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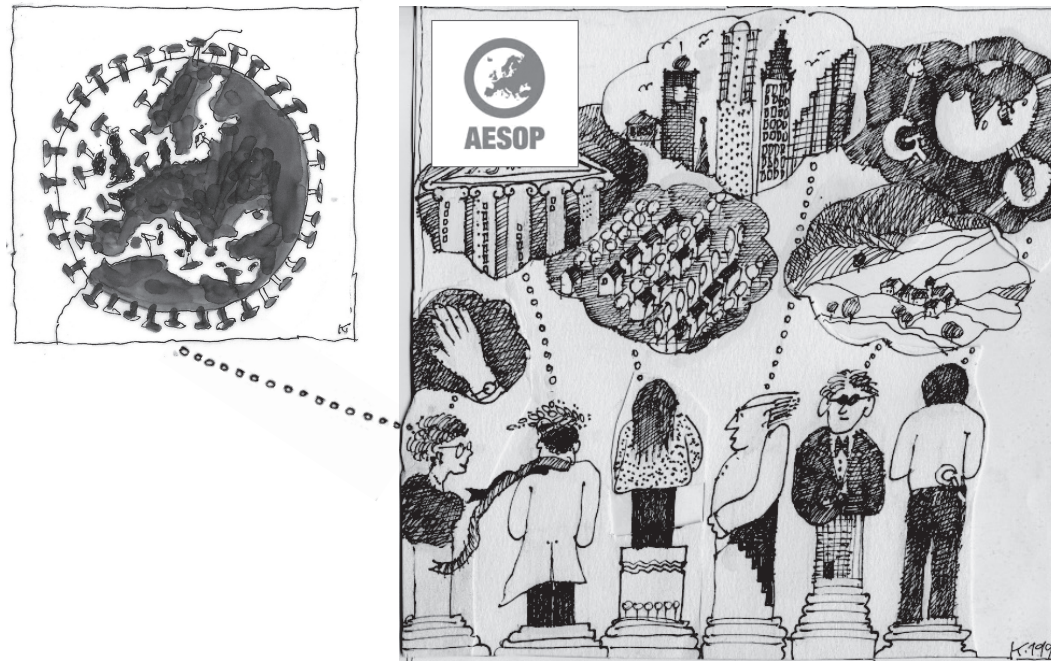
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What Does the Future Hold for a Post-Covid AESOP?

Klaus R. Kunzmann



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Covid-19 has alarmed the world and forced local economies to reorganise production and services, citizens to reorganise their daily lives, work habits and entertainment preferences and universities to organise online education or hybrid forms of teaching. It has also debarred the community of European planning educators from two annual congresses. This seems to have caused some planning educators at AESOP member schools in Europe to reflect on the future of an association that is highly dependent on face-to-face communication at its annual congresses. Will everything return to a new normal after the pandemic has been successfully tamed? The following comments raise some questions and present some pathways into the future.

1 AESOP: More Than a European Travel Agency?

The annual jamboree of ambitious and curious planners was not able to take place. Planning educators could not travel to another country, present their research results, listen to other planners' findings, compare their planning ex-

perience with that of others, learn about innovative approaches to urban development on study tours or mobile workshops, leaf through recently published planning books or forge plans to collaborate with researchers from other planning cultures. They were not forced to explain their planning approach in another language to an international audience. And they could not learn, often more importantly, about the merits or shortcomings of their own planning culture back home, when urged to explain it to a curious neighbour in a planning workshop. Even more joyful pleasures could not be experienced, such as communicating in another language, drinking a cappuccino with a colleague in the university courtyard, practising another European language over lunch, or roaming through an unknown city quarter in a new city and visiting a museum or cathedral guided by the eyes of a colleague from another planning culture. Even face-to-face experiences with a new friend during coffee breaks could not be adventured. For many participants of the annual congresses, these pleasures were more significant than sitting in one of the numerous sessions and listening to the (sometimes more, sometimes less) innovative and inspir-

ing presentations. All these pleasures could not be experienced during the pandemic. Online meetings were an insufficient substitute and less favourable mode to look outside national or regional boundaries or even courtyards. As a rule, these annual explorations in uncharted territory or favourite holiday destinations were financed by universities and research foundations, which were anxious to prove their international ambitions, to attract Masters and PhD students or recruit new research staff for international research projects. The much-welcomed annual diversion from teaching and doing research in another urban environment could not take place.

Besides the meetings of the heads of planning schools, the annual congress has become the only crucial element in keeping the network alive. Covid-19 and two years without the congress have shown the weakness and shortcomings of AESOP. The annual conference, however, is not the only rationale for planning schools of being a member of the AESOP community. But why does it make sense to maintain membership and pay a membership fee? Apart from organising the annual conference, AESOP offers many other services to its members via its website, such as announcing AESOP and other planning-related events and events by institutions or associations, advertising vacant teaching jobs and providing information on new books published by members of the planning community. However, is a website and a monthly newsletter and a bi-annual meeting of deans, respectively representatives of planning schools really sufficient to nurture post-Covid interest in AESOP? Many staff at member schools rarely open the link to the website or show an interest in AESOP activities. Often, their academic or professional home is the disciplinary community of architects, geographers, sociologists, political scientists or legal practitioners, rather than the community of educating planners. How can AESOP reach them? How can AESOP get them involved and committed? This has been challenge since the beginnings.

2 Planning: a Cinderella Discipline in Universities?

There are many developments in the modern world of academia that have implications for AESOP member schools. During recent decades, globalisation and digitalisation of trade and communication have forced universities to

open their doors and windows to the international world. They have made efforts to enrol international students, changed the curricula, introduced English as a second teaching language and recruited international staff for teaching and research, as they felt that this would raise their international image. Ranking has become a crucial factor. In recent years, the ranking of universities has become a key concern of university presidents, to attract international staff and students, and also of cities, who feel that the rank of their local university is crucial for attracting an innovative international labour force to the city. The criteria for ranking, primarily being scientific publications in international peer-reviewed publications and procurement of international and national research funds from national or regional governments or international institutions (such as the EU), third party research foundations or even from the private sector, are often questioned. Traditions differ from discipline to discipline, from biology, philosophy and architecture to spatial planning. This has considerable implications for planning schools. They are forced to offer a form of dual education. On one side, they have to educate and train planners in the regional language for national practice in cities and regions, and on the other side, they have to prepare researchers in the discipline for international collaboration. And another dimension has to be considered. In the market economy, information is not freely available. Libraries are providing less and less unlimited access to academic books and journals. Following international developments, a predominantly English-speaking international publication industry has emerged, serving the international academic community and their information requirements. Scholars who wish to share their research findings in open-access publications have to pay a considerable fee (often around €2000) to the publisher. As a rule, this fee is covered by the university or included in a research contract, hence, does not have to be paid by the researcher. To have access to information in books or journals that are not published under open-access conditions, researchers have to pay the amount requested by the publisher. The challenge has recently been articulated once more by the Swiss newspaper NZZ, stating that the social sciences are the losers in the business trend and universities have to take action (NZZ 1 February 2022). On the requirement of university presidents, the number of publications in internationally refereed journals and books together with the amount of research funding obtained by the staff of a school

is considered as proof of the scientific quality of a department and its reputation and importance for the university. Obviously, this has numerous implications for staffing and internal funding. For planning schools which, traditionally, are not the most prestigious departments in universities, this is a particular challenge.

3 *Planning: a Discipline Losing Its Focus?*

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the development of cities and urban affairs have become a popular concern of politics and a much-covered theme in scientific (spatial) and popular media. This is also reflected in the multiple activities of the European Commission. There is much evidence that the number of scientists teaching and researching subjects related to urban affairs, as well as to urban and environmental development in institutes of higher education and working in public administrations, think tanks, consultancies and in a growing urban world has increased considerably. This reflects the exploding attention that life in cities and environmental concerns have received in traditional and social media, and among citizens who are increasingly participating in local and regional planning and decision-making processes. In times of climate change and Covid-19, universities have reacted to such trends. The new interest has encouraged many universities to offer BA, MA and PhD programmes in urban planning and urban affairs, and to initiate congresses, summer schools, workshops and “labs” dealing with urban and rural development. With the widening of the field of urban and regional to the social and cultural dimensions and to participation, governance and data mining and modelling, planning and planning education have changed the original architectural, technical and legal profile of courses and programmes. Though if planning is everything, maybe it’s nothing, Aaron Wildavsky reminded the community more than 50 years ago.

When it was established in 1987, AESOP founding members had the ambition to promote planning as a self-contained discipline, independent from traditional disciplines, which were offering special courses for students who wished to learn more about urban and regional development on top of the traditional curriculum. Over the years, this aim proved to be too ambitious. At a meeting in Schloss Cappenberg near Dortmund, the aims of the Association were stated as:

- to represent the interest of planning schools in Europe in national and international administrations and organisations, particularly within Europe
- to promote the development of teaching and research in the field of planning
- to facilitate cooperation and exchange between planning schools in Europe, and to encourage the harmonisation and equivalence of their degrees
- to articulate a European dimension within planning education as part of the process of institutional cooperation and integration within Europe, bearing in mind also the prospect of increasing professional mobility within Europe
- to foster and enrich higher education in planning across Europe by mutual support, including facilitating dialogue, exchange visits and the spread of information
- to defend the cause of expanding and enhancing higher education in planning and
- to promote a progressive approach to planning education in schools of planning by experts with a rounded view against rival claims from older-established academic units and from other disciplines and professions.

In 2012, the Charter was changed and updated in accordance with Belgian law on 20 December 2017 and accepted at a meeting of the Council of Representatives in Oslo. With cooperation agreements with two international planning journals, *European Planning Studies* and *DisP: The Planning Review* AESOP has strengthened and promoted its international mission. The early aims of AESOP were to support planning education and not to promote research. The hope was that planning as an independent discipline could be better promoted, if it were supported by an international network. It soon turned out, however, that the two dimensions of education and research are closely interrelated. Gradually, however, the educational dimension lost much of its original spirit, and the research dimension was confronted with competition from other traditional disciplines and associations.

Since then, only very few universities have established independent planning education over the last two decades, such as the schools in Berlin, Aalborg Dortmund, Hamburg, Kaiserslautern, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Vienna and Volos. Many other universities have introduced interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary planning courses in urban planning, urban affairs, urban management or environmental planning relying on interfaculty cooperation.

4 *The Challenges of Hybrid Learning*

In the third decade of the 21st century, slow-balisation (a slowing down of the globalisation process) and populism are now closing windows of national planning cultures to the outside world. National lockdowns and travel restrictions are reducing opportunities to cross the boundaries of national planning cultures. Such developments are nurturing inward-looking national environments, which reduce openness and interest in international initiatives and activities and cross-border networking in Europe. The pandemic has forced many universities to temporally close their doors to students. Staff had to move discussions in planning labs and cooperative research projects to Zoom conferences. Not every staff member was technically and mentally prepared to immediately shift lectures to online presentations and tailor their presentations to the new communication mode. Students had fewer opportunities to get actively involved and ask questions to better understand the content presented. Foreign students in particular had difficulties following the lectures from their laptop computers at home or from cramped student accommodation. They did not know whether the lectures were being communicated from a second home in a distant rural area in the country or even from a sunny island in the Mediterranean. Anyway, they missed the personal contact with their supervisors and classroom colleagues. The obligation to develop more formal introductory courses has certainly improved the quality of courses, though it is not known whether all students have appreciated and benefitted from such transformation. Permanently virtual learning has become increasingly streamlined and intense. It is losing its ease and lightness. McKinsey, the global management consulting firm that “helps organizations achieve sustainable, inclusive growth”, reported on 21 January 2022, “As US students return to classrooms, some are catching up on unfinished learning, but others are falling further behind, widening pre-pandemic gaps.” For a discipline that is very much related to teamwork in projects, labs or workshops of labs, online meetings can never replace face-to-face discussions with teaching staff. There is a role for the young academics. They are experiencing the lockdowns and suffering from online learning in a discipline that is aiming and forced to bridge theory and practice. Planning schools qualify their national and international graduates both for local and regional planning practice in their country and

for an international job market, be it in academia, international institutions or practice in their home countries. This is an ongoing academic tightrope act.

5 *AESOP Has to Sharpen Its European and International Profile*

AESOP, however, is not the only international home for urban and regional planners who are interested in looking beyond national planning cultures. Networks of practitioners or researchers such as the *European Urban Research Association* (EURA), the *International Association of Urban and Regional Planners* (ISOCARP), the *Regional Science Association* (RSA), or the international grouping of national regional science associations across Europe (ERSA) are competing with AESOP. Moreover, for some staff in planning schools, the events and activities of other international associations are more attractive, such as the European Real Estate Association, or international networks of architects, urbanists, geographers or sociologists. All of these associations compete for individual or institutional members, participants of their events, readers of their publications and financial support from their universities or the public sector. They all operate in a corridor of professional management and voluntary work by individuals. In this wider context, AESOP has to find its specific role in international arenas and continuously sharpen its international profile to legitimise existence and value for the discipline. Though there is another challenge. Professional management requires sufficient budgets to employ competent staff, adequately paid by the association. Voluntary work, in turn, requires passionate individuals who sacrifice their time to the association and commit themselves continually to tasks that keep the networks alive. Both conditions are not easy to fulfill.

6 *Planning Education After Covid-19*

Will everything return to normal, once the pandemic is over and has become an episode in history, like the Spanish flu after the first world war? Will travelling across Europe remain as cheap and comfortable as it was before airlines reduced their services and number of flights? Will academic travel follow the road of business travel when, after a successful period of convenient home-office practice, hybrid modes have become routine? Will the interest in other

planning cultures decline, while national parochialism in Europe is affecting urban and regional policy arenas and further widening the gap between inward local practice and international theoretical advancement? After BREXIT, migration flows into Europe and conflicts on the border to Russia, and aggravated by the pandemic, national interests now are dominating the political agenda in most European countries. The European soul has lost much of its cohesion of spirit. Inward-looking values and concerns about post-pandemic life and work in the country are dominating planning communities. European curiosity and exchange have lost some of their importance, even for younger generations.

Obviously, at the beginning of 2022, the end of the pandemic is not foreseeable. It could well be that free movement across cities and borders will remain regulated. Whether or not this is the case, hybrid forms of higher education will become the new normal and universities will have to adapt. Given the low academic profile that most planning schools have, university chancellors and senates may be tempted to suggest that planning schools import ready-made online courses from different faculties instead of hiring new teaching staff focusing on planning, and not on architecture, sociology or computer science. Given the above deliberations and observations, sceptics may express their concern about the future of AESOP after Covid-19 in times of slowbalisation, (a slowing down of the globalisation process), populism and virtual communication. Where to go? What to do? What to improve? Where to start? And, not to be forgotten, who should do it? Maybe the manifesto, the acting AESOP president Maros Finka, is preparing for a meeting at the University of Kaiserslautern in March will contain a road map for the future of AESOP.

7 Pathways Into the Post-Covid Future of AESOP

The worldwide pandemic means that AESOP, in its 35th year of existence, has come to a crossroads, where decisions need to be made to prepare pathways for its future. AESOP is only supported by membership fees from planning schools and by income from the annual congress. The lack of public funding and marketing sponsors or even funding from charity organisations and benevolent philanthropists does not maintain that professional services that actively assist their members to overcome the many

technical and workforce constraints of the crisis, particularly to manage the transformation to hybrid forms of information and communication in planning education. Such forms will dominate the time after the crisis. Hybrid learning will be the new normal and time will show the winners and losers of the transformation. In the future, even the annual AESOP congress may have to be organised in a hybrid format to overcome constraints. (In 2022, ISOCARP was forced to operate its annual congress in Doha/Qatar in hybrid format as all Chinese participants were unable to attend in person). This may also address the difficulties experienced in the past when the number of participants exceeded the managing capacity of a planning school and raised the costs for the operating school and the participants. A hybrid form of the annual congress would reduce travel costs and appease the environmental conscience in times of climate change. Hybrid congress forms, however, will also raise the outlay for technical services. Not many schools will have the capacity to provide such services and subcontracting the services will raise the costs. Thus, new fairways will need to be found to sustain AESOP as an association of planning schools in digital times after the crisis.

After the stagnation, caused primarily by the Covid-19 pandemic, four roads may open up new pathways into the future of AESOP: Broadening the communication platform, strengthening the thematic groups providing online packages for planning schools and promoting a European University Alliance in Spatial Planning.

• Broadening the communication platform: Covid-19 has accelerated the digitalisation of living and working. Hybrid forms of working, learning, consuming and entertaining will be the new normal once the pandemic is over or once the economy and society have learnt to live and deal with it. Communication will be split between virtual and face-face communication. Professional information modes will have to adapt. The AESOP website (AESOP-planning.eu) is a rich source of information (uninformed internet users, however, may end up on the website of AESOP, the Australian perfume brand). The website of the planning association informs the curious web explorer about the many activities the association provides to its member schools and to scholars in the community of planners who have an interest in the field. The categories are: *About us, membership, events, quality recognition, thematic groups, resources, young*

academics network, news, books, jobs, journals, and educations. A further link leads to online resources. It can be assumed that the active use of the website remains modest (in future, the actual use of the website and whether it is linked to other websites should be explored). The AESOP Secretariat produces a monthly newsletter that informs the member schools selectively about events, open teaching positions at universities, AESOP positions and voluntary commitments to activities of the association, as well as information on newly published books written in English by AESOP members. There is no information on who is reading the newsletter, though it can be assumed that the newsletter is not really a key source of information for all staff at AESOP member schools, even less so for teachers and researchers in the broad field of urban affairs outside of the member schools.

It could make sense to invest some thoughts into how, in times of virtual communication, an AESOP platform for planning schools could be established, operated and regularly updated by an association that does not have permanent and fully paid professional staff and no external sponsors who are willing to financially support the operation of the platform. In this context, two more areas could be considered. Could it make sense to link the AESOP website to websites of other organisations and institutions and to use social media and influencers to reach new target groups? Obviously, the contents of a broader open platform and the conditions of its use would need to be creatively explored.

- Changing the format of the annual AESOP congress: Covid-19 has shown that online conferences are an option for cross-border cooperation. Hence a new and permanent hybrid format of the annual congress could be an option. While one location offers a face-to-face event with a more general thematic focus and reduced participants, and incorporates the annual YA congress, speakers from established or even new thematic groups from three to five schools across Europe can organise online events that are thematically linked to the theme of the main congress. These decentralised hosts would filter the growing number of admissions to the congress, including applicants from outside Europe. Such a format would reduce associated travel and be climate-friendly. It would reduce the management load of the organisers of the main annual congress and augment the discussions in the thematic sub-congresses.

- Strengthening thematic networks: At present, AESOP sustains 17 thematic networks. They fo-

cus on specific thematic fields such as *Planning and Complexity, Planning Theory, Transportation Planning, Planning Education, Sustainable Food Planning, French and British Planning Studies, and Urban Transformation in Europe and China*. The thematic groups have been established in order to create more effective platforms for debate and discussion among AESOP members and reflect specific thematic concerns. They benefit from institutional patronage, they have the rights to the logo and to include the words 'AESOP Thematic Group' in the name, get support for their logistical activities, can propose topics for events (i.e., congresses) and have preferential access to AESOP's communication platform. The thematic groups report on their activities annually to the AESOP Secretary-General and meet during the annual AESOP congress. They receive some financial support from AESOP for their activities. Depending heavily on the commitment of their coordinators, they discuss and communicate their findings in papers and books. One outcome of the thematic group on planning education is, for example, the book *Teaching Urban and Regional Planning Innovative pedagogies in Practice*, edited by Andrea Frank and Artur da Rosa Pires published by Edward Elgar in 2021. Another is the "Just City" conference, prepared by the AESOP Thematic Group of Ethics, Values and Planning, and operationalised by the Young Academics group.

Lacking face-to-face meeting opportunities during the Covid-19 period, the activities of some thematic groups have slowed down. Not all thematic groups continued their work with the help of virtual conferences. Even though the groups may benefit from their internal thematic debates, the visible outcome for all planning schools is limited. Thematic groups, which are reflecting the zeitgeist will soon lose active commitment and audience. Other thematic groups may prefer to cut the rope to AESOP and continue their discussion independently.

One assignment could be the task of elaborating a special online package on the theme for the thematic group, introducing planning students (and staff) to their subject and concerns. This could be an instrument to open up thematic groups to the whole AESOP community. Otherwise, AESOP could turn into a fragmented world of splintering interests. Here is room for improvement.

- Providing online learning packages: During the lockdown, all planning schools had to switch to online teaching and learning in order to bridge the time until face-to-face learn-

ing in classes, study projects and labs could be resumed. Without much time for preparation and didactic advice as well as insufficient technical support, teaching staff had to develop online courses. When developing such courses and given the lockdown in the regional context, the European dimension may have received less attention. AESOP may have to promote the development of online courses tailored to the specific requirements of planning schools. The thematic range of such online packages that can enrich face-to-face-courses could be the *History of European Spatial Planning*, *Urban Cooperation in Transborder Regions* or special packages on *Planning in Another European Country*, to prepare students and staff for a study trip. Another action field that could be considered is to prepare European online packages for planning schools in the US, Asia, Africa or Latin America, not leaving the job to the international publication industry. Schools overseas could buy these packages with a European subject from AESOP and contribute to its budget.

• Promoting a European University Alliance in Spatial Planning: In 2017, upon initiative of the French Government, the European Commission launched a programme to develop European Universities in order to strengthen,

“... strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions and encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty ‘European Universities’, consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities”,
and to achieve

“...the ambitious vision of an innovative, globally competitive and attractive European Education Area and European Research Area, in full synergy with the European Higher Education Area, by helping to boost the excellence dimension of higher education, research and innovation ...”

“European Universities’ are developing challenge-based approaches for shared education, research, and innovation to enhance interdisciplinary critical mass; they are sharing capacity and pooling resources, strengthening the attractiveness of academic and research careers, supporting institutional change, for example, through inclusive gender equality plans, and reinforcing co-operation with surrounding ecosystem actors; they are working towards open science and open education, engaging with cit-

izens for solving societal challenges and reinforcing excellence in education and research for global competitiveness.”

I am not aware whether AESOP member schools at European universities have discussed forming a European University Alliance in Spatial Planning, aiming to develop a joint PhD-programme in planning theory and apply for funding from the European Union. This would certainly have raised the European profile of planning schools and attracted students from Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

8 *The Post-covid Normal Will Be Different*

During Covid-19, the time could have been used to explore ways and means to sustain the European spirit of planning schools, while national borders had to be closed. Mindsets focused on local challenges of transforming traditional courses into online courses and organising hybrid formats of planning education combining online courses with face-to-face workshops in nearby urban laboratories or in the countryside. In business circles, agility has recently become a key factor to survive in the VUCA world: a world characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Even the cultural institutions that have suffered most from two years of pandemic lockdowns take it very seriously. Agility does not mean speeding up actions – it points to the need to reconsider activities in a challenging context. That is what AESOP has to consider. In the post-Covid time, some of the transformations will remain. Universities will have to adapt and accommodate new forms of learning and provide spaces within the university that will favour new learning forms. The post-Covid new normal will be different. Planning education needs to go on to educate planners to contribute their expertise to transform cities and regions after the pandemic into healthier and livelier cities and places. And, equally importantly, the European spirit needs to be brought back to the membership of AESOP.

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