

2008 AESOP PRIZE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

Bridging the Gap, Building the Bridge:

The Mediating Role of Planning Theory and Practice

The **AESOP-ACSP 2008 conference theme** “Bridging the Divide: Celebrating the City” focuses on the mediating role of cities. Many cities are, to some degree, divided or contested: differences (in age, ethnicity, gender, class, religion and culture) are evident in cities at various scales and levels of intensity.

From the perspective of a more equitable society, planning is about designing socio-spatial interventions to promote greater social equality. This is the ethical dimension of planning. Can we teach students how to think reflectively about designing socio-spatial interventions in this ethical way? What are the practical-moral and pedagogical problems which need to be addressed?

The **2008 AESOP Prize for Excellence in Teaching** asked for planning courses that had clearly and consciously integrated elements linking the spatial dimensions of planning with matters of social equity and diversity in order to promote social inclusion and cohesion amongst diverse groups. The jury was looking for courses which explicitly raise these ethical issues alongside – or as part of – developing students’ technical skills in designing socio-spatial interventions, which aim to heal social divisions and conflict and which place a particular emphasis on the ethical dimensions of social equity and inclusion which we would like to see taught within planning courses.

The course selected for the 2008 AESOP Excellence in Teaching Prize provides an exemplary opportunity to gain a better understanding of how the discipline of spatial planning can help to alleviate social, economic and environmental problems. Social inclusion is the underlying planning concept which, in this course, is embodied in the positive duty to promote disability equality.

The idea of the teaching project which lies at the heart of the course is to encourage an experiential understanding of social inequity, both at the level of the built environment and in terms of how disability is understood, thus encouraging students to envision what an inclusive city might be like. Not only were students encouraged to bridge a gap in their understanding and experience, but also, through the experience of the project, students were invited to be imaginative in building a bridge to a more inclusively designed environment.

The rationale and stimulus for the innovation stems, then, from wishing to embed a more sensitive understanding of how planning practice mediates the use and experience of the built environment *at the very beginning* of the students' journey through the study of planning.

The course bridges theory and practice by working with a specific client group, Moving on With Life and Learning, a charity working with adults labelled as having learning difficulties.

The pedagogical rationale for this course is based on a commitment to making the project 'come alive' for the students. Working with a client group for whom 'learning difficulty' is such a central issue represents an important opportunity (and metaphor) to explore the feasibility of a learning partnership jointly addressing the learning needs of both groups.

The approach is innovative because, while planning engages relatively easily with visible issues of physical disability, the issue of learning difficulties is rather more invisible. This initiative is, therefore, a direct attempt to be more inclusive in communicating and understanding planning with a specific, often overlooked, community of interest. This, then, served to help the students to gain a fresh, and shared, understanding of the potentially *dis*-abling nature of the built environment.

The sensitivities developed through the co-production of learning in this environment provided a thought-provoking method for raising awareness of 'hidden' issues, for generating greater self-awareness and for questioning the potentially disabling consequences of societal action. Given the sensitivity of the problems to be addressed

in this pedagogical situation, an important part of its innovative approach was that the project explicitly used the principles of action research, so that the insights for theory and practice emerged from the work itself, deepening professionally responsible reflexivity through critical reflection, self-accountability and self-evaluation. Furthermore, the course provides an evidential base on which to engage in the dissemination and sharing of practice, making a valuable contribution to teaching and learning within the wider planning academy and community.

The courage required to engage in this type of co-production of knowledge, to bridge the gaps and build the bridges, led to a deeply enriching educational experience and was deeply appreciated by all the jury members.

On behalf of the members of the jury of the **AESOP Prize for Excellence in Teaching**, I congratulate the **winner of the 2008 prize**, Deborah Peel, who created the module, *Aspects of Effective Communication*, at the Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool.

Francesco Lo Piccolo

Chair of the jury