

David W. Massey

Viewpoint

AESOP at twenty: introduction

The founding of the Association of European Planning Schools (AESOP) in 1987 was part of a critical decade in the institutionalisation and the internationalisation of the planning academy (Stiftel and Watson, 2005). The moves towards change can be seen as combinations of three main threads: first, the growing strength of the social science intake of staff in planning schools over against those trained and practised in the more traditional design professions; secondly, a desire for the recognition of the separate academic identity of 'planning' and hence of the 'planning school' over against the approach of offering a specialist planning option in a related discipline; and, thirdly, a reaching out to engage with other national and academic planning cultures beyond interests of the long-established personal membership and more professionally identified associations.

Things were, of course, more complex than a mere conjunction of the three elements: there were – and still are – contests; there was a certain Anglophone/Anglo-Saxon lead and elements of national and regional emulation and rejection; there was also an underplayed academy vs professional/practitioner element in the discourse. Some national and international contexts were more conducive and welcoming to change than others; some existing institutional strengths could be built on, while other fragmented and more polarised interests remained detached and uninvolved. Elsewhere, existing alternative structures and distinctive traditions continued and even strengthened. It is important also to recognise that the social science perspective is one among a number of alternative approaches and has its own tendencies towards hegemony, that a research-driven planning academy needs to recognise and nourish policy and practice (without being co-opted by either), and that national and local cultural identities are essential and valid in planning scholarship and practice, not hills and valleys to be made plane in pursuit of a reductionist internationalism.

Town Planning Review recognised the beginnings of change in 1984, in an 'Editorial Note' remarking on how over 250 academics from planning schools throughout the US had assembled in San Francisco the previous October at the third, more independently organised annual conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) and what a positive occasion it had been. The transformation of the Association's *Bulletin* into the more ambitious *Journal of Planning Education and Research* was also noticed. In a more modern version of 'transatlantic crossings', the Note went on to float the idea of a British initiative along similar lines strongly linked to the need

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to improve the research capacity, strength and role of the planning schools. That was too narrow a national vision to be taken up (although the more recent annual UK 'Planning Research Conference' suggests that it had some currency), and it needed further transatlantic crossings to subsequent ACSP conferences to widen the scope to the European scale for action to take place.

This 'Viewpoint' provides an opportunity to look back to and reflect on the consequences of that widening of scale in the formation of AESOP in 1987 and its development over the next twenty years and then to take stock of the Association in 2007 and look ahead to some future interests and issues. The first of these two specially commissioned 'Viewpoints', 'European integration and the planning academy: reflections on the AESOP project', is contributed by Patsy Healey, and the second, 'AESOP – an ambitious "TWEEN"', is provided by Peter Ache.

References

Editorial Note, 'Planning education: American perspectives ... and a British initiative?', *Town Planning Review*, **55**, 1–4.

STIFTEL, B. and WATSON, V. (2005), 'Building global integration in planning scholarship', in B. Stiftel and V. Watson (eds), *Dialogues in Urban and Regional Planning 1*, London and New York, Routledge, 1–14. Stiftel and Watson not only cover the 1980s, discussing parallel moves to establish scholarly institutions for planning in Canada, Brazil and France, but also the subsequent emergence of wider regional associations (adding to the international alphabet soup for planning academics) and the first World Planning School Congress in Shanghai in 2001 and the first meeting of the Global Planning Education Association Network (GPEAN) in Volos in 2002.

European integration and the planning academy: reflections on the AESOP project

Patsy Healey

In the mid-1980s, the planning academy in Europe consisted of a range of planning schools with different intellectual traditions, as well as specialist options in courses of architecture, engineering and economics (Rodriguez-Bachiller, 1988). The academics teaching within them were influenced primarily by their national cultures in education and research, as well as by a variety of intellectual traditions. For many, planning was a practice craft rather than a scholarly endeavour. Some published in the academic literature, primarily in economics and geography, but many acted as consultants to government and private bodies. International networks existed, but mainly within separate language communities. Student movement between countries during their educational programme was unusual.

It was in this context that AESOP was born. Of course, the wider project of European integration was a major influence and opportunity, but for many of those who gathered for a snowy weekend in Schloss Cappenberg in January 1987 (Fig. 1), invited by Klaus Kunzmann of Dortmund University, the motivation to create an Association of European Schools of Planning was to widen horizons for staff and students, to promote a more international outlook, and, in particular, to advocate a social scientific underpinning for understanding and developing the theory and practice of planning activity. For me, certainly, coming from one of the larger EU countries, I felt that the academic planning community in my country was too small, and its intellectual traditions as yet too weak, to sustain a vigorous community of critical inquiry. Both Klaus and I had experienced the energy of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning Congresses of the 1980s, and appreciated the way in which the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* had been developed. But we also felt that a European association should have distinctly European qualities.

This European quality was very evident at the founding Congress held in Amsterdam in the autumn of 1987. Many of those who became research collaborators in the 1990s met there for the first time. We astonished each other with our different practices. Forthright Scandinavians encountered the elegant rhetorics of Italians. Pragmatic, managerial Britons struggled to accommodate the desire for conceptual clarity among French and German participants. And we all found diffi-

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Figure 1 AESOP's founders, Schloss Cappenberg, Germany, January 1987.

Photo courtesy Sébastien Piantoni, AESOP website administrator.

culty in communicating, not just because planning academics in most parts of Europe at that time had not been trained with English as a second language, but because our intellectual traditions, the positions of our planning education programmes and the vocabularies we used to talk about planning were so diverse, as Dick Williams highlighted later in his book on European spatial planning (1996). Yet what was also evident was a strong commitment to coming together into an Association.

In the first few years, creating a community of planning academics across Europe involved intense debate about all kinds of matters as we got to know each other and developed the practices of the Association. Some, particularly those already well networked in the fields of urban and regional development studies, argued that AESOP's focus should primarily be on education issues and the promotion of exchange of students and lecturing staff. Others, of whom I was one, believed that an Association without a strong focus on enhancing the quality of research and scholarship would not carry the intellectual weight to involve significant numbers of academics across Europe. Then there were debates about membership. The principle was that membership was open to schools of planning. But what *is* a school of planning? The classes of 'membership' now recognised by AESOP developed out of this debate. In the early days, every application was scrutinised to ensure that programmes in architecture, engineering and economics which merely had planning options were not allowed to become full members. There were also difficult debates about where

'Europe' ended and how far into the Middle East it stretched, as well as how AESOP should approach the 'language' question. This last was and is a particularly difficult issue for the planning field, which combines an openness to international ideas with a commitment to interactive relations with planning practices, where one of the key qualities of local specificities lies in local languages. Some people argued that AESOP, too, should operate in a multi-lingual way. UK people abstained when voting on this last issue, which resulted in English being adopted as AESOP's language. We perhaps should have insisted on 'Euro-English' as the language, as some UK participants still fail to realise that their peculiar way of speaking English is not readily understandable to non-first-language English speakers! Meanwhile, a younger generation of planning academics in Europe are much more skilled in communication in international English.

In time, these early debates faded into the background, as the AESOP project developed its institutional infrastructures. Of these, by far the most important are the Annual Congresses. It is in the Congress arena that we have developed the academic art of scholarly presentation of research material, and progressively built up transnational exchange of ideas and inspirations across a range of subject areas with a relevance to the planning field. In the early days, we had a hard time listening to each other, not just because of differences in capacity in English, but because of the different intellectual traditions and different performative practices noted above. The contrast with recent AESOP Congresses is striking. Now a new generation of academics engages with the Congress presentation format with an ease and a seriousness which make for very stimulating experiences. Those meeting in Amsterdam in 1987 would have been astonished at the range and quality of the material presented and the smooth, professional organisation of the 2007 Congress in Naples. They would also have been proud that the Congress now attracts participants not just from across Europe, but from North America and Asia as well.

If the Congress is where AESOP has its most influential presence in European planning academia, there are also many other arenas of encounter which have been important in 'integrating' the planning academy in Europe. One has been the Association's basic governance mechanisms – the Council of Representatives (COREP) and the Executive Committee (EXCO). These have been not only sites for debate and the development of initiatives but important opportunities for regular meetings where education and research collaborations of various kinds have developed. Among the special initiatives has been the PhD Workshop, running now for nearly fifteen years, in which many current planning academics have participated. Then there have been the special commissions – on planning research and on planning education, the journal, *European Planning Studies*, and the AESOP Newsletter (now superseded by the website, www.aesop-planning.com) and the institution of prizes for best paper in a planning journal published in Europe, for teaching innovation and for best Congress paper.

Meanwhile, membership of AESOP has spread eastwards, although some difficulties in engaging participation in some western European countries, notably Spain, are still encountered.

What is striking about these different AESOP activities is not just their existence. Most organisations have similar programmes. What has been more important is their role in the creation and spreading of networks among planning academics in Europe which could be mobilised to take advantage of Europe-wide initiatives and, particularly, EU opportunities. AESOP arrived just in time to take advantage of the EU's ERASMUS/SOCRATES programme, which promoted the interchange of staff and students. Large numbers of planning students, from undergraduates to doctoral students, have been able to spend a semester in a planning school outside their own countries. And the networking opportunities of AESOP have been invaluable in developing the links needed to put together the trans-national research networks demanded by EU projects funded under the structural funds and by the succession of EU Research Framework Initiatives. One outcome has been the appearance of much more comparative research in the planning literature, and an increasing understanding of the differences which different practice cultures and institutional contexts make to how planning is practised. These experiences have in turn helped to make planning academics valued resources for national, regional and local governments seeking to learn more about practices in other countries and how, or how far, these might be transferred into specific local contexts.

Looking back twenty years, the project we embarked on seems to have grown into something larger and much more vigorous than we could have imagined at the time. This is not just because of the energy and commitment of a few people – in particular Louis Albrechts, Goran Cars, Klaus Kunzmann, David Massey, Alain Motte and the late R. H. (Dick) Williams – who helped to build AESOP and develop the relations between AESOP and national planning education arenas, although this was very important. What was also important was the moment of opportunity, when, in each of our national communities, we were waking up to the significance and opportunity of the project of European integration for our subject matter – urban and regional development, environmental improvement, urban design, and place-making in all its forms, and for educational development and academic endeavour. The formation of AESOP helped to create or reinvigorate national associations of planning academics in several countries.¹ Overall, AESOP has played a major role in generating the intellectual energy which has made European contributions to our

¹ In France, the organisation of planning academics, APERAU, created in 1983–84, was very keen to develop links with the emerging AESOP. In the UK, AESOP came to replace what had been the Education for Planning Association (which generously donated the residue of its funds to AESOP), but helped to stimulate a new arena for UK planning academics, the Planning Research Conference, sponsored by the professional institute, the Royal Town Planning Institute.

field so stimulating in recent years. It has helped many to become skilled ‘travellers’, not just between different practice contexts, but among different disciplines and traditions of addressing particular subject matters.

These days, I have less contact with the inner workings of AESOP or with the networking that goes into sustaining student exchange and transnational research projects. But some of us ‘founding fathers and mothers’ of the AESOP ‘movement’ have been wondering lately whether perhaps AESOP has become too much focused on the research dimension of the planning academy and too little on the development of teaching programmes. We also wonder if the focus of attention on developing research and scholarship in the planning academy may be pulling against a commitment to an interchange between research and practice, especially when practice cultures and exchange of ideas necessarily take place in local languages. There is a danger in the current emphasis across much of European academia on ‘research output’ as evaluated by peers, rather than on contributions to developing practices in different places. Committed academics have of course always done both, but it is not easy to meet both demands as funding pressures build up on universities across the continent. Yet surely, the contribution of the planning field intellectually and in research lies in its tradition of grounding its scholarship in engagement, in all kinds of ways, with practices and of recognising that knowledge development is not some kind of linear translation from abstract theories to ‘applied’ practices, but a continual interaction between the purposes and experimentation of the practical world and the practices of academic reflection, inquiry, critique and the generation of potentially useful ideas, concepts and vocabularies.

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AESOP – an ambitious ‘TWEN’

Peter Ache

On its twentieth anniversary, the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) has become so to say a ‘grown-up’ institution, with the ambition of contributing to the development of both the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). Our twenty-first conference was held in Naples this year, with about 600 participants coming from 40 countries inside and outside Europe. More than 400 presentations were given in 14 tracks dealing with a diverse range of topics from ‘planning education’ to ‘planning theory’ and subsumed under the main conference theme of ‘the risk society’.

Obviously, AESOP has grown strong over its twenty years of existence – and, taking into account the fact that nine presidents of our sister organisations were also present in Naples to discuss and work with us, it now has a global audience. At the time of writing, AESOP has 108 full institutional members and 40 associate members – that is, schools that share our ideas about planning education and meet our standards for a proper planning education in Europe. This is a huge international structure which until now has operated on an entirely voluntary basis.

Recently it has become clear that we have reached the limits of this organisational model. The Council of Representatives has therefore made the very positive decision to raise the membership fee in order to provide a full secretarial support to the Secretary General, the holder of the office which keeps AESOP together. This step is also very positive with respect to the more immediate challenges which the planning community has to address, related to educational questions, to research and to the position of planning in the professional field.

In education terms, AESOP has provided a first report on the progress of the Bologna process. We now have an exploratory (though not comprehensive) picture of the current situation in our member schools, showing us that many schools have already prepared for the two-cycle model. Clearly, more research is needed and we have also asked our members to continuously update this information. In the course of this, we have recently established a new feature in our routines, i.e. the Heads of Schools meeting. The first meeting was held in Bratislava (Slovakia) in 2006, followed by one in Leuven (Belgium) in 2007.¹ The 2008 meeting will be held in Łódź (Poland). The Heads of Schools meeting will hopefully become a regular exchange and discus-

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¹ Reports on both meetings can be found on the AESOP website, www.aesop-planning.com.

sion platform for all those colleagues at the various schools who are responsible for education and curriculum development. As was seen this year, the discussion may also be related to matters such as accreditation and general quality assurance. The aspect of accreditation, the scrutiny of programmes (at both levels in the two-cycle system), is a function with which AESOP should be much more closely and proactively involved in the future. The development of proper European Masters² and PhD programmes under the umbrella of AESOP is clearly desirable.

Education has been and continues to be one of our main concerns and I should therefore mention a recommendation, formulated by past and current presidents of AESOP in April 2007, to reaffirm this mission:

AESOP sees the ‘art and science’ of planning as a complex expertise. To develop this, a strong relation with planning practice is indispensable for planning education. As an academic field, planning clearly has an applied science character, providing a particular stimulus due to its multi-disciplinary approach bringing together different intellectual traditions and concepts. In planning education we therefore need to make sure that students can learn in practice situations at an early stage. As a scientific endeavour, we need to work towards innovative new solutions in cooperation with day-to-day planning practice.³

Since the WPC conference in Shanghai in 2001 AESOP and other planning associations have formed the global education planning association network (GPEAN). Here we come together to discuss matters of common concern and to plan further world conferences,⁴ but also to publish at regular intervals the ‘Dialogues in Urban and Regional Planning’ (Stiftel, Watson and Ascelrad, 2006), giving an overview of actual research themes and topics.

The research aspect is vital for AESOP. The planning academy, despite the centenary to be celebrated in Liverpool in 2009,⁵ is still rather young and experiences constant changes in terms of a modern understanding of planning as the complex task of creating good quality spaces and sustainable territories – or, to express it in accordance with the ‘risk society’ topic of the Naples conference, avoiding risks

² In 2007, some AESOP members prepared joint applications for the ‘Erasmus Mundus’ programme; for example, the University of Reims (France), the Technical University of Bratislava (Slovakia) and the Royal Institute for Technology in Stockholm (Sweden) have applied for a joint programme on European Planning in the context of globalisation (EuroPlan).

³ The reference to ‘art and science’ relates to the well-known notion used by RTPI.

⁴ The first World Planning Schools Conference was held in Shanghai in 2001, the second in Mexico City in 2006; the next one is scheduled for 2011/12, with the venue being still open.

⁵ The point of reference here is the appointment in 1909 of Stanley Adshead as the first Lever Professor of Civic Design and also founder of *Town Planning Review* in the University of Liverpool’s Department of Civic Design, marking the start of a formal planning education before it was introduced in other parts of Europe and the USA.

and mitigating hazards. Research is important as it helps us to reflect on practice, to develop theories (or concepts), and to systematise our knowledge as an academic discipline to make it available for practice.

Our community has a rich record of research and development of research themes. This richness becomes visible in the many thematic groups initiated by individuals or groups of colleagues, using AESOP as an umbrella to regularly discuss and work on actual topics, feeding this into the conference tracks or round-tables. This research is also indispensable with respect to new requirements coming from the institutional environment, as universities increasingly use statistics relating to contract research or scientific publications to assess our quality as academics or the success of departments. All who are involved in this know that at times such an approach generates strange results or is straightforwardly inappropriate for the discipline. AESOP developed an initiative to establish more appropriate criteria to assess our research quality as against the currently dominant practices. A first report⁶ and suggestions have been put together, providing information about actual practice in countries where AESOP is present. This report came with a list of more than forty journals, which AESOP uses in part to select the winners of the prize for best published paper, but which might also be used as a manual for universities which are looking for appropriate material to assess the research quality of planning schools or departments. This is definitely something AESOP will promote in the near future.

We also have our own associated journals and quite a number of our individual members founded journals or sit on journal editorial boards. *European Planning Studies* started as a means to communicate our planning debates and agendas, addressing a global audience. Currently AESOP is reviewing the situation and considering whether to establish an additional instrument for communication which would bear an AESOP quality mark and would reach the full range of our members. One important aspect of this is the language option(s) available. New models have been discussed, such as the possibility of formally embracing a journal as the official AESOP journal, with subscription linked to membership fees and operating as a direct means of communication with our members. However, this discussion is still ongoing and needs careful thought.

The planning profession has recently entered a discussion regarding professional standards, initiated by the European Council of Town Planners and the International Society of City and Regional Planners, representing professional practice interests. AESOP is taking an active role here as well. We have established a relationship with the European Commission (EC) in order to investigate whether a regulation should be expected at the level of the European Union. Thankfully, no immediate regulation is intended by the EC and it is up to professional and educational bodies to

6 For an outline, see the presentation by A. Balducci, available from http://www.aesop-planning.com/Bratislava_ppt/Alessandro_HOD_Marcho6.pdf.

come up with proposals in case of, for example, barriers preventing market access for planners in Europe. This issue was discussed extensively at the Heads of Schools meeting in Leuven (April 2007). AESOP and the professional associations have agreed to cooperate closely in any future activity, for example towards the creation of a common platform. As the field of planning changes rapidly, we have to respond to these changes and make sure that the educational institutions have a say in this context. As the EU is enlarged (and possibly reinforced with a new treaty), professional mobility and recognition of planners is crucial for our future. The schools organised in AESOP are, to put it simply, the producers of future generations of professionals. Our research at its best identifies current changes and future challenges. Who else is better positioned to reflect on qualification requirements?

Whereas the early years of AESOP were clearly much more concerned with establishing a communal spirit and enabling networking, very well described by Patsy Healey above, we now are in a situation where we have to face up to the importance of AESOP as an institution in very practical terms: AESOP is the only representative body which brings together the planning schools of Europe. Given this unique position AESOP has to strengthen its profile as a professional body. AESOP has to mobilise its resources, taking a leading role and lending its expertise to ongoing debates and initiatives regarding planning education and planning qualifications of future professionals. AESOP has to promote its agenda with politicians and all other key stakeholders (or actors) in place development and management across Europe. From this threefold objective it follows that our voluntary structure brings us to the limits of our capacity. To safeguard past work and sustain it in the future, AESOP intends – as noted above – to establish a permanent office to support the work of the Secretary General and the President. As described above, at our last meeting in Naples (July 2007) the Council of Representatives gave its support to this ambitious agenda and agreed to raise the membership fee structure in order to provide the urgently needed resources. A further review of the membership fee is planned for 2010 and with that, the next steps towards a more professional structure will also be reviewed. The Executive Committee will provide and present a report on options regarding office operations and representation. This is a very important discussion ahead of us; one result could be that AESOP will decide to have a permanent address, establishing a headquarters somewhere in Europe and being clearly and permanently visible as an association with a proper business address.

In its first twenty years AESOP has grown to become truly representative of European planning, and has developed a conscious vision of planning. AESOP's commitment to the issues of planning education is facing new challenges which bring new items to our agenda. In the field of research, AESOP has grown from a spontaneous facilitator to a proactive stakeholder. In the context of globalisation, AESOP supports the worldwide debate on planning with its sister institutions and in GPEAN.

Our ambition as a TWEN[ty something] for the next twenty years is definitely to mature and sustain our level of activities, services and functions as the only body representing planning schools in Europe.

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