first using this application in the workplace. Even a visionary like Steve Jobs, often credited with a few others for putting these devices on our desks, did not predict that it is CONVERSATION that would soon become, as a recent Newsweek put it, "the killer [application]" of the Internet revolution.

Many readers may already see where this essay is going, and do not need any lecturing on the meaning of "many-to-many" communication, on the mixed-media information sharing and archiving available with networked computers, or on the relative virtues of "real-time" versus asynchronous CMC conversations. Many will also be aware that nearly every kind of information can now be had, at ever-decreasing prices and with ever-simpler oper-

ating techniques, through computers utilizing the graphical-user interface of the World Wide Web, the platform of choice for CMC. For those who still think of the computer as an upscale technology requiring high tech skills, you need to know that the entire drive of the industry right now is to make these devices at least as transparent and unthreatening to use as the telephone. Web-communications devices can now be had for a few hundred dollars, about the same price as an economy-model television. And for those who still consider such devices to be beyond the reach of the masses, well over ninety percent of households in the United States have at least one television. Virtually anyone who wants a television has one. And with a robust, emerging business in updating and recycling computers and selling them at bargain basement prices, they will only become more available.

Right now household market penetration of personal computers stands at forty percent in this country. Rather than being amazed that the prevalence is so high, I prefer to ask the question "why only forty percent?" Where is everyone else? For one thing, I admit that the device can still be intimidating to many people. After all, a networked computer is NOT like a television. It is an interactive device. True, one can spend one's time simply "surfing the Web," as the phrase goes, clicking open one site after another to find amusement and diversion in new images popping up on the screen, but often this turns less rewarding over time. Many computers are still loaded with gizmos and options that are not entirely intuitive in their value to someone who has never used them, and there must be a felt need and reward for bothering to acquaint oneself with this new medium.

In pursuit of democratizing this technology and empowering the many, an acquaintance of mine has received grant funding to inaugurate a non-profit training center (Andy Kimes, director of Open Arms Computer Training in Petaluma,

CA). The most impressive aspect about this effort is that Mr. Kimes has made it a charter condition that he will focus on outreach to many groups, including seniors and minorities. The training is bilingual. The fees range from twelve dollars per session to gratis, depending upon the learner's ability to pay.

Okay, suppose we have a model for democratizing CMC technology. There is yet another barrier (read, phobia). What would one talk about? Suppose I enter a forum, or chat room, what might I say? Most people have never spoken (or transmitted) in public, and that can be intimidating. Right now, it is true, there are certain personality types which tend to dominate such public discussion spaces as chat rooms, and they are often adolescent and male. This often does not make for very interesting discussions, except for other adolescent males. But this situation is changing, and will most rapidly evolve to enlightening and enviting discussions as we see the emergence of more and more "local community networks," or, as I sometimes refer to them, "electronic villages."

What happens to a town, community or enclave when, rather than just holing-up in their anonymous living spaces after work, people engage in conversation. The pace and structure of modern life has all but made that gift, taken for granted in preindustrial cultures, impossible. Our communities often become monetary investment holding zones, rather than the conversational fabric of life. We commute to work, often leaving before light in our insulated steel transports and returning after sundown to be swallowed by our electric garage door. And THAT is called the good life, if you are among the more economically fortunate.

By far the single most communal thing we do is educate our young, but even that is struggling to keep from unravelling altogether. Not only do we commute (to our real neighbors,

our workmates), but we move so frequently for the sake of our careers that it is often “not worth the bother” to get to know our neighbors. Extended families living in reasonable proximity is a romantic pipe dream. How can we invite people into meaningful discussions about things that matter, like the shape and direction of public life — and this of course means the design and activities of our physical spaces — if there isn’t a public life to care about?

It doesn’t need to be this way. And efforts to encourage community life and spirit are finding voice in innumerable locations as thoughtful individuals realize that their primary work in life need not be to simply maintain an economic survival holding pattern. Ideally we ought to be working toward “conversational communities,” where there is real commitment to quality of life in the locales where we live, and certainly the best expression of such conversational communities lies in communicating face-to-face, and working side-by-side. How do we get there? Our working hours dominate our lives, and there are so many demands on our time we consider ourselves lucky to have a few hours a week without demands. Besides, I have no idea what sort of work and interests others in my neighborhood would prefer. Again, I am certain that many readers see where this line of reasoning is going.

What if there were a way for people to share ideas FIRST, so that they had compelling reasons to also meet in person? Have a mass meeting you say? That, unfortunately, draws a disproportionate population who are already not in a communitarian mindset, but rather who are angry and frustrated and most interested in being heard, rather than in having a constructive conversation. Furthermore, how do we possibly coordinate the individual schedules of two wage-earner families with single-parent families; of commuting professionals with swing-shift hourly workers; of the privileged with the poor; of the householder

with the homeless? (Yes, even the homeless are beginning to gain access to public conversation through public computer terminals.) How do we build constructive and thoughtful conversation, and record those thoughts so that we don’t have to revisit every suggestion many times over? How do we invite those who come from so many backgrounds, who are often certain they have nothing to say to those unlike themselves, so that they find respect and comfort in being heard, or just in listening until they are ready to speak?

All of these qualities are possible, and are already being cultivated, in local community networks. Schoolchildren are already publishing their thoughts and creative projects to their districts and towns. People are already finding book clubs and discussion groups, with their neighbors, that would have been impossible to initiate if the only solution were, first, scheduled face-to-face meetings. Local governments and agencies are already bringing far more residents to the tables of meaningful participation, and in the process opening up the public sphere and increasing the confidence in and appreciation for those public institutions and officials among the populations they serve.

Yes, it is true, that these very same technologies can allow us to communicate with conversationalists in distant lands whom we will likely never meet in person, and that is remarkable. But more than anything else, this new age of many-to-many communications will allow us to rebuild our COMMUNITIES, and to resurrect the most cherished aspects that determine quality of life. How do we go about doing this? In my experience creating vibrant local community websites is best done locally, as a community project. But the content that goes into the different presentational and discussion areas is best done group by group, agency by agency.

And this brings us at last to the future of professional planning. It would be arrogant of

me to presume to answer this question with the authority of a professional planner, for that is not my line of work. I am an educator, and so the reader must take my visions for what they are, the words of an outsider who has been privileged to speak to those who work in another, noble, calling. I see the future of planning as being even more challenging, and more rewarding, than it currently is. In point of fact, I see the future of planning very much as I view my own calling.

I teach college students. I consider my position to be very nearly ideal. I teach in the Hutchins School of Liberal Studies, an interdisciplinary degree-granting program at Sonoma State University. This revolutionary program was initiated in 1969, long before I arrived, so I can't take credit for the ideas that make up its operating principles. The basic forum for study is not the lecture hall, but the seminar. I had experienced seminars in my own education only at elite graduate schools. I certainly had my doubts when I took this job that it was remotely possible to take a dozen or so undergraduates, ask them to come prepared by reading fairly strenuous tomes, and have an intelligent conversation about subjects as diverse as the history of economics, epic poetry, and the meaning of the Enlightenment. I am happy to report, I was amazed to find out how well it does work, if I, as the professor, can trust in the process of students being responsible for their own education. And that process, the seminar, is at its root, the natural working of a deeply committed conversational community. I freely credit the insights I've described above to my six years teaching at the Hutchins School.

Still, I realize as well that my education and experience have given me knowledge and insights that my students haven't encountered, and I would be remiss if I didn't share them as well, giving them the freedom to accept, critique, or reject them. One hears all too often, in the public press and casual conversa-

tion, that today's students are apathetic, that when they do pursue a college education it is because they are scared into it, and that their goals are for economic advancement only. And that is the picture we receive of the good students. The others, dropouts and "slackers," don't care to play the game of competition for a good career. To the extent that students DO live by these assumptions, it is certainly not because they represent an entirely new genetic strain in the species. They are the same people as are we. What they need is vision, just as their parents do.

Without vision we wither; we become our worst selves. One of the operating principles of liberal education in the 1970s was that kids just don't understand the scale and scope of the world's problems, from population to disease to pollution to racism. Certainly, they still need to learn and comprehend these problems if they are to contribute to solutions, but it has NOT been my experience that they "just don't get it." But it is extremely unworthy of an educator to simply load up his or her students with the worries of the world without also offering both positive visions (that is REAL visions), as well as the ways and means that enable students to themselves become visionaries. I consider the guiding of students in becoming visionaries themselves to be among my most important responsibilities as a teacher.

This is where I see the planning profession moving: from mastering the tools of envisioning for their own work, to also teaching others, many others, to become impassioned and competent visionaries themselves expressing themselves in public conversation. Planners can no longer afford to be simply technical experts, and I don't presume to impute that to the professional planners. But to an ever greater extent than before, planning must embrace the role of humanistic intermediary, along with its traditional roles of bringing to bear its manifold areas of expertise. Planners

must become conversationalists in the very broadest sense. They must learn how to engage the many, to teach them what may be, and to trust that this broad public can speak responsibly and creatively. Planners must not be the only designated visionaries, but they must teach others how to envision.

These new channels of conversation and information dissemination (CMC) must be mastered and continually reinvented by the planning profession. Just consider the possibilities we can already see, let alone those that must wait for technical elaboration. It is already possible to craft virtual reality "walk throughs" for unbuilt physical spaces, and place them at the disposal of anyone who can get to a library of other public venue. Software companies have already produced and distributed all sorts of "envisioning" packages whereby even third-graders can try out everything from designing their own towns, to methods for distance learning, to conflict resolution.

Up to this point, professional planners often have been society's designated visionaries, beginning with the single "heroic" engineer to the designated panels of experts mastering the arcana and technical databases needed to create new landscapes and spaces for the use of us all. If we are to solve our problems, rebuild our communities, and empower individuals to create a meaningful and sustainable future, we must invite them to the party. There will probably always be places for the single, heroic intellect, whether the engineer or scientist, philosopher or artist. However, this is not the notable hallmark of the age we are entering. Individual genius will always have its place, but the years ahead will be defined by the genius of LINKED and COOPERATIVE intelligences, and especially the intelligences of the adult layperson, student, and child. We can embrace this, or shy away from it, but it is surely inevitable. And for those who say there is nothing new under the sun,

these new directions are already the facts on the ground!

Biographical Note

Nelson Kellogg received his doctorate in the history of science from The Johns Hopkins University in 1991, the year he joined the faculty at Sonoma State University. Since arriving at SSU he has been engaged in developing pioneering new curricula for the showcase liberal arts degree program at SSU, the Hutchins School. Two years ago he launched an experiential research seminar titled "Anatomy of a Virtual Community," which was sponsored by the California State University Chancellor's Office. Along with a group of students from that class, he formed Group One, the SSU Electronic Villages Project. They helped plan, organize, and inaugurate a local community network in the town of Sebastopol, CA; and Professor Kellogg has since been working with the town of Petaluma, CA, in their electronic network efforts. Dr. Kellogg has held fellowships with the Smithsonian Institution, Princeton University, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE).

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Note: especial attention to chapter 2, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?")