

A motivation letter, not a programme

Why a motivation letter and not a programme? It is not by chance that the AESOP chart asks for it, and I entirely agree with this choice. AESOP is a well-established and flourishing association indeed, and with a wide mission; but what distinguishes AESOP from other planning associations in Europe is that AESOP members are not individuals, but schools; consequently, its very nature is based and rooted on collective work. **Collective work** is a compound of individual wills and actions, but acting cooperatively and according to a sharing of some **values** and **principles**. So, I will talk first, and at greater length, of those before talking of actions and initiatives to be potentially undertaken.

Some values and principles

So, which motivation? Time flies, and I realize that I have spent twenty years in AESOP, since the beginning of my academic life. Honestly, I am indebted to AESOP, directly and indirectly, as most of my research experiences and academic activities – not to talk of friends – find their way to and often come across from AESOP. I discovered and then considered AESOP not just an international vibrant context, or a place of potential research or teaching opportunities (although AESOP is both), but also, and especially, a **friendly** and **cooperative context** inspired by the idea of collective work. If we look **outside AESOP**, in these hard and troubling times, **it is not so**. In times of crises, and in Europe particularly, there are many challenges and threats: in public life, in society, in our cities as well as in our schools and departments. Cooperation and collective work are often not the priority, and we are all (sometimes reasonably or even unwillingly) ‘tempted’ to build fences, to compete in a solipsistic way, to look just at our ‘home-work’, being stressed by internal duties, commitments and bounds.

I believe that the challenge of the next years is to maintain and even improve the mission and the very nature of AESOP, which is embedded in **cooperation** and **solidarity**, together with **intellectual freedom**, **passion**, **ethics**, in a dynamic and friendly environment.

Hard Times (although not in AESOP)

In times of crises, there is the risk of becoming ‘selfish’, of increasing competition (eg. in order to ‘attract’ more students or resources), of cooperating less. In my view, AESOP is the ‘fresh air environment’ and a way to escape from that risk, while recognising the financial obstacles for some members (eg. those from Eastern countries) to benefit from it, attending its congresses and meetings.

In **times of crises**, usually we regret the past, we are obsessed by the present and scared of the future. It is reasonable and natural; but a winning strategy has always been to learn from the past as a rich experience, to face the present as a temporary and challenging condition, and to look forward and imagine the future, as difficult and uncertain as it can appear. This is an approach that, as planners, we should expect of ourselves and our organisation. So, let’s talk about the future of AESOP, and let’s ‘imagine’ it, learning from its richness of experiences in the past and its surprisingly (if compared to the general situation) vitality at the present.

Imagining the future

1. The future of AESOP: new generations of academics.

I do not want to indulge in rhetoric, but it is really the future of AESOP: it is just a matter of fact. Lots of initiatives and actions have been undertaken in this direction, as the PhD Workshop or the establishment of the **Young Academic Network** and its involvement in many AESOP initiatives and governance.

In times of crises, besides general working difficulties for young researchers in every department or school, there is also the risk that YA could appear as a ‘loose’ or ‘minor’ association. I do know that

is not at all AESOP's intention, but we have to develop further actions, as there is a strong need of cooperation and solidarity amongst generations: most **innovation comes from the future**.

Mission: According to this principle, YA should have a more structured role and position within AESOP, in order to acquire a more defined institutional nature inside the association, and a broader recognition outside it. It would also be advantageous to expand the representations of countries and schools in the YA Network. Another challenge is to keep an open approach to the PhD generation at the annual congresses in relation to fees and rules of acceptance of papers.

2. The future of our schools: diversity and plurality.

We are stressed by, and sometimes scared of, validation procedures, as they are all based on (implicit and sometimes explicit) competition and considered as the main criterion for assigning (paucity of) resources. Coordination of planning curricula, quality assurance and accreditation processes have been and still are on AESOP's agenda, but there is the need for further work and stimulus, on the principle of **cooperation** and **mutual benefits**. Despite the shrinking of curricula and students, the 'diversity' of planning programmes (and practices) is increasing: this has to be considered a richness, and not a threat or weakness.

Mission: Coordination and accreditation have to be considered in a **cooperative approach**, rather than in a competitive one: this approach has to be based more on **diversity** and **plurality** rather than uniformity. Innovation in teaching means also **critical thinking**, despite some general trends to uniformity, managerial performances and standards. Although AESOP does not accredit schools, AESOP could build up a framework for quality assurance – based on the above mentioned core values – which members would benefit from in their own processes of accreditation.

3. The future of our research: achieving good standards, together.

In recent times, and especially in a time of crisis, there is a great pressure for some members, schools and colleagues to cut back on quality and quantity of research. AESOP was, and is, important in challenging this and promoting **excellence in research**. I will not give an exhaustive list, but the 'evolution' of AESOP Congresses and the invention and flourishing of the Thematic Groups are just two great examples of the gradual and supportive approach to promoting research excellence, not to talk of the Awards (Best Published Paper and Best Conference Paper).

Mission: I believe that the **open** and **cooperative** approach was and still has to be the winning strategy, and a major involvement of YA can be very helpful (eg. in Thematic Groups). It is not just a matter of innovation, but also of **critical thinking**, and for its nature, structure and forms, AESOP is the best place for it. The role of young generation is essential in this.

4. The future of our discipline: professional recognition, a hard task today.

Planners are not valued, or even professionally recognized in many European countries. Instead of shrinking, this process is spreading even in countries that, in a recent past, have been considered 'lucky' and 'progressive' in this respect. Especially in times of crises, planning (and its public role) is not at the top of agendas, at the EU level as well as in most of national contexts; there is also a lack of recognition of planners' role and competencies. It is a very hard task to oppose this trend, and it has been widely debated and fully undertaken in the recent past of AESOP.

Mission: This is not just a professional matter. This affects also policies about **planning schools** and **planning research**, and we should try to 'show', even in a creative approach, how planning is '**useful**', **especially in times of crises**. I know, it is David against Goliath, but cooperative work (inside AESOP but also in cooperation with other associations, such as ECTP) is the only way at least to have some chances of success. It is also the time to think about further networking and collaboration initiatives with AESOP cooperation partners on the young professional level.

5. The future of our European identity: let's go on, as we did and we do, in a global network.

If we look at the 'Map' of AESOP (number of members and countries), in 25 years it has become much wider and diverse, not to talk of PhD students from outside Europe attending our PhD programmes: in short, more and more schools and countries, which reflect **an idea of Europe** which is neither geographical nor political or institutional, but which is sustained by an **inclusive approach** and an **open attitude**. At the societal and political level, the notion of Europe (and its union, not to talk of its policies) is challenged, put under debate and even fiercely criticized.

Mission: Despite that, and even in opposition to that, we have to maintain and enhance our inclusive, cooperative and supportive approach, as **AESOP geography** has ever been a '**state of the mind**' and a **cultural matter** before and rather than a geo-political one. We should also create the conditions in order to have the non-european PhD students and researchers of the present as a resource for greater global networking in the future.

A few words about myself: a very short self-portrait

It is requested by the AESOP chart to present a CV. In mine, besides the usual stuff, there is a description of my **previous involvement in AESOP**, as member, Corep member, Exco member as Junior Vice-President, chair of a thematic group, member and then chair of the Excellence in Teaching Prize. But it is about previous experiences, that is the **past**. Let me think about myself (very hard task! I paint watercolours -as some of you know- but I never experienced portraits or self portraits) in the perspective of some potential for the **future**.

Looking at my **research interests and experiences**, across specific issues you will find some red lines which are: plurality and diversity, the principle of common good in its spatial dimension, participation as a way of enabling democracy (and the 'right to the city'), ethics in planning research and education. I wouldn't like to emphasize these issues as more significant than others. I would just say that my experiences, and reflections, on those issues helped me in building up an approach to planning, as well as to academic life, that is already at the very base of AESOP nature, and that should be preserved and improved, especially in times of crisis such as the present ones.

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