

On Ethics and Economics

Kanishka Goonewardena

AS A STUDENT, PRACTITIONER AND PROFESSOR of planning committed to socialist ideals over a quarter of a century in three countries and six cities, I can claim to have lived with a certain ‘identity crisis’. Am I a planner, an activist, an intellectual or even a radical of some kind—or, better, a combination of these? Accompanying this existential question is a nagging angst, rooted in the contradiction between my sense of what planning could be and what it is. These two have been drifting apart since I started thinking about them. And the recent discussion on the ethics of planning in these pages, following the attempts by the American Planning Association (APA) and the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) to modernize their professional ‘ethical codes’, tells me that this issue is not just my problem. Ethics in planning has quite properly become a matter of public dispute—thanks above all to the exemplary writings of Peter Marcuse. But I see no harmonious resolution of it on the horizon. So let me reflect on our so-called ethical dilemmas, in a way more autobiographical and anecdotal than academic.

I entered planning via architecture, even before I really knew it, as an undergraduate student in Sri Lanka in the mid to late 1980s. Politically this was an overwhelming time for most of us, as the Sri Lankan state was radically challenged by militant Tamil separatists operating in the North and East and by an ultra-leftist Maoist



Kanishka Goonewardena was trained as an architect in Sri Lanka and teaches critical theory and urban studies at the University of Toronto. He is coeditor of *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre* and now studies the relations between urbanization, imperialism and colonization.

movement in the South. Revolution was in the air and we were radically politicized in the universities, which were centers of militant organization. I always recall this context to remind myself of my attitude towards architecture at a moment when it seemed that another world was not only possible but also inevitable. For even if we were mistaken then about the balance between the real and the possible, we had firmly registered the injustices of our world and resolved to make another one. I could not therefore avoid the question in studios and lectures: how could architects be revolutionary? Although this was rarely addressed by our teachers—many of them were trained at places like the Architectural Association in London—a couple of us discovered in our dusty university library a few precious books like *Town and Revolution* by Anatole Kopp, which we read alongside cheap Soviet editions of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

We realized then that architecture and revolution were indeed once united in a moment called ‘modernism’ and that urban planning was central to it—even if I was unaware of Marshall Berman’s classic *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* at the time. Being inspired by the architects of Red Vienna, Neues Frankfurt or Russian constructivists like Konstantin Melnikov, Moisei Ginsburg and the Leonid and Victor Vesnin brothers did not, however, help me much in my first job after college—as an apprentice in Colombo to my favorite teacher of architecture, a brilliant designer trained at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in the 1970s. It was a dream position for an aspiring architect, but I quickly lost the kind of discipline needed to work on fancy residences for wealthy clients in a place engulfed by burning ethnic and class conflict. I think he kindly ‘let me go’ before I quit—to take up a much less coveted job as an architect in a government of-

fice. There I thought I could be more relevant to the needs of ordinary people of Sri Lanka, who could not afford architects. So I became an urban planner, hoping very much to serve the common rather than the private interest. It was the only decision that struck me as being—as I understood this loaded word—ethical.

Ethics and planning in this sense were umbilically linked in my mind: planning was simply what enabled me as an architect to be ethical in practice. Yes, I am known to be utopian, but even then I was not so naïve as to think that a public servant in Sri Lanka, an architect at the national Urban Development Authority, could really be revolutionary. Nonetheless, I was in principle committed to the prevailing state policy of building low-income houses for the masses and investing in urban planning and design to serve those who were otherwise denied their ‘right to the city’. This was however the same state that was also murdering my fellow students by the thousands, in the North and the South, often on the mere suspicion of being ‘insurgents’. Even before the word became fashionable in the 1990s, then, I had a practical lesson in the limits of ‘insurgent planning’. But I did not give up on *revolutionary* architecture and planning. I left my government job and, thanks to some generous scholarships, devoted nearly ten years of study in the USA to my abiding topic and attendant ‘theory’.

I have to fast forward now to get to the point—which arrived just after I had become the Director of the Program in Planning at the University of Toronto in 2010. It was a letter from our provincial professional planners’ institute, saying that our planning program was due for an accreditation appraisal. And it promised more than business as usual—which is tedious enough, involving reports whose thickness alone damages the environment—because we were told that we would be evaluated according to a new set of rules, drawn up in accordance with the Canadian Institute of Planners’ hyped-up Planning for the Future initiative. This intensely debated project assumed a sweeping mandate to modernize the planning profession in Canada by revamping many things, particularly the standards for professional ethics, membership, competence and accreditation. I noticed the word *excellence* appearing with alarming frequency in the mass of documentation associated with Planning for the Future, and this made me approach the whole enterprise with due diligence.

The missionary zeal of Planning for the Future rested on a simple observation, in itself reasonable enough: the planning profession had not kept up with the demands placed on it by a rapidly changing world. Both Jane Jacobs and Lenin would have agreed with that. Yet the more one got into the substance, the more problematic it all became. To begin with, the basic concept of planning at the core of Planning for the Future offered a shockingly narrow view of the diverse array of activities in which various kinds of planners are actually engaged, by summarily reducing all that to an outdated notion called ‘land use’. It did not help that this had been the Canadian Institute of Planners’ operative yet archaic definition of planning for some fifty years, which if anything needed to be radically reformatted. But in many ways the future promised by Planning for the Future looked worse than the past, not least when it came to the crude redefinition of professional planning competence in a direction that was most unapologetically technocratic. This flew in the face of much good work done in critical planning thought, especially by those who drew on Jürgen Habermas’s celebrated distinction between instrumental and communicative reason to restore a liberal moral dimension to planning practice. We know that this is a practice increasingly subjected to the nihilist means-ends calculus characteristic of technocracy—of the sort that once claimed in Vietnam to ‘bomb the village in order to save it’, provoking a memorable ethical refutation from Marcuse and other progressive planners.

One did not of course have to be a revolutionary to find fault with Planning for the Future. Intelligent liberals and even neoliberals also read between the official lines of the Canadian Institute of Planners, expressing concern over its tendentious technocratic thrust. I have had the pleasure of talking to some of them about this noxious futurism. And one of the most articulate in their ranks, a partner of a leading international planning and urban design firm based in Toronto, once told me what he asks young people applying to work with him: not if they know cost-benefit or input-output, but whether they have read *Middlemarch*. He and I inhabit different political worldviews, but we agreed on the relevance of George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) to a proper education in planning, which is the business of planning schools that the Canadian Institute of Planners was proposing to subsume under its technocratic vision. But not without a struggle, much to my delight.

Emails started flying between distressed professors across planning schools in Canada as soon as the threat of new accreditation standards—developed without any meaningful consultation with planning schools—became reality. The Association of Canadian University Planning Programs (ACUPP) mobilized rapidly, like an innocuous neighborhood suddenly galvanized against impending bulldozers.

So I got involved in the fractious negotiations between the Canadian Institute of Planners and representatives of Canadian planning schools, and especially in animated deliberations on Planning for the Future among fellow faculty and with students. This was not Sri Lanka in 1989, and we were not debating revolution with T-56s and AK-47s in attendance, but I relished the occasion to search our souls, asking questions about who we are and what we do. Among the positions around which some consensus emerged within the assembled group of faculty was the view that the Canadian Institute of Planners has and should have no monopoly over planning—particularly planning education. Universities too have a vital and critical role to play in planning, and their autonomy and *critical distance* from the professional world is absolutely essential to it. Mutual respect for theory and practice, so to speak, was one of the demands we put to them as a pre-condition for any agreement on new accreditation standards. As one of us wrote in an internal communication: ‘The *unique* contribution that university planning programs could make to the “future of planning” derives from the fact that we don’t have to worry from 9 to 5 about how to satisfy our clients’ demands, make a profit for our firms and hustle for the next contract; it rests on our privilege and duty to read, think, write and teach with minds of our own’.

That the technocrats of the Canadian Institute of Planners regarded our eminently liberal protestations with disdain was perhaps predictable. Unexpected was the way in which the essence of Planning for the Future once revealed itself to me. This happened not in a formal meeting, but in a Toronto pub, during a random altercation of sorts with a bureaucrat of the planning profession, who could not contain himself at my insistence that our planning program ‘would prefer not to’ seek professional accreditation under the proposed terms. He cut off my Bartleby-inflected rant on

the humanist mission of the university, dispensed with the bombast of the Canadian Institute of Planners, and told the truth: Planning for the Future is not about ethics, it is about jobs. How could I ignore the plight of poor professional planners whose work is everywhere being stolen by others—architects, engineers, lawyers and God knows who else? I was stunned as he said it better than I could: what Planning for the Future is doing is nothing else but redefining planning in such a way that it would be possible to put a fence around it and say, hey, ‘only we can do business here and not you infidels’. I appreciated the candor, but could not resist a response after a few drinks. Even if the bottom line *were* jobs, would not restricting the definition of planning so tightly decrease rather than increase the work available to those who used to be called planners? Would not the future be better if we asked instead how to broaden rather than reduce the scope of our critical engagement with the problems of the world, not in competition but in cooperation with kindred spirits—experts, intellectuals, activists?

There is more to the unfinished Planning for the Future story than I can say here, but at least one lesson from it should be clear: ethics is a code-word for economics. Capitalism destroys the distinction between being good and having goods. So it is utopian in the bad sense of the word to imagine that we can somehow fix our problems in the ethical realm without also and at the same time addressing fundamental contradictions in economics if not indeed in society at large. As philosopher Theodor Adorno put it, ‘the wrong life cannot be lived rightly’. What is to be done then about the appalling gap between our professed commitment to social justice and the actually existing ethical standard of our so-called profession—which is anchored by the ‘client’ who pays the invoice, not some ethereal notion of common good? I am drawn strategically to what Lenin called ‘dual power’, which in our context points to the necessity of struggling for a better ethical code within and against the official organizations of planning, while also acknowledging in practice that much of the terrain of radical planning lies beyond those institutions. It would be dialectical to say that revolutionizing planning cannot dispense with revolutionizing the world, especially if we are to say—like I did in Sri Lanka and still do now—that planning can be revolutionary. P²