

## Giving Birth to AESOP

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(...) in February 1987, with the help of Patsy Healey, I invited a small group of academic planners to Dortmund, to discuss, whether it would make sense to establish a European association of planning schools. Searching for a location with *genius loci* I selected Schloss Cappenberg, a castle North of Dortmund. (...) from 1824 to 1831 Freiherr von Stein, a Prussian statesman who introduced the reforms that paved the way for the unification of Germany in the 19th century lived in the castle. He promoted the abolition of serfdom and the establishment of a modern municipal system felt that the innovative and forward-looking spirit of this Prussian landlord and statesman had much to do with planning and cities.

(...) The representatives from planning schools across Europe, Patsy Healey and myself had encouraged to attend the meeting in Cappenberg were, David Massey, (Liverpool), Dieter Frick (Berlin), Giorgio Piccinato (Venice), Dieter Bökemann (Wien), Willy Schmid (Zürich), Andreas Faludi (Amsterdam), Jean-Claude Hauvuy (Paris) and Luigi Mazza (Turin) In addition Michael Wegener and Gerd Hennings of the Dortmund School of Planning joined the meeting, as well as Kwasi Ardakwa, who happened to be in Dortmund in the context of SPRING, the Dortmund-UST-Kumasi cooperation programme to train planners for developing countries, which had I had initiated and established in 1984. They are all shown on the famous AESOP picture on the terrace of Schloss Cappenberg.



(...) A draft charter of the association and essential next steps to bring the idea into life were discussed. Faludi, an enthusiastic supporter of the idea, suggested that the first congress of the association could take place in Amsterdam. Obviously, his spontaneous invitation was unanimously cheered. One more name should be mentioned in this context. Richard Williams from Newcastle, who passed away much too early, has not been present in Cappenberg. He has been an enthusiastic supporter of AESOP from the very beginning, backing the idea of a European network of planners, Later he followed David Massey as AESOP Secretary, who, based in Liverpool, helped with all his institutional experience to get the AESOP project working.

In Cappenberg we soon agreed on the name **AESOP**, which I had suggested for the *Association of European Schools of Planning* to be established. AESOP is the name of a Greek philosopher (...) (who) wrote popular fables (AESOPICA), which we would call narratives today, *where he made use of humble incidents to teach great truths, and after serving up a story he adds to it the advice to do a thing or not to do it.* (...) Again, I thought this name is linked to ambitions of planners, to plan for people, to communicate with people, and to use narratives and storytelling in planning and decision-making processes, not just plans and maps.

(...) My own aims and expectations 25 years ago were ambitious. In my memory they were:

- Given the fact that planning, maybe with the exception of Great Britain, have a kind of Cinderella status in their home countries, I expected that an association of planning schools in Europe could provide a transnational, respectively a pan-European academic community of scholarly exchange.
- Experiencing that the planning community in Germany was very much inward looking, I hoped that an international network could open the window to a European wide perspective of the discipline, and prepare the grounds for a next generation of much more international planning educators.
- Being strong advocate of planning education as an academic discipline, independent from architecture, civil engineering, geography, and other more established academic disciplines, I had expected that a recognized international association would offer a pan-European support for planning education as a discipline in its own right.
- I was quite convinced that being a member of a European association of planning schools would strengthen the reputation and the status of a planning school within the home university.
- At a time when the ERASMUS exchange programme was just about to start, I anticipated that the existence of a European network of planning schools could facilitate and promote the exchange of planning students.
- Last but not least, I hoped that the international community of planning researchers could benefit from the network by providing an exchange platform for joint and comparative research planning research.

Such similar expectations were expressed during the Cappenberg meeting and unanimously shared by the participants. Most of these ambitions have been achieved. In fact, more than that, the vitality of AESOP is represented by the many activities, which the association has successfully carried out since. The continuous commitment and passion of many planning educators across Europe makes the association an indispensable stakeholder of the pan-European plan.

## **Afterword**

In 2017 Europe is not really in a good shape. Migration from Africa and the Middle East and the BREXIT are dividing the continent. Security has become a prime concern. Nationalism is dominating politics and elections. Market led-policies support privatization of public services. Urban and regional planning is low on political agendas, unless driven by developers and smart digital infrastructure corporations. There is a hope: Donald Trump has succeeded to bring continental Europeans closer together again. But at what price? By cancelling the Paris Treaty on Climate change? By asking Europe to spend more money on US defence equipment? Yes, Europe has promised to spend more money on defence, though this money and is required to support innovative development

in peripheral European regions and is lacking in higher education. These are not favourable times for planning and planners, though their visions, passions and competence are needed even more than before to prepare cities and regions for the next challenges ahead, the widening of social polarization and the digitalization of life spaces and work environments.

In recent years most planning schools have been placed under the umbrella of schools of architecture, geography or civil engineering. The advocates of independent planning schools have less and less allies. New undergraduate planning programmes have hardly evolved. Planning has become a post-graduate discipline on the shoulders of traditional disciplines. This will hardly change in the decade ahead. It is even more likely that *zeitgeist* urbanism and big data hypes will replace planning as a scientific label within universities and in wider socio-political arenas. Urbanism and the internet of things apparently sound sexier and more scientific in market led economic environments in Europe than planning, that is always associated with naïve idealism, radical movements and control. Though teaching idealism, passion, radical participation, control of untamed market forces aside of ethos and professional competence should rather be considered to be the mission of planning schools. Here AESOP has a role to demonstrate and engage.

Potsdam, 08-06-2017