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Why Should Master Plans Make Dull Reading?

Practicing Planners... there is room for improvement!

By Gerald Luedtke, AIP

I'm disappointed. In all the years I have been reading the *New York Times Book Review*, I have never seen a master plan make the "best sellers list" for nonfiction (or fiction for that matter). I had hoped by now some smart planner would get a best selling master plan right up next to Wayne Dyer's *Your Erroneous Zones* or Irma Bombeck's *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*. Have you ever stayed up all night reading a master plan so fascinating you could not put it down? Few planning studies are spellbinders. Too bad! How can people get excited about carrying out a plan when the plan itself is not very exciting?

It has been wryly observed that a Ph.D. dissertation is a book written by one person and read by one person. I fear that some master plans are books written by one person and read by no more than a handful of persons.

We who write plans relish our special "third person detached" technical writing style. We sterilize our writing until all the color is bleached away. Can a planning report show no emotion? Is excitement found only in novels and poetry? I recently read a plan aimed at preserving an unspoiled shoreline of truly ethereal beauty. The author set forth excellent recommendations in the plan. But the scenic shoreline itself was described in such shallow and detached language that I doubt the plan could motivate anyone to take up its cause.

There is an old Italian story about a country lawyer who had two quite different cases. The first case involved a man who had seduced a lovely young maiden and the second case involved a man who had stolen a goat. Although the lawyer was usually a conscientious fellow, he had the misfortune of getting the two cases mixed up when they came to trial. On the day of the goat stealer's trial, he went into the

courtroom mistakenly thinking he was defending the man who seduced the maiden. The lawyer masterfully probed the defendant's deepest and most subtle emotions as he described how this poor man, when he came upon such a nubile and lovely creature, could not resist wanting to embrace and possess her as his own. The judge had never heard such moving and beautiful language used in describing a goat. He dismissed the case.

Writing plans. A lot of stodgy writing in planning studies results from slavish following of federal program planning requirements. Planning requirements set forth in the *Federal Register* are designed to implement federal statutes and ensure a reasonable level of comprehensiveness in planning work. Admittedly, federal planning requirements are becoming increasingly detailed and complex. But I think it is still possible to develop one's own organization, focus and style in a

A lot of stodgy writing in planning studies results from slavish following of federal program planning requirements.

planning study while meeting the basic federal planning requirements. I recently collected several housing studies prepared in various parts of the United States and was surprised how similar all of them were. Each study followed current federal planning requirements in rigid formula like fashion. I think it would help greatly if writers of federal planning requirements would include explanatory notes encouraging a more imaginative and flexible interpretation of basic requirements.

A well written plan should focus on the personal concerns of different age groups. A baby may be concerned with his belly, a youth with the itch of his sexuality, an adult with his livelihood, an old man with ennui and his bowels. But many plans appear to be written for an

ageless society. Plans usually contain a component which analyzes the age structure of a planning area's population, but often do not carry through by addressing the needs of specific age groups in key sections of the plan. How often have you been involved in a public hearing where elderly people will speak out in unison on a planning proposal? Or teenagers? Or young childbearing families? Newspaper writers have long realized that readers identify with the ages of people in news stories and usually give the ages of their subjects. A plan should more carefully focus on the needs of each age group. If each age group does not get what it needs out of a plan, it won't be interested.

During the past decade, the "policies planning" approach has become widespread in the United States. A policies plan sets forth an interrelated series of written policy statements which provide guidance to decision makers in each aspect of

community development such as housing, commerce, industry, transportation and open space. Earlier plans usually recommended specific land uses for each section of a planning area and detailed locations for transportation routes rather than setting forth more general written policies which would continue to be valid under changing conditions. The policies planning approach is excellent. Well articulated policies provide a planning commission with a set of decision making tools which are issue oriented yet flexible. But policies must be very carefully written if they are to mean anything.

Gerald Luedtke, AIP, is president of Luedtke and Associates, Incorporated, a firm of urban planning consultants located in the Renaissance Center, Detroit, Michigan.

What is the writer of this "policy" trying to say?

Provision of new and rehabilitated housing units within the high density core should maximize the opportunities to ensure a reasonable supply of safe, sanitary and aesthetically appropriate housing, as well as a full choice of housing types and residential locations which are consistent with the socioeconomic characteristics of the city's core area population.

Too often, the policies planning approach has been emasculated because policies were not clearly written. Clear writing, of course, is a result of clear thinking.

Everyone has read the famous admonition of Daniel Burnham:

Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever growing insistency. Remember that our sons and our grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty. Swell for Burnham. He was writing a plan for the entire Chicago Metropolitan area. He had the magnificent expanse of the Chicago

Planning educators should devote more effort to improving writing skills of planning students.

waterfront as the central jewel of his planning strategy. But how about the planner who is given the job to stir men's blood in West Pondunk Township? Of course, it is fallacious to seek boldness and drama in all plans. I think it is fair to say that most people's blood would be "stirred" by a plan which is developed and written with a high degree of perceptivity and sensitivity. A planner, as a creative artist, should be able to see the physical environment in a clearer and more penetrating way than most people do.

Recently, I read a very effective plan which sought to preserve the historic character of a small New England village through a series of rather minor land use and transportation modifications. There was nothing bold or impressive about the plan's recommendations; but the

writer had such a sensitive feeling and appreciation for the historic character of the village, that he made his plan compelling to the reader.

Improving skills. Planning educators should devote more effort to improving the writing skills of planning students. I remember how Christopher Tunnard, who taught me planning at Yale many years ago, stressed that good writing and effective planning were one and the same. During the years I taught urban planning, students frequently asked me where they could get remedial instruction in basic writing skills. They complained that most courses in technical writing stressed research techniques rather than how to put a good sentence together. Planning schools offer remedial courses for students who lack basic drafting and graphic arts skills, but what about students who cannot write?

Planning commissioners can also help achieve a higher quality of writing in planning studies. One planning director told me how chagrined he was when his planning commission assigned a different chapter of their draft master plan to each planning commissioner for editorial critique. The director got each chapter back peppered with changed words, reworked sentences and deleted paragraphs. Predictably, the composite effect of the plan, when put back together again, was that of a too loosely stitched patchquilt. A good plan has a beginning and a conclusion. Everything between these two parts must be essential to developing and explaining the rationale of the plan. Otherwise, it should not be there. A plan cannot be randomly changed around without affecting the integrity of the total document.

I am not advocating that every planning document need be a literary masterpiece. But, I would like to see more clarity and inspiration in the written portions of planning studies. Practicing planners, there is room for improvement! □

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Continued from page 2.

to advocate USDA displacement of HUD in rural America.

HUD may very well be the department to take the urban initiative. They have not and cannot take the lead in rural communities. HUD

should divest itself legislatively from rural areas and the newly formed Farm and Rural Development Administration should fill the void never really occupied by HUD.

*Philip Harris
Director of Technical Services
Maine State Planning Office*

Compliment Not Complaint

We so often hear complaints, but I would like to do just the opposite—to compliment you and your staff on "Practicing Planner."

I have been a planner for 13 years, and though I rarely can find time to plan through the academic *AIP Journal*. I find I have more than enough time to thoroughly enjoy "Practicing Planner." I find it timely, intelligent, practical, easily "digestible" and covering a wide range of topics. The layout and photos make it even more pleasant.

I recommend it as a fine and easy way to gain exposure and learn what others are doing. Please relay my compliments to the staff of *Practicing Planner*.

*Mim Gieser, Assoc. AIP
Senior City Planner
City Planning Commission
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Following Raymond's Advice

Congratulations to Mr. Raymond for a much needed statement about private planning consulting firms. Those of us who practice in this area, and some others too, have long been aware of all the various items in his article. We sometimes feel we preach them to whomever will listen until we are blue in the face. We also often feel, with considerable justification, that our plaintive statements usually fall on deaf ears. Mr. Raymond's article should be required reading for every public (and private) entity that has, is or will, use the services of a private consultant. If more communities would follow his advice there would be far fewer problems with "fly by night organizations," "burned" clients, overworked, overextended local staffs and the resultant black eye for reputable firms and ineffective local programs. He "told it like it is." What more can be asked?

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