



DISCIPLINING DISCOURSES – CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE CITY, THE URBAN AND THE PLANNER IN SWEDISH URBAN PLANNING EDUCATION¹

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Abstract

This paper concerns discursive constructions regarding the city, the urban and planning within urban planning education in Sweden. It is the construction of norms that is the centre of attention, based on the hypothesis that education is one arena where this happens. Group interviews with students have been conducted, showing how students relate to urban history and current planning issues. The lack of visions and social perspectives on the urban is discussed. An important conclusion is the importance of a balance between social theory and design training in education, or between critical thinking and visions, or analysing and improving the city.

1. Introduction

“My argument is that, however insistent this traffic, these buildings, and those inconsiderate bastards may be, my sense of this combination of information and affects as uniquely urban is mediated through a powerful set of political, sociological, and cultural associations. It is these connotations that are condensed in the symbolic space *the city*. You know what I mean about being in the city, not only because your lungs and ears have been assaulted like mine, but because you too operate with the city as a category of thought and experience.” (Donald 1997, p.181)

The city as a category of thought, in line with Donald (1997), is a central starting point for the arguments in this paper. The purpose is to discuss ideals regarding the city, the urban and planning that are discursively constructed in Swedish planning education. The students both have to learn to understand and analyze spatial – as well as economic, cultural, social, environmental – situations and processes (“urban studies”), and in addition formulate proposals for change (“urban planning”) (Tewdwr-Jones 2011). It is the construction of norms regarding this that is the centre

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of attention here, based on the hypothesis that education is one arena (among others) where this happens, and that urban imaginaries are important in this process (Tewdwr-Jones 2011). The students' discourses and the students' ways of relating to, contributing to or being affected by, urban discourses is considered as an indicator of ongoing urban planning discourses, being open and interested, reacting to ongoing developments in their surroundings, stories in the news etc. as well as easily affected by education and the views and opinions of their teachers.

This paper first discusses the discursive approach in relation to urban and planning research, then how and by what factors “the planner” and “planning” as discipline are being shaped, and thereafter the results of an interview study with urban planning students from four different educational programs in Sweden is presented and discussed.

2. The city and the urban as discourse

“... discourse theory turns our attention to the complex relations between discourse, power and knowledge.” (Richardson 2002, p.353)

In analysing the stories and images of the city, the urban and planning this project uses a discourse oriented approach. Here it is considered as an *approach* more than a specific *method* (Howarth 2007; Torfing 1999). Firstly, language is of critical importance in affecting power structures and thereby also materiality, so considering statements as discursive means considering them as more than “just talk”. Instead language and statements is intimately related to a practice and in this case to the shaping of the planner's ideals in the education context (Pinson 2004). Secondly, a discursive approach means looking at how actions are legitimized, naturalized and normalized – how conditions of existence for certain actions are created. This opens up for a discussion on how planning practice is, or could be, done. A discursive approach consequently epistemologically here has to do with how the interviews are considered as empirical material, how they are used and what importance they are given. Ontologically it means that categories such as “the city” or “the urban” are considered as ideological categories.

Urban planning is a discursive practice – policies and plans, as well as their implementations or realizations are discursive (Pløger 2001; Richardson 2002). We are all – students, academic staff, practitioners, citizens – part of this and affected by it. Images and stories of the city and the urban are constantly in the making and constantly changing (Çinar & Bender 2007; Donald 1997; Tewdwr-Jones 2011; Westwood & Williams 1997). In urban planning, imaginaries have high policy importance; they are a method, a tool – the creation of visions, plans, place marketing etc. It is not possible to dismiss them as “only ideas”, or “only discourse” but necessary to consider them political, following a certain agenda. How should the city be developed or revitalised? What places should be preserved or altered, what places are safe or unsafe, postcard beautiful or shameful? Who belong in certain



places in the city and who do not? Urban discourses are a strong factor in the answers to these questions. Adding to this the often proposed communicative planning perspective puts more focus on the planner as a listener, mediator etc. and for the planner to invest his or her own personality in the work, instead of striving for the impossible neutral and rational model builder. This accentuates the norms and values of the planner, and raises ethical questions concerning the blurring of the personal with the professional/political.

Several authors have discussed planning and urban design as “potent speech acts”, or storytelling (Donald 1997; Forsyth 1999; Throgmorton 1993, Tunström 2009; van Dijk 2011). This is to emphasize that it is not about a presentation of facts or aiming for the optimal solution, but to create stories about the present, past and future in the form of plans, designs or buildings, and that it is about sense-making, persuasion and even manipulation (Throgmorton 1993) – and that students in the field must be trained accordingly.

Van Dijk (2011) emphasises the power in the position as designer (or urban planner) and the power in their images, plans, sketches etc. – not from a perspective of politics but because of the political in planning and design activities and artefacts (a Foucauldian approach). Forsyth (1999) makes a similar point discussing the use of images of the US city Los Angeles in urban planning. Los Angeles is perhaps the most powerful contemporary urban image, often used as illustration for urban sprawl, car dependency and the unsustainable city. It is used to discuss such diverse phenomena as ethnicity in cities, the urban region and air pollution. Forsyth sees the use of images such as Los Angeles as an aspect of the rhetorical nature of planning, that also others have emphasized.

“The images of urban places that show up in plans are influenced by theories and ideologies about cities and spaces. What urban space is understood to be, and how it is commonly represented, will shape how it is planned for.” (Jones 2000, p.380)

According to Jones (2000) “the spatial discursivity” in the plan often neglected. In planning documents etc. an epistemology of space is embedded. Through categorizations such as “uptown” or “downtown”, “inner city or “suburb” a spatial discourse is constructed. (See also Tunström 2009.)

3. The undisciplined planning discipline

Planning as a discipline has many guises. Pinson (2004) calls urban planning an undisciplined discipline due to the multidisciplinary character, both in education and practice. Gunder (2004) writes: “... the very nature of the illusiveness of a concise definition of “planning” makes it a prime candidate to be a master signifier and ideological hook or quilting point for its disciples.” Planners are also considered “notorious for the difficulties they have in explaining to others – parents, friends,



university administrators – what they do.” (Gunder 2004, p.302). It is physical and social, descriptive and normative, analytical and applied, theoretical and practical, multi-, trans-, and interdisciplinary (Pinson 2004).

“Vital to planning is the illusion that the profession succeeds in providing the necessary solutions for harmony and certainty in our decision making as to what ought to be in the future.” (Gunder 2004, p.301)

Planning borders architecture, geography and politics, and its consequences are visible in buildings as well as in the spaces and activities in-between the buildings. On this arena students and teachers, literature and education forms construct the city, the urban and the planner in the way they talk, write and in other ways relate to it. The students learn to talk the talk of planning and urban development, to use concepts and arguments. Gunder claims that:

“Planners recognize themselves ‘through the common use of some jargon-laden expressions whose meaning is not clear to anyone, be it’ the public good, sustainability, globalization, smart growth or new urbanism.” (Gunder 2004, p.302, quoting Slavoj Zizek)

These master signifiers are important for creating a common identity, an idea of who the planner is and what the task at hand is, and they change over time reflecting and contributing to a changed role of the planner (Gunder 2004). In planning education research there has been discussions regarding whether education prepares planners to “do the job”, and whether education should be about producing planners (mainly practitioners) or educate students to become critical urbanists (mainly theorists) (Poxon 2001, p.539; Sandercock 1999). Poxon points to that the role of the planner is:

“... so ill-defined now that it is difficult to claim that a planning course is providing training for a particular job. Instead, it should be exposing students to the complexity and intricacy of a planner’s role, whether in public, private, or voluntary sectors, and equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes upon which further training can build.” (Poxon 2001, p.573)

This opens up for further discussions regarding what issues this can be, more in detail. There is no fixed core to lean on, so this is partly created at the different universities. They tell certain stories of planning history or urban development, and they emphasize certain tools for planners etc. Poxon further states that:

“Planning courses should [...] encourage students to question what is happening in practice and provide them with tools to challenge, criticize, and respond creatively to these circumstances.” (Poxon 2001, p.576)



Leonie Sandercock (1999) talks about necessary “literacies” and calls for a more elaborated analysis on contemporary urban development, for more discussion on ethics and for the students to take a stand, for planning to clearer relate to identity politics and also leave the ideal of rationality behind, in favor of empowerment and alternative ways of knowing and planning:

”We need to replace the old core concepts of rationality, comprehensiveness, and the public interest, with new concepts of empowerment, alternative ways of knowing, and planning for multiple publics.” (Sandercock 1999, p.540)

She considers that not only is a new conceptual language needed, but also a new practice. British planning researcher Patsy Healey (1999) is however hesitant to the literacies, stating that “[i]t takes time to become literate, each literacy having its particular bundle of concepts and skills” (Healey 1999, p.547).

In the following some empirical results will be presented and discussed, pointing to how Swedish planning students conceptualize their task and professional role, and touching on the issues of storytelling, multidisciplinary and the conceptual language of planning that have been discussed so far.

4. Results

4.1 Planning stories are told and retold

In making the interviews the main focus was how the students relate to, contribute to or are affected by urban discourses. First it can be stated that it is clear that they do. They relate to stories, arguments and events in ongoing urban discussion. They have heard histories of planning and urban development that they structure their ideas around, and they express and negotiate their opinions in the debate. They seem to quickly be able to retell, and position themselves in, for example the story of modernist planning in Sweden, the reconstruction of Stockholm city centre in the 1960s or the story of the successful transformation of the city of Malmö from industrial to knowledge economy. The stories of planning of previous times are however often conceived of as stories of *mistakes and problems*. This resembles the so dominant welfare state critique in Swedish planning discourse (Tunström 2009). They negotiate within and between themselves, constantly switching between own experiences, normative statements, current events, literature and lectures. Images and ideals are constructed through education, media, the discussions on coffee breaks between lectures and more:

“... this together becomes a total, and you know what you are supposed to do.”



The negotiations between own experiences, normative statements, current debate, literature etc. clearly develop over the years. In that sense the education is shaping them as practitioners and giving them a “language of planning” as one of their tools. They learn to relate to and position themselves in the urban development discussion. In the following long quote from one of the group interviews several aspects of storytelling in relation to planning education are illustrated:

“– I was thinking about the heritage from previous planners, previous generations. This is something we maybe should problematise more. We hear a lot ‘this is what they did before and this was bad and this was good’. We get quite fed with what went wrong, what was right, and quite controlled as regards what *we* should do. In some courses it has been like ‘this is how it works, so do like this’, and ‘this is not good, but it is the standard so do the same’.

– *Can you give an example?*

– I was thinking about the course, ‘Planning for work places’, then we talked quite a lot about, or we have talked a lot about roads, that they take up a lot of space, there is very much road and hard surfaces and so, and I know that when we were planning work places we talked about doing it differently, to improve it. But then we had a lecturer that said ‘yes, but this is the standard’, and when you try to think differently, or someone did a different solution, it was ‘yes, that is innovative, but it is better if you do it in the rational way’, so I feel we should reflect more over what heritage we bring with us from previous planning, and what we have been taught to do, what is good. Every time has its norm, ‘this is the right thing’, and then after a few decades you see that it might not have been so good. Perhaps we need to be more aware of what we get from previous times. (...)

– I feel sometimes that, like X said, that it is just repeated over and over what is good and bad and this becomes some kind of idealized image of what we do, as if that will not happen to us, but what we do will be right, and I am sure it will not. A lot will succeed but a lot will also fail, because we are strongly influenced, just like previous generations, by today.

– Just look at our presentations and projects and how similar they are and what they need to contain in order to fill the expected demands at the moment. There is a very clear norm that we are influenced by and live in and are being taught.

– *What do you mean similar projects, that you all do the same thing?*

– Yes, it is a bit like as if you know that if you in a project presentation include certain aspects, you have not stepped outside of the frame and it will work out, sort of.

– *What certain aspects?*

– There is always talk about active ground floors and this is something that is always brought up – urban life and that. And no one really deviates from that since it is what we have been taught.



- Something I appreciated last spring (...) we had a course called ‘Planning theory’ where we discussed the role of the planner over time, how a planner should be, from the 1940s and onwards. And that was quite rewarding, to see how they were thinking then, how we are thinking now and that you somehow are aware of that every point in time has ...
- Yes, and that parallel to that we actually went out to the million program areas (...) We have actually not visited that kind of areas until then, we went around in Stockholm, in Bredäng and Fittja et cetera. It is one thing to read about it because then it is always so biased, but to be there and see the qualities, because there are qualities, actually.
- Yes, I think there is a lot of focus on that what was done in previous times was all bad, that we should be ashamed of the planning that took place in the 1950s, 60s and 70s (...).
- *Is it like that in the course as well?*
- A bit (...) We are given an example, for example here out in X, that is the million program area here, and there our job is to improve ...
- That is true, it was not renew, but improve ...
- Yes, and it feels like, OK, let’s look at that kind of an area, with its surrounding structures, everything is ‘what is wrong here’, the focus was not on qualities, somehow (...) I don’t know what you thought about that?
- I can agree, in how that assignment was formulated, that we should ‘change’ or see if anything needs to be ‘improved’. But it can also be more subtle, some comes from the school, some comes from television and some from a discussion over coffee, and somehow all this together results in that you know almost what you *should* do.”

The same group of students thinks that a certain history is being told in their education through the planning ideals that they are being taught about – the garden city, the functional/international style, the building up of the welfare state and the post war mass housing schemes. These are not surprising historical categories, but they illustrate the need and use of categories in planning education, in rationalizing actions and constructing a line of development.

- “– It is very black and white sometimes. This is the way it was, it is not problematised very much.
- You learn to appreciate that which has an explanation, I think. (...) You learn to understand, and suddenly it is something you like, because you can see something more than just how it looks.”
- (...)
- Even though I cannot say exactly what, I have a feeling of what is OK and not OK when I do a project. And the OK is then fully based on what the main teacher is communicating to us, and previous experiences with that teacher.
- (...)
- X usually says ‘this is nice, this is ugly’.”



Another group states that they formulate their own problems, as part of their education. They get a site, but not a problem to solve:

“You always look for a reason, something to support an idea. You are trained to look for reasons to do something.”

So in different ways, a clear problem orientation can be seen, regardless of if it comes from the teachers or students. It is not about understanding or analyzing, but about *solving problems*.

A central problem to be solved that was mentioned often in the interviews was how to populate *public space*. Boredom, isolation, young people with nothing to do and a “dead” inner city was referred to. Another obvious node or problem is *sustainability*.

“... sustainability, sustainable urban development, what have we more ... compact city, the kind of words that are being used all the time, no one can really define what they actually mean, and we have seen that also from our discussion here. Everybody uses it but no one can really explain what it means.”

In general the interviews show a strong disbelief and almost cynicism in relation to sustainability. They do not believe in the concept, there is no such thing as the sustainable city, and the concept in itself does not mean anything. Or, they might believe in striving for sustainable development, but not in “a sustainable city”, or that sustainability strategies leads to a sustainable city:

“... we know where to start, but no one is doing anything”.

The *economic* storyline is another strong node. Consumption, an economic logic and economic development are conceived of as both a problem and a solution, paradoxically. The concept of *segregation*, concerning spatial segregation and physical barriers, densification and sprawl and the relation between city centre and suburb, is of central importance for some of the interviewees. Related to this is the discussion on *how to heal the suburb into becoming a city* (also discussed in Tunström 2009) – a physical and social problem at the same time. The role of the inner city – suburb division in Swedish urban discourse cannot be overstated. It appears and reappears constantly in different forms, also in the student interviews.

4.2 Envisioning the good city

“I am not sure why but it feels like a very strong word. The entire program is built around visions. (...) It is really a profession of vision. I think the time perspective has a lot to do with it.”



“We talk about the future all the time (...) we want to make something better.”

An important concept for many of the interviewees is *vision*. Many want to be visionary planners, involved early in the process, but also seeing it to the end. To be able to walk past a place and say that they made it happen. There are several aspects of the role of visions that are worth highlighting. First, to put it shortly – they like it, many miss it in their education, but at the same time they themselves are not very good at it. It was striking during the interviews that the students were unable, or at least had problems, putting their own vision into words and formulate clear urban ideals. For example, in the interviews they were asked to say something about inspirational images or places. Where do they for example find inspiration to their ideas of a “good city”, or a “good place”? Many of the participants had trouble answering this and gave very vague answers. Whether this is because they are not trained in doing this, or too disciplined to allow themselves to dream and envision a “good future”, or because this simply does not interest them, in line with a critical approach, is an issue up for discussion. But there are apparently also limits to visions. A student from a design oriented planning program referred to an incident when a fellow student in a project tried to argue for a radical and different kind of vision, but was met with so much questioning from the teachers that he gave up.

In general the interviews show that quite many lack training in social analysis and in conceptualizing the relation between the social and the material. Social aspects of planning, and the social in urban life interests many of the interviewees. It might even be there that their interest began, but the connections they make between the physical or material environment and “the social” are limited or not very reflected. Talking about urban theory, an interviewee tries to explain what she means by that:

“– I mean, the way you see the city, from the outside ... what to say, it is really difficult, not as a physical structure, but more as ... the urban life.
– More a social place than a physical ...
– Yes, exactly.”

Several of the students however express that they miss urban theory, urban politics and social perspectives on the urban, at the same time as they in some statements consider this as outside of their own field.

“There are many conflicts, with democracy and politicians ... for example that they are building big external shopping centers that depend on traffic – or cars. This is nothing that we can influence very much, unless you work with planning in the municipality planning office.”

Throughout the discussions “reality” and education, how it *is* and how it *is presented*, exist in parallel, in the way the students talk and are aware of the potential gap between the two. Or they express that they miss contact with “reality” – through guest lecturers, internships or similar. They constantly make this separation. There



are representations, images, marketing etc and then there is “the parking lot in Skövde” (representing what they think they actually will be working with, rather than the big visionary urban development projects) or “ending up in the municipality” when it comes to future employment. Also, references to the post war suburban areas as problematic places although they themselves do not – even as inhabitants in such areas – have experiences of the problems, similarly point to the gap between “reality” and images, stories or representations, and it contributes to constructing the rather gloomy image of planning practice as mentioned above. The city is discussed as a place for café and restaurant life, as a place where something always happens. At the same time several of the interviewees bring up the problematic approach in planning that something always has to happen and that it is hard to argue for no or very small projects.

“.. it can be really good to think freely and big, no directions at all, but it can also be good to get the connections to how it works in reality, when someone actually has an idea of what should be there, to get the connection between reality and our project.”

4.3 Critical thinking or cynicism?

The first conducted interview was with students in a quite social science oriented planning program, in the end of their first year of a bachelor. Critical thinking was a theme that came out very strong from their conversation, and this then occurred also in the following group interviews, in different guises and to an extent that was somewhat surprising. This first group appeared and expressed that they were strongly shaped by the stress on critical thinking from their lecturers. In their view their year so far was almost too focused on critique and what they referred to as discourse analysis. Paradoxically perhaps, they were also a group that expressed strong criticism of contemporary urban development and planning. What is possible to designate as *cynicism* characterized the conversation. It is necessary to reflect on the connection between critical thinking and cynicism, and perhaps especially in a planning program. Is a strong emphasis on critical thinking something that inhibits envisioning? They learn to critically analyze and criticize planning projects and urban development, but not to formulate their own visions?

In a design oriented program the students instead miss reflections and a critical discussion, here on their own working process. They feel that none or very little time is spent on discussing choices and alternative ways of working. They also express struggling with the balance between their own personal ideals and the ideals they are supposed to be working for, in line with what their education expresses as regards “the good city” or “good planning”. Should I want the same as I think is good for the city, or would that be imposing my own ideals on the city as a whole? So there seems to be either an aesthetic steering or a critical analysis steering, and a need for more ethical discussion.

4.4 A neoliberal economic logic?



The cynicism and disbelief in good urban development among the interviewees is often expressed in economic terms. “The economy” is also recurrent as a major limitation in design projects. A group of design students say they do learn that every project is limited by economy, but they are not trained in estimating costs etc.

In the interviews there are recurrent references to the economy, the market and to different expressions of the privatized city – a growth focused planning, elite projects, commercialization or external shopping centers destroying small scale inner city shopping.

“The only thing that is being built is identical condominiums that cost several millions.”

Several of the interviewees frame this in quite a strong consumption critique. Together with the recurrent idea to reduce car use through planning this is actually where the few but more alternative urban ideals are expressed.

“Consumption catches better what I am thinking about (...) irrespective of if it concerns things that we buy or if we buy homes – urban development is very consumption driven. How much money can we get out of this project, how much can we sell per square meter, what pays off – these are issues that we rarely discuss in our courses. We almost never hear about it, unless there is something wrong with the consumption patterns, we consume too much, but at the same time, everything is consumption driven. I think this is missing to a high degree, and that it is very interesting.

– Especially the economics of it, that what you plan and design, it will be reduced by ten (...) And you can get quite depressed by knowing that all is decided upon by the market forces, the market and that all has to be profitable and not the best, that can make you lose faith in yourself a bit, what can I do in order to achieve good living environments and not only economically viable living environments.”

In relation to this many voice, like the second statement in the quote above, disbelief in public planning and in their own future professional role. At the same time, the interviewees do in general express quite liberal ideals as regards urban life. People should be able to do what they want and to influence their environment and planning less is good. An organically growing and flexible city is a good city.

“That there is possibility to do what you want in a city, that it is not limited to ‘this is where you shop’, ‘this is where you skateboard’, ‘this is where you ride your bike’ but that there is a mix and that people are allowed to do what they want in their city, basically, so that the city feels lively, and you do not have to go to different areas to do the different



things, but that the citizens create their own city. It is very important, according to me.”

“That you are not limited, that you can do what you want without feeling any fear at all.”

“Many big projects, such as many suburbs, have not at all resulted in what was planned. Perhaps we should build allowing for a lot of mistakes but that it is OK. A large framework, but it can develop as it wants. I don’t know ... just so we do not build anything completely static. What you build must be able to change as well.”

4.5 The importance of the locality - the suburb, the small town and the town as planning project

In this section several aspects of *place* in relation to storytelling about the city will be brought up. The division between inner city and suburb plays a central role in Swedish urban discourse and the suburb is a contradictory both place and concept (Tunström 2009). This is clear from the student interviews as well. To refer to the division between inner city and suburb, and to do it in combination with a normative statement, is common. It is clear the students are aware of the suburb as a contested and almost emblematic place, and it engages them in different ways – in confirming or protesting against the image of the suburb as a problem. Also, there are those who live in places that locally are constructed as problematic, and to see for yourself can complicate and nuance the verdict. During the interviews places and concepts are negotiated between the interviewees – is the suburb in general a problematic place or not, is to be critical to be cynical, what are my own and your experiences and how do they match etc? But, the suburb as framed within a discussion on social, economical, environmental, design related and other problems is apparent.

“– An area you watch out for, that you have learned to stay away from, at least me who are from here (...) is X.
– Where all the students live.
– Yes, there are a lot of immigrants, drug addicts and students. (...) I don’t know exactly how it is now since I am not usually there.
(...)
– I have only lived there for 2-3 weeks now and I have absolutely not seen everything, or I haven’t experienced the crime there (...)
– ... have only heard. I find it scary with the prejudice concerning these places. From people who have never been there and perhaps have heard, that is the most frightening, I think.”

Secondly, the small town as an important concept for the students was surprisingly strong in many of the interviews – in the sense that they thought of it as an aspect that was lacking in their education. It appears also as the students learn a lot about the city in a period of development with high pressure and growth, but not so much



about a city in decline or stagnation. In relation the polarized discourse this emphasis on the small town among the students adds another dimension: the small town as absent, but also the small town as associated with lack of development.

“It is like the precondition is always, if you plan a city, that it is growing. New people, new housing, parking spaces, it is always a precondition for all projects that we do. But this is not how it looks in Sweden today. What do you do in places where not much is being built? Don’t they plan anything? Should everything just stand still there, and be boring, and nothing should happen?”

Finally, another aspect that puts emphasis on the importance of the locality is the location of the university. This of course influences examples, study visits, project areas etc. and a resource, but at the same time somewhat problematic in the sense that the local context heavily influences the stories being told. There is not much outlook to other towns or countries, according to the interviewees.

“There are examples from here; this is where we look at the city. It is good to have something close by to go and look at, but sometimes it is a bit frustrating, that we do not broaden our horizons.”

4.6 A spider in the web or a marionette?

In a discussion about “the good city” in an urban planning context the discussion often touches on planning as practice and the role of the planner. It is clear that many students go into planning because of an interest in architecture and design – the visual, aesthetic and material, and the final result of the planning process – but after a while shifting interest and orienting more towards the planning *process*.

“– I think it has changed quite a lot. Or it is about what I thought before I came here, but also during the first and second year. Then it was a lot about learning to read a map, a drawing, all the time about creating, and you got the impression that ‘yes, I will probably work with creating something that is good’, and now it feels more like, OK, if I can manage something from an idea I should be satisfied. The creative has definitely been toned down, for me at least.

– *And instead, what emerged?*

– An understanding of the many perspectives there are on things, many priorities.”

In spite of showing engagement and interest in urban development and planning, many of the students do have a rather “gloomy” view of planning. Working in a municipality is not the first priority in the beginning:



“It seems unavoidable. Part of me wants to be in a municipality, but the thought of only doing that doesn’t make me feel good, I want something more, somewhere else.”

“... in the beginning I thought ‘I do not want to end up in a municipality, so boring and only coffee breaks and slow processes’ but now I think it might be good since we do have a municipal planning monopoly, that is where you can see how this is practiced, that is where you learn the basics for that which you have to work with. (...) But at the same time there is some kind of a hierarchy, what is cool and what is boring, the municipality is seen as a bit boring and consultant is a bit cooler, perhaps.”

The holistic perspective as central to what planning is, in the sense of multidisciplinary and a comprehensive view on sustainability, reemerges constantly in the interviews. They are, in their own understanding, broad in their knowledge:

“... you are a link between several professions, and you have to try to understand them. I think we know a little bit of everything.”

But, the other side of the broad knowledge and holistic ambitions from the university is the confusion about what it is they really do know that some students feel, and what position planners have in society. One student refers to the common metaphor of the planner as the spider in the web:

“– ... it was something like that I had the programme described to me, that I should be like a spider in a web and collect all the different threads, but I do not feel that I am trained in leading in the way I think is necessary.

(...)

– What you said, about the spider in the web, I have heard that metaphor several times, but if it is true all things should start from the spider, but actually it is the politicians that take the decisions, so in that case we are only a tool of theirs, in a way. And seeing yourself as a tool is not as fancy as seeing yourself as the almighty, the one to put all the pieces of the puzzle together and create a nice final product.

(...)

– You didn’t feel much like a spider, but more like a marionette doll. Redo and do it right.

(...)

– ... if we learn to listen, like we do very much, then we may turn into that [marionettes].

(...)

– If we start from that this is what I know, I have been trained, I am the expert, then we do not allow ourselves to be manipulated?

(...)



– I mean, if we come here and learn that ‘your job is to listen’, and then we go there and listen and try to mediate what other people are saying, then we are more or less steered by them.”

The marionette/spider contradiction also has influence on the conceptualization of power. As the final statement in the quote indicates, there are expressions of ambivalence to power among the interviewees. They both long for it, fear it, and wonder why *they* should or would be the one having it. They both realize that they have to take responsibility, and fear it. They both think they are experts on something, and have a design idea to try to pull through, and that they are managers of a participatory process that might end up far away from the vision. On the one hand they look forward to making places or cities better, livelier or more beautiful, but they are also aware of the need for public participation and schooled into thinking planning as a participatory process rather than an expert dominated process. Their conception of the citizen is also related to power. The students in the beginning of their education still have a positive view of citizens, and identify with more them than with “the planner”. They do not talk about NIMBY-ism and they downplay their own role as powerful actors. The more progressed students have a more problematic relation to their own knowledge and vision and citizen participation.

“You have to listen to the people that live there, if you are changing an area, see what they want above all, I think (...) I do not think that it will be good if you say ‘this is what is happening because I like it’, you have to listen to the citizens, they have the last word.”

To have the right knowledge, to make strong and convincing arguments as a basis for opinions is clearly important for the students. Knowledge and good arguments seems to be the bridge between the expert and the citizens, and between an opinion and a democratic decision, judging from the interviews.

5. Conclusions

The students’ discourse can be characterized as paradoxical in several respects. Social aspects important – but they are not very good at that. Visions are stressed – but they have problems formulating them. They both reproduce a mainstream problem oriented history of the suburb, and question it. They are very ambivalent to power and discipline in planning. The radicalism or heterogeneity that I was hoping to see from the interviews is rather weak. Students in their first year of planning education are not knowledgeable enough to formulate a clear vision, and students in their final year of studies are schooled into conforming with both a critical position to a lot of contemporary urban development, but also into repeating established urban discourse through for example general statements about sustainability. The liberal attitude to the city and urban life – we should be able to do what we want – together with the “gloomy” view of public planning practice, the confusion about what their knowledge and skills actually are, the stressing of holism and the in some cases lack



of urban and social theory – I think points to the need for a deeper discussion regarding planning and power in education.

They are clearly shaped into thinking about the city and the urban as a problem to be solved, and planning as problem solving. This is apparent in how they talk about changing, improving, constructing problems, and learning to look for a reason to “do something”. To not do anything seems unacceptable; instead places can always be improved. But there were also examples of not being allowed to be too visionary. This indicates steering, towards “doing something”, but not anything. They are shaped by teachers, assignments, each other etc. Perhaps the focus on problems can be explained with the help of Tewdwr-Jones (2011):

“The biggest challenge is to reconcile an historic desire for spatial fixedness on one hand, with recognition of space as a sphere of multiplicity and flows on the other. Spatial fixedness not only relates to viewing geography and location in a one-dimensional way; it also involves the planner’s desire to legitimise and politicize intervention, which, by its very nature, requires space to be conceptualized and pinned down. Here then, is the paradox of planning and space – urban planners may recognise the city of emotion, of desire, of interconnections and of flows, but may not feel they can translate this awareness into a conceptualized and legitimate form without dismantling the very confines of conceptualized space they rely on to work within. Urban planners are caught between order and chaos, the natural desire for ordered spatial patterns, layouts and behavior against the space of movement, flows and interconnectedness.” (Tewdwr-Jones 2011, p.25)

This illustrates a central issue that is addressed in different ways in this paper – the conflict or balance between social theory and design training in education, or between critical thinking and “envisioning”, between analysing or improving, and perhaps even the different agendas in “urban studies” and planning. And, educating planners means both presenting planning as a private sector development oriented practice and as a practice in support of community development, environmental interests etc. This only emphasizes the balancing act. It is clear that a shift in the role of the planner both has been called for in Sweden and internationally since the 1980-1990s. This is connected to an emphasis on communicative planning that has increased the immediacy of issues of construction of knowledge, values and norms. This shift involves a more personalized, political, or politicized, planner. Planning education has yet to react to this, and also weigh between the procedural/process oriented, visual/design oriented and political/planning ethics. The research presented in this paper illustrates and underlines some of the central practice related dilemmas planning education faces – with some students lacking analytical capacity, and some where their analytical/critical perspective inhibits their ability to formulate urban visions.



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