

Creating AESOP

Patsy Healey

Patsy Healey is a specialist in planning theory and the analysis of planning practices, recently developing approaches to collaborative planning practices, linked to an institutionalist analysis of urban socio-spatial dynamics and governance. She was an AESOP founding member and President from 1994 to 1996. Her books include *Collaborative Planning: shaping places in fragmented societies* (1997, 2nd edition 2006), *Urban Complexity and Spatial Strategies* (2007) and *Making Better Places* (2010). She was Senior Editor of the Journal, *Planning Theory and Practice*, until 2009.

Atlanta, Georgia, 1985. We are at the annual conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) in the US, both invited for a special session on developments in planning in Europe. Klaus Kunzmann was already well-known in regional development planning circles. I was only there as a substitute for Mike Batty, who had fallen ill with pneumonia. But both of us felt somewhat alien inside the huge hotel and conference complex, and outside in the centre of the city, where we seemed to be the only people, in our separate explorations, trying to discover the area on foot. It was in this challenging context that we came together. We were both excited by the intellectual energy evident at the ACSP event. Could such an arena be created in Europe, then vigorously building a transnational single market and encouraging professional interconnections? Could this be done not as a reproduction of the ACSP model, but in a distinctive and European way, infused with a deep awareness of the diversity of cultural, economic and political conditions across the continent? We knew that, in Europe, planning systems and practices, and education for these practices, had arisen in several different ways. In several countries, the architectural tradition dominated. In others, an engineering origin was more significant, while in eastern Europe, planning was often strongly linked to urban and regional economics (Rodriguez-Bachiller 1988; Frank 2006). We sought to recognise these different strands, while emphasising the focus on place and spatial relations, on urban and regional dynamics and environmental qualities. Both of us understood the planning field as about the interaction of people and places, and how to enhance place qualities for the benefit of ordinary citizens.

Klaus Kunzmann was especially gifted with capabilities for realising this project, as I soon came to realise. He was already leading the challenge to the architectural traditions which were so pervasive in much of European planning education at the time, having created the Dortmund *Institut für Raumplanung*, with its emphasis on a regional approach inspired by social science inquiry. But at the same time, he retained the designer's emphasis on imaginative creativity and knowledge synthesis when approaching any practical planning problem. And for Klaus, as for most European planners,

the planning project was deeply focused on enhancing place qualities, especially from the point of view of the ordinary citizen. This meant that planners had to develop fine-grain ways of understanding how people and place interact. For Klaus, this democratic sensibility was extended to a conception of 'Europe' as not some grand structure, with heartlands and peripheries, but as a collection of multiple regions, each with its own characteristics, captured in his famous diagram of Europe as a 'bunch of grapes'. On top of this, Klaus has always been a skilled networker, making connections both across the continent, but also globally, always informed by an intense and challenging curiosity. And then of course, his wonderful central European grasp of hospitality helped to draw people together from very different contexts into a common European-scale enterprise. The locations of early meetings were always carefully chosen to promote enjoyable encounters while building new commitments and relationships. All these capabilities have greatly contributed to the *tone* which is now such a striking quality of the AESOP community, a tone which combines friendly discussion and support with intellectually demanding inquiry while opening up to new challenges and ideas. In the tradition of generous hospitality, all AESOP events are organised so that they are also an encounter with a particular place and its challenges.

In the AESOP context, Klaus' special commitment was to developing planning education. While recognising the importance of acquiring systematised knowledge of urban and regional development processes, he has always wanted planning education programmes to cultivate the imaginative understanding necessary to grasp the critical dimensions of a particular planning problem in situ. He has been a strong advocate and practitioner of a project-based approach to planning education, involving students in live projects, just as he was involved in all kinds of advisory arenas within Germany, elsewhere in Europe, and internationally. He often argued that the key role of AESOP was to promote imaginative approaches to planning programme design. For him, planning skill is as much about cultivating sensibilities and values as it is about techniques, rules and process recipes. As he often says, good practice in planning involves absorbing a sense of place through sit-

ting around and sketching rather than just arriving on a new assignment with a pre-defined approach. And I am really proud that the journal of which I became the first senior editor, *Planning Theory and Practice*, has become a gallery for the urban sketches he has made over the years.

It was Klaus who brought the group together in Schloss Cappenberg, in the Ruhr area of Germany, in 1987 which led to the formation of AESOP, and of course it was Klaus who arrived at our acronym! But I remember the discussions in those early years of AESOP in which Klaus played a decisive part. He never held back from presenting his views, and continually challenged those who disagreed with him to defend their arguments in a robust way. He was particularly scathing about any signs of political manoeuvring, and was intolerant of those who did not take the AESOP project seriously or who reserved participation at AESOP events for senior staff. Although he did not always win his arguments, his way of arguing and challenging helped to clear the ground upon which the AESOP community could then develop.

Klaus has always underestimated his contribution and had to be encouraged to expand on his achievements in his recently published autobiographical memoir (Kunzmann 2017). But I think it is fair to say that without his leadership, the AESOP community which so many now value would not have its distinctively European character. He has fostered an approach to the development of planning education which combines intellectual challenge, creative imagination and generosity of spirit, along with a deep understanding of the broader political,

environmental and economic conditions within which the challenges planners are called upon to address must be situated. In the present context of the potential unravelling of the late 20th European model of flexible integration while retaining cultural diversity, such qualities are ever more necessary.

As Klaus often says, his career has not been that of the 'classical' academic, devoted to scholarly inquiry in some ivory tower. Nor has he been interested in building a well-stocked portfolio of academic papers, though he has published a good deal. He has been much more concerned with encouraging future generations of skilled professionals to be fascinated by the challenges in our field. He has been a model, which surely should inspire all of us in the planning field, of the continually engaged academic, developing knowledge and experience in intensive interaction with wider social worlds in which planning expertise can make a contribution. Let's hope that the current performance pressures on academia do not squeeze out opportunities for future leading planning academics to develop such a profile.

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Fig. 1–2: Inaugural meeting of AESOP, Schloss Cappenberg, 24 January 1987. (Photos: Personal archive Kunzmann)





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