

CONVERSATIONS IN PLANNING THEORY AND PRACTICE BOOKLET PROJECT



PLANNING FOR POSSIBILITIES THROUGH CRITICAL PRAGMATISM

JOHN FORESTER IN CONVERSATION WITH
GIUSY PAPPALARDO AND MARTIN WESTIN



AESOP Young Academics Booklet Project
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Booklet 12

John Forester, Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin

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Table of Contents

Editorial , by Mario Paris.....	03
Introduction	05
1. In the Face of Power: Questions that matter for planners	
First Period: 1978-1990	12
2. Stories count	
Second Period: 1990-2000	24
3. Conflict, mediated-negotiations, and surprising possibilities	
Third Period: 2000-2010	41
4. Listen for significance, leverage expertise, and act!	
Fourth Period: 2010-today	53
5. Other scholars' perspectives upon John Forester's work	
Contributions from: Larry Susskind, Charles Hoch, Hendrick Wagenaar, Howell Baum, Heather Campbell, Kenneth M. Reardon, Daniela De Leo and Giovanni Laino	70
6. Continuing the dialogue	
Reflections and perspectives of Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin.....	88
Acknowledgments	98
References	99
Authors' Bios	109

Editorial

The “Conversations in Planning” YA-AESOP booklet series is a Young Academics initiative aimed at documenting conversations between scholars on theories, ideas, concepts, and practices that matter in spatial planning. The series provides an interactive platform for YAs to develop their academic and intellectual skills through their involvement in the production and publication of these booklets.

I consider this an especially valuable tool for the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experience. I have contributed to the series both as an author (with Prof. Alessandro Balducci in 2019) and as an editor (of the booklet “In the Mirror of Urban Landscapes: Sharing Experiences and Grounding”, written by Ana Ruiz Varona, Federico Camerin, and Prof. Juan Luis de las Rivas Sanz). In 2022, I was appointed as a member of the editorial board of the series, and since 2024 I have served as Editor-in-Chief. Throughout this time, this booklet has been in the pipeline and is now finally completed, thanks to the efforts of Giusy and Martin and the support of Prof. John Forester, bringing a long-standing process to a close.

In every role, and in supporting the work of all the authors involved in the development of each booklet, I have had the opportunity to encounter diverse perspectives and sensitivities. This experience has allowed my understanding of planning themes and approaches to evolve, becoming progressively richer and broader.

For me, this is precisely the purpose and mission of these booklets, their cultural role. They offer those engaging with the field of planning, in all its complexity and multiple dimensions, the opportunity to learn from already developed trajectories and to grasp insights, knowledge, and reflections.

This becomes possible thanks to the efforts of the authors and senior academics who actively engage in this process, creating spaces of exchange and interaction. At the same time, this work builds upon the long, complex, and structured trajectories of those who have contributed to the field over time and who now place their experience at the service of others.

It is, fundamentally, a work of “putting into perspective”: one that does not simply look back at past experiences or isolated cases, but uses them as a starting point to reconnect individual trajectories with the broader international academic debate, while also building bridges towards the future in two directions. On the one hand, it extracts key elements from personal intellectual journeys to develop more general reflections and shared learning. On the other, it pushes the horizon forward, opening up new lines of inquiry grounded in solid and well-structured foundations.

Following this consolidated tradition, the booklet presents a dialogue with a senior scholar while also incorporating a variety of materials, contributions, and essays. The result is a complex scientific product that readers can approach in different ways, using it both as a

reference and as a guide to a specific and relevant topic, as well as a starting point for future research. The booklet addresses five key aspects of planning studies and practices.

First, planning is always political. At its core, planning is not a neutral or purely technical activity. It unfolds “in the face of power,” where decisions shape whose voices are heard, which issues matter, and what futures become possible. Forester’s work reminds us that planners cannot stand outside politics; they are inevitably part of it and must act critically within it.

Second, the booklet highlights the importance of learning from stories and practice. Rather than treating practice as a simple illustration of theory, the dialogue shows how planners’ stories and their real experiences, dilemmas, and judgments are themselves sources of knowledge. This shifts the focus from abstract models to situated learning.

Third, from the various accounts presented in the booklet, it emerges that conflict is not a problem to eliminate, but the terrain in which planners operate. More than that, conflict is an inherent condition of planning, and it can become productive when approached through mediation, dialogue, and the search for workable agreements. This perspective is particularly relevant in today’s context of increasingly polarized debates.

Fourth, planning is not only about methods and instruments, but about what practitioners actually do: listening carefully, facilitating dialogue, working across differences, and improvising in uncertain situations. This reframes planning as a craft grounded in relational and practical skills, developed through experience as much as through formal training.

Finally, the booklet highlights the importance of critical pragmatism as a way of acting with purpose. Across all these insights runs a common thread: planning is not only a theoretical stance, but a way of working that connects critical awareness of power and inequality with the practical need to act and make things happen. In this sense, planning becomes less about perfect solutions and more about creating possibilities, may imperfect, negotiated, but meaningful.

In my view, the final result of the authors’ efforts is a strong contribution to the academic dialogue and to the advancement of knowledge in planning theory and practice. This booklet offers more than a retrospective on John Forester’s work: it provides a grounded reflection on what it means to practice planning in complex, unequal, and often conflictual contexts. Moving across four decades of theory and practice, it reminds us that planning is not simply about designing solutions, but about engaging with people, power, and possibilities.

In this light, the booklet invites us to rethink planning as a practice of engagement: a continuous effort to listen, to learn, and to act in the face of uncertainty and difference, not a search for definitive answers, but a commitment to shaping better questions and more inclusive futures.

Mario Paris

Introduction

This booklet explores more than 40 years of scholarly debate and planning practice. Its focus is on the evolution of John Forester's formulation of a "critical pragmatism", its theoretical foundations and its practical forms in the field of city and regional planning.

Our purpose is to offer analysis and encouragement for those interested in planning in the pursuit of more just societies, interspecies solidarity, and ecological wisdom. So, this booklet is for those concerned with the status of our democracy, for the persisting unbalanced relations of power at the global level as well as in local contexts. More importantly, it is about the possibilities to act in the face of them. Not least of all, this is for those interested in acknowledging the value of kindness as well as justice, to address vulnerability and suffering as central matters for planners.

Critical pragmatism is here introduced and assessed not only through Forester's direct words and autobiographical notes (as in Forester, 2017), but also through the views of other planners: this honours the very nature of the AESOP Young Academic Booklet Series that tries to enhance intergenerational conversations for catalysing the exchange of ideas and experiences amongst senior and younger scholars.

From such a blend of perspectives, we hope that new, fresh and generative ideas will emerge, nurturing the debate of the international scientific community, as well spreading inspiring ideas for those engaged in local communities, in experimenting with and practicing "planning as the organization of hope, not in intention alone but in deed" (ibid., p. 288).

The making of this booklet has been a long journey, interrupted several times due to the uncertainties and fluidness of our contemporary lives (Bauman, 2009), including academic precariousness, before and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

In 2016 a Call of the AESOP Young Academic network was issued for selecting this booklet's co-authors, alongside John Forester. Alessandro Coppola and Federica Leone responded, were selected, and they worked on a first project until 2019. Then, they had to pass the baton of this booklet to one of the co-editors of the Booklet Series, Giusy Pappalardo (GP), who had previously been in contact with Forester as an interviewee for one of the practice stories that Forester had collected (Saija et al., 2017; De Leo and Forester, 2018). Forester and Pappalardo subsequently involved another scholar who had long engaged with Forester's work, Martin Westin (MW).

Despite Coppola and Leone leaving the completion of the Booklet to other scholars, their work provided important inputs for this final manuscript, and we warmly acknowledge them in this introductory piece.

The subsequent phase of drafting this booklet took place between 2020 and 2025, during the COVID-19 pandemic and amid the unfolding wars in Europe and the Middle East. The Booklet grew initially from correspondence between Forester and Pappalardo—as the starting point of the conversation that is at the core of this booklet—and was nurtured with the reflections developed through the conversation with Martin Westin.

So, chapters 1 to 4 are organized according to specific time frames—each spanning a decade or more of Forester’s work—that correspond to four nuclei of theoretical reflections upon planning practice.

Although with some overlaps, these thematic time frames constitute the analytic skeleton for presenting and exploring the evolution of critical pragmatism, as follows:

- The decade between 1978 and 1989 led to the publication of *Planning in the Face of Power* (1989), along with two edited books (Forester, 1987; Fischer and Forester 1987), and several articles. In the search for a critical theory of planning practice, this work explored the ways planners shaped attention, worked on public-serving priorities, and acted in organizations of public administration and planning. This involved the exploration of communicative interactions (Habermas, 1979) that produced and reproduced power and powerlessness, conditions of public participation and exclusion in planning (Forester, 1980; 1981; 1989).

“Habermas’s theory of communicative action in effect treats social and political-economic structures as operative communication structures. These relations of power and production not only transmit information, but they communicate political and moral meaning; they seek support, consent, trust, sacrifice, and so forth” (Forester, 1980, p. 276). As such, acknowledging that planning is not only a technical but also a political act, Forester hoped to explore how planners could “organize to enable citizens’ learning, participation, and self-determination” (Forester, 1989; recalling Freire, 1970; 1973), despite the existing unbalanced relations of power.

- Between the 90s and early 2000, the book production (Krumholz and Forester, 1990; Forester, 1993; Fischer and Forester, 1993; Forester, Fischler and Shmueli, 2001) has a focus on stories that came from the practical work of planners in the field. The attempt was to learn from practice, to dig into experiences that may teach general lessons, such as that of equity planning in the city of Cleveland that gives insights on the shaping of a committed and passionate leadership in the public sector (Krumholz and Forester, 1990). However, this was no matter of suggesting easy and ready protocols. “We distrust the search for recipe-like answers, for these are too often today’s false promises of *solutions* that will be threatened by obsolescence come daybreak. [...] We propose pragmatic approaches and welcome the proposal of alternatives” (ivi, xxi). The exploratory journey around the value of practice leads – at the end of this second

period—to *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes* (1999). Here, the focus is on the significance of the act of interpretation of stories that animated the everyday workplaces of planners, stories at work that shaped identity as well as utility, trust as well as consequences. Recalling Nussbaum (1986, 1990), others' stories "can give us an astutely alert pragmatism, hope, with less false hope, a keener perception of what is really at stake in our practice." (Forester, 1999, p. 20).

- In the first decade of the current millennium (roughly between 2000 and 2010), still drawing from practical experiences as a source of learning, Forester's work focused on issues of conflict and public disputes—how planners might learn from mediators' practices to work in the face of disputes that are naturally embedded in the policy arena. This is at the core of *Dealing with Differences* (2009), and of *Planning in the Face of Conflict* (2013). These books focused on the possible ways to enable action despite conflicting interests and values. They were "all about making democratic deliberations work inclusively and intelligently—not, as we shall see, as a matter of hopeful idealism, manipulative co-optation, or empty talk." (Forester, 2009, p.5). In the attempt of making democracy work, the point was not to "compromise" but to craft practical decisions and implement them through a process of creative negotiation, without giving up on rights, but working to enact responsibilities. As Susskind put it: "The whole process is the epitome of what I think democracy is really supposed to be like. It's not that people are no longer concerned about what they need. It's that they now realize that the only way to meet their needs is to respond to what others need as well, and therefore to come out with something that we can do together that meets each of their needs. And all this does not happen for altruistic reasons. The we here is special. This we can help get what each of us wants and needs. There's no loss of I, but there is recognition of others, of differences". (Susskind in Forester, 2013, p. 294).
- In the second decade of the current millennium (2010-2020 roughly), reflections on experiences and practice stories consolidate as means for learning how planners face challenges and creatively respond to enable action. Here, the focus is on how planners can embrace the challenge of improvisation and keep on track the necessity to act. In this period, a wide range of articles and Interfaces were published in *Planning Theory and Practice* (Forester et al., 2011; Forester, 2012; Forester et al., 2013; De Leo & Forester, 2018; Saija et al., 2017), providing a great variety of context-based stories. Each of them gives some insights on a specific topic, such as the integration of technical expertise with participatory planning, discourse analysis, urban design conflicts,

trading zones, deliberative practices, environmental and community mapping as action-research in planning, learning from mistakes. Three books add more, with a focus on three different contexts: *Conflict, improvisation, governance. Street Level Practices for Urban Democracy* (Laws & Forester, 2015) with insights from the city of Amsterdam and its region; *Rebuilding Community after Katrina. Transformative Education in the New Orleans Planning Initiative* (Reardon & Forester, 2016); *Reimagining Planning: How Italian Planners are Changing Planning Practices* (De Leo & Forester, 2018).

These four periods of work are not strictly separated but are partially overlapping. Here, they are used to organize a skeleton of this variegated and rich production. As Forester had written in one of our first email exchanges:

“these are the hidden bones, of four phases of my work. Each was working out some theoretical issues trying to refine, extend and apply, not just repeat, Habermas, Freire, Nussbaum, Susskind, Frank Barrett. [It is about] planning practices taking four different but related forms of expression, manifestation, enactment: first, the focus on planner’s selective attention and agenda setting and influence; second, the significance of the planners’ narratives and stories and interpretation (building on the earlier work on listening critically and deeply); third, the work of planners in-between as mediators (building on a chapter of *Planning in the Face of Power*, too); fourth, the work of planners as improvisers in fluid contexts. None of these last labels or roles were essentialist, but these were the aspects of planning practices that the four periods focused upon”.

In recent years, particularly after 2020, Forester has consolidated and expanded his earlier contributions, further advancing his research agenda and deepening the four phases that are outlined here and examined in greater detail in the following chapters.

His earlier focus on distinguishing among facilitating dialogues, moderating competing arguments within debates, and mediating negotiations—three interrelated skills essential for planners—has evolved into a broader reflection on what it means to cultivate these capacities while also remaining context-responsive and capable of exercising practical judgement in the face of power. His reflections on improvisation—understood as the ability to respond to uncertainties based on practical judgment—underscore that “when relations of power and inequality matter, improvisation becomes more and not less important to organizing and targeting critical responses” (Forester’s words in correspondence with GP and MW, recalling Forester 2023). As such, “improvising” gains a specific and distinctive role in the planner’s endeavour, standing alongside more recognizable planning objectives such as “governing, inquiring, managing, regulating, and so on” (Forester in correspondence with GP and MW).

As planning scholarship cannot overlook the major world dynamics that shape the societal contexts in which we are all embedded, his work has likewise been significantly shaped by an abruptly changing global landscape.

From 2020, the already existing social-ecological-democratic global crisis has been worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. From the moment that western/northern societies woke up with the awareness of the fragility and vulnerability of the dominant socio-economic models, the world did not look the same as before. Such a turn has been reflected in the lives of all, but especially of those most vulnerable.

During the pandemic crisis, the debate about the destiny of humanity on this Planet gained momentum thanks also to the push of the youngest generations, that joined and nurtured the arena of social movements for climate justice and climate action. In such a context, reflections on ecological wisdom (Forester, 2017) and the value of kindness in planning (Forester, 2021) turned out to be pivotal for understanding how to move forward (Forester, 2020).

“As the COVID-19 pandemic confronts us with our interdependence and vulnerability, we can respond in distinctly different ways. Our fears may prompt blame and its rationalization, but our fears may also motivate inquiry and learning. Compassion and collaboration hang in the balance—shaped in part, we shall argue, by political leadership, scientific expertise, and emergent social solidarity” (Forester & McKibbin, 2020).

After the experience of social distancing, it is also time to return to considering social-ecological relations in places. The recent *How Spaces Become Places* (Forester, 2021b) offers insights on place makers. Their stories stress the necessity of working alongside people in places, reinforcing community ties, not only for what we experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis but for the need of continually improving the quality of life in our neighbourhoods.

Because there is still much work to do—for gender, poverty, race, and class struggles still reflect open wounds of our society. The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, U.S.A., in May 2020, which occurred while we were developing the reflections presented in this booklet, and the killing of Renee Good and Alex Pretti, also in Minneapolis, in January 2026, taking place as we revise this manuscript, serve as stark reminders of how much sustained commitment will be required in the years ahead to advance social justice, from the neighbourhood scale to broader structural transformation. Other recent events unfolding both locally and globally—including the ongoing genocide in Gaza as we finalize this booklet, among others—further underscore the imperative to confront violence and injustice through actions grounded in solidarity with those rendered powerless.

In this context, as we write, Forester is also working to finish a small book tentatively titled *The Gift of Listening: Paying Attention to What Matters*. Although not included in the

reflections presented in the Booklet, we believe it is important to recall this new book, as it completes the picture discussed in the pages that follow.

Seeking to summarize the post-2020 body of Forester's work, two practical skills appear to assume increasing importance in planners' work within the current global context: improving wisely and listening care-fully. These action-oriented commitments are especially salient in a socio-ecologically fragmented—yet still repairable—world, where the need to strengthen deliberative democracy, and democratic practice in its various forms, has become more urgent than ever (Forester, 2020; 2021).

These insights resonate with a broader body of scholarship developed by other planning researchers (Healey, 2018; Legacy et al., 2024; Freeman and Nel, 2024; Davoudi & Ormerod, 2025; Levy & Belingardi, 2025), especially those engaged in wider reflections on the ethics of care (Gibson Graham, 2008; Federici, 2018; Barca, 2020). Building also upon John Forester's articulated and far-reaching reflections, this trajectory—planning with care—can be understood as a possible evolution of critical pragmatism, as outlined in Forester (2020; 2021).

In the aforementioned book by Forester, currently in preparation and tentatively titled *The Gift of Listening*, the opening chapter argues that practices of listening constitute practical forms of engaged attention and care, and the volume as a whole examines the significance of such care-full attentiveness in contexts of community planning and participation, deep differences, and conflict (Forester, forthcoming). Therefore, although not addressed in detail in this Booklet, the intersections between the ethics of care, the ethics of listening, and critical pragmatism remain open to emerging research agendas—particularly for future generations of planners interested in these matters.

Book structure

Chapters 1 to 4 present opening statements derived from the authors' correspondence: John Forester offers some opening remarks, Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin map and discuss related arguments in the literature. Chapter 5 presents multiple perspectives in conversation, with brief essays from Howell Baum, Heather Campbell, Daniela De Leo and Giovanni Laino, Charles Hoch, Kenneth M. Reardon, Larry Susskind, Hendrick Wagenaar. Finally, in chapter 6, Pappalardo and Westin add their own perspective, discussing how Forester's work is connected to theirs. This variety of perceptions provides insights for reflecting upon critical pragmatism concerning different approaches and contexts.

The following pages attempt to offer food for thought for operating in the micro-political environment of the everyday life of planners, in the awareness of the challenges that the macro-dynamics pose—as Forester had suggested in correspondence:

“I have tried to presume differences of power and then ask what might be possible for planners to do in the face of capitalism, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, and other structured forms of inequities. I have focused on organizers, planners, mediators, wider ranges of actors because my fascination was not with macro-systems explanations but with understanding possible forms of actions on the ground, never ideal, but always political, even if micro-political within macro contexts”.

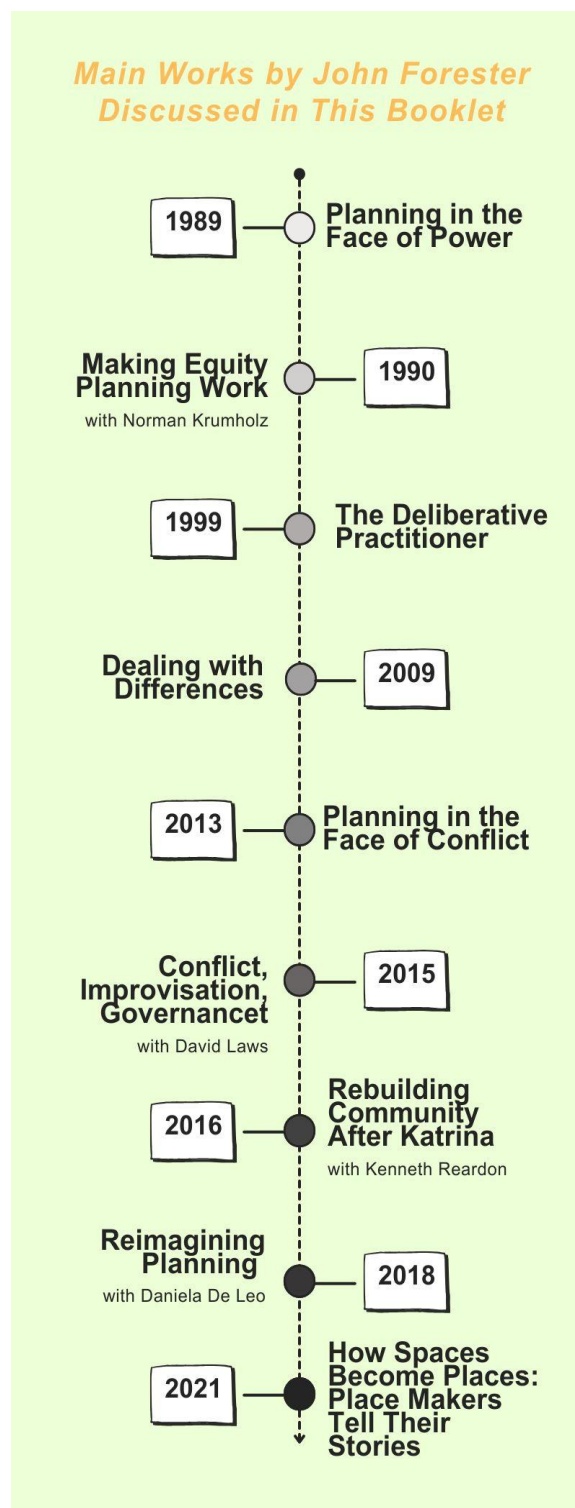


Fig. 1 – Timeline illustrating the publication years of the principal works examined in this Booklet. Source: Authors' elaboration

1. In the Face of power: Questions that matter for planners

First Period: 1978-1990

An excerpt from John Forester's reflections upon this period

"In the first period of my work, I focused on the micro-politics of planning, on the ways that planners selectively shaped others' attention and agendas— involving issues of the effective management of their beliefs and knowledge, their consent and deference, their trust in relationships, and their framing of issues at hand. As the article *Questioning and Shaping Attention as Planning Strategy* (1981) showed, inspirations were equally the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. I argued for "opening up" and democratizing planning, not with respect to any abstract "communicative" ideals but practically to resist the exclusions of people of colour and women, i.e., to resist systemic, institutional racism and patriarchy. This period ran from 1977-1978 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and from 1978-1989 at Cornell when I published the diverse essays included in *Planning in the Face of Power*. Strangely, although the title chapter and the later theory chapter attracted attention along with the essay on Listening: *The Social Policy of Everyday Life*, the chapters on the politics of bounded rationality and conflict went almost completely under critical readers' radar. The Habermas chapters seemed to be read as uncritically adopting Habermas's work instead of being examined as appropriating and extending selective elements of the Habermasian corpus to applications—particularly about agenda-setting and power— in planning contexts. Revising and applying Habermas required drawing upon not only critical social theorists like Trent Schroyer (1973) and Anthony Giddens (1979), but ordinary language analysts—from John Austin to Hanna Pitkin (1973) and Wittgenstein (1953)—, and radical pedagogy in the work of Paulo Freire (1970)—to explore the actual micro-politics of questioning and shaping attention in planning practice."

1.1 A view of the first period

Tracing back the path that led to *Planning in the Face of Power* (1989), through Forester's early articles (such as Forester, 1980; 1980b; 1981; 1982; 1982b; 1982c; 1983; 1983b; 1984; 1985; 1986; 1987b; among others), allows us to recognize the genesis and evolution of what Forester came to call "critical pragmatism", with its roots not only in Habermas's critical theory of society (Habermas 1970; 1970b; 1971; 1973; 1975; 1975b; 1979), but also in phenomenology—e.g., Alfred Schütz (1970), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), John O'Neill (1974) —, and the pragmatism of John Dewey (e.g., 1927), made compellingly accessible by Richard Bernstein's *Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1976). Not ultimately, amongst the pillars of critical pragmatism, there is the work of Paulo Freire (1970; 1973) concerned with the emancipatory processes of the most oppressed groups. Such theoretical foundations imply framing planning as a political – rather than a mere technical – act (e.g. Forester, 1984b). As such, not only in this early phase of work, but also in all the subsequent ones, Forester moves from the assumption that planning is political, with several implications on the role planners can play in challenging the status quo, refusing the assertion that planners should remain trapped in power dynamics that cannot be faced and challenged. Forester put the point this way:

“Only the cynicism of an overly deterministic view of history supports the thesis that planners and administrators *must* simply legitimate powers-that-be and thus that they *cannot* work to restructure or democratize political power. And only the romanticism of Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, confirmed in his belief that this is the best of all possible worlds, would support the counter-thesis that planners and public administrators *always* serve freedom, effective citizen participation, and democratic politics. If the truth is likely to be somewhere between these two positions, it remains to be seen *how in actual practice* public administrators and planners can play either role, or emphasize one rather than the other (Forester, 1982d, p. 67).”

But how to challenge the status quo in practice? In what follows, we will explore several of Forester's early manuscripts and their evolution in the 1989 *Planning in the Face of Power* (PIFP), focusing on the ways planners could organize attention to possibilities, the democratizing power of questioning, and the liberating force of education. After clarifying the ways in which Habermasian communicative theory, in connection with other intellectual encounters, has influenced Forester's work (Box 1), we will discuss key concepts not only from frequently quoted chapters (such as Chapter 7 of PIFP on *Listening*), but we also reflect upon the use of planning theory to anticipate and respond to problems of practice.

Box 1. Forester drawing from Habermas, and beyond.

In planning literature, Forester's work is often associated with theories derived from Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action. In this Box, Forester—speaking in conversation with GP and MW—explains the nature of his engagement with Habermas, moving beyond that initial encounter to highlight additional intellectual influences (some of which will be further elaborated in the following paragraphs). He concludes by pointing to what critical planning theory has, to date, tended to overlook in his work.

As an ex-engineering student all too aware that many social problems were political ones that could not be reduced to technical questions, I was interested in interpretive, phenomenological social research that explained how variously and selectively “problems” could be framed, how problem-solving agendas could be set. I had been the teaching assistant to Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber shortly after they published their famous “wicked problems” essay that sought to drive a stake through the heart of any professionalism that pretended to short-circuit ethics and politics. So, as I discovered the writings of Jürgen Habermas, I had been first drawn to his rejection of scientism and technocracy. He seemed to understand that technocrats were not just making philosophical claims, but they were selectively framing others’ attention (cfr. Forester, 1984b). Their speech mattered, not just their ideas. I soon saw that Habermas was indebted to Wittgenstein and John Austin, both understanding that language was not simply about meaning but about practical “use.” [...] Second, though, I was drawn to Habermas’s suggestion (e.g. Habermas, 1970) of an ethically compelling alternative to “instrumental rationality,” the idea of a communicative rationality which asked, essentially, *under what conditions* could a democratic agreement be considered *legitimate*? [...] So, for a Habermasian rationality, inclusion mattered in principle. But in fact, HOW it would take shape empirically would always depend on context/place and participants’ abilities to voice interests and claims. Too many planning readers never understood that Habermas’s counterfactual “ideal speech situation” was a conceptual device to warn of and resist arbitrary exclusions and disenfranchisements with respect to race, gender, class and more, but it was never a practical ideal. As I thought about Habermas’s notions of “systematically distorted communications,” I noticed that Herbert Simon’s idea of the sensible response to bounded rationality was itself a response to one kind of constrained or distorted understanding, the *inevitable* constraints of cognitive limits. So, Simon’s particular concerns were with that special “boundedness of rationality” that could be both a) inevitable, and b) non-structural. But that begged several questions: now we could ask how planners might also face *other* differing constraints that could be *contingent rather than inevitable, and/or structural (due to political-economy or social structure) rather than non-structural*. [...]. That analysis, in Chapter 4 of *Planning in the Face of Power* and my closely related Public Administration Review piece (Forester, 1984) argued that Habermas let us see *four* kinds of practical rationality (see Section 1.2) because of political contingencies: the contingencies intimated by Herbert Simon, Charles Lindblom, Max Weber, and Karl Marx.

These 'rationalities' were context-dependent in a systematic way, and years later I came to discuss such practical context-dependency in terms of the improvisation we do every day (Forester, 2022 in *Planning Theory and Practice*).

My interest in Habermas shifted in the late 1980s as I began to work with Norman Krumholz on his 12 years as planning director of Cleveland under three radically differing mayors. [...]. I saw that I needed a way to work with recollections and reports, interpretations, stories and narratives in planning in a way that Habermas seemed not to inform nearly as powerfully as Martha Nussbaum did so lucidly. Somehow no one in planning noticed that while *Planning in the Face of Power* was indebted to Habermas (supposedly a hopeless Kantian idealist), my *Deliberative Practitioner* (MIT 1999) followed the lead and analysis of Nussbaum, a thorough Aristotelian. But even with these differing philosophical roots, both Habermas and Nussbaum were also sympathetic to forms of pragmatism, to making sense of what social actors actually did, and so they both helped me to understand (with John Austin's and Stanley Cavell's assistance) how listening well did not only interpret the world but change it too (the echo of Marx's thesis on Feuerbach intended). What I still find important, if not foundational or all-controlling, in Habermas's work remains: Agency matters; voice matters; history/context stages, enables, corrupts (all the major theorists see this, too: Weber on religion, Durkheim on interaction, Marx/Lukacs on relations of production), language combines use and semantics, and far more.

But along the way, I have been surprised by two elements of so-called critical planning theory: first, the ease with which planning theorists brushed Habermas aside as an idealist (rather than taking his debts to pragmatism seriously), but more personally, second, the lack of virtually any planning criticism of how my work *diverged from* Habermas's, applying it in ways he had never mentioned. Two examples stand out: my work on listening and, more obviously, my translation of his speech claims into an analysis of the rhetorical effects of planners' speech on "belief, consent, trust, and attention/framing." The latter analysis of *effects* informed agenda-setting and the micro-politics of planning in a way that Habermas had made possible but had never himself addressed. A third silence among planning theorists involved my application of Habermas's work to fieldwork and interpretive, qualitative research (Forester, 1993, 2003).

From Forester's own words, we gain insight into the multifaceted ways in which Habermas's thought—and other intellectual influences—have shaped his work, as well as into what often remains hidden in planning theory until it is uncovered and opened to further investigation. Moreover, in this first period, several of Forester's articles (Forester, 1983b; 1985), and a chapter of *Planning in the Face of Power* (Ch. 8. *Design as Making Sense Together*) had a focus on place-making as a collective accomplishment; the same topic appears later at the core of Forester's most recent books (Forester, 2021b). In our view, this topic is of relevance for spatial planning; as such, Section 1.3 below has a focus on it.

Then, Section 1.4 will examine how – in *The supplement on Planning Education: Teaching Planning Practice, in Planning in the Face of Power* – Forester addresses planning education through experimental (and experiential) devices, such as planners' profiles, that

have a specific value not only for planning curricula, but for planners' learning processes outside of the classroom, more generally.

1.2 The genesis of critical pragmatism. Early manuscripts and Planning in the Face of Power

In 1980, “Critical Theory and Planning Practice” appeared in the *Journal of American Planning Association (JAPA)*, introducing a contribution to the planning debate in the light of Habermas’ critical communications theory of society (Habermas 1970; 1970b; 1971; 1973; 1975; 1975b; 1979).

In a nutshell, Habermas’s theory—as Forester viewed it—is focused on the “distortions of communication” that might affect planning as well as other forms of social and political-economic structures.

In the *JAPA* article of 1980, the relevance of such a debate in the planning field could be summarized through the following (still open) questions:

“How does the planner politically shape attention and communicate? How does the planner provide or withhold information about project alternatives to affected people? Does the planner speak in a way that people can understand, or are they mystified? Does the planner encourage people to act or rather discourage them with a (possibly implicit) “leave it to me?”

Forester suggested that we could distinguish necessary (or inevitable) “distortions of communication”—those due to human finitude or cognitive limits (Lindblom 1959, Simon 1957)—from unnecessary ones (decisions to exclude inconvenient data or “cook the data”, for example). Based on that distinction, then, Forester asked, “What can planners do to prevent unnecessary, disabling distortions of communication: how can they work to enable learning, participation, and self-determination?” (Forester, 1980, p. 276).

Here, the focus was on the challenge of recognizing problems and envisioning opportunities, organizing attention and action toward what truly matters so as to strengthen the capacity—thereby enabling the power—to question the status quo.

Forester’s argument was based not on theory alone but on 18 months of observation in a metropolitan city planning department’s office, with the attempt of identifying some practical lessons for inspiring action, understanding how planners dealt with various forms of misinformation.

Theories of speech—“performative utterances”, as Austin (1962) had called promising, or questioning or forgiving, for example—and the “pragmatics of human communication”¹ (Watzlawick, 1976) illuminated what planners did at work.

Extending that work, Forester still referred to what Habermas has suggested: four working norms ordinarily made it possible for people – including planners – to understand one another, although these norms might in some case be violated.

Specifically: i) in speaking with one another, we conventionally expect that our references to facts could be checked and shown to be ‘true’—or they might be rejected as false; ii) we expect that claims to authority could be checked and shown to be legitimate, or they could be challenged as illegitimate; iii) we expect conventionally not that another is always joking or deceptive, but that they ordinarily mean what they say; and iv) we expect that the other conventionally presents a way of framing things, a way that could be accepted or rejected (Forester, 1981b).

These four “norms” were not prescriptive. Instead, they suggested how ordinary talk in the planning world could go wrong, could be manipulated, could be subject to power plays and “misinformation”— as the title chapter in *Planning in the Face of Power* showed.

According to Forester, these problems could occur at various levels, from the interactional level to institutional dynamics. They might occur inside various types of organizations that can act as concentrations of power. They might occur—even more dangerously – within decision-making contexts, with planners in their role as public servants. Aware of the contingencies of such norms, planners could anticipate strategic misrepresentations—of the likely public benefits of private development projects, for example. They could anticipate misleading claims to expertise; they could anticipate deceptive appeals to trust and selective framing of problems to serve private rather than public welfare (Forester 1982 on misinformation; 1989).

Manipulation, power plays, and misinformation can also emerge in community-based planning processes, when working with vulnerable groups through various forms of social work and collective inquiry aimed at supporting their emancipation from different forms of oppression. This sphere of practice at times intersects with planners’ actions, for instance, in Participatory Action Research, as we’ll see in this booklet from Chapter 3 onward. In such contexts, *the way that* communicative action is exercised becomes crucial. Recalling another pillar of Forester’s work, Paulo Freire², the Brazilian educator and philosopher), had summarized and

¹ A framework for understanding how people communicate—not just through words, but through every aspect of interaction. The central insight is that communication is a relational process, and ruptures often arise not only from what is said, but also from how it is said and *how* it is interpreted within a relationship.

² “Freire was the Brazilian educator who made popular the difference between “banking education” and “problem posing education,” raising questions—but Freire’s questions were [of the type of] “Who owns the land?”. They weren’t innocent questions. Freire was integrating Marx, with a structural background, Socrates, in ways of asking questions [...]. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) was translated into a zillion languages; it was enormously influential as a southern model of organizing. Paulo Freire represented in his practice what Habermas was theorizing more generally. I had realized that only in finishing my dissertation and working that out was the intellectual project that I brought to Cornell” (Forester, 2021c).

expressed these problems with these words: “Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence.” Forester explained, “So, the denial of another’s inquiry and possibility to communicate, make sense, understand what’s going on and what’s possible: that is tantamount to doing violence” (Forester, 1980b, p. 600). This one idea—of the violence of the obstruction of human inquiry—forms one of the ‘red threads’ through virtually all of Forester’s work.

Planners have responsibilities for their own actions that may produce and reproduce such violence and imbalances in the micro and macro socio-political dynamics. Yet if planning is always a political choice, then planners can decide how they might act to confront violence and imbalances of power, or not.

As Forester points out in correspondence with GP and MW, in his article (1981, reprinted in 1993) on “questioning and shaping attention”:

“the clear inspiration from the title onwards is Paulo Freire’s Socratic activism of problem-posing: what matters is not only selective attention and agenda-setting/power, but the actions of questioning, shifting responsibility, opening up lines of thought and action—not more general and vague “communication”!”³

As a response to the practical vulnerabilities of communication—misinterpretation of facts, incomprehension of issues, management of consent, and trust’s manipulation—Forester argues: “the progressive planner can learn to expect and anticipate misinformation before the fact, when something may still be done to counteract it” (Forester, 1982, p.74; Forester, 1981b).

Several strategies (Forester, 1980; p. 282) are discussed in *Planning in the Face of Power* (p. 155), as ways for practically counteracting such vulnerabilities of communication. They regard what planners can do to organize attention to emergent possibilities, engaging in important work like: cultivating community relations, listening and paying attention to excluded and less-organized groups, enabling possibilities, encouraging community-based groups, resisting political-economically dominant forces.

These elements might be used by planners working inside public offices, but their core message could be extended—although with some adjustments—to community planners engaged from the bottom-up and in grassroots processes. These are ethical more than technical

³ The subtitle of *Critical Theory, Public Policy, and Planning Practice* was already, in 1993, *Toward a Critical Pragmatism* (Forester, 1993). Forester further explains that the increasingly popular label “communicative” had become problematic for him. As he puts it, the term is “too confusing and apolitical: confusing because ‘communication’ could too easily be reduced to ‘sender-receiver’ models burying pragmatism, apolitical because it jettisoned and obscured issues of power, ideology, and socio-economic structure. [...] I thought that ‘Critical Pragmatism’ pointed more clearly to issues of power and agency, structure and discretion” (Correspondence between JF, GP, and MW).

issues. Moreover, they rely upon an awareness that not all the problems can be solved with blind confidence in the same determinism of scientism that has shaped Western thought in the light of the legacy of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (Forester, 1989, p. 50).

As discussed in Forester (1984) and later in *Planning in the Face of Power*, planners operate in contexts of bounded rationality (March & Simon, 1983): ambiguous situations, incomplete information about baselines and background of the problems, uncertain alternatives, and consequences. This implies two key challenges:

- the values and interests at stake are not always clearly articulated
- time, skills, and resources are frequently constrained.

Still in *Planning in the Face of Power* (pp. 51–62), Forester identifies four forms of bounded rationality that shape planners' work:

1. the cognitive limits of the individuals involved;
2. the influence of social settings and their internal differentiations;
3. the presence of multiple, often conflicting positions;
4. and the structural distortions embedded within the institutional contexts in which planners operate.

As he notes, "Inequalities provide and shape the context in which planners and public administrators, and decision makers more generally, work and act" (ivi, p. 59). The core question, then, becomes how to operate under such inherently but differently limiting conditions.

The *Politics of Muddling Through* (Forester, 1984; 1989) recalls, questions, and re-frames *The Science of Muddling Through* of Lindblom (1959), discussing the assumption of the incremental approach to planning and policymaking. Lindblom argues that "power is diffused so widely in the society that all-important affected interests have an effective voice or watchdog" (in Forester, 1989, p. 58), arguing that social claims can be heard and addressed incrementally. While Lindblom focuses primarily on institutional reforms, Forester turns his attention to the performative dimensions of individual-level practice. Rather than seeking universal formulas for confronting structural distortions, he emphasizes context-dependent repertoires of strategies that expand the possibilities for meaningful action. This does not mean that the impact of those actions remains confined to the local dimension; rather, micro level actions lay the foundations for producing structural change⁴.

A repertoire of strategies pointing in this direction is revisited in Laws and Forester's work (2015) on improvisation, street level practices and urban democracy, later (see Chapter 4). In Forester's view, this requires work of "anticipating and counteracting: theories could be

⁴ With Forester's words, "Why might you be assured that the small steps won't ignore vulnerable or under-represented people who might thus get exploited? Lindblom had an answer. He argued that as long as everybody had what he called "a watchdog," no one would get exploited. But Lindblom didn't really say anything about guaranteeing efficacy or even the existence of the watchdog" (Forester, 2021c).

used not to predict facts but to direct attention, to raise inconvenient questions to established powers and pose problems that matter for unveiling and facing such distortions.

This also calls for mediated negotiation strategies: a first reflection concerned with the role of planners in the middle of conflicting parties—and the strategies to navigate the possibilities of moving forward—are already discussed in *Planning in the Face of Power*, but they will be later deepened in *Planning in the Face of Conflict* (Forester, 2013), discussed in Chapter 3 of this Booklet.

In this early phase of work, Forester also points out the importance of the democratization of the planning process: toward this end, the integration of planning with various forms of community-organizing strategies may be a practical translation of the Freirean call for self-determination, as it will be even more clear in further works (such as Reardon & Forester, 2016), also discussed later in Chapter 4.

Summarizing the main points that emerge in this first period, in response to the unbalanced dynamics of power and of structural distortions that affect contemporary societies, planners can organize others' attentions by posing questions and framing problems for catalysing action, working in advance to act effectively. In such a complex framework, a reflection upon the act of design can be an example of a specific way to pose questions and frame problems, as discussed in the next section.

1.3 Design as making sense together

As Forester recalls, in the 1960s and 1970s, in the U.S.A. and the anglophone contexts, the planning profession switched from being design centric to including the applied social sciences (Forester, 1983b). Back in those years, the problem was related to the limits of design intended

“only as an aesthetic, non-institutional, and therefore non-political, thoroughly depoliticized activity. The opposite, though far less likely danger, of course, is that design could be seen only as an expedient political activity, as if aesthetics, culture, and tradition were irrelevant. Though we can expect arguments of both sorts, neither are likely to be compelling, if popular to a degree nevertheless.” (ivi, p., 59).

Later, in the 1980s, planning curricula started reintegrating physical and environmental skills and practice. The opportunity was that the reintegration of design provided the occasion for planners to teach and learn from those who have thought about the problems of judgment, in addition to those of calculation, for a long time, particularly from those concerned with the evaluation of action, argument, text, symbol, and meaning, where interpretations still had to be given, defended, justified, and legitimated. (ibid.).

In those years, Forester (1985) discusses a key-point: framing the design practices not only as *form-giving* but, more generally, as *sense-making*. In other words, design, like planning, emerged not only as a technical endeavour, but above all, as a search process or—better to say—an interpretative (hermeneutic), and transformative process (world-shaping).

Given the assumption that urban and environmental design affects the life of a variety of community members, the act of design shouldn't be conducted as a demiurgical one, by a sole type of actor, the architect. Rather, questioning “who is involved in such a process” is the core issue at stake (Hayden, 1997).

In *Planning in the Face of Power*, the chapter *Designing as Making Sense Together* gives several insights on design as a social process embedding “practical, interpretative, and institutional dimensions” (p.132). Drawing from O'Neill (1974), Forester (1989) argues that

“When form-giving is understood more as an activity of making sense together, it can then be situated in a world where social meaning is a perpetual practical accomplishment. Designing takes place in institutional settings where rationality is precarious at best, conflict abounds, and relations of power shape what is feasible, desirable, and at times even imaginable. By recognizing design practices as conversational processes of making sense together, designers can become alert to the social dimensions of design processes, including organizational, institutional, and political-economic influences that they will face—necessarily, if also unhappily at times—in everyday practice” (ivi, pp. 120, 121).

Reflecting upon what they learn through the design process (Schön, 1983), practitioners like architects, planners, and, in general, all the involved actors would be able to shape not only physical change but also social change. This has a two-fold interrelated implication.

- On one side, the design process becomes an opportunity for practical reflection on the ethical and political rationalities at play, as well as on the decisions made by actors engaged in the collective conversation in relation to spatial dynamics. This dimension concerns the possibilities for action, highlighting how practitioners navigate and respond to situated dilemmas.
- On the other hand, questions of value, interest, and power give meaning to the design process beyond its formal or technical aspects. This dimension concerns the possibilities for critique, foregrounding how practitioners can interrogate and reflect upon the ways spatial dynamics are produced, reproduced, and transformed through social actions and interrelations.

This lesson also has relevance in the shaping of planning curricula.

1.4 Educating in the Face of Power

The Supplement on Planning Education: Teaching Planning Practice, in Planning in the Face of Power, offers an interesting reflection on the educational process for applied and normative disciplines such as planning. The supplement assesses a teaching “experiment” conducted at M.I.T. by Donald Schön, Phillip Clay, Phil Herr, Frank Jones. Forester had been a visiting faculty member on sabbatical leave from Cornell (1984-1985), and he assessed the M.I.T. teaching experience. The innovation of this course was related to the way that stories coming from practice were used as teaching materials for students who were invited to step into others’ shoes to reflect upon their professional roles and their related practical challenges.

This approach will be developed and improved along the entire journey explored in this Booklet, up to the most recent productions (such as De Leo & Forester, 2018; Forester, 2021). As such, the approach of learning from practice and practitioners’ stories will be elaborated and deepened in almost all of Forester’s subsequent works, albeit with differences in the way such stories have been collected, reported and discussed, and their thematic focus.

In general, the reference to Freire’s work—that already emerges from this first phase of Forester’s work in relation with Habermas’ theory—suggests some reflection upon a distinctive approach to education, as a collective and emancipatory praxis pushing for self-determination. As such, education is approached at a double level.

- It regards planning education, and the way other planners’ work enables learning processes in the classrooms: planners’ profiles and stories can be a means for grasping the core of experiences, in an effective and engaging manner for students who are, themselves, people following their own emancipatory processes.
- Outside of classrooms, *planning* itself can be framed as a learning opportunity, both for planners themselves and the other actors involved in planning processes, in a reciprocal and interactive manner. This regards specifically a progressive approach to planning⁵. If they embrace a radical democratic perspective, planners can work “to understand the differing abilities of affected persons to make their wishes heard” (Forester, 1982d, p. 76). In this sense, the planning process—intended also as a learning process—echoes Freirean lessons.

In other words, educating not only students, but more generally people to rely on their own abilities, to make their wishes heard—and meanwhile, learning from them—is something that

⁵ In 1975, Planners Network was formed in North America as an organization of progressive planners committed to support the most distressed and powerless groups. For more details, see for example [The Planners Network]. (1979). *Dialogue*, 1(3), 8–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25610259> and <http://www.plannersnetwork.org/> Last access: January 5th, 2022.

lies at the core of many of the experiences that we read in Forester's texts, whose epistemological foundations are grounded in this early period of work. However, such a two-fold focus on education is not generally understood as a core in the planning discipline—it requires the acknowledgement that education itself is a transformative act. The next chapter provides some insights into such an endeavour.

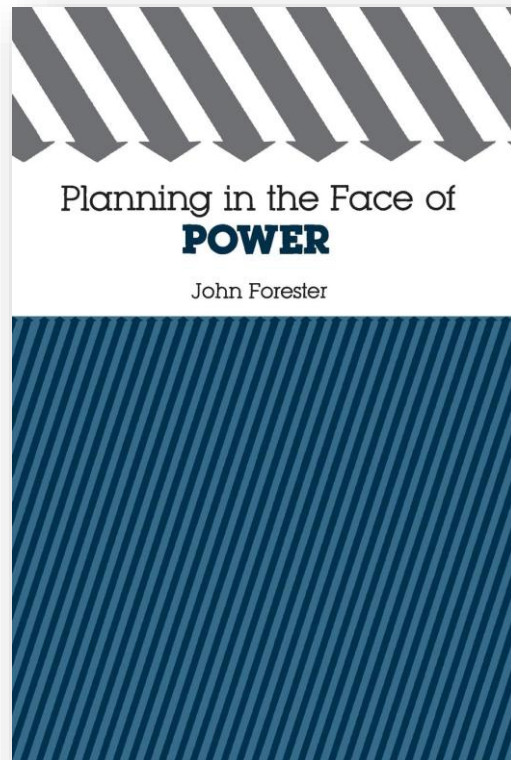
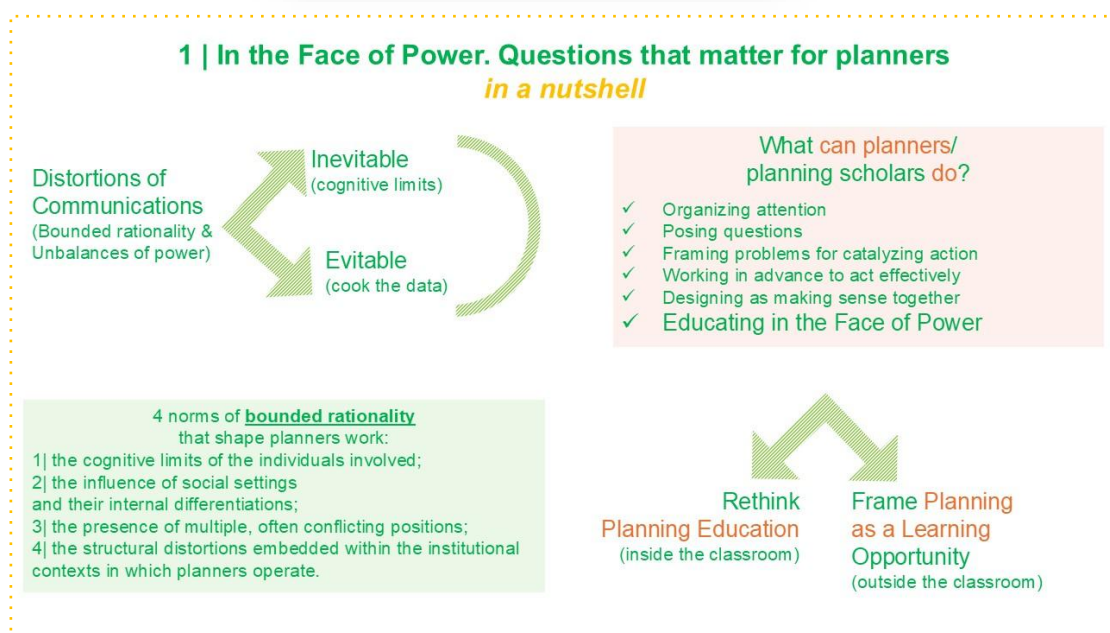


Fig. 2 – Cover of *Planning in the Face of Power* (Forester, 1983), First Edition, University of California Press

Fig. 3 (bottom) – A conceptual diagram illustrating selected key concepts (first period)
Source: Authors' elaboration.



2. Stories count

Second Period: 1990-2000

An excerpt from John Forester's reflections upon this period

“Between 1987-89, I wrote with Norman Krumholz about his work in Cleveland, and my three chapters—in *Making Equity Planning Work*—have nothing to do with ideal speech but everything to do with publicity, control of information, agenda-setting, learning underground from other experts, etc. Then, the focus of my work shifted, being less on politics of language as performance in speech and agenda-setting, more on the practical work that the planners' stories perform. This culminates in the *Deliberative Practitioner*. My theoretical inspiration had moved from Habermas and Freire to Martha Nussbaum. Core themes are identity and learning, practical virtue and ethics—in an Aristotelian rather than Kantian sense—, and a crucial chapter on transformative learning. Here, learning is seen not only cognitively—through the analysis of arguments—but experientially, focusing on the process of capacity-building through interactions (recalling Kenneth Reardon, “learning not from arguing but from doing”).

In this period, I fell into a way of doing “practice focused oral histories” because I had a grant to improve undergraduate teaching and to bring the stories of our alumnae and alumni back to the classroom. This discovery of a method to explore practice, not by getting the opinions but the grounded stories of projects (however imperfectly), was quite different than [depending upon] typical academic articles “about” planning, and that closer first-person voice consideration led to several later books. This research strategy is probably as distinctive to my work as any abiding theoretical concern, although the concern with practical judgment, with “what can be done,” in the face of complexities of power and conflict is equally pervasive”.

2.1 A view of the second period

In the search for understanding “the ways in which planners address even the most abstract cognitive problems within a system of social *inter-actions* (the playful hyphen is John Forester’s) and narratives” (Forester in Mandelbaum et al., 1996, p. 201), the second period regards the way planners can learn from stepping into someone else’s shoes within deliberative processes, and the implications for planning theory. To this end Forester moves from planners’ stories as powerful means for reflection, to also engaging with practical experiences in the field. Planners’ stories accomplish work!

Thick narratives deriving from such stories, planning processes and policy arenas offer a rich variety of *anchors* to understand identities, emotions, political judgements, situated ethics and values in practical situations. They also illuminate the capacity to exercise situated ethical judgment—introduced here with reference to the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis*⁶. Such narratives reveal troubles, mistakes, trials and errors, perturbations, not only successes. Unveiling and entering deeply into conflictual positions and arguments shine light on uncertainties, fears, misunderstandings, lack of trust and relations of power.

Drawing on Martha Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Forester begins to foreground the power of stories as a means of understanding how ethics and values unfold in practice. Building on this insight, he emphasizes that narrative accounts can serve as powerful tools for planners, both for learning from the experiences of others and for shaping their own grounded courses of action. More than antiseptic and detached theories, more than “controlled experiments”, planners’ stories serve the purpose of adding meanings and details for understanding—or, as importantly, for acting—planning processes seen as opportunities to challenge the *status quo*, and the very reasons embedded into the willingness of challenging it.

In Forester’s view, the stories themselves—the way they are told and constructed—frame the problem, the issues at stake, deliberations, and shed a light on the dynamics of power. Recalling the theoretical dispute – mirrored in the planning theory debate of those years – with Forester’s words:

⁶ Here, Forester refers to practical wisdom, that is what Aristotle frames as *phronesis* in the Sixth Book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Phronesis* is the capacity of developing ethical judgments and a reflective attitude in practice. In planning literature, also Flyvbjerg refers to *phronesis* as a “lost virtue”: a word that is not even properly translated in current language. *Phronesis* expresses – as Flyvbjerg argues – the “practical value-rationality” that is related to ethical questions such as “Where are we going? Is this desirable? What should be done? [...] Who gains and who loses, by. Which mechanism of power” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.60). Those questions lie at the heart of Forester’s *Deliberative Practitioner* (1999); despite Flyvbjerg draws this argument from Foucauldian discourses juxtaposing it with Habermasian theory (Flyvbjerg, 1998), practical wisdom (*phronesis*) can be framed as the joining link with Forester’s interpretation and application of Habermas (Forester, 1994). As already introduced in this Booklet, “Forester’s Habermas” is intertwined with other theoretical pillars (Paulo Freire has been recalled in Chapter 1, Martha Nussbaum is recalled here), and such theoretical twine leads to the definition of Forester’s critical pragmatism (Forester, 1999), as seen in next pages.

“I turned to the problem dividing phenomenologists and critical theorists: How to integrate a powerful understanding of hermeneutics, of the importance of interpretation, with an analysis of systematic relations of power that illuminated domination and oppression, resignation and hopelessness?” (Forester, 1999, p. 10)

In Forester’s writings, planners’ stories “show” the work that planners do, that is moral, political, emotional and deliberative. Not least of all, it is a “care-full work” (Forester, in Mandelbaum et al., 1996, p. 221). In this second playful hyphen (care-full), it is possible to trace the echo of Martha Nussbaum⁷ (1990) on literature and moral philosophy, as well as an anticipation of the ethics of care that will recur throughout Forester’s work.

In *Love’s Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Nussbaum enters into moral philosophy through literature, exploring the “relationship to written form and style” (ibid., ix), between words and ethics.

In her essays, she calls for “a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity and gives a certain type of priority to the perception of particular people and situation, rather than to abstract rules” (ibid.).

In her work, then, Nussbaum grounds ethical reflection in the situated stories and practical contexts that lie at the heart of novels, poems, and other literary forms, drawing for example on Henry James’s fiction and the kinds of narratives that cultivate an empathic responsiveness in the reader.

Moving from Nussbaum’s *Essays*, in Forester, planners’ stories and their practical judgment “reflect their moral imagination and shape the moral imagination of others” (ibid., p. 220). In Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge*, the focus is on “the relationship between style and content in the exploration of ethical issues; [...] the role of emotions in deliberation and self-knowledge” (Nussbaum, 1990, ix). In Forester’s interpretation within the planning discipline, the same focus regards planners’ work in the field, and the way planners shape their narratives, discourse, and critical reflections upon their challenges, as well as the way they are able to develop practical judgements and moral improvisation in “real, nonideal settings” (Forester, 1999, p. 255).

⁷ Alongside *Love’s Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, that has deeply influenced Forester’s second period of work, Martha Nussbaum’s work on the capability approach (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Nussbaum, 2011)—together with the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics Amartya Sen—and on justice (e.g., Nussbaum, 2007) has impacted the planning debate concerned with the empowerment of the most distressed communities (see, e.g., Basta, 2017).

Such stories are not merely descriptive: “It is not just about facts, but about facts that matter, facts that are significant to planning practice and citizens’ lives.” (Forester in Mandelbaum et al., 1996, p. 212). As such, stories are powerful means for grasping lessons that can inspire other planners’ work in practice, and advance

“In planning and policy work, we plainly do learn from astute accounts of particulars, from the dramas of the moral challenges and the conflicts of others. Watching and listening closely, we are impressed by some people and dismayed by others, but we often learn from both. Frustrated by some, we nevertheless pick up “tips” from others: We see new ways of going on, ways of handling pressures, ways of presenting information, ways of being careful and persistent” (Forester, *ibid.*, p. 204).

The great variety of stories we read in Forester’s works, up to this period, can be grouped into several macro-categories.

- Stories told with the direct words of planners/planning scholars⁸, in the form of:
 - written reflections, with a closing commentary that links them to a more general theoretical debate (such as in Krumholz and Forester, 1990); or
 - in the form of interviews that generate a profile⁹ (such as in Reardon et al., 1993); this form will be extensively used in the subsequent periods of Forester’s work, too.
- Stories reconstructed, and commented by Forester, with a methodological approach based on ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic discourse analysis, as exemplified in Forester (1997);
- What Forester calls “practice focused oral histories”, as exemplified in the *Deliberative Practitioner* (Forester, 1999), where planners’ words are strictly bounded with Forester’s commentaries that provide reflections for advancing the theoretical debate.

Someone could argue that the richness of details and messiness and peculiarity of many of these stories is a barrier to pulling lessons out of them. But on the contrary, their usability

⁸ Both Krumholz and Reardon are academics who have shared their reflections upon their work in the field, the first within a public planning office, the second within participatory action research processes.

⁹ In Forester’s work, a *profile* is a narrative that illuminates the practical and political judgment exercised within a specific planning process. It is told in the first person by a key participant, who *recounts the story* not in abstract terms but by drawing directly on his or her own engagement in the events described. Profiles are typically presented without interview questions to preserve the interviewee’s voice as fully as possible. The emphasis falls on the participant’s practical experience rather than on the broader challenges of the process, attending to “actions, judgments, hesitations, strategies, fears, worries, deliberation, hunches, mistakes and surprises” (Reardon et al., 1998, p. 70).

relies on the idea that “particulars and uniqueness matter [...], that individuals must be treated not as stereotypes but as the specific people they are” (ibid., p. 205), and that stories can offer insights for acting in other different contexts and circumstances.

In Forester’s work, then, stories can be devices aimed at giving inputs for both:

- inspiring planners to act in contexts where power dynamics are unbalanced and questions at stake require political standing (refusing the idea that planners would be neutral; Forester & Stitzel, 1989);
- enabling planners to support other actors in the field, especially those who are less represented, offering insights upon, e.g., equity planning (Krumholz and Forester, 1990), advocacy planning (Forester, 1994b), participatory action research (Reardon et al., 1993).

The enabling power of planners’ profiles and stories will be further elaborated when planning as *political deliberation and critical pragmatism* is examined in Section 2.4. The echo of Martha Nussbaum’s work in Forester’s writing lies in the possibility of recounting not only technical considerations but also the diverse rationalities, emotions, identities, and moral visions at the base of their practice, as “we learn not only with our ears, but with our eyes and hearts” (Forester, 1999, p. 151). It is quite challenging to recall—in the space of this Chapter—the entire variety of planners’ profiles and stories at the core of this period of work. However, in the attempt to provide a significant exemplification of the lessons learned stepping into other planners’ shoes, a brief selection is provided in the following paragraphs.

2.2 Learning from equity planning: Norman Krumholz and the staff working in Cleveland

“Norm’s stories concern not just the vision of social justice but the long, slow, hard work inside and outside of city hall, with allies you don’t always agree with, integrating timely information with excellent professional analysis, expanding planners’ scope to vulnerabilities including far more than land use, working with the press and media to educate public attention, and more still. Norm’s modesty sometimes hid from our view how much more than his articulate equity goals he really cared about, how much more he did practically as he pursued the vision he shared with us.” (Forester, 2020b, p. 633)

Between 1969 and 1979, during the intense times of the civil rights movements in the U.S.A., Norman Krumholz (Norm, in Forester’s *Testimonial* quoted above) worked as the director of

the planning commission in the city of Cleveland (Ohio, USA), working partially within the liberal Carl Stokes¹⁰ administration, then with Republican Mayor Ralph Perk¹¹, concluding with the Democrat Mayor Dennis Kucinich, during his last two years in the municipal office.

Krumholz was a “quietly intense dreamer, one who hoped against the history of his chosen profession that he might seriously contribute to racial integration and the alleviation of poverty” (Altshuler in Krumholz and Forester, 1990, xi).

Cleveland, in Krumholz’s words, was “a prototypical product of industrial America. It is more an agglomeration of jobs than a deliberately located and planned community [...] Like most other older, industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest, Cleveland has experienced population loss, waves of plant closing, rising unemployment and poverty rates, and the growing deterioration of an aging housing stock” (Krumholz and Forester, 1990, p. 15). It was a city under political contractions, and businessmen running the town.

In ten years, Krumholz worked to accomplish the goal of what has been framed as “equity-oriented planning”. Without digging into its meaning, here, the choice of the label “equity”, rather than other labels emerged from the reflections that Krumholz, together with the planning staff he had built in Cleveland, considered to be their clear commitment¹².

“They wanted the city’s citizens to have jobs so they could feed their kids; transportation to get whatever jobs existed; the opportunity to rent or own an affordable house without the terror of finding a cross burning on the front lawn. They wanted the city’s and the nation’s resources to be used prudently, not to subsidize millionaires in the development industry, but to upgrade services and infrastructure for the neediest populations in the city. So the Cleveland planners were quite traditional in many respects. They wrestled directly with democratic ideals: protect all citizens, provide opportunities and care for those most vulnerable, consider public and not just private welfare” (Krumholz and Forester, 1990, xix).

This revealing quote highlights “planners” in plural to stress the key role of the entire staff rather than just one individual working alone. Also, here the traditional (conventional) role of

¹⁰ Stokes was the first black mayor elected in a large American city (with a population of 39% of black people at that time).

¹¹ Perk was a conservative Republican who was “interestingly enough [...] as supportive of most of our proposals as Stokes had been” (Krumholz and Forester, 1990, p. 54).

¹² “As significantly, we use *equity planning* here as a shorthand to refer to planning efforts that pay particular attention to the needs of poor and vulnerable populations, populations also likely to suffer the burdens of racial and sexual discrimination, both institutional and personal. But we do not examine the notion of equity systematically, as philosophers might, for the Cleveland planners referred to equity planning colloquially and culturally, not philosophically” (ibid., pp. 210-211).

planning is presented as the pursuit of public interest, with attention to vulnerabilities, even though planning is not always understood and conducted in these terms¹³.

In the case of Cleveland, working from within the municipal administration provided the legitimacy required to advance the principles of equity planning as a redistributive practice. From this institutional vantage point, planners could exercise the power to act as public advocates¹⁴ for the poor and the working class without alienating other residents or jeopardizing the city's economic vitality. Above all, it regarded being "political professionals", as "involvement in policy and program formulation inevitably means involvement in politics" (ibid., p. 56). It regarded also many other controversial matters, such as to issue recommendations for disapproving changes in the zoning, to avoid private control of a beach fronting a lake to preserve and expand recreational areas for all; to set priorities and make Cleveland's citizenry voice heard at the regional scale; to face the issue of improving the living conditions within low- and moderate-income housing; to oppose dangerous projects for the City while advocating for key projects, such as a Park System; to help Cleveland's neighbourhood organizations from the inside of "city hall," etc.

Forester's reflections upon Krumholz's work and the pursuit of equity planning¹⁵ focused on three aspects. First, the possibilities: aiming for equity planning in Cleveland worked to provide opportunities for the most disadvantaged persons, even though not always in the form of fully accomplished results.

According to Forester, these open possibilities can inspire other planners' works, teaching the importance of embracing the challenge of dealing with the "non-monolithic character of urban politics", still using Forester and Krumholz's words (p. 212).

As such, the story of the Cleveland planning experience—directly told and framed by one of its central actors (Krumholz), and assessed for general lessons by Forester—shows

¹³ For example, consider the harsh criticism that Jane Jacobs made, in the 1960s, of those urban planners that "have ignored the study of success and failure in real life, have been incurious about the reasons for unexpected success, and are guided instead by principles derived from the behavior and appearance of towns, suburbs, tuberculosis sanatoria, fairs, and imaginary dream of cities – from anything but cities themselves" (Jacobs, 1961, p.6). Jacob's struggle was against those urban planners who contributed to increase socio-economic disparities in cities rather than tackle them, against the role of financial capital and private profit as the main drivers of urban renewal, and her fight for the defense of public spaces is very close to the same ethical tension of Krumholz's equity planning, and that of progressive planners.

¹⁴ Forester and Krumholz argue that "equity planning and advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965) are siblings" (Krumholz and Forester, 1990, p. 210). However, with some differences. With Forester's words: "Paul Davidoff [the father of advocacy planning] had been trained as a lawyer, and he cared deeply about racial inequality, and he argued that typically excluded poor communities of color should have their own advocate planners and their own plans. (Forester, 2020b). The application of equity planning from another position—planning offices inside the body of public institutions—allows advocacy for the most disadvantaged in a more comprehensive and coordinated manner, at the city level, still sharing the same ethical tension of advocacy planning.

¹⁵ With Forester's own words: "Norman Krumholz's notion of equity planning was both descriptive and normative. His definition of equity planning was "more choices for those who had few"—right at the time when Milton Friedman was popular as a conservative economist who became very famous for a book "Free to Choose." Friedman's defense of the market was a defense of individual choice. So Krumholz stood the argument on its head. He said, essentially, "Look, if we're going to defend the dignity of choice, let's recognize that poor people have fewer choices." So even on Friedman's own account—the conservative economist's account – planning should create more choices for those with few" (Forester, 2020b).

how planners can welcome ambiguities and problems as opportunities for publicly formulating and reformulating the issues at stake, using the planning process as a powerful occasion to organize information, to shape discourses, to orient the political agenda and, therefore, to really affect the transformations of cities¹⁶.

Second—and directly linked to the first lesson above—, the power of the planning process can be effective only if planners act, at the same time, professionally and politically, anticipating the issues at stake, and organizing their technical work to support the political cause they aim to defend. As such, planners will be politically and technically accountable if they rely on a set of analysis done with competence and with a clear vision of what they'll accomplish. At the same time – following Forester's argument – planners will make their voice heard if they are able to nurture the public debates, to engage the local media, to foster the circulation of information as weapons for making their arguments heard and defending them, beyond the hallways of the city administration.

Finally, what Krumholz and the Cleveland staff ultimately teach readers—through Forester's interpretation—concerns the productive tension involved in evaluating work on the ground, even critically, while learning from experience through the analysis of both practice and structure. The latter includes, for example, class structure, understood not as a fixed constraint but as “a set of social relationships that shape access, control, initiative, and belief” (ibid., p. 243). This reinforces the idea that contextual and structural dynamics must be understood as interconnected. In this sense, this experience invites reflections grounded both in the contextual dynamics that unfolded through practice and in the broader structural conditions that shaped it.

As related to both practical outcomes and structural changes, evaluation in planning must do not only with measuring the direct impacts of a planning process—those explicitly linked to its stated goals—but also assessing its indirect side effects and its unintended, unexpected consequences, as well as the “qualities of action and judgement” (ibid., p. 245) of planners. This aspect will be at the core of other planners' stories, too: in the next paragraph, some examples are recalled.

¹⁶ To clarify the role of equity planners as organizers of information, shapers of public discourse, and agents of transformative action, an excerpt from *The Cleveland Policy Plan Report* (1975) is included here. The report emphasizes that “the decision-making process does not wait for the completion of detailed, ‘comprehensive’ plans. Decisions are made constantly; changes occur in conditions, attitudes and institutions. The Commission must be prepared to provide its analyses and recommendations when decisions are being made; it must be prepared to respond to change. These realities are reflected not only in the process by which the Commission discharges its responsibilities, but also in the form of this document. [...] In a context of limited resources, equity requires that priority attention be given to the task of promoting choices and opportunities for those individuals and groups who have few, if any, choices” (Cleveland Policy Planning Report, Volume 1, 1975, p. 13; Ernie Bonner Collection, 113, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/oscdl_bonner/113; last accessed January 20, 2026).

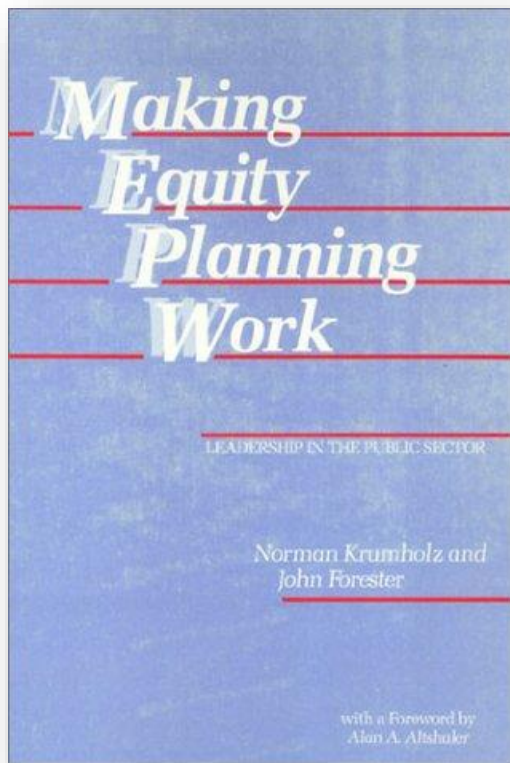


Fig. 4 – Cover of *Making Equity Planning Work: Leadership in the Public Sector* (Krumholz and Forester, 1990), First Edition, Temple University Press



Fig. 5 – Centre for Neighbourhood Development left to right Boll Whitney, Norman Krumholz, Mary Anne Simpson and Patrick Costigan. Source: Press Photo Centre for Neighbourhood Development Cleveland Plain Dealer. <https://www.cleveland.com/galleries/NLOWBR6Q7ZG5RLBDE7YZXV3URI/> Last access: March 20, 2026

2.3 Other planners at work

Krumholz's narrative of his planning experience in Cleveland and Forester's commentary have shown how planners' stories—their contents and the way there are told, their forms (recalling Nussbaum, 1990)—can be the base for drawing general lessons to advance the disciplinary debate, grounding theoretical reflections upon the discursive reconstructions of planning practices.

As we have seen in Section 2.1, in Forester's production, the way stories are collected, told, analysed is widely heterogeneous. For example, in Reardon et al. (1993), readers learn, from Ken Reardon's direct words in an interview, about a participatory action research (PAR) process in East St. Louis (IL, USA), where he worked with local residents and students from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, to push for community-based planning, "putting the needs of the poor on the agenda" (*ibid.*, p. 71), and actively engaging people in building their transformative paths, as it is in PAR processes.

Different from the experience within a municipal planning board commission (Krumholz), the focus in Reardon's account is on the interaction between academia and the world outside it: how to improve urban conditions through partnership of reciprocity between planning students, scholars, and residents.

Details about this story can be drawn from Reardon's own manuscripts (e.g., Reardon, 1994; 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2005, 2019), and from the same interview at the core of Reardon et al. (1993). Here, it is interesting to notice the way in which this profile was produced, to "explore the character of practical and political judgment required of participatory action researchers" (*ibid.*, p. 69): Ken Reardon's profile is a story told in first person and stimulated through specific interview questions, questions that are not reported but provide the 'red thread' running through the narrative.

Readers learn not only about successful outcomes, but, again, more importantly, about the turmoil of practice, about the issues that emerge in University-community partnerships, in terms of tension, distrust, resistances. We learn about the challenges of leadership, the importance of patience, listening, and dialogue in PAR processes.

The way questions have been asked is mirrored then into the way the narrative has been constructed; as such, these profiles not only tell something about the specificities of context-based, situated stories of the interviewees, but also underline the way in which planning scholars (the interviewers) have shaped attention in exploring and recalling what is important to reflect upon, for addressing challenges of practice and advancing planning theory.

In Forester's research, another form of examining and reflecting upon planning practice is "quasi-ethnographic discourse analysis [...] supplemented by questions derived from critical social theory [...], structural phenomenology, an analysis seeking to do justice both to

practical experience and to structural settings (Forester 1982c, 1989, 1992; 1993a)", as exemplified in Forester (1996b, p. 258): excerpts of conversations provide insights on planners' evaluations, actions, contradictions, "problems of substance, power, and passion" (ibid., p.252).

However, reflections upon "micro-politics" of what planners do" (Forester, 1999b, p. 175) are not always constructed on the base of excerpts of dialogues and planners' own words. In the case of the reflection that came out of the observation of planners at the Boston Redevelopment Agency, for example, we learn from Forester's own interpretation of his position as an observer that was questioning the interactions' dynamics within the Agency. As such, Forester uses a

"strategy indebted to phenomenologists even more than to critical theorists, to feminists as much as to ethicists. I try to explore planning practice by taking seriously, but not uncritically, planners' own accounts of the challenges, mistakes, and lessons—the friction—of their practice. I take this approach to be a critical pragmatism: pragmatic enough to relate to planners' real problems of getting something done, and critical enough to worry about the quality of what in the world gets done and, of course, for whom it gets done" (Forester, 1999b, p. 176).

Having discussed the different forms that Forester uses to dig into planners' practice, bridging "the theoretical work of Habermas (1984) and Foucault (1980) with that of English language theorists like John Austin (1962) with American pragmatists like John Dewey (1927)" (Forester, 1998, p. 5), the next section is dedicated to a view on *The Deliberative Practitioner* (Forester, 1999a), and its explorations of the micropolitics occurring within planning processes.

2.4 Planning as political deliberation and critical pragmatism

In *The Deliberative Practitioner*, Forester experiments with an extensive and articulated use of "practice focused oral histories", i.e., excerpts of planners' reflections upon their work intertwined with commentaries that link detailed and thick narratives with theoretical reflections and pragmatic lessons.

Through a rich variety of stories, we can dig into both ordinary and extraordinary work that planners do, into the daily administrative burdens inside public offices, as well as into the challenges of community partnerships, working with persons who carry the pains of class, racial, and sexist discrimination, among other burdens.

Recalling Nussbaum's essays on literature as moral philosophy, where Nussbaum explores ways to learn about values and ethics from novels and stories, Forester argues that we (scholars, students, other planners and practitioners, etc.) can learn as well from "practice focused oral histories".

Nussbaum suggests that novels illuminate ethical complexities and human values not through abstract reasoning, but through the narrated experiences of characters. Inspired by this, Forester argues that planners and scholars can learn in a comparable way from practice-focused oral histories. These stories are not abstract commentaries about what practitioners believe; rather, they are accounts of how planners acted, what decisions they made, and how they navigated real constraints. By focusing on the how – "How did you act?", "How did you handle that?", "How did you carry yourself through that dilemma?" – these oral histories become a source of insight into values, moral reasoning, identity, strategy, and theory in action.

This pedagogical approach has resonated deeply with students. As Forester notes, students—who have long served as a proving ground for his ideas—responded to these narratives with heartfelt clarity: "Finally, I can explain to my mum what planners really do" or "This is the most practical thing I have read in this program" (oral conversation between JF, MW & GP; May, 24th, 2023). Such responses confirm the Freirean power of narrative to transform education, not just by conveying content, but by cultivating critical consciousness and moral imagination.

Nussbaum's essay on *Literature and the Moral Imagination* inspired Forester as he put it regarding "how can we learn about ethics from novels, about what we can do with words. And I thought to extend the concept, to show how, through planners' stories we can learn from the practical judgements they are making" (same conversation, May, 24th, 2023).

Subsequently, on the content side, the *Deliberative Practitioner* provides elements for learning about practical judgment: on the theoretical side, it provides elements for refining the way theory can be grounded in practice. This book demonstrated a method: "It freed me, as it allowed me to ground my thinking in practice", in Forester's words (same conversation, May, 24th, 2023). This dual contribution—practical judgment on one hand, and the refinement of theory on the other—has helped bridge the often-perceived gap between action and abstraction. Thus, where Nussbaum turns to fiction for moral philosophy, Forester turns to planners' oral histories. Both seek the same ethical clarity and human depth: an exploration of what can be done with words—and, crucially, what can be learned from actions.

In summary, what stories tell us is not just about facts but, above all, about facts that matter in planning practice, in terms of what shapes and affects actions, and that is a moral, more than a technical, matter. The focus is on what counts for planners to be effective in their action.

Here, we continue to learn that planning is not neutral but political: it is a matter of political deliberation, practical judgment, and moral improvisation. It is a matter of developing both technical skills (to be credible, accountable, in front of others), and ethical judgment (not *a priori*, but through practice itself), to respond to unpredictable challenges in complex situations, where the diversity of actors involved may affect predictable trajectories in favour of unexpected ones.

Practice focused oral histories do not provide a cookbook, but examples, some inspiring, other instructive—together a set of references that work as anchors when, in other contexts and conditions, other planners need to develop critical judgement confronted with *practical* choices, that is—in Forester’s view—a matter of *critical pragmatism*. This is also related to the very nature of planning that implies working with others. Here, it clearly emerges that planning is a not a neutral and antiseptic linear road; it is more an entwined path; as such, planners cannot escape from the challenge of acting with others and entering in resonance with their identities, values, past experiences, and expectations. As such, Forester develops a more specific conceptualization, extending Schön’s (1983) insights into learning from and reflecting upon practice.

“while the reflective practitioners learn as they act on practical situations, deliberative practitioners learn as they act with others in the practical situation at hand. If planning is not to be heavy-handed imposition of a small group’s benign (or malign) decisions, it must foster not only voice and participation, but real learning, if not also practical deliberative decision making or the crafting of mediated multiparty agreements” (Forester, 1999, p. 249).

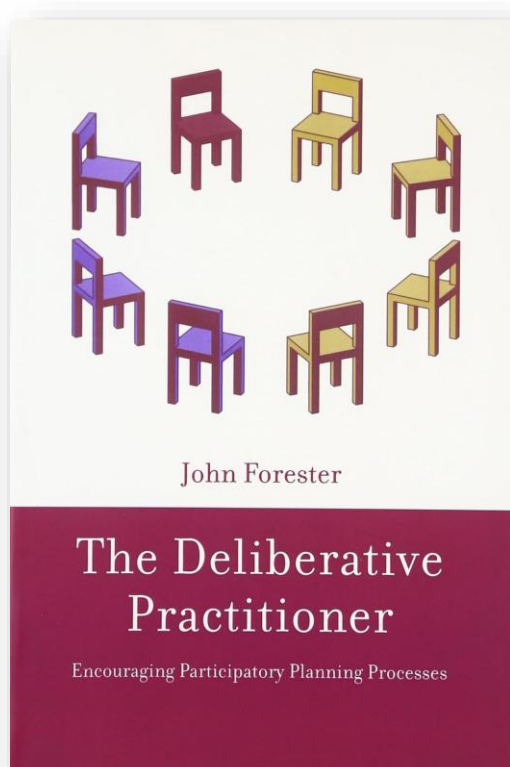


Fig. 6 – Cover of *The Deliberative Practitioner. Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes* (Forester, 1999), First Edition, MIT Press

Box 2. Forester drawing from Donald Schön, and more

In planning literature, the influence of Donald Schön on Forester's thinking is particularly evident in how Forester extends Schön's notion of the reflective practitioner to the idea of the deliberative practitioner. In Forester's formulation, planning practice requires not only personal reflectivity but also the social skills needed to act effectively in politically contested and uncertain environments. This shift highlights the inherently relational and dialogic dimensions of planning processes. In this Box, Forester's own words—drawn from his conversation with GP and MW—offer insights into his encounters with Schön's work and into how these engagements have shaped his evolving understanding of planning practice.

My relationship to Donald Schön's work is both appreciative and critical, as my *Deliberative Practitioner* sought to show. When I went to MIT for my first sabbatical in 1985-1986, I had gone there largely to 'work with' Schön, whose *Reflective Practitioner* had shown me a promising way to study what planners did on the job, while it also reflected a deep interest in John Dewey's pragmatism. The Department of Urban Studies and Planning had supported me by having me evaluate their introductory master's level course, which was to be taught that year by Schön, Phil Clay, Phil Herr, and Frank Jones (the appendix to *Planning in the Face of Power* presents my evaluation). Students had come up to me several times after classes to ask, "Professor Forester, why are you taking more notes in class than we are?" I found Schön's work fascinating, both for what it did (give a lucid account of reflection-in-action) and for what it did *not* do (account for group formation, ritual participation, changing identity, links to political agendas, and more). When Don took students in class through an example of a World Bank consultation, I watched and found he was doing even more, much more, than his own account of reflective practice described. He had wonderfully scratched the surface of planning practice, and there was a gold mine of significant implications yet to explore. To this day, I find that the widespread appeal to reflection-in-action is often right, but not quite right enough. Yes, as planning educators, we should cultivate reflective practitioners, but we should also educate them about the selectivity of their work, about how identity can shift as "I" moves to "We" in planning processes, and much more, as I tried to argue in my *Deliberative Practitioner* (Forester, 1999a). I find readers' appreciation of "reflection-in-action" appealing psychologically, as Don had hoped, but too often it is apolitical, narrow, missing broader ethical and political concerns. So, I count myself as a friendly critic of Schön's work, as one hoping both to value its contribution and to extend it socially, politically, and practically as well.

Still within the dialogical orientation of this book, GP notes that the collective dimension of Schön's reflexivity—and the possibility of extending 'learning how to learn' to groups and organizations—can be traced in the work that Donald Schön developed with Chris Argyris on organizational learning. Their joint work examines how processes of reflection and inquiry can move beyond the individual to become collective practices embedded within groups and organizations. In *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Argyris & Schön, 1997), 2, they analyse how organizations construct and revise their 'cognitive maps' as a collec-

tive endeavour, enabling members to question not only specific actions but also the assumptions that underpin them, not as isolated individuals but as part of a collective, Yet Forester would no doubt find this interpretation still overly individualistic, agent-centric, insufficiently normative and political.

[...] Looking back at that sabbatical year, I see that my sense of the pragmatic possibilities of planning practice grew even more from Larry Susskind's developing interests in public dispute resolution (and mediation) than it had from Schön's concerns with learning how to learn. Years later, with David Laws (a doctoral student and then colleague of both Schön's and Susskind's, years before he became a professor at the University of Amsterdam) I would explore policy analysis and planning as modes of mediating conflicting interests (e.g. Laws and Forester, 2006; Laws and Forester, 2007). Where Schön had been enchanted by the questions of how practitioners changed their minds to learn in practice, Susskind was fascinated by the ways conflicting parties with little or no trust in one another could find themselves assisted by a mediator to craft and then realize creative, 'both-gain' agreements that neither party had initially envisioned (cf. Susskind et al, 1999; Forester 2009; 2012b; 2013). But I learned a great deal from all three of these colleagues.

2.5 Within and beyond communicative planning

In the broader debate in planning theory occurring in the 1990s, Forester's exploration of planners' stories is linked with a stream of literature interested in understanding planning practice, what planners do (Hoch, 1994), and the way they develop reflections and practical judgement in the field, often within conflictual arenas.

In those years, Forester and others (Sager, 1994; Innes, 1995; Healey, 1997) were, by the planning community, seen as a new group of scholars who shared an interest in interactions between planning actors and a normative orientation towards opening expert-driven planning for broader participation. The theories that Forester and other scholars—such as Patsy Healey, Judith Innes and Tore Sager—developed during this time is often called communicative planning theory. This is a stream in the planning literature which still attracts interest and debate (Mattila, 2018; Westin, 2022; Calderon & Westin, 2021; Mäntysalo, Westin, Matilla, 2023).

In Forester's view, the sources that inspired those variously engaged with communicative planning were essentially two. On one side, there was a concern for exploring the type of rationality at the base of planning: assuming that it couldn't be cartesian rationalism—for planning does not have to do with solving mathematical problems as "the square root of four", or other relatively resolvable problems—it was a different form of rationality, for planning has to do with "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1974), whose solutions cannot rely on one technical knower, but on

“a process of debate and scientific inquiry and refutation that is never perfect and that is historical and always evolving. [...] So, one source of communicative planning was this interactive, de-centred problem of rationality. The problem was, to restate it: Can we come up with a notion of rationality that isn't purely centred in the expert's brain, but that's more engaged, accountable, transparently debated, and so on?” (Forester, 2021c).

On the other side, there was a concern for the very nature of planning as a political act, and it had to do with social structures, the way they change, and relations of power. Given this assumption, the problem is understanding the possibilities for planners to act (their agency), and their abilities to be effective, to have an impact on the structures of power, and on the influence of oppressive systems on their work. In this sense, communicative planning has to do with both: a) addressing questions of accountability, transparency, and inclusion in the decision-making process, as well as, b) engaging with the pragmatic effects of planners' action, investigating how to try to make a difference in the social structures and systems in which they operate and are immersed.

Forester has recently refined the concept of communicative planning, stressing more the framework of critical pragmatism (Forester, 2021c; 2022).

“I don't use the words “communicative planning”, because I think that to say “communicative planning” is like “air breathing planning”. Well, we all breathe air. We all communicate. [...] However,] the care-full improvising of context responsiveness is crucial to what I've long called a critical pragmatism, one that's as communicative as it is “air-breathing,” but one that's neck-deep in issues of power and inequality, voice and coalition-building, getting working agreements, too.” (Forester, 2021c).

Later sections will offer more insights on “context responsiveness”, improvisation, mediation, public disputes, and working agreements as crucial matters for critical pragmatism, as well as the importance of care-full practice.

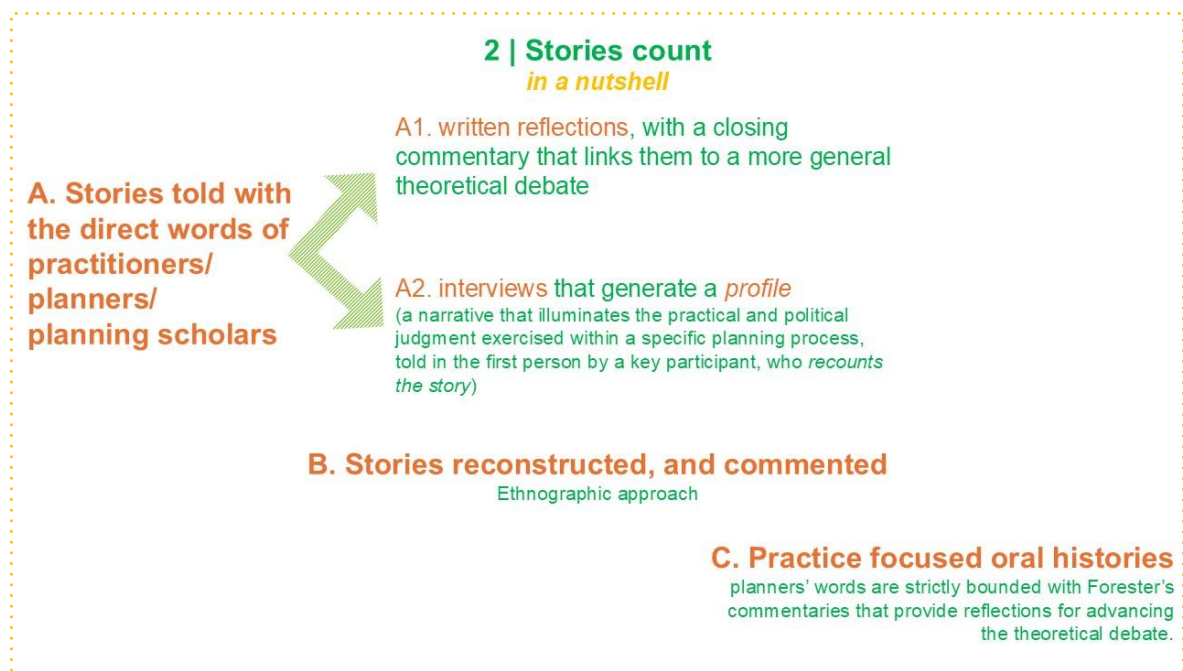


Fig. 7 – A conceptual diagram illustrating selected key concepts (second period).
Source: Authors' elaboration



Fig. 8 – Judith Innes, John Forester, and Patsy Healey sitting outdoors in Aveiro during the 1998 AESOP Conference, where Forester delivered the plenary lecture. Source: John Forester's archive.

3. Conflict, mediated-negotiations, and surprising possibilities

Third Period: 2000-2010

An excerpt from John Forester's reflections upon this period

“Then, I turned to exploring the moves, responsiveness, and skills, what the practical experiences of mediators of public disputes could suggest, teach, imply for planners who cared about organizing—since any community has internal differences—and “participation” always involves differences of interests, even values. I had student research assistants since the mid-1990s engaged with interviewing, to produce first person “profiles” of mediators, and I did that as well. The underlying question was: how did these practitioners work with conflict, distrust, differences in power—what did they actually do? I was not interested really in “consensus”, Susskind’s ambiguous term, but in practical working agreements, ever since my article in the *Journal of Planning American Association* (Forester, 1987c) concerned with “planning in the face of conflict”—an article that was almost ignored by reducing the discussion to some idealized version of Habermas. The essays written in this period of work were mostly given as lectures to different universities, and I brought them together, in 2009, for Oxford University Press, in book form as *Dealing with Differences: Dramas of Mediating Public Disputes*. Questions such the one in the Interface (Saija et al, 2017)—“Ok, you disagree and have a problem with that, but how can we make it better?”—were close to the central themes of that book. That is the essential mediating move: recognizing layers of differences of power and interest and probing for what might be possible. Then, the actual mediator profiles assessed in *Dealing with Differences* were published separately in 2013 as *Planning in the Face of Conflict* (American Planning Association Press, now Routledge).

At the same time, in these years (2006-2008) with Kenneth Reardon we were working on the Katrina project that led to a later publication (Reardon and Forester, 2015). I also spent 2008-2009 in Amsterdam working with David

Laws doing interviews with “street level democrats”, not bureaucrats, exploring their work, that we’d publish eventually in 2015 (Laws and Forester, 2015). Despite publications that came out later, this mediation-focused period—recognizing that all processes of participation involve conflict and many ways of handling that—ran roughly from 2002 to 2011 or so”.

3.1 A view of the third period

In the previous period of work, Forester had mainly concentrated on “practice focused oral histories” as a way of inquiry (and pedagogical materials, in a Freirean sense, too). This methodological approach—tuned along the years and systematized in *The Deliberative Practitioner*—now became the basis for collecting and reflecting upon “practice stories”, that formed the core of two of the main books delivered in this period: *Dealing with Differences* (Forester, 2009), and *Planning in the Face of Conflict* (Forester, 2013).

Some years before, the significance of ordinary practitioners’ work was the subject of analysis in a manuscript (Forester, 2003) contributed to critical management studies, a study of “fieldwork in a Habermasian way” that was hardly recognized in the planning literature. Here, Forester had explored the “many-layered practical significance of performative, communicative action” (Forester, 2003, p. 53), entering deeply into the significance of words and interaction, using the case of an ordinary meeting of a city planning staff in a small New York municipality. Breaking down and analysing the flows of interaction amongst the staff, Forester showed how the pragmatic Habermasian “validity claims” revealed the micropolitics of speech and interaction (Habermas, 1979) that shaped practically resulting belief, consent, trust, and attention. Such an approach provided the theoretical and practical lens

“to an analysis of discursive or communicative power-legitimation, the construction of selves, the framing of attention, and the resulting social and political re-fashioning of the social organization at hand—in its relationship to encompassing political structures” (Forester, 2003, p. 62).

Alongside Forester’s interest in “ordinary professionals’ work” as a means to explore on-going decision-making and symbolic meaning, including political and social identities, in this third period of work, a pivotal theme clearly emerges: it is the one of conflict, and the work of mediators in the face of it, with both theoretical and practical implications.

Therefore, the underlying question is now how planners and planning scholars can derive lessons from the work of mediators, even if “planners are not always mediators, but they can certainly learn from what mediators do” (oral conversation between JF, MW & GP; May, 24th, 2023).

Forester's interest in conflict and mediation was already at the core of some early works of his. In the 1987's article that appeared in JAPA (see the opening quote), Forester was concerned with contexts of conflict over land use regulation and power imbalances.

The last—power imbalances—are intended as asymmetries of information, different availability of financial resources, different expertise, etc., that emerge when developers and neighbours get to enter into the planning office (Forester, 1987c, p. 305). Here, the focus was on the way planners can act, simultaneously, as negotiators and mediators, on the practical strategies, and on the basic skills (not only technicalities, but also emotional, and interactive skills) they are called to acquire and improve.

The question is “how might mediated-negotiation strategies empower the relatively powerless instead of simply perpetuating existing inequalities of power?” (ibid., p. 303). Considering that negotiation presumes to be in favour of a specific position, and mediation presumes bringing different positions together, in this first analysis Forester comes up with a set of mediated-negotiation strategies that combine both positions: at times planners needed to work as negotiators for the administrations they served; at times too, though, planners needed to work as mediators “in-between” the diverse, conflicting stakeholders at hand. Generally speaking, “mediators” assist “negotiators”: when negotiating parties get stuck or have difficulties proceeding, they may ask mediators for assistance. Their roles – mediators and negotiators – are complementary but quite distinct (cf. Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987; Forester, 2009).

In many planning situations, Forester argued against the common presumptions that no one could actually play both roles—negotiating and mediating. His 1987 article tried to show how planners did such supposedly impossible work all the time, or quite often! He argued that planners working for cities and working “in between” conflicting parties:

“are called to exercise practical judgment, both politically and ethically. These judgments involve who is and who is not invited to meetings; where, when, and which meetings are held; what issues should and should not appear on agendas; whose concerns are and are not acknowledged; how interventionist the planner's role is; and so on” (ibid., p. 311).

In other words, through their work, planners can set some rules of the game, using their professional judgement; they can represent concerns of each conflicting part; on one respect, they can prepare the conditions to let such parts meet together, and, on the other side, they can rely on the ability to perform shuttle diplomacy, probing and advising each conflicting part, even beyond official meetings, to try to get agreements done.

More generally, planners' work can build trust on each side; and, at the same time, planners might split the job: someone from the planning staff can mediate, some others can negotiate. This set of possibilities was one strategy among others that Forester uncovered as planners' mediated-negotiation strategies at the beginning of his inquiry on conflict. However, these are not "ready-to-wear" solutions. A deeper understanding of mediation's arts and crafts requires a wider observation, and it will be the underlying main question of this period of Forester's work, being at the core of the two books (Forester, 2009; 2013) which are briefly recalled in the following sections.

3.2 Dealing with Difference

One of the clearest definitions of what planning essentially is, i.e., "the organization of hope" (Forester, 2009, p. 6), is stated at the beginning of *Dealing with Differences. Dramas of Mediating Public Disputes*; but how can planners *organize hope*? What theories derive from the significance of practical work of practitioners performing mediation, and what methodological devices can be used to understand, analyse, draw lessons from the practice of *organizing hope*? Following the stream of work that has been opened with the *Deliberative Practitioner*, in this subsequent book, *Dealing with Differences*, Forester reflects upon the profiles of mediators, constructed through practice-focused oral histories. Based on interviews, the leading research questions try to explore the practical dimension of the "how" (how have you done this?), placing the focus on the flows of actions and interactions that give elements for understanding the contextual judgements in place when facing conflicts. The profiles of practitioners provide support for the idea that "mediators don't make agreements any more than midwives make babies" (ibid., p. 175), that suggests a parallelism between the mediating and the maieutic process, the latter at the base of Freire's pedagogy.

In *Dealing with Differences*, the core of the exploration is related to understanding how to overcome the troubles of conflicting positions to get to working agreements, connecting parties through the work of letting them recognize each other's differences, seeking justice in practice, not only evoking it through "empty talks", with a constructive—rather than only a complaining—attitude.

Critical analysis tells us not just that injustice exist, but how and why power plays take pace historically and specifically, not simply as the general order of things: how injustice exists changeably rather than inevitably, politically rather than metaphysically – how our lives could have been different. Critical analysis tells us, colloquially speaking, not just what's wrong but also what we can do practically to respond. Complaint, in contrast, tells us what's wrong—unjust, racist, manipulated, sexist, and so on—but tells us nothing new about how the world can be otherwise, how we can change the world, resist injustice, do justice (ibid., p. 11).

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Here, the echo of the work of Susskind emerges (see, e.g., Susskind & Cruikshank, 1987), in the search for understanding possible ways to move forward, despite rooted divergences and opposing positions. Forester worked to extend Susskind’s basic insight: passionate parties in opposition often have differing priorities, differing fears—and these differences can enable “trades”, enable them to help each other on what each care about most, so making “practical working agreements”, working for each party (Forester, 2009).

Mediators’ works unveil possibilities for critical pragmatism, intended as “a stance toward conflict and dispute that stresses public learning, recognizing differences of interests, values, and power, the power of asking good questions, and always anticipating structured biases related to ethnicity and culture, race, class, gender, and more” (Forester, 2009, pp. 15-16).

Accordingly, Forester turns to practice stories emerging from regional land use planning, transportation conflicts, and the work of mediators dealing with ethnicity, identity and Native American struggles. We go beyond the strict matters of spatial planning, involving questions related with police departments, arrest, the use of force, and black communities; or in matters of HIV-AIDS prevention strategies, and the challenges of bridging religious conservatives’, homosexuals’, and prostitutes’ views at the same time; we get to know more about the Israelis and Palestinians’ historical conflict, and the context-based strategies adopted by planners in the Middle-East.

In these chapters we see, not only planners acting as mediators, but other mediators’ profiles, too, to suggest elements that are crucial for the planning discipline intended as “the organization of hope”, recalling the opening definition.

In mediators’ profiles, obstacles related to conflicting parties’ interests emerge, in terms of misrepresented and undisclosed interests, as well as different types of relationships between them. Possibilities to overcome such obstacles open through the mediators’ practical questions. The insights and lessons of such practitioners, and Forester’s reflections upon them, show how to work in the direction of the “organization of hope” through the involvement of practical wisdom and judgement in various settings.

The context of public participation here is deepened as a process of interdependence between multiple actors and complex issues at stake, with all the differences and conflicts involved. If some people misunderstand “participation” as simple “talk”, it can effectively nevertheless provide a means of reaching practical agreements in planning if planners can bring mediated-negotiation skills to these cases, as the many practical examples and cases of Forster (2009, 2013) suggest.

Through the participatory work and words of Lisa Beutler in California, for example—engaged in the context of a long-lasting land-use and environmental conflict—it is possible to distinguish some differences between *facilitating* conversations, *moderating* debates, and *mediating* negotiations.

Facilitation is needed to catalyse phases of productive dialogue as an act of listening to each other and recognizing both differences and similarities. Moderation—quite different from mediation!—is simply the procedural management of ‘debate’: where arguments, not interests, compete. Mediation may come into play when interests, not simply arguments, come into conflict. So, the practice of negotiation—i.e., reaching agreements that are valuable and convenient for each conflicting parts—can work by itself for parties in conflict, or at times when negotiating parties get stuck or fail to make progress, they may turn to ‘third party’ mediators for assistance. Therefore, the differences amongst facilitation, moderation, and mediated negotiation are crucial¹⁷: each of them can be used in different phases of a process. Moderating debate and argument, however, should not be confused with mediating negotiations over conflicting interests. Through the analysis of Beutler’s profile, it emerges how

“moderating turns argument toward counterargument, and so it surfaces (and risks escalating) debate; mediating turns parties toward their multiple and diverse interests, and so it *surfaces practical proposals from the parties* to negotiate. Moderating helps parties to sharpen conflicting arguments and terms of disagreement; mediating helps parties to respond to one another’s concerns to craft workable, mutual gain accommodations and agreements” (ibid., p. 147).

Mediating, therefore, is one key to facing conflicts and to treating negotiable elements, that emerge through the prior acts of facilitating and moderating. Therefore, distinguishing and in-

¹⁷ An excerpt from the conversation between JF, GP, and MW further clarifies the distinctions among these key sets of skills for planners. “Facilitating” abilities help evoke and surface viewpoints in a conversation so that participants can listen to one another and appreciate differing perspectives and interests. “Moderating” abilities involve managing competing arguments through clear and fair procedural rules that enable voice and, potentially, greater transparency. “Mediating” abilities focus on clarifying underlying interests rather than stated positions, to help and enable negotiating parties to identify possible “trades” or mutual gains—creating value together rather than settling for lose–lose agreements (especially since so called “win–win” outcomes are often more illusory than the more common “both gain” outcomes).

tegrating creatively these different acts can lead to working agreements i.e., areas of overlapping interests that open possibilities for parties to move forward, based on the possibility to gain each parties' priorities. So a mutually acceptable "trade," for example, reflects a working agreement that is not so-called "common ground". Trades take advantage of differences, not commonality.

To this end, the importance of yet another pivotal act, the one of *listening* (which is at the core of Forester's very early but also subsequent work)—aimed at understanding conflicting parties' concerns, interests, priorities, and to learn from one another—which is pivotal to enable a process of recognition, and to reach such practical outcomes of mutual agreements, about "what to do next". Negotiating agreements are about asking "What can we do if...", which is an analysis of options to work more on proposing, less on blaming each other, and therefore requires attentive, and care-full, listening.

However, following Susskind, Forester suggests that if negotiations typically involve a space or "zone of possible agreementS" (plural), then some agreements might be better (for ALL the parties) than others. Perhaps parties settled too quickly, or without crucial information. So, the mere fact of agreement does not mean that all agreements are good ones. Forester uses Susskind's four criteria to evaluate potential agreements, i.e.: "1) fairness, e.g. inclusion; 2) efficiency, as in maximizing joint gains/trades; 3) intelligence or using best available information; and 4) stability via structured opportunities for possible renegotiation" (ibid., p. 192).

Another key aspect involved in building relationships in planning contexts is humour and the imagination it reveals. Recalling an article (Forester, 2004) that appeared on the *Negotiation Journal*, Forester highlights how having a sense of humour and irony—which is different than making disrespectful jokes, though—can contribute to recognizing the dignity of conflicting parties, to acknowledging vulnerabilities, and to bringing people together into a community, tearing barriers down in a common effort of reciprocal recognition.

In a way, acting with humour when appropriate is an expedient to build power where imbalances exist, for exposing imperfect expectations, the need to learn, and acknowledging pain, which create preconditions for exploring new and safe relationships. Humour can be a central element in processes for generating new possibilities and hope, in the face of long-lasting conflicts. In this line, the next paragraph gives more elements on other surprising possibilities.

3.3 Planning in the Face of Conflict

Drawing from lessons discussed in *Dealing with Differences*, Forester (2013) now deepens the practice of facilitative leaders, "as we can call them, in their own words (xi)", given that many do not recognize themselves under the label of mediators.

Beyond the slippery question of naming things differently, there is a convergence in the understanding that conflicts are context-dependent, and no simple recipes can be provided to work and to plan in the face of them. Therefore, analysing “practice stories”—as they are framed here—is a way to give elements for connecting specific experiences with clues, moves, responses that emerge from each of them. Such stories recall the experiences of facilitative leaders’ reflection upon the challenge they have met along their way, e.g.: from designing a new hospital, and dealing with urban design conflicts, to be involved in Pro-Life/Pro-Choice controversies in the catholic State of Maryland, or to facilitate state-wide HIV/AIDS policies in Colorado; from dispute resolution of Native Hawaiian rights on private land—and other ethnicity issues—to an off-highway vehicle planning and Parks regulation in California, and other environmental, land-use, and regional planning conflicts.

The account presenting the practice story of Larry Susskind provides elements not only on his work as a M.I.T. planning scholar studying “the promise of mediation, facilitative leadership and consensus building for governance and planning in face of conflict” (ibid., p. 261), but, more importantly, on his being “in the middle of a half-dozen, multiparty, multi-issues disputes involving, for example, the siting of hazardous waste facilities, the design of controversial regional public housing plans, the creation of city-suburb cost-sharing schemes to ensure regional water quality, or the crafting of toxic waste clean-up strategies involving industry, government, and community members” (ibid., p. 261).

Lessons derived from practice stories might serve the planning discipline as a catalyst to bridge differences, and to open unexpected possibilities for overcoming rooted, long-lasting, apparently intractable conflicts.

“Politically, these striking accounts can make us smarter about power and interdependence, about the distance from abstract claims to concrete gains. We see in case after case how despair and frustration yield to fresh and surprising new perspectives on problems and, crucially, of course, to new options and new opportunities. We see clearly a practical politics of relationship building in the face of difficult and painful histories. We see the creative politics that Hannah Arendt saw—as new moves and actions in settings of conflict enable wholly new relationship to come into being” (ibid., xiii, xiv).

If *Dealing with Differences* has provided some lessons for planners focused on the practice of mediation, *Planning in the Face of Conflict* complements those lessons through a variety of specific highlights, such as paying attention to outcomes, not just to processes, and avoiding relying on compromises. As a result of facilitative leadership, the aim is not to settle for compromise, but to generate “workable options” capable of meeting the priorities and addressing

the pressing problems of all parties involved—something quite different from compromise in the narrow sense.

Workability relies on a process of social learning that is not only “edifying and insightful”; it is, above all, tangible and practical, generating actions to take, decisions and commitments to make, outcomes to be effectively realized. Here, listening emerges as a central component of social learning. In *Planning in the Face of Conflict*, listening is presented not merely as a means of gathering information, but as a practice that prepares the ground for enabling parties to understand one another, step by step, with planners as facilitators and intermediaries acting as catalysts in this process. Listening thus becomes a necessary precondition for fostering mutual recognition.

Finally, through facilitative leaders’ practice stories, an iconic, yet crystal-clear sentence emerges: “we can at time still disagree about what our gods require of us and yet come to agree about where the stop signs should go” (ibid., p. 299). Around this lesson, surprising possibilities are opened, and planners might find some space, and traces for the organization of hope.

3.4 Organization, mobilization, improvisation, and street level practices for urban democracy: working with Kenneth Reardon and David Laws

Before entering into the subsequent period of Forester’s work, two more books have a focus on conflict, on the role of planners in the face of it, to get things done, to improve reality as a statutory mission for the discipline.

Even if these books have been delivered later, they are based on the work developed in the third period of Forester’s work: *Rebuilding Community after Katrina. Transforming Education in the New Orleans Planning Initiative* (Reardon & Forester, 2016), and *Conflict, Improvisation, Governance. Street Level Practices of Urban Democracy* (Laws & Forester, 2015).

In the first—*Rebuilding Community after Katrina*—planning is seen as the mobilization, rather than only the organization –of hope. The context is a post-disaster university-community partnership developed in New Orleans, following 2005 devastating Hurricanes Katrina, with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Here, the promise of the scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1990), and the power of service learning intertwined with community planning (Reardon, 2006) and community organizing (Rathke, 2011) have been practiced to try to fulfil the promise of universities’ civic engagement as real, rather than empty rhetoric (Reardon & Forester, 2016, p.2; cf. Reardon, 2019), despite a context of “fog of war” pervading the post-disaster recovery. In the final chapter, based on students’ words and comments on their experience, Forester gives some elements for understanding the challenges, frustrations, but also inspiring lessons deriving from doing fieldwork trying to build

“non-exploitative partnerships of low-income activists and university-based scholars, partnership based on reciprocity and mutual benefit” (ibid., p. 6), as a never easy effort.

In the second—*Conflict, Improvisation, Governance*—the focus is on accounts of various practitioners engaged both in the public and non-profit sectors, as a way for digging into the challenge of making democracy work daily at the street level, in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht.

Here, the focus is the significance of improvisation for planning, which will continue to be at the core of Forester’s more recent work. The Dutch cases give insights on the work of practitioners who “are keenly aware of their interdependence with others [...as...] the polder tradition of consensual politics is often linked popularly to the precedent of shared labour to reclaim and protect land from the sea” (Laws & Forester, 2015, p.1).

In such a complex context, conflicts related with immigration, racism, housing, multi-problems families, disasters, murders, etc., are the arenas where “improvised democratic practices” must work on the ground: they cannot escape the test of producing tangible changes.

Through practitioners’ own words, the reader discovers that the balance between conflicting processes and the attempts to get to dispute resolutions shows that

“agonistic [cfr. Mouffe, 2005] ideas of plurality—of ethnic, cultural, and interest-based kinds and value differences as well—threaten to be “one hand clapping” if we ignore practical resolutions, working agreements, de facto reconciliations that bridge but do not erase differing commitments” (ibid., p. 2).

As Balducci and Mäntysalo (2013) have argued, drawing from Galison (1999), in Forester’s interpretation, these practitioners show the possibilities embedded into working within “trading zones”, areas of possibilities to go beyond conflict and collaboration intended as a dichotomy. Their delicate work is to converge efforts toward an area of partial overlap between divergent positions, through what Galison calls “boundary objects”¹⁸: devices that, despite differences in values, interests, and visions, can work as mechanisms of translations and areas of partial overlaps. Practitioners’ abilities of improvisation lie in their practical judgement, sensitiveness, and political intelligence, that is something one can learn only through a continuous and dedicated work in the field.

In Laws and Forester (2015), the performative dimensions of planners are explored on the ground, and the 13 profiles presented in the book result from a “co-generative style of engagement between the authors of the book and the profiled practitioners” (Legacy, 2017, p.

¹⁸ The historian and philosopher of science Peter Galison uses “boundary object” to describe an entity flexible enough to carry different meanings for different social groups while still enabling cooperation across their distinct practices (Galison 1997).

339). In this sense, the process of writing a book about—or, to a certain extent, *with*—those engaged in everyday struggles to make democracy work becomes a learning experience. Both the authors and the practitioners had the opportunity to reflect on the improvisational nature of planning practice. Through the meaningful use of details, which helps the reader grasp the complexity of these stories, the conflictual yet relational dynamics of street-level democracy emerge, along with the planner's possible role as a democratizing agent. (ibid., p.342).

Toward this end, what skills should planners aim to acquire? In the fourth period of John Forester's work, more in-depth reflections are presented, expanding beyond New Orleans and the Netherlands to a variety of other contexts explored through practice stories.

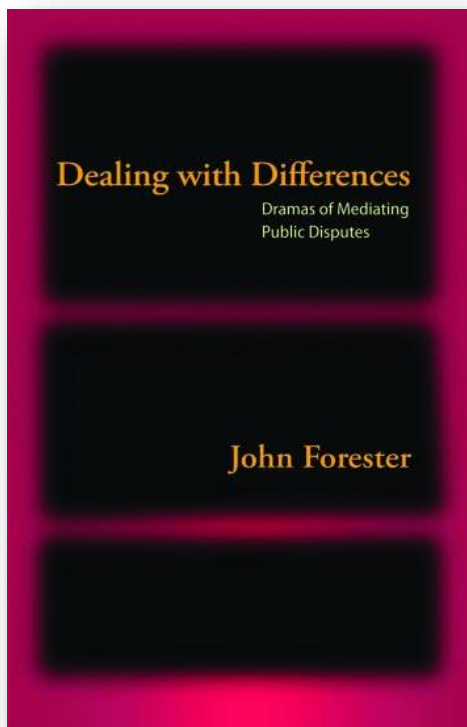


Fig. 9 (top left) – Cover of *Dealing with Differences* (Forester, 2009), Oxford University Press

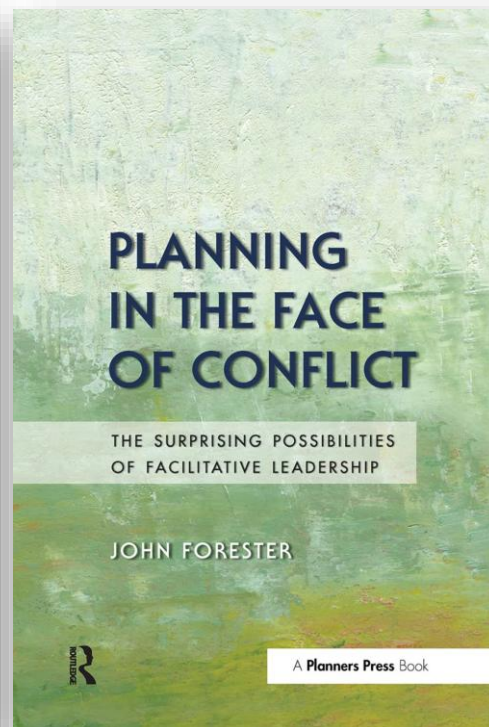


Fig. 10 (top right) – Cover of *Planning in the Face of Conflict* (Forester, 2013), Routledge

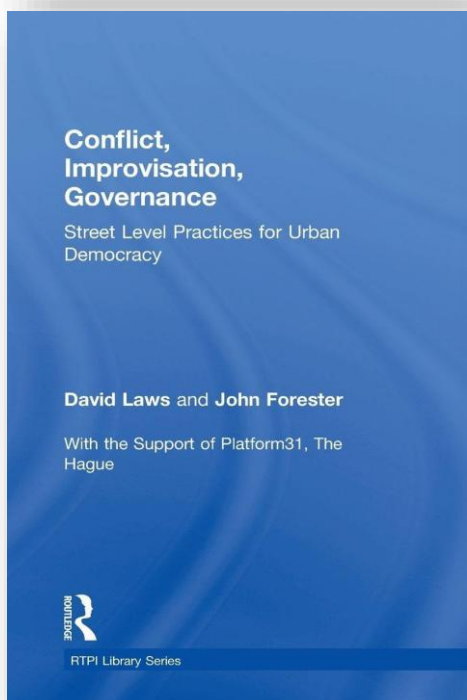


Fig. 11 (bottom left) – Cover of *Conflict, Improvisation, Governance* (Laws and Forester, 2015), Routledge

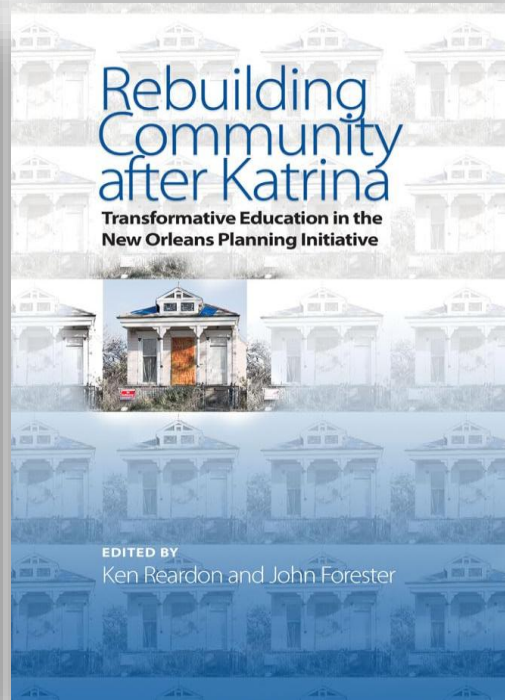


Fig. 12 (bottom right) – Cover of *Rebuilding Communities after Katrina* (Reardon and Forester, 2016), Temple Univ. Press



Fig. 13 – A conceptual diagram illustrating selected key concepts (third period).
Source: Authors' elaboration

4. Listen for significance, leverage Expertise, and act!

Fourth Period: 2010-today

An excerpt from John Forester's reflections upon this period

“Then, in a fourth period, roughly from 2011 to 2020, I tried an idea that began with someone’s reducing mediating a dispute to moderating a debate, a mistake like thinking that going out with someone is the same as reading a novel. I thought: mediating is about people crafting actual actions; but moderating is about procedurally shaping arguments; they’re different, but what else must planners do in messy planning situations? My answer was Freirean: before action or argument seemed to come some kind of dialogue, a sort of facilitating the conversation leading to any moderating or mediating later. It seemed: before there can be any moderating or mediating, there must be something to talk about at all, so where’s that come from? That led to seeing, I thought, that planners have to be able to do, as important elements of their work, three things often in a project: they have to listen and evoke conversation or dialogue about what different people care about; they have to think about how expertise of what different kinds need to be involved; and, not least of all, they need always too to be thinking about what can be done, not just argued. And that has to happen over time...So I took that scheme of a triple helix—one strand about dialogue about the issues, one strand about debate/expertise about what’s known on those issues, and one strand about possible actions that might be taken. I applied this scheme to the work done in New Orleans with Kenneth Reardon years before, and I wrote and published my concluding chapter, and our book was eventually published in 2016. And that scheme worked well enough (early ideas cooking since 2007) in concluding and analysing the New Orleans’ work, that I tried to extend that scheme with David Laws as we were working on our 2015 book, *Conflict, Improvisation, Governance*. So, this period is all about showing that there is a deep structure to the work of improvising politically, and I have lectured about that in Michigan and Rome, London and Shanghai in these last few years: listening, leveraging expertise, building coalitions to act.

Ignore the first, you solve the wrong problem. Ignore the second, you act stupidly. Ignore the third, you don't act at all!"

4.1 A view of the fourth period

As stated in John Forester's first editorial in *Planning Theory and Practice* (Forester, 2008), which integrates Patsy Healey's work on collaboration (2006) with that of Larry Susskind and colleagues on multiparty negotiation (Susskind & Cruickshank, 2007), mediation is framed as

"A specific skilled practice of 1) assessing stakeholders' options and initial interests, 2) convening representatives of those parties to present their views and data, questions and proposals, 3) enabling parties to engage in joint inquiry and learning, and 4) enabling a process of inventing options and formulating agreements" (Forester, 2008, p. 303).

These words capture a key theme that bridges the third and fourth phases of Forester's work: a sustained inquiry into the soft skills that planners must continually cultivate through practice. After working closely with David Laws, an MIT-trained planning scholar teaching at the University of Amsterdam, Forester was deeply influenced by the accounts of practice they collected during his sabbatical in the Netherlands (2008–2009) from planners, housing association staff, and community development workers. They characterized these practitioners as "street-level democrats," conceptual cousins to Michael Lipsky's "street-level bureaucrats" typically situated within public administrations. Forester and Laws had taught intersession courses on negotiation and mediation for several years, recognizing that although planners – as already explained – were not mediators, they had much to learn from mediators' practices of listening, convening conversations, designing processes, and assisting conflicting parties in reaching workable settlements. Their book *Conflict, Improvisation, Governance* (2015) sought to acknowledge that community planners routinely operated in contexts marked by power and conflict. Committed to promoting the voice and participation of affected and less affluent publics, these practitioners lacked rules, scripts, or straightforward precedents; they were required to act creatively and responsively in fluid, politicized, and contested settings. They had to improvise with care. Notably, the notion of care continues to surface here as a theme that underpins Forester's work.

Drawing on first-person practice narratives, Forester and Laws observed that these practitioners operated within complex organizational environments shaped by inequality, power differentials, and racial and religious diversity. Influenced—and at times unsettled—by Lipsky's account of bureaucratic discretion, they noted that although mediators' practices were relevant, organizational actors were constrained in distinct ways: they worked within public,

private, and nonprofit institutions; they were bound by rules and precedents; and yet they still engaged in creative forms of practice. This raised a central question for them: how did these practitioners improvise under such fluid and demanding conditions?

During this period, Forester was also shaped by Larry Sherman's account of assisting a municipality outside Toronto when the mayor asked him to manage a public debate on a proposed waste incinerator. Officials reassured Sherman that police would be present should disorder arise. His response—discussed by Forester in several publications (e.g., Forester 2017)—was both simple and incisive: he agreed to facilitate the meeting only if the event were reframed from a “public debate” to an “informed public conversation” genuinely open to questions and discussion. This episode reinforced for Forester that moderating a debate differed altogether from mediating a negotiation, and that neither debate nor negotiation captured the more fundamental interactional form he understood as dialogue.

“I thought, planners could learn from the practice of mediators who worked in the face of conflict all the time. But planners were not mediators, even if they could share or borrow mediating skills. Similarly, planners were often not technical experts in air or water quality. Also, I realized that many readers seemed to equate or actually reduce the techniques and processes of “mediating a disagreement” to those of moderating a disagreement. I realized that two very different activities are involved here: one *moderates a debate of arguments*, but that requires different actions from what one does when *mediating negotiations over action-proposals*. But neither activity or practice was really the same as *facilitating a dialogue or conversation*. This ‘discovery’ was not about words or semantics but about practical repertoires that planners had available to use. I saw that not only can planners really do different things, but they need to do those things in the differing, distinct circumstances of being in a multi-party negotiation (development negotiation involving city, neighbourhood, developer, etc.), a multi-party conversation or discussion (e.g., a neighbourhood meeting) or a debate between experts, for example, perhaps in a public hearing in which officials structure competing presentations.” (Forester in correspondence with GP and MW).

A first core of the fourth period of Forester's work is therefore a sustained investigation into the interrelated yet distinct skills of facilitating, moderating, or mediating a negotiation. This fourth period was also shaped by Forester's collaboration with Ken Reardon in documenting Rebuilding Community After Katrina, a participatory action research initiative in New Orleans's

Ninth Ward following Hurricane Katrina. As the manuscript neared publication—after prolonged delays in the review process—a reviewer requested further elaboration on Forester’s claim that the work with ACORN, Louisiana officials, and local residents had necessarily been “improvised.” The reviewer sought a clearer account of how the New Orleans Planning Initiative, led by Reardon, had enacted improvisation in practice.

In response, Forester drew upon the situational demands of the project and the repertoire of planning practices he had previously identified—facilitating conversations, moderating debates, mediating negotiations or action proposals. He proposed, and effectively tested, the argument that the participatory action research team had improvised by integrating a three-part, responsive practice. In New Orleans, this practically meant: (a) engaging residents in conversations about their visions for rebuilding; (b) applying geo-physical survey expertise to assess claims regarding the economic feasibility of reconstruction, based on newly collected elevation and storm-damage data; and (c) developing the negotiating capacity to demonstrate to local and state officials that residents were organized and possessed viable plans for return and reconstruction, thereby countering external proposals to “green the Ninth.” This integrated strategy proved effective: the planning team’s improvisation lay in combining (i) dialogue to explore what mattered to residents, (ii) research and debate to determine what was feasible, and (iii) negotiation to craft workable agreements about who could take action and how.

A second nucleus of the fourth period can therefore be traced in the search for practically grounded insights into planners’ skills for engaging with a variety of local actors, particularly in processes such as Participatory Action Research (Saija and Pappalardo, 2022).

The fourth period of Forester’s work is also characterised by a continuous and carefully articulated search for additional insights emerging from planning practice, as well as by sustained attention to their implications for planning theory. This is also reflected in various editorials appearing in the journal *Planning Theory and Practice* (PTP).

Forester’s work at this stage continues to deepen the analysis of three key phases of planners’ practice, as indicated in the title of this chapter: (1) how to listen carefully, (2) how to leverage expertise, and (3) how to act effectively. Forester explained:

“giving a lecture at Harvard for Diane Davis’s History and Theory class, I realized that the problem I had to clarify was about the significance—and even the necessity—of “improvising in the face of power” (Forester, 2023). That is, if planners are ever going to respond in creative and productive ways to inequalities due to power structures and hegemonic ideas, they will obviously not have rule books to follow but they will have to improvise with whatever possible sources of discretion that they have to build informal relationships, share information, etc. So, my recent editorial(s) in *Planning Theory and Practice* tried to address

that problem directly: to show that improvisation was not an alternative to facing power, it was a necessity to figuring out how in complex circumstances planners might do their work “in the face of power” (Forester, 2023). This is obviously not only about “knowledge production” but about creating new relationships or shaping, rebuilding, existing ones, and it is about paying attention carefully and acting as well as producing knowledge. This again echoes the concern that planning (theory and practice) must worry as much about what to do (ethics) as about what we know (epistemology)” (JF in conversation with GP and MW).

In this sense, the diversity of improvisational characters explored across various Forester’s works underscores both the potential for planners to challenge power structures through actions grounded in ethical tensions and, simultaneously, the need to further advance planning theory concerning these characters in relation to practice¹⁹.

The editorial venue for such an exploration, *Planning Theory and Practice* (PTP), warrants a few words of commentary. As a journal committed to bridging the circular and reciprocal relationship between theoretical advancements and practical experimentation, PTP features also a section titled *Interface*. This section is dedicated to fostering informed dialogue between scholarly debates and the nuanced insights that can be gained from in-depth analyses of practice.

A set of “Interface” contributions edited or co-edited by Forester offers insights into a variety of cases, focusing on:

- practice stories and planners’ profiles, as will also be done in books like *Reimagining Planning. How Italian Planners are Changing Planning Practice*, co-edited with Daniela De Leo (2018);
- reflections centred on the relationship between planning practice and pivotal contemporary issues and struggles,
- as well as key events in contemporary history, like Obama’s first election and the movements that emerged in response to the current socio-ecological crisis.

These issues prompted deeper consideration of the significance of place and context, resistance, collective action, and practices of care.

The following table provides an overview of the diverse Interface contributions made in *Planning Theory and Practice* throughout the decade spanning 2009 to 2023 and some of the key lessons drawn from them.

¹⁹ This is evident in the chapter ‘Conclusions and Reflections: Difficulties and Epiphanies’ in *Rebuilding Community after Katrina* (Reardon and Forester, 2016), in *Conflict, Improvisation and Governance* (Laws and Forester, 2015), and in the works concerned with ecological wisdom further explored in this chapter.

Table 1 – Summary of Interfaces edited, co-edited, or contributed to by John Forester on *Planning Theory and Practice* (2009–2023), and key lessons.

Year	Editors and co-authors	Key-lessons
<p>2008</p> <p><i>Making a Difference in Response to Hurricane Katrina</i></p>	<p><u>Editor:</u> John Forester</p> <p><u>Co-authors:</u> Ken Reardon, Andrew Rumbach, Efreem Bycer & Praj Kasbekar</p>	<p><u>Exploring the challenges and opportunities of proactive, reciprocal university-community partnerships in the context of major social calamities.</u> This <i>Interface</i> draws on the experience recounted in the book co-authored with Kenneth Reardon (2016) – though published some years later – and discussed in the previous chapter. It serves as a connecting thread within the third phase of Forester’s work, transitioning from the exploration of engaged planning possibilities to a deeper inquiry into the skills and nuances of creativity and improvisation. Here, the stories highlight the intersection of engaged planning and community organizing, revealing the complexities of managing, coaching, encouraging, and leading. They also address logistical challenges, the framing effects of race relations on planning practice, and the cultivation of students’ commitment, responsibility, and leadership.</p>
<p>2009</p> <p><i>How Lucky We Are: A Glimpse at Patsy Healey’s Contributions</i></p>	<p><u>Editor:</u> Robert Upton;</p> <p><u>Co-authors:</u> John Forester, Maarten Hajer, Margo Huxley, Louis Albrechts, Janet O’Neill & Heather Campbell</p>	<p>This <i>Interface</i> is dedicated to honouring Patsy Healey’s remarkable contribution to Planning Theory and Practice as she steps down after ten years as the journal’s first Senior Editor. Although John Forester did not edit this <i>Interface</i>, his reflections serve as a thought-provoking lens on <u>the value of being multifaceted planning scholars – an approach magisterially embodied by Patsy Healey herself – in contrast to prevailing calls for specialization and sectoral focus.</u> “Patsy’s own work, of course, has been quite diverse, and this might have been confusing to some who demand one real, essential identity. There’s the Patsy who’s written about spatial transformations. There’s the Patsy who’s worried about national planning. There’s the Patsy who’s always after the historical roots of institutions. There’s the Patsy who envisions collaborative possibilities where others see only power plays. There’s the Patsy who worries about the state and the economy. And so on—there need not be one essential intellectual commitment, and we can be grateful instead for decades of Patsy’s writing, grappling with problems, searching for new angles, offering up new perspectives and ways of seeing” (Forester, 2009b, p. 135).</p>

2010

**After Obama
election**

Editor:
John Forester
Co-authors:
Phillip Thompson,
Ron Thomas,
Jason Corburn,
W. Steve Lee & Maria-
nella Sclavi

Reflecting on the potential practical implications of Obama's election for urban planning, even if in the early stages of his administration.

This *Interface* gathers diverse perspectives, starting with J. Phillip Thompson who emphasizes the possibility for coalitions bridging labour, community, and environmental interests to turn green jobs into reality. Ron Thomas examines Chicago's shifting political landscape alongside emerging federal opportunities. Jason Corburn advocates linking public health and urban planning, while Steve Lee explores collaborative possibilities in complex environments. Marianna Sclavi's interview draws on Obama's grassroots political practice to explore conflict, power, and the planner's role as a creative force for transformation.

2011

**Planner-
Architect
Laurence
Sherman**

Editor:
John Forester
Co-authors:
Lawrence Susskind,
Karen Umemoto, Masa-
hiro Matsuura,
Giancarlo Paba,
Camilla Perrone & Raine
Mäntysalo

Entering the practicalities of being "process sensitive" while remaining "results-oriented", beginning with the profile of Larry Sherman. This *Interface* navigates the challenges of integrating technical expertise with participatory planning. Lawrence Susskind reflects on facilitative leadership and collaborative problem-solving, while Karen Umemoto and Masahiro Matsuura offer insights into the roles of instinct and ritual. Further, the commentary by Giancarlo Paba and Camilla Perrone explores the interplay between words, bodies, and things, expanding the conceptual terrain. Raine Mäntysalo's reflections challenge planning theory by weaving together deliberation and agonism, ultimately emphasizing the importance of relationships, creativity, and emotions in the planning process.

2013

**Planning
scholar
Ric
Richardson**

Editor:
John Forester
Co-authors:
Alessandro Balducci, Ali
Madanipour,
Klaus R.
Kunzmann,
Tridib Banerjee,
Emily Talen &
Ric Richardson

Exploring the intersections between urban design and participatory planning, beginning with the profile of Ric Richardson in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This *Interface* offers insights into enhancing both institutional and process design, with a focus on urban conflict resolution and spatial problem-solving. Reflections by John Forester on mediation are woven together with Alessandro Balducci's concept of trading zones in urban planning. Ali Madanipour contributes perspectives on the role of narratives and the generative power of clarity, echoed in the writings of Klaus R. Kunzmann and Emily Talen. Technical dimensions – such as those embodied in charrette practices – are examined through the contributions of Tridib

	<p>Banerjee. In response, Ric Richardson underscores the importance of integrating mediated negotiation with thoughtful urban design to achieve “diverse representation, careful process, an appropriate understanding of the geographic, political and economic context, and mutual trust” (Richardson, 2013, p. 276).</p>
<p>2017</p> <p><i>Environmental and community mapping as PAR in planning</i></p>	<p><u>Examining the challenging work of community and environmental mapping within daunting planning contexts.</u></p> <p>In this <i>Interface</i>, we explore emerging practices that combine planners' technical approaches with the relational skills required to foster productive—and potentially transformative—engagements with local communities and the territories they inhabit. The central reflection focuses on the role of collective maps not only as tools for democratizing planning practice but, more importantly, as catalysts for reciprocal learning processes, despite the challenges, pitfalls, and failures such processes may entail. Rather than viewing obstacles as inhibitors of action, they can be reframed as prompts for fostering new cycles of learning.</p>
<p>2017</p> <p><i>Humanism and critical pragmatism</i></p>	<p><u>Reflecting upon humanism in the planning field,</u> in terms of three normative positions: pragmatic approach to moral inquiry, humanist Marxism, and capabilities approach to human development.</p> <p>In this <i>Interface</i>, Forester explores the practices of humanism connected to critical pragmatism, not merely as an interpretive effort, but as the practical exploration of how to improve people's lives through planning. He engages in issues of sexuality, race, class, religion, migrations, ecologies and their everyday impacts, and with the profound challenge of mutual understanding. At its core, Forester's reflection centres on inter-subjectivity. For planners, this approach demands learning together, confronting differences not with defensiveness, but with curiosity and care. This leads toward a distinctive form of humanist expertise: not as a technical endeavour, but as the capacity to convene living subjects, each bringing their own complexities, into practical, deliberate conversations, built on listening, openness to surprise, mutual respect, and action.</p>
<p>2018</p> <p><i>Can we learn from our mistakes?</i></p>	<p><u>Challenging the assumption that only success narratives are instructive, recognizing instead that failures and missteps often offer deeper insights, following Hall (1980) and</u></p>

**Abiding
Challenges of
Deliberative
Practices**

Anwar, Carlos Brando,
Iwan J Azis, Matteo Ro-
biglio, Ezio Micelli, Ric-
cardo
Delli Santi & Dave
Vanderhoven

Schön (1983). This *Interface* engages planners with reflective questions such as: “What practically could I have done, or now must do, differently” (Campbell et al., 2018, p. 426). It encourages viewing mistakes not as sources of embarrassment, but as opportunities to advance planning knowledge. Rather than prompting blame or defensiveness, these moments become key steps in recognizing the limitations of planning practice and expanding the boundaries of its understanding, even through failure. “Good practice cannot be mistake free; it should think of mistakes as a source of learning on the journey towards better planning outcomes, not as a sign of human failing” (ibid., p.427).

Learning from mistakes involves both deliberation and reflection, shaped through the relational nature of planning practice (Innes, 1995; Forester, 1999). “Ignoring reflection, practicing planners will fail to reframe. Ignoring deliberation, planners will undermine their always precarious cooperation with others” (Campbell et al., 2018, p. 445)

2021

**Religion and
Secularism in
Urban
Planning**

Editors:
Babak Manouchehrifar
& John Forester
Co-authors:
Vincent Lloyd, Pamela
Klassen, Katie Day,
Charles Hoch, June
Manning Thomas,
Angela C. Carmella,
Brian J. Miller, Weishan
Huang, Christine
Hwang, Courtney
Bender

Engaging with religious differences as an aspect that matters for planners as much as space, regulatory frameworks, and governance structures. The underlying question is concerned with the relationship between religion convictions and planning practice. This *Interface* gives insights into four broad topics: 1) Opposition to local decisions concerning the inclusion – or exclusion – of religious spaces, practices, or sites/activities that are perceived as controversial from a faith-based perspective.; 2) Disputes regarding the definition of what constitutes a religious space; 3) Spatial segregation affecting specific religious communities; 4) The potential role of faith-based organizations in advancing social justice through their integration into planning practices.

2022

**Repair and
Healing
in Planning**

Editors:
Courtney Knapp, Joce-
lyn Poe & John Forester
Co-authors:
Michael Méndez, Clau-
dia B. Isaac, Kathryn
Quick, Nicole Lanphier,
Mia Charlene White

Entering the delicate challenge of reparative planning ethics, framed as praxis: a dynamic interplay of dialogue and action, acknowledgement and atonement. Praxis is shaped by specific contextual conditions, while addressing structural issues tied to racialization, gendered violence, patriarchy, colonialism, and class struggle. This *Interface* presents a series of cases discussed to provoke reflection on how planning practices oriented toward justice and equity might intersect with a reparative approach. These cases highlight the potential of various sources of solidarity – often emerging from

		ordinary people – to spark reparative action within the planning field.
2023	<p><i>Wrestling with context</i></p> <p><u>Editors:</u> Neema Kudva & John Forester</p> <p><u>Co-authors:</u> Vincent Lloyd, Jane Rongerude, Janice Barry, Claire Bénit-Gbaffou, Samina Raja, John Arroyo & Sheryl-Ann Simpson</p>	<p><u>Engaging with the ambiguities behind the concept of context</u>, “taken both as the structural setting in which a planning problem is situated and framed, just as [...] the world of meanings and understandings that allow community members to make sense of what seems to be happening around and to them” (Kudva & Forester, 2023, p. 550). This <i>Interface</i> explores the continuously shifting nature of contexts, the challenges posed by contextual radicalities, the endogenous obstacles and limits to the creative tensions of planning, and the persistent friction between local factors and more structural issues.</p>
2023	<p><i>Resistance and Response in Planning</i></p> <p><u>Editors:</u> Susan S. Feinstein & John Forester</p> <p><u>Co-authors:</u> Kevin Lujan Lee, Tiara Na’puti, Julian Agyeman, Nicholas Stewart, Johannes Novy, Aysin Dedekorkut Howes, Paul Burton, Stefan Norgaard, Nick R. Smith, Sharon Zukin, Adam Lubinsky & Michael Keith</p>	<p><u>Going beyond the notion of "resistance" as mere opposition</u>, embracing "resistance" as a multifaceted struggle, one in which planners may find themselves on all sides. This <i>Interface</i> invites the reader to engage with the intricate issue of “resisting a plan” and explores the diverse ways of navigating this tension across both local and broader scales.</p>
2024	<p><i>Collective action sustained cooperation and practice of care</i></p> <p><u>Editors:</u> Atul Pokharel & John Forester</p> <p><u>Co-authors:</u> Raul P. Lejano, Wing Shan Kan, Aleksí Heiniñä, Hanna Mattila, Babak Manouchehrifar, Bernadette Baird-Zars & Kieran P. Donagh</p>	<p><u>Entering the enduring dilemma of collective action</u> (Ostrom, 1990) by engaging with the limits of the rational action model and exploring the correlation between the possibility of collective action and the perception of injustice (Pokharel et al., 2024). This <i>Interface</i> offers insights into issues such as interpersonal connections as relational goods and the variety of motivations. It views planning as a continuously evolving practice and plan-doing as a process of ongoing adjustments that can support the possibilities of collective action beyond models of rational choice.</p>
2025	<p><i>Inspirations in planning</i></p> <p><u>Editor:</u> John Forester</p> <p><u>Co-authors:</u> Sai Balakrishnan, Emmanuel Frimpong,</p>	<p>Exploring variety of <u>sources of inspiration</u> that have helped a wide range of planners – between the Global North and South – <u>re-think the field beyond its dark side</u> (Yiftachel, 1998), refusing to be held hostage by insti-</p>

Mindy Thompson Fullilove, Charles Hoch, Jeffrey Hou, Theodore Lim, Senchel Matthews, Clare Mouat, Mark Purcell, Deden Rukmana, Karen Umemoto & Oren Yiftachel

tutions and images that continue to do violence to human possibilities" (Forester et al., 2025, p. 110). This *Interface* engages with the "guiding lights" of planning scholars and educators: those principles and inspirations that have supported them "in the face of chaos and fog, ambiguity and uncertainty" (ibid.).

The range of topics, practice stories, themes, and planner profiles that John Forester has explored, with a variety of co-authors, over the years reveals the complexity, richness, and diversity woven into the planning discipline. From its role in community recovery after disasters to the imaginative possibilities sparked by pivotal political shifts—spanning technical insights and religious orientations—this collection of *Interfaces* offers some reflections on three key points highlighted at the beginning of this Chapter, that Forester (2019) frames as a triple-helix.

1. Listening as an act of problem posing, in a Freirean sense (1970). Without a deep commitment to resonating with the problems at hand, even the most sophisticated technical plans risk solving the wrong problem.
2. Leveraging expertise as a multifaceted process. Expertise requires both technical skill and empathy; without it, good intentions alone may lead to ineffective or misguided actions.
3. Acting by embracing imperfection. Accepting the flaws inherent in action and learning from inevitable mistakes is essential for generating new insights and fostering *growth*, in the Nussbaumian sense of developing capabilities (2011) through reflective and engaged practice.

These three dimensions acquire deeper nuance across Forester's three main bodies of work developed during the Fourth period, as explored in the following pages.

4.2 How Spaces become Places

Connecting with John Forester's early work, particularly as discussed in Section 1.3, "Design as Making Sense Together," in *How Spaces Become Places: Place Makers Tell Their Stories* (Forester, 2021), we learn about the transformative possibilities not in planning conceived as a detached technical process, but in placemaking deeply entwined with memory, legacies, identity formation, storytelling, and the expressive power of art and culture.

“They transform intersections. They rebuild community. They create urban gardens and provide affordable housing in diverse neighbourhoods. These place makers have experience and strategies, discoveries and wisdom that will surprise us. As their work “takes place”, they transform ordinary, taken-for-granted spaces into places that matter, and in doing so, they reanimate the social and political geographies in which we live” (Forester, 2021, p.1)

With these words, John Forester opens the introductory chapter: *Place Making, Not Plan Making—Learning for What Takes Place*. As in his previous phases and works, the focus of his investigation remains firmly grounded in practice and in the practical insights that emerge from place makers’ own experiences. What this book contributes, in relation to the earlier work, is a sharpened attention to the concrete practice of place making itself, yet it continues to draw its reflections from encounters with practitioners who offer their own situated experiences and narratives. These are experiences of transforming taken for granted spaces into places where relationships and meaning become central: relationships cultivated through sustained engagement with communities and through projects that activate and nurture collective bonds; meanings that are discussed, negotiated, and shared as part of the social and political geographies in which they unfold.

Place Makers’ stories emphasize the importance of shifting from plan-making to the creation of places that matter to people, not only for their physical characteristics, but for the process through which they’re made. We learn of places shaped through collective sense-making and shared experience, built in and through the very act of designing and transforming them together. We learn from architects who reject the role of autonomous demiurges, choosing instead to frame creativity as a collective act.

We discover that places are not static entities, but continuously evolving ones, shaped by temporal as well as spatial dynamics. Places become learning arenas, where social struggles intersect with how the same places are organized, accessed, and distributed throughout the city. As such, we explore the entanglement between planning as a process and planning as the act of making, transforming, and caring for places.

Here, places are framed not merely as containers of function, services, and resources, but also as bearers of cultural value, meaning, affection, and the possibility of nurturing relationships: “we make locations into places of memory—we create a history of place—as we remember or recognize performances: this is where we broke up, this is where Kate was born, that’s where my parents came from”. (Forester, 2021, p. 5; Hayden, 1997).

The significance of this book, published during the COVID-19 pandemic, also lies in its focus on access to healthy places as an issue of distributive justice. The way places are designed, located, and maintained across the city fundamentally shapes people's opportunities to build meaningful relationships, both with one another and with the environments in which they live.

The importance of these relationships—specifically, socio-ecological relations, which inherently interweave social and ecosystemic dynamics—also emerges in another line of work from Forester's fourth period, which explores the pivotal role of ecological wisdom in urban planning, as discussed in the following section.

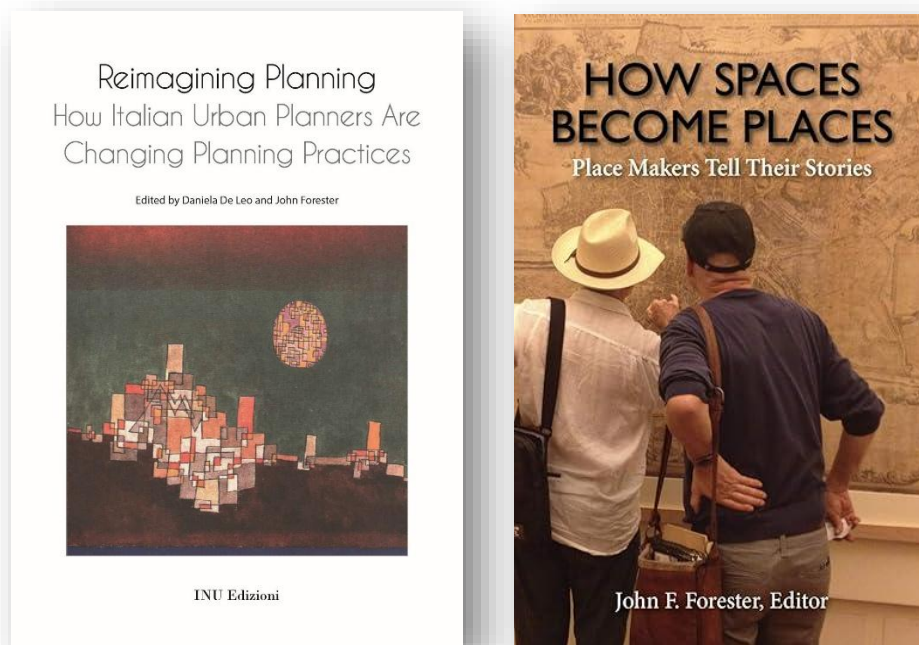


Fig. 14 (left) – Cover of *Reimagining Planning. How Italian Urban Planners Are Changing Planning Practices* (De Leo and Forester, 2018), INU Edizioni. Fig. 15 (right) – Cover of *How Spaces Become Places. Place Makers Tell Their Stories* (Forester, 2021), New Village Press.

4.3 Ecological practical wisdom

In defining practical wisdom, Forester (2019) draws on his earlier work, arguing that it can be framed as “engaged, appreciative judgment, in contrast to technical calculation [...and...] cannot be pre-scribed: it must be creatively and responsively improvised” (p. 12).

In the same article, Forester (2019, p. 13) refers to the triple helix—discussed earlier in this chapter—as a process of enacting wisdom.

Box 3. Planners' wisdom through a triple helix

Here, John Forester recalls the importance of cultivating ecological wisdom—understood as a form of practical wisdom exercised with full awareness of the socioecological relationships in which we are embedded. He argues that such wisdom emerges through the integration of three interdependent strands: (1) facts, mobilized through relevant forms of expertise; (2) values, clarified through dialogues that explore what matters and why; and (3) negotiation, which enables the advancement of pragmatic and workable action.

When Wei-Ning Xiang invited me to do a lecture at Tongji University in Shanghai in 2017, I tested this tripartite scheme again in a talk about ecological wisdom. Such wisdom, I argued, depended on integrating issues of fact, value, and action, and that depended on having skills of facilitating conversations about what mattered, managing or moderating debates about the best available science, and negotiating or mediating differences over action. The best way to understand this, I found, was to think about the costs of ignoring any one of these three: If we ignored conversations about what matters, we risked solving the wrong problems, solving what we could conveniently solve, but not what was most pressing. If we ignored science, we risked attending perhaps to important problems, but acting ineptly. Lastly, if we ignored negotiations, we might have talk, talk, talk, report after report, but no actual action. I tried to make that argument more clear in my paper about “options analysis” (Forester, 2022) especially after I realized a linguistic or rhetorical problem of appealing to the term, “improvisation,” in planning theory.

It seemed that if anyone spoke about improvisation, listeners thought about jazz and the apparently spontaneous and mysterious creativity of jazz musicians. “They” do that, we don’t. But if someone spoke about context-responsiveness, listeners seemed to say, “Oh yes, we do that all the time.” When I learned that British philosopher Gilbert Ryle had argued that improvisation is as generally practiced as ordinary conversation, an important lesson became clear to me. In planning theory discussions, we do far better to speak first of context-responsiveness—something we all know that we do—and only then, secondly, can we talk about doing that as our improvising in fluid and ambiguous circumstances.

Whether we speak of planners work in the face of power and conflict, uncertainty and ambiguity, as “practical judgment” or “discretion” or “improvisation” or “context-responsiveness,” all of these terms are approximations of one another. None are technically precise any more than other terms typically describing social actions: dictating, governing, inquiring, managing, regulating, and so on. Since Wittgenstein, notions of “definition” have given way to grammatical usage. But in planning, when private concerns are interdependent with public entities and both are interconnected with civil society, issues of planners’ discretion, judgment, flexibility, rule-applying, and managing difference will be inescapable. And all of that happens in diverse and overlapping institutional contexts, of course: those of public authorities, private markets, public and private ownership (property), cultural and religious traditions. And when relations of power and inequality matter, improvisation becomes more and not less important to organizing and targeting critical responses (Forester, 2023).

How do the *triple helix* and practical wisdom relate to ecological wisdom? In these turbulent times of climate crisis and the urgent call for climate action—within a dominant capitalist system that continues to produce and reproduce wasted relationships (Armiero, 2021)—Forester’s examination of the micropolitics of planning practice addresses these challenges through a critical yet pragmatic lens.

His reflections make clear that this crisis cannot be solved through technical or engineered solutions alone. Rather, it demands a more integrated vision. Through the enduring lessons he has cultivated throughout his scholarly journey, we can trace new directions for addressing the crisis from a planning perspective.

“Becoming ecologically wise—not simply following rules but improvising practically, creatively and responsively—requires us, then, over time to interweave a triple helix of practices: identifying significant threats and opportunities in novel and changing settings, leveraging the best science and expertise, negotiating differences to act well now—not in separate organizational silos, but in deliberative practices together. In environmental planning and policymaking, carefully integrating, not radically separating, the asking and answering of these three questions of problem diagnosis, critical knowledge, and negotiated action may be the practical beginning of ecological wisdom, both intellectually and pragmatically.” (Forester, 2019, p. 19).

Forester’s ecological wisdom is not something distinct from practical wisdom; rather, it is practical wisdom elaborated through an awareness of ecological relationships. This awareness is not limited to technical concerns but opens onto a broader political horizon, resonating with the tradition of political ecology (Gorz, 1980). As a form of practical wisdom, it takes the shape of a “practical, engaged, appreciative judgement” (Forester, 2019, p. 12) that exceeds technical calculation and demands attentive, care-full listening in order to craft appropriate responses to complex challenges. The adjective *ecological* underscores that the problems unfolding in our present moment require a capacity to negotiate the more than human interdependencies on Earth (Tsing, 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Haraway, 2020). In this respect, Forester’s work can be placed in dialogue with scholars of the ethics of care, whose attention to relationality and interdependence resonates with his understanding of ecological wisdom.

With these insights in mind, younger generations of planners, including the co-authors of this Booklet—tasked with confronting urgent challenges shaped by the violent disruptions of war, suffering, and injustice across both the Global North and South—can use the triple helix as a compass to guide planning practice in meaningful engagement with local dynamics.

In such turbulent times, planners more generally must remain attuned to the urgent call to nurture the socio-ecological relationships within local contexts, counteracting wasted relationships through the *power of practice*.

This requires staying mindful of systemic dynamics without becoming paralyzed by their apparent insurmountability, and discovering possibilities, windows of opportunity, and interstices for action.

In this spirit, to complete the picture, another lesson emerges from Forester's recent and ongoing reflections: the centrality of practicing kindness in planning, as discussed in the next section.

4.4 Practicing kindness in planning

In a recent article that appeared on *Planning Theory*, Forester (2021) defines the framework of his most recent exploration connected with "Our curious silence about kindness in planning: Challenges of addressing vulnerability and suffering".

Still immersed in Martha Nussbaum's work (2014, 2016), particularly her exploration of the "intelligence" of compassion, Forester shifts from the concept of compassion to that of kindness, arguing that this move introduces the tension inherent in action.

"We can begin by distinguishing kindness from the more encompassing, colloquial sense of "compassion." We can understand "compassion" as "the awareness of the suffering of others accompanied by a desire to take action to alleviate the suffering" (Lyles et al., 2017). "Kindness," in contrast, brings such compassion into the world in action, action more specifically aimed at another's well-being. If a passerby stumbles on the sidewalk, our sense of compassion allows us to gauge their discomfort; but kindness appears in our offer of a hand to help them up. If "compassion" refers to a more general concern toward Others' welfare, "kindness" is our specific action toward the Other." (Forester, 2021, p. 64).

By placing kindness at the core of planning practice, Forester proposes four contingent and contextually sensitive practical judgments, summarized through the following enactments.

1. Empathetic recognition of Other's vulnerability or suffering
2. Causal and moral gauging of the sources of that vulnerability or suffering
3. Crafting acts to mitigate that vulnerability or suffering
4. Forming the motivation to respond practically to the Other's situation

Through a critical analysis, Forester highlights how these contingent judgments can misfire: yielding not kindness, but humiliation, shame, victim blaming, pity, condescension, or fostering dependency rather than autonomy.

In this light, his theoretical reflections are presently focused on examining both the moral imperatives and the inherent risks involved in practical efforts to address the vulnerabilities and suffering of Others, framing these as central concerns for planners.

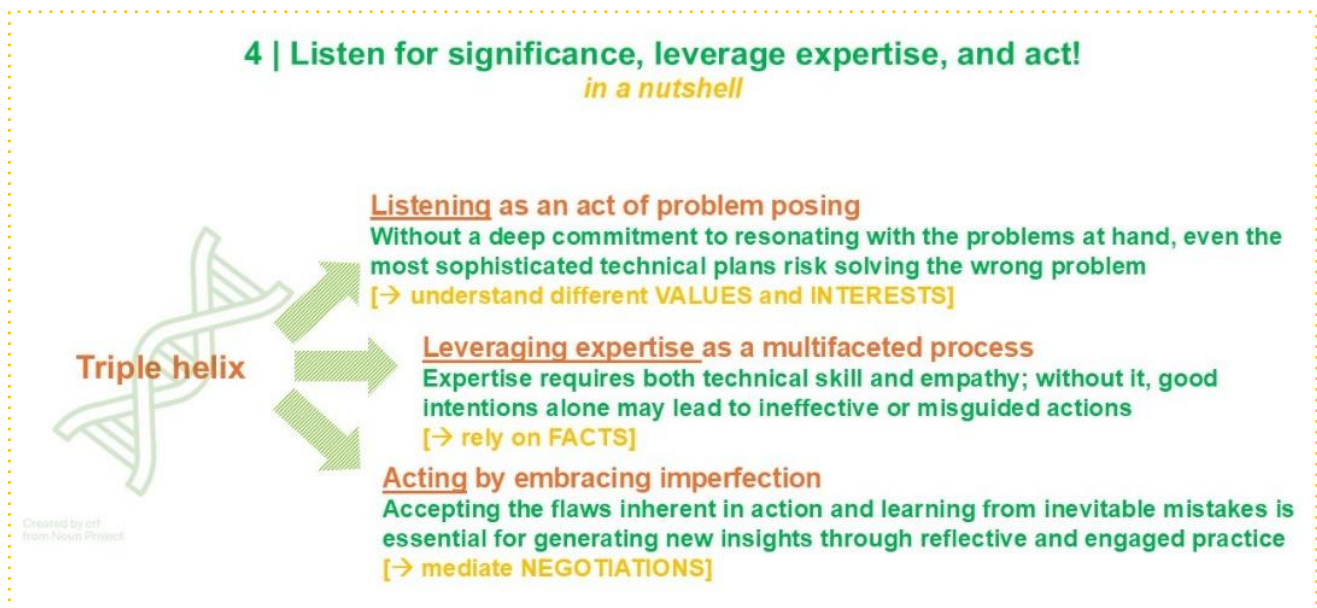


Fig. 16 – A conceptual diagram illustrating selected key concepts (fourth period).
Source: Authors' elaboration

5. Other Scholars' Perspectives upon John Forester's Work

5.1 Introduction

In this Chapter, we pause the dialogue between the co-authors of this Booklet to invite the perspectives of other planning scholars who have built both professional and personal relationships with John Forester, drawing inspiration from his work while engaging with it critically. The following pages present contributions that are intentionally heterogeneous, organized along a conceptual thread: beginning with a brief introduction by Lawrence Susskind and culminating in a more structured essay by Daniela De Leo and Giovanni Laino, which concludes the Chapter.

In between, Charles Hoch, previously interviewed by Alessandro Coppola and Federica Leone in 2018, has updated the contents of that conversation. He recalls the context in which he first met John Forester, shares his perspective on critical pragmatism while revisiting its major controversies and debates, and reflects on the power of storytelling, the pedagogical implications of Forester's work, and the key lessons he has drawn from it.

The interview with Hendrik Wagenaar, conducted by Coppola and Leone in 2018, is presented in its original form, but it has been edited and summarized by Giusy Pappalardo, who crafted a consistent section from the transcript.

Howell Baum contributed a text reflecting on his and John Forester's similar yet distinct approaches to studying planners' profiles. Baum examines the sociological lens developed by Forester, which complements his own more psychologically oriented perspective. He emphasizes the importance of understanding these profiles and explores how such insights can benefit new generations of planners eager to learn from them.

Heather Campbell contributes a review of *The Deliberative Practitioner*, underscoring its importance as a landmark within John Forester's body of work. She pushes beyond a narrow interpretation that reduces the book to an analysis of public participation in planning, offering instead insights into its broader themes of inclusivity, anticipation, and the construction of open institutional spaces, where respect for all individuals is upheld and the systematic suppression of information is rejected. In her review, Campbell emphasizes the often-overlooked conflictual dimension of deliberation, shifting attention away from the search for consensus and toward the productive tensions that shape authentic deliberative dialogue.

Kenneth Reardon traces the key moments of his encounter with John Forester, beginning with his time as a Ph.D. candidate in City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, where Forester was in his second year as an Assistant Professor in 1980. Their shared work

culminates in a major planning process in 2007 in New Orleans, following the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, which led to massive life loss. Together with residents of the Lower 9th Ward, Reardon and his colleagues mobilized over 90 undergraduate and graduate planning students and faculty from Cornell, Columbia, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to collect, map, and analyse environmental, economic, and social data. These efforts contributed to the completion of *The People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Comprehensive Strategy for Building a More Vibrant, Sustainable and Equitable Lower 9th Ward*. Although Forester's and Reardon's reflections are extensively documented in manuscripts referenced in previous chapters, Reardon offers here a fresh perspective on the enduring influence of Forester's work on his own practice.

Finally, Daniela De Leo—who worked closely with John Forester in exploring practice stories in Italy—alongside Giovanni Laino, reflects on the transformative impact of Forester's work on her and Laino's teaching and research. Their encounter marked a turning point, as they transitioned from passive readers of Forester's writings to active interlocutors, engaging directly with him through in-person dialogue and knowledge exchange. Through this experience, they were able to observe his ideas in action and participate in thoughtful conversations around his work, deepening their understanding and reshaping their own academic perspectives.

Therefore, the following pages may be understood as a polyphonic ensemble, in which each voice contributes to the vibrant reflections on the significance of John Forester's work for urban planning.

5.2 Lawrence (Larry) Suskind

I first met John when he was a graduate student at Berkeley. After a particularly passionate exchange with a room full of doctoral students and professors, I watched him patiently unpack what they had been debating. He didn't impose any judgements. He just helped people hear their own ideas more clearly. For decades since, I've kept close track of the fascinating results whenever John listens closely to what small collections of public dispute mediators and urban planning practitioners have to say. Whether they are struggling with a knotty philosophical debate that needs sorting or squabbling about the most pragmatic approach to a particular problem, they're lucky if John is available to facilitate. His books and his classes are a deep trove of good ideas. He's tireless, curious, empathetic, and most of all, a true friend.

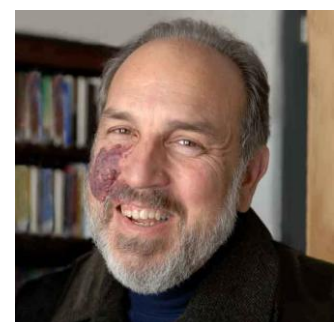


Fig. 17 –
Lawrence Suskind
<https://lawrencesuskind.mit.edu/> Last access: March 20, 2026

5.3 Charles Hoch

5.3.1 *First meeting in Cincinnati*

I read an essay published (without permission I later learned from John) in the American Collegiate Schools of Planning Newsletter in 1980. I had just started as an assistant professor at Iowa State University. I was completing my dissertation and trying to figure out how to integrate the demands of radical social critique with the sober realism of the pragmatist outlook championed by John Dewey. How could we conceive urban planning as a practical enterprise elaborating the ideals of social transformation? John (Forester) was trying to answer the same question using a pragmatic approach adapting the synthetic social theory of Jurgen Habermas.

We met over breakfast with Howell Baum at the 1980 national conference of ACSP in Cincinnati. Howell and John had studied at Berkeley with Mel Webber and I at UCLA with John Friedmann and Peter Marris. The conversation was lively and fulfilling. We left with a shared research idea, that we would study how planners in various settings conducted planning and how they might improve that practice. The conception of improvement was fluid at the time. We held different conceptions of social learning even as we shared a wariness of a too optimistic progressive outlook.

We started arranging future ACSP conference sessions in the 1980s with others curious about the relationship between theory and practice. After a few years of informal meetings the ACSP conference organizers adopted a planning theory track. The three of us adopted what social scientists would call a social psychological approach. We used field work observation, interview and survey methods to study planning conduct. We were not analytical observers, but interpretive witnesses trying to understand the how, what and why of planning conduct. We did not believe that we could discover the causes of planning behaviour independent of the meaning that planning action had for those doing it and experiencing its consequences. We started reading and using each other's work and almost a decade later John invited us back to Cornell to meet with Patsy Healey, Linda Dalton, Norm Krumholz and Judith Allen to review and discuss the book manuscript he had written with Norm about Cleveland planning (1990). He challenged us to do more research on planning practice. The result was articles by Linda Dalton (1989) and Patsy Healey (1992) and books by Howell Baum (1998) and myself (1994).

Forester in his 1989 book makes the case for practical reasoning in a chapter entitled 'What do planning analysts do?'. He contrasts the strategic activity we associate with game playing, warfare and other modes of competitive interaction against examples of activities



Fig. 18 – Charles Hoch
<https://cuppa.uic.edu/profiles/hoch-charles-j/>
 Last access: March 20, 2026

planners conduct on the job. Planners do not target a clientele for manipulation, but conduct deliberations that include describing conditions, indicating possible consequences, designating sources of information, explaining processes used to create information, alerting people about opportunities for feedback, pointing out salient consequences for different groups, specifying requirements, notifying clientele of their rights and asking for feedback to earlier actions. The list includes what some philosophers call speech acts, talk that generates or inspires action because it relates beliefs about conditions in the world to the purposes and desires of the relevant audience. The concepts in the list all include assessments of value and importance. When we reason practically, we offer reasons for actions we expect will avoid bad things and embrace good ones.

5.3.2 Forester Critical Pragmatist Theory

Forester describes people as actors using their full range of intellectual, emotional and practical powers to focus on the plan. He envisions planning deliberation at the most intimate interpersonal scale where conversations are the medium for communication across specialized institutional domains. At this level participants can tap and use the power of practical reason to inform and guide their deliberations. When people get practical, they give emotional and moral shape to their actions shaped to fit the situation at hand.

“So, analysts are not apolitical problem-solvers or social engineers. Instead, they are pragmatic critics who must make selective arguments and therefore influence what other people learn about, not by technically calculating means to ends or error signals, but by organizing attention carefully to project possibilities, organizing for practical political purposes and organizational ends.” (1989, p. 18)

Interestingly, organizing attention combines the strategic quality of instrumental rationality (we organize for a purpose) with the interpretive qualities of inter-subjective deliberation (attention to one another makes conversation possible). Forester applies the norms Habermas identifies to classify distortions in the conversations that planners conduct. Planners need to reduce the influence of strategic and manipulative interests as these undermine trust with peers and clients. However, planners also put their strategic and instrumental expertise to work serving their clientele. One aspect of critical review draws upon norms for discourse to ensure that strategic interests do not distort conversations about the meaning and value of plans for the future. Another aspect draws upon technical and theoretical beliefs about relevant problems, solution tools and strategies offering observations and interpretations for their use.

Forester offers brief examples to illustrate how professional planning advice combines conversational norms with technical expertise. Professional planners conduct conversations that organize attention about information that people might use to change the places we inhabit. The reasons that planners use to guide and justify their judgment about information

have social and political features that change dramatically if we adopt the kind of critical approach Forester describes. Information offers both insight and efficacy, knowledge that people can and do use to organize complex places. How can we learn to organize and communicate this information in ways that respect the conversational norms that make deliberations among different groups, factions and stakeholders both morally legitimate and instrumentally effective? We learn from stories about planning practice.

5.3.3 Controversy and Debate

Forester and the community of scholars with whom he has associated inspired theoretical ideas and arguments, as well as empirical research. Forester pursued a promising set of ideas about planning generously and strategically seeking others to adopt and test these ideas in their own scholarship and practice. Planning theory offered not only conceptual insight into the meaning of uncertainty, but also practical actions for coping and resolving the problems that uncertainty posed for people and the places they inhabit. Critics insisted that this approach focused on process at the expense of substance. Pragmatist ideas inspired a relativist approach to truth that shied away from a more directive and definitive analytical explanation. It was unable to offer causal justification for the right action. This criticism missed how pragmatism sidesteps the quest for justification focusing instead on understanding the meaning of purposeful action in specific historical situations. Planners on this account do not seek the right solution, but a feasible solution that improves the situation for those facing a problem. Moral ideals and empirical causal evidence both get used to compose plans for the future inescapably bound to the practical experiences shaping the situation at hand.

Forester and the allied pragmatists were not offering theory as a kind of philosophical trump, but an intellectual resource for improving the efficacy of professional practice. Theory in this view does not inhabit an elevated stature, but just another kind of vocabulary that may help practitioners better anticipate and prepare for complex urban problems. Rational plans are not wrong on this account but focused on solution sets that are not relevant for the types of complexity urban planners must face.

5.3.4 Practical Storytelling

For instance, Forester in his field work uses observation and interviews to study how public officials, organizers, activists, bureaucrats, commissioners, directors, administrators and others conduct local planning in democratic countries (United States, Italy, Israel). He selects participants purposefully based on their record and reputation making plans to remedy injustice. The collaboration with Norm Krumholz writing about the Cleveland Policy Plan offers a good example.

Forester starts with a moral commitment to greater social justice. This is given. The research focuses on how Krumholz organized and managed uncertainties while emphasizing equity. The details of each case show how Krumholz anticipated conflict, negotiated deals,

made compromises, bolstered morale, and many other actions tied to unfolding events. Forester crafts the narratives to include crucial details about the context for choices to illustrate how the consequences were not inevitable, rarely favourable and mostly mixed. Krumholz failed to accomplish the ambitious egalitarian goals his equity plan proposed for Cleveland. Studying how he worked with his colleagues offers insight and knowledge about conduct in light of consequences. The narratives frame and distinguish how an eloquent planning argument might be overlooked by other pressing issues, an administrative glitch or direct opposition. Other times the planners made mistakes, miscalculations, poor judgments, and the like. The thread of egalitarian value frames the ups and downs of pragmatic big city planning

5.3.5 Forester Now

In a recent essay Forester charts the path of his own theoretical journey. The critical pragmatism of the fifth generation recognizes that practical judgment relies upon our response to three issues in any situation. What matters? What do we know? What can we do? These cannot be answered beforehand or abstractly but rely upon collaborative learning in the midst of unfolding events. Forester focuses on improvisation—the art of responsive collaboration in a creative enterprise like a comedy act or jazz session.

We should not mistake this sophisticated collaboration with our intuitive apprehension at the onset of a crisis. Improvisation builds on many rounds of prior effort and practice. The practice combines the exercise of technical competence with the social learning used to weave together significance, knowledge and commitment. The practical art of democratic deliberation invites those involved in planning to listen to each other and reciprocate with kindness even as differences in interests and outlook remain. The solidarity of a “Yes and...” not only helps keep a community intact but allows for the consideration of jointly composed options none could have created on their own.

5.3.6 Planning Education

The pragmatist outlook that Forester demonstrates and inspires provides a powerful antidote to the increasingly specialized and siloed knowledge fostered by university education. Specialized knowledge abstracts from the complexity and uncertainty of the problems planning seeks to comprehend and resolve. Understanding what to do in specific places and situations requires practical savvy learned through trial and error in specific situations. Pragmatist theory offers an interpretive framework to bind together moral insight with technical savvy for democratic planning for complex places.

5.3.7 What I Learned from John

We communicate social meanings based on habits we acquire growing up in a specific household, community and society. The linguistic and other cultural practices we use when we think

and give reasons for what we do represent, social beliefs and habits taken for granted. These customs shape our expectations until such time as we recognize other beliefs as possible ways of life and adopt a viewpoint that treats these other ways of life as both worthy and possible for oneself. This time has not arrived for everyone. Those other ways of life pose challenges for attention, recognition and understanding.

What Forester calls planning deliberation combines rational discourse and practical judgment to improve how we accomplish this. Forester uses Habermas' transcendental pragmatic discourse to describe how we humans already always anticipate the norms for successful deliberation. Recognizing the contingency of our beliefs and habits within discourse frees us to reconsider what it means to adopt other beliefs and habits quite different from our own. Discursive conversation provides a common framework people can use for judging difference across different cultural divides. This is why we call discourse critical. Discourse pulls us out of the thick conventions of our provincial socialized speech to submit claims in arguments where only the weight of reasons tips the scale of our judgment.

Planning deliberation also includes practical comparisons of different beliefs so participants learn how each may adopt the beliefs of the others. The practical comparison of alternative beliefs introduces acts of will and feeling into the mix of human judgment undertaken as part of deliberation. Discourse prompts a common understanding to frame differences, while planning compares the effects that holding different beliefs might mean for us in the future. In this context meaning includes emotional and moral attachments as well as the cognitive conviction associated with beliefs about design ideas, technical requirements, political effects, social opportunities and assorted issues and topics subject to planning deliberation.

5.4 Hendrik Wagenaar

One of the earliest connections we shared was our mutual interest in value pluralism, especially in public administration and policy. John's work—much of which he generously shared—was profoundly helpful, particularly as I was deeply involved in the practice of public administration. My central argument challenged the notion that value pluralism is an insurmountable issue for administrators.

Public administrators face deep and often conflicting values on a daily basis yet manage to craft practical solutions. That idea resonated strongly with John and sparked the beginning of our exchange.

Our conversations deepened as we explored the challenges of writing qualitative research within various constraints, including the strict word limits of academic articles. In my academic environment, interpretive approaches were rarely addressed, yet I found myself increasingly aligned with a small group—among them Martin Rein—who were actively advocating for a shift toward this perspective.

Our friendship deepened through John's connection with David Laws. Although we had studied in the Department of Urban Planning at MIT at different times, both of us were supervised by Martin Rein. When John came to Amsterdam to collaborate with David, we met in person, shared meals, and developed a lasting friendship.

I came to deeply appreciate his work on deliberative practitioners, which complemented my own research in interpretive policy analysis and planning practice. Over time, our dialogue expanded to explore the evolving role of citizens and the intersections between our respective interests in practice and citizen engagement.

John helped clarify several insights I had sensed but hadn't yet articulated. One enduring contribution is his emphasis on the generative power of narratives, (Wagenaar, 2002; 2011) not just in understanding complex situations but in helping move them forward. He was consistently rigorous in applying a practice-based approach to social and planning analysis, a rarity in social science, where "practice" is often invoked but poorly understood. He also supported my exploration of citizen deliberation in planning and public policy. His work with David Laws on conflict mediation particularly resonated with me, as I believe in the transformative power of deliberation, another cornerstone of his contribution. We also shared a growing impatience with traditional social science's emphasis on theory and detached analysis, rather than co-production and participatory action research (Wagenaar, 2002, 2011).

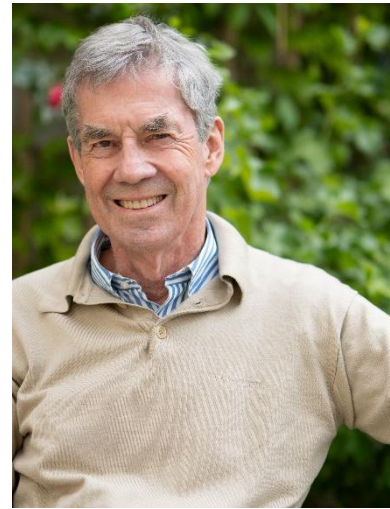


Fig. 19 – Hendrik Wagenaar
<https://hendrikwagenaar.com/>
 Last access: March 20, 2026

Despite the richness of his work, I think that one area that deserves more investigation is the role of institutions²⁰—not merely as formal structures and routines, but as environments shaped by power asymmetries that influence identity, aspirations, and even language.

As authoritarian politics continue to rise globally, I believe our greatest hope lies in civil society. It's crucial to bring visibility to the countless citizen initiatives emerging across Europe and beyond, and to explore how they might influence structural and institutional transformation. These initiatives often embody Forester-style approaches to deliberation and practical problem solving, yet they remain overlooked in mainstream discourse. In today's world, that message is perhaps more urgent than ever.

5.5 Howell Baum

John Forester and I could have met in high school in 1962, because we attended the same school in San Francisco, but our paths through the hallways never crossed. Instead, nearly a decade later we met in the graduate planning program at Berkeley, where we quickly became friends. We both read voraciously and widely and were deeply engaged in field research for our dissertations. He spent his days in the San Francisco Department of Planning, and I attended classes and hung out with students at a Berkeley experimental high school. Many late nights we met at a café to reward ourselves for our work with a pitcher of dark beer, a loaf of garlic bread, and talk about our ideas and, especially, ourselves.

Like most others who go into planning, we wanted to reorder the world to improve it. For us that meant making society more just. Yet planning is a peculiar strategy for change: it is a way of thinking. What kind of thinking could have the effect of altering social conditions? Simply, how could knowledge produce power? John and I were part of a new generation of planning academics, who taught planning without having practiced it, and we had no professional experience to reflect on. However, we both had the good sense to go observe planners and talk with them about what they thought they were doing. Strikingly, this research in itself was innovative, because few had studied planning or planners, perhaps because academics shared planners' assumption that rational thinking inevitably brought power, possibly because they feared that it didn't.



Fig. 20 – Howell Baum
<https://arch.umd.edu/about/people/howell-baum>
 Last access: March 20, 2026

²⁰ Reasoning about the role of institutions, John Forester has been invited to offer a further reflection on how institutional dynamics are conceptualized in his work and how this conceptualization has evolved across the four periods. A concise account of his response appears in the next Chapter (Box 4), in dialogue with GP.

John proceeded by asking planners (and, later, organizers, negotiators, mediators, and many others) a deceptively simple question: what did they look at and think about when planning? As it turned out, some were much more aware of, and intentional about, what they looked at than were others. Moreover, significantly, those who were curious about the desires, fears, and interests of people they worked with and served, and who talked with them about these things, were more likely to develop plans that got adopted and implemented. From conversations with such exemplary planners John began developing “profiles” that explicated “what planners do” when they are making a difference. These profiles taught me a lesson about attention: what planners look at and think about, and with whom they collaborate in looking and thinking, affect whether they can discover what people care about and ways of making changes that address these concerns. John called attention to a way of planning that diverged from the customary view that planners should simply write expert documents about substantive matters.

At the same time, he talked about planners with what struck me as an extraordinary optimism about the possibility and power of communication. He drew on Habermas to articulate how planners should communicate to understand and be understood. He recognized obstacles to good communication, but he adhered to a belief that, to oversimplify, good-faith efforts to speak and write accurately and clearly can engage and influence an audience. He called attention to how institutions, social relations, and personal traits purposely or incidentally confound understanding and speech, but he emphasized how taking these hindrances into account may reduce their effect.

John and I examined obstacles to understanding and communicating in different realms. John is more a sociologist, paying particular attention to social structures—the nature of a society, the requirements of institutions, the interests of groups, organizations, and regimes, and ordinary human conflicts. Though he recognizes the obduracy of some structures, his optimism about communication, and thus planning, derives from his observation of instances where practitioners have altered these structures. In contrast, I am more a psychologist, paying attention to mental and emotional structures, including unconscious patterns of thinking and relating. From talking with hundreds of planners and other practitioners, participating in and observing a variety of planning processes, and taking note of my own thinking and acting, I am struck by how often habitual ways of thinking hamper realistically considering what may be possible and how it might come about.

Sometimes we inflate the probability of what we desire. Other times we exaggerate the likelihood of what we fear, unless we play it down or ignore it altogether. We hesitate to trust, and we give priority to defending ourselves against amorphous dangers. Observing these tendencies, I am less optimistic about communication.

Thus, the profiles pose an important question: why are these practitioners exceptional? How are they able to pay attention to things that matter and communicate openly about them, when so many others cannot? The explanation is not that they work under different, more favourable social conditions. Rather, apparently, they experience greater freedom from psychological constraints on understanding, communicating, and acting. They are able to take risks, unafraid of real or possible conflict. This capacity allows them to see others as potential collaborators, with whom they can talk about desires and fears to find ways to plan together.

I think the profiles suggest that if we want more planners to pay attention and communicate as these exemplars do, we must study how internal and emotional structures distort our thinking and social relations, so we can find ways to reduce their force.

The next generation of planning academics can advance John Forester's work by combining with it this complementary line of investigation. Then we will have a still more sophisticated understanding of how planners should think and act as they try to reorder the world in some small ways for the better.

5.6 Heather Campbell

Excerpt from the Book Review of the "Deliberative Practitioner", published in Environment and Planning A, 2000, volume 32, pp. 1898-1900

The work of John Forester demands respect and attention not only of the planning community but from all those with an interest in policymaking and democratic processes, most especially the effective operation of participatory practices. *The Deliberative Practitioner* sits alongside related texts, such as those by Healey (1997) and Sandercock (1998b), in trying to move the planning community away from positivism and instrumental rationality on the one hand and political economy analyses on the other while demonstrating an appreciation of difference and the existence of multiple truths.

Forester is undoubtedly one of the planning community's leading theorists, but it should be acknowledged that theorizing for Forester is inextricably linked to action. He takes as read that planning is political and sees the key priority as the search for normative concepts to indicate how planners, or other policymakers, should act. [...].

Deliberative practices are for Forester about more than 'mere' participation, and to perceive this book as simply a call for more participation is to miss the point. Emphasis is placed on the importance of inclusivity, anticipation of self-protective behaviour, and the creation of open institutional arenas in which all are respected, and the systematic suppression



Fig. 21 – Heather Campbell
<https://scarp.ubc.ca/directory/heather-campbell>
 Last access: March 20, 2026

of information is avoided. He also acknowledges that deliberation is likely to take place under conditions of conflict rather than consensus.

However, the objective of deliberation for Forester is to get beyond interest-based bargaining to a situation where all involved in the planning process understand their mutual interdependence and through this connection are transformed in such a way that new understandings and values result.

The emphasis on the transformative nature of public deliberation is crucial and is linked to really listening to what people have to say and learning from it. Importantly Forester rejects the notion that participatory practices are value neutral and hence argues that astute deliberative practitioners should be 'activist mediators'. Practitioners should engage with ends and means and nurture a form of deliberation in which the planner neither unilaterally decides nor accepts 'anything goes'. In this connection the importance of ethical judgment or 'moral improvisation' is stressed. The latter implies a form of practice where general principles are related to the particularities of a specific context and vice versa.

Forester is conscious that moral improvisation may seem like incrementalism, a process whereby the key central objective is to reach agreement. However, he sees deliberation, as much more than this; it is a process through which planners create a space in which all are transformed. This emphasis on a process of working together is also important for Forester in distinguishing his approach from the experimentation and individual reflection of Donald Schön's 'reflective practitioner'.

This book is striking in its overwhelming sense of optimism and the author's humility and sensitivity. Forester asks on several occasions whether he is too silent about power. He certainly does not ignore power but sees it as enabling, not just limiting.

The assumption that the existing structures of power are alterable is crucial to his argument, for if this were not the case there would be no role for planners and more problematically no hope for many communities. [...]

5.7 Kenneth M. Reardon

Making Waves High Above and Far Beyond Cayuga's Waters

In the fall of 1980, I entered the Ph.D. in City and Regional Planning Program at Cornell University where I had the good fortune of studying with John Forester who was beginning his second year as an Assistant Professor. I was immediately drawn to John's research and teaching which critically examined the role planners were playing in advancing social justice in the city through redistributive policies and participatory processes.

During the subsequent forty years, my own research and teaching which seeks to understand and advance resident-led revitalization in severely distressed communities has been greatly inspired and influenced by John's scholarship which investigates the role power plays within public planning processes, the challenges city dwellers, who live in highly segregated communities, face when seeking to overcome racial and class barriers to solve "wicked problems", and the contribution community mediation can play in resolving conflicts that can derail what Whyte described as "social inventions for human problem-solving".

John's influence on equity-oriented planners has not been limited to his journal articles, book chapters, books, and lectures. For decades, he has visited community-based planning projects committed to building what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described as "The Beloved Community" to document and assess their effectiveness in hopes of distilling principles of good practice needed to enhance the quality of various forms of democratic planning. His careful chronicling and analysis of dozens of "bottom-up" planning efforts throughout the US and Europe has helped to raise the visibility and legitimacy of these efforts enabling many of them to broaden their base of non-partisan political support while expanding their external funding.

The in-depth interviews John and his students undertook with the planners, institutional leaders, and grassroots leaders from these projects prompted many of these individuals to critically reflect upon their own democratic planning practices, comparing their approaches to Davidoff's advocacy planning, Krumholz's equity planning, Kennedy's transformational planning, and Miraftab's insurgent planning, and specifying the contexts in which their model of progressive planning might serve as an the optimal strategy for addressing the structural causes of social inequality.



Fig. 22 – Kenneth M. Reardon
<https://www.umb.edu/directory/kennethreardon/>
Last access: March 20, 2026

In the mid-1990s, interviews John and his students conducted with planning students, design faculty, and grassroots leaders with whom I was working in East St. Louis prompted our team to refine our empowerment planning approach to community development which sought to integrate the central values and core methods of participatory action research, direct action organizing, and popular education into a seamless approach to social change.

The subsequent articles, book chapters, and technical assistance materials we generated, in part, because of our interaction with Forester's research resulted in our bottom-up approach to community planning being replicated in distressed neighbourhoods in Springfield and Rockford, IL; New Brunswick, NJ; Liberty, Nichols, Rochester, and Ithaca, NY; Memphis and Brownsville, TN; New Orleans, LA; as well as several towns and cities in Sicily's Simeto River Valley.

In 2006 and 2007 I returned to Cornell as a member of the planning faculty. Shortly after being elected Department Chair, Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast causing massive property losses and significant loss of life. Several weeks after the disaster, I received a call from the Chief Organizer of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), Mr. Wade Rathke, who asked me if Cornell would work with them to prepare a comprehensive post-disaster recovery plan for the Lower 9th Ward. After developing a detailed scope of work needed to formulate an empirically based recovery plan for these historic African American neighbourhoods, our department mobilized more than 90 undergraduate and graduate planning students and faculty from Cornell, Columbia, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to collect, map, and analyse a dizzying array of environmental, economic, and social data needed to complete the plan.

As we began working on *The People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Comprehensive Strategy for Building a More Vibrant, Sustainable and Equitable Lower 9th Ward*, John assisted in preparing this document that is credited with significantly increasing the amount of federal funds devoted to Lower 9th Ward recovery efforts. Twelve months later, John organized a spring semester writing seminar in which a dozen student participants in the New Orleans Planning Initiative told the stories of their work, complemented by accounts of my own and co-organizer Richard Hayes. That writing seminar provided the basis for our book, *Rebuilding Community After Katrina: Transformative Education in the New Orleans Planning Initiative* that described the extremely challenging nature of the recovery planning process that we had just completed in New Orleans. John's efforts to document our work, along with his thoughtful analysis of our major activities, accomplishments, and failures is especially impressive in the extent to which it presents an unvarnished picture of this effort as seen from the differing perspectives of students, faculty, planners, politicians, and community residents. As such, it represents an extremely valuable resource for training planners

charged with leading high-stakes, multi-party, post-disaster recovery planning efforts in contexts involving diverse stakeholder groups.

For youthful planners committed to using their planning knowledge, skills, and experience to promote more equitable and sustainable patterns of metropolitan development, John's scholarship, especially *Planning in the Face of Power*, *Making Equity Planning Work*, *The Deliberative Practitioner* and *Rebuilding Community in New Orleans* should be required readings. These books along with works by Paul Davidoff, John Friedmann, Don Schön, Mel King, Marie Kennedy, Leonie Sandercock, and Anne Spirn should be included in the planning library of every practitioner seeking to get into what the late American Civil Rights leader and U.S. Congressman, John Lewis, described as "good trouble".

5.8 Daniela De Leo and Giovanni Laino²¹

*Two or Three Things We Know About Him*²²

5.8.1 As Readers and Observers

The knowledge and impact of John Forester's work on our teaching and research activities varies depending on generation, background profiles, and opportunities for sharing. Nevertheless, in both cases, there was a turning point when we had the chance to personally engage with him, leading to in-person interactions and knowledge exchange. The experience marked an evident shift for



Fig. 24 – Giovanni Laino
<https://www.youtube.com/@profgiovanilaino5288>
 Last access: April 20, 2026

us, moving us from passive readers of his works to active and direct observers and interlocutors in discussing his works at certain times. Indeed, like others, our initial introduction to John was through his books, perhaps during our doctoral studies and at the early stages of disciplinary research with a strong theoretical and international focus.

For example, Daniela has a significant memory from her XV PhD academic cycle, where she started from the "fundamentals" and encountered two Johns, John Friedmann and John Forester. There were occasional publications of their texts in Italian, such as the fine disciplinary series of Nuova Biblioteca. Dedalo, which was promoted and directed by Dino Borri. This was the era when there was



Fig. 23 – Daniela De Leo
<https://unina.academia.edu/DanielaDeLeo>
 Last access: April 20, 2026

²¹ Several of John Forester's seminars delivered in Italy can be viewed on Giovanni Laino's YouTube channel (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6GYFPJKFJE>). Last accessed on April 20, 2026.

²² The title is paraphrasing Godard's film *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*.

no eagerness to publish, and books mattered (in the absence of medians and class-A journals). The study of *Planning in the Face of Power* (Forester, Italian Edition:1998) as well as that of *Planning in the Public Domain* (Friedmann, Italian Edition: 1993) provided insights into the international debates on urban planning. These works offered a solid framework rich in essential references to situate what was being studied within the Italian and European contexts, providing a diverse research and intellectual landscape for scholars within a challenging and diversified horizon.

At the time, Giovanni was a researcher attempting to define and legitimize his personal as well as original path as a social planner²³ within a world predominantly driven by architects and engineers. On the other hand, Daniela, after her doctorate, then progressed through the long path as a precarious researcher and, finally, as a structured one, a path characterized by a critical as well as open and curious approach to the international debate²⁴ until the most significant moment of sharing research in the field. At the end, both were able to better understand Forester's positioning beyond the oversimplification of his being an 'Habermasian participationist'. Thus, from one side, Daniela was able to test his research approach in the context of Italian practices; from the other side, Giovanni gained both legitimacy on his profile as a social planner and appreciation from John of his being a social planner in Naples, substantially different from the other urban planners he met in Italy.

5.8.2 As Researchers in the Field

After a thought-provoking encounter with him at the AESOP Conference, John was invited to visit the Sapienza University in Rome, which puts out competitive resources to foster internationalization opportunities by funding joint research on a proposal basis. Therefore, for Daniela, the knowledge and impact of Forester's work had a pre and post-collaboration related to the abovementioned joint research that ultimately led to long work done together in Italy, culminating in the publication *Reimagining Planning. How Italian Urban planners are changing planning practices* (INU Edizioni, 2018).

John's arrival in Rome encountered complications because Daniela was undergoing complex rehabilitation after significant surgery. Nevertheless, that challenging situation necessitated a proactive approach. As a result, an extraordinary interview schedule was arranged, involving selected urban planners and planners from Italy who generously accepted the invitation to participate in interviews lasting up to an hour, using the then most mysterious 'Forester method'. This method was deemed mysterious because many of us had read about its successful implementations in Holland, Japan, and Israel, but being able to experience it live

²³ In this regard, Giovanni believes that the meetings he organized in Naples were particularly crucial: these supported him in legitimizing a profile of a bricoleur immersed in social planning that animates social and educational service processes and practices.

²⁴ In particular, there has also been frequent interaction and collaboration over time with other leading international authors who also have long criticized John's approach by wanting to distinguish themselves from a thought that appeared dominant at certain stages.

certainly offered new dimensions and different perspectives of learning, knowledge, and, thus, experimentation.

Although our initial group of participants consisted mostly of friend-planners, it quickly became apparent that the interview process was exhausting. It required digging into the practitioner's hands-on experiences to get to the essence of what these planners' did (not just into the horse's mouth, as John repeated). A now-retired professor of urban planning, whom I hesitate to refer to as a colleague, noted in writing that the outcome seemed more like a reportage, highlighting the limited perspective captured. In fact, despite his active involvement in one of the (not published in the book) interviews *à la Forester* with the usual apparatus of pressing inquiries and clarifications that John provided before and during the recording, it appeared that he did not fully grasp the true intention behind that original research practice. Indeed, those kinds of interviews produce a wider range of outcomes, from in-depth deeper insights, personal narratives, nuanced perspectives, and strategic understandings that go beyond mere reporting. Instead of seeking testimonies, the objective was to formulate a proposal that provided concrete answers to conditions of uncertainty in our planning practices, which, as Forester stresses, necessitates improvisation based on extensive practice, study, experience, and comparison of references akin to that of jazz.

5.8.3 In Conclusion

In addition to Daniela having the privilege of being one of John's four co-authors in his books on planners' practices around the world, she also had the opportunity to participate in a scholarly open discussion on methodology and excellence with John and the other co-authors at a symposium organized at Cornell in September 2018. This event served as a valuable opportunity to discuss, particularly, the pedagogical work of using practice stories and narratives in the classroom by providing students with a detailed sense and understanding of "what planners do". However, when it came to implementing this approach in her "Rehabilitation and urban regeneration-Studio" semesters in Sapienza University between 2019-2023, the use of the text had mixed fortunes. Indeed, even though Daniela carried out the research with Forester, and her students were of international background (and thus without language barriers), some struggled to understand how they could actually draw on those experiences of Italian planners and apply them to their own design practices. Basically, it appeared they were not able to catch the technical solutions, the how-to from the experiences of single planners, by not understanding motivations and emotions behind planners' actions, since the "stories of practices" can exactly help people in better understanding human behaviours, tricks and decisions in complex planning challenges.

Nevertheless, despite the minimal circulation and dissemination of the published volume—partially due to the choice of a publishing house that does not have the breath of APA and has not promoted any kind of distribution—certainly, the volume can still provide valuable

materials for the inquisitive young people in AESOP and ACSP seeking understanding, and ways of doing research methodologies as well as opening unseen frontiers to planners. Especially if younger scholars will be able to better learn from valuable examples of direct planners' practices for being better researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

This is undoubtedly an important legacy of John's work, with particular attention to the Italian context along with his contribution to legitimizing not only policy approaches but also a broader social science-orientated perspective, which is closely linked to the critical reflections on dialogic-participatory-communicative frameworks, as well as a nuanced examination of the role of the planner. Being a multifaceted and complex figure, akin to a mediator in a trading zone, straddling various areas, the planner tries to inhabit self-reflexive competencies within a significant exposure in the world of practices (albeit with expertise in practices of theories). All of this can certainly be useful for young people in AESOP and ACSP (and beyond), even considering that the prevalent trend is that many academics read superficially and focus on mere verbal play instead of ethically oriented engagement. It is critical to consider that it is precisely the younger generation who train and specialize within a landscape of strong corporatization of research and, at the same time, of extreme competition in which some ethical dimensions are exposed to risk. In this framework, it seems that John's contribution serves to recentre practices with an emphasis on ethical-political foundations, urging caution against oversimplifications and instrumentalizations.



Fig. 25. John Forester, picture taken by JoonSik Kim

6. Continuing the dialogue

Reflections and perspectives of Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin

6.1 In Dialogue

Having recalled and discussed the long and intense production of John Forester through an analysis of his works, through his self-reflective words as well as the accounts of other planning scholars, it is time for us, the co-authors, to enter an explicit dialogue with his work.

Prior to the process of writing this Booklet, which gave us the opportunity to deepen the key concepts at the heart of each chapter, we both had the opportunity to relate our paths to Forester's, albeit from two different perspectives.

Martin has worked more on the theoretical implications of Forester's line of research; Giusy has met Forester and shared her practice story to add her small piece to his wide exploration of planners' profiles.

These encounters are briefly evoked in the next paragraphs to provide examples of how the lessons of an experienced scholar like Forester can shape the work of younger generations of scholars.

As such, the blending of our two perspectives is intended to offer a complementary view of Forester's work and an attempt to project his lessons onto the challenges that new generations of academics and practitioners face and will face as they seek to continue planning 'in the face of power' towards the goal of more just societies.

6.2 Martin's Reflections

"There is this guy John Forester who has done a lot of interesting work on planners' stories"

I came across John Forester's work about 10 years ago. At that time, I had just entered my PhD studies. I had had many conversations with my supervisor, planning Professor Tim Richardson, about how to link my thesis work to my experiences of facilitating deliberative processes. In one of those conversations, Tim said something resembling the quote above. Following up on Tim's recommendation, I started reading Forester's work and was immediately fascinated by how he paid attention to the experiences of practitioners with an interest not only in theorizing, but also in improving practice. Because I too wanted to link theory with practice, Forester's work spoke to me, and I have engaged with it since.

In my thesis (Westin, 2019), I analysed Forester's publications from the 1980s to the 2010s in view of mapping how he treats the concept of power. My analysis (later extended

and published in Westin, 2022) showed that Forester's work has more to offer for understanding planners' roles in power relations than the critics have acknowledged. Even so, the analysis also identified how Forester's work could be extended with a conceptualisation of conflictual, yet legitimate *power over*.

In Forester's work, *power over* figures primarily as a problematic and normatively charged concept, particularly where it operates as unnecessary domination that constrains communicative action (Westin, 2022). Forester is thereby drawing attention to the power relations through which experts, bureaucrats and corporate actors get it their way at the expense of marginalized communities. His core framing of power –over the years– is that planning ought to empower disadvantaged communities by including them in well-designed planning processes where the use of unnecessary *power over* by powerful actors can be transformed into relations of power with; concerted action towards shared objectives. Thereby, he has established a useful basis for critiquing dominating power, and he has developed ideas about how planning processes could shift power dynamics to the benefit of disempowered groups.

Nevertheless, an understanding of *power over* that primarily emphasizes undesirable domination risks under-specifying the role of authority in planning. The instructive stories from planners, that Forester has analysed, show how planners cannot merely do away with power, but must use *power over* to contribute to the development of “more just and beautiful, sustainable, and liveable places and spaces” (Forester, 2009: 6). In my view, besides instructive stories and practical lessons à la Forester, we also need a conceptualisation of *enabling power over* in planning because planning is concerned with making contested choices regarding places and societies (Campbell, 2002). To make such choices involves exclusion of issues and voices, which will often lead to open or covert conflicts (Connelly and Richardson, 2004; Mouffe, 2005). Hence, if we want to ‘get things done’ in democracies (Mansbridge, 2012) through planning, we cannot only have a concept of *illegitimate power over*. Treating *power over* primarily as a problem to be minimized may imply an aspiration to escape conflictual power altogether, even though such an escape is neither possible nor desirable in planning. (Flyvbjerg and Richardson, 2002). *Power over* is, in many instances of planning, inevitable and, when institutionally grounded and publicly accountable, democratically justifiable or even desirable. A key task for planners, as well as planning scholars, is to distinguish the kind of power which is legitimate from that which is not (see Haugaard, 2012).

In sum, my analysis of Forester's publications showed that he demonstrates, through rich and instructive examples, when planners' exercise of *power over* is actually legitimate. At the same time, the analysis revealed an important task that remains: to articulate in more general and conceptual terms how legitimate *power over* can be distinguished from illegitimate domination across varying planning contexts.

A clarification is warranted here. Forester does not reject *power over* as such, nor does he equate all *power over* with illegitimate domination. Drawing on Habermas's theory of communicative action, Forester distinguishes between necessary *power over*—mandated by the rationalization of modern societies and embodied in the authority of public institutions—and unnecessary *power over* that colonizes the lifeworld and constrains communicative action. His concern is primarily with the latter. In this sense, Forester's work does already contain an implicit distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of *power over*, and a key task of planners, in his account, is precisely to navigate where these boundaries lie in shifting contexts. My argument should therefore not be read as a rejection of Forester's position, but as an attempt to extend it conceptually. While Forester compellingly demonstrates legitimate authority through situated narratives and practitioner stories, I argue that planning theory would benefit from a more explicit conceptual vocabulary for describing the enabling and democratically justifiable forms of *power over* that his work often presupposes rather than fully theorizes.

After completing my thesis, I have, with Forester's work as one of the sources of inspiration, worked to investigate critically the legitimacy of power in planning. The first step that I, with colleagues, took, together with a group of planners in the city of Uppsala in Sweden, was to explore the power dilemmas that planners faced in dialogues with citizens (Westin et al., 2021). Drawing on Forester's work on practitioner profiles, we organized a series of focus groups with the planners. Through these conversations we learned that these (deliberative) planners experienced the dilemma of being experts in a practice that had developed as a reaction to expert-rule and top-down power.

One experience that the planners shared exemplified the dilemma that the planners faced. A team of deliberative planners held a workshop with pupils at one of the schools in the district Gottsunda in the city of Uppsala where a major construction scheme was under way. The purpose of the workshop was to provide opportunities for youths in the district to discuss plans for their area prior to the formal consultation meetings that were due to take place at a later date. One of the planners explained (Westin et al., 2021: 119–120), "We were holding a workshop for kids, and during the short introduction, one of the kids protested 'Don't ruin Gottsunda!'" When the planners, in a focus group, reflected on this experience, they expressed ambivalence. One planner said: "At first, I thought it was great that she [the kid] had heard about [the plans for the district] and had opinions about them, and that she was brave enough to say right out what she thought. Then, I started to reflect. It is hard for someone of her age to know what this is really about. Did she understand, or was this just something she had heard at home or elsewhere and repeated without understanding? Kids can be like that." (Westin et al., 2021: 120).

As this example illustrates, the planners were ambivalent about their use of power as representatives of the planning system. They clearly wanted to open up the planning system

for alternative voices. But how could they do that without using the kind of *illegitimate power over* that they were critical towards. They faced the dilemma of needing to critique the exclusionary power of the system and yet also needing to use power that they derived from their positions in the same system. Hence, this study taught us that the planners were inclined to critique the power relations that exclude marginalized voices from urban planning, but also that they found it more difficult to justify their own use of power in pursuit of a more inclusive governance system (Westin et al., 2021).

After having done this study, I set out to do conceptual work on legitimate *power over*, with the planning scholars Raine Mäntysalo and Hanna Mattilla. We outlined how Mark Warren's (1996) concept of deliberative authority could be used to shed light on planners' use of power. We argued that conceptualizing planners as deliberative authorities is useful for understanding how planners can exercise *legitimate power over* (Mäntysalo et al., 2023). According to Warren (1996, p. 51)

“[d]eliberative democracy requires authority but of a specific kind, an authority that simultaneously complements and reinforces deliberative decision making, enables a society to make good use of its resources and capacities, allows individuals to experience their environment as relatively secure and predictable, and underwrites opportunities and encouragements for political participation.”

Mäntysalo, Mattila and I argued that people have scarce resources in engaging in deliberation on numerous planning-related matters and decisions. “Any democratic system – indeed any decision-making entity of even the slightest complexity – must rely on experts at all levels within the system” (Mansbridge, 2012: 13). Necessarily, people need to place trust in the authority of the public planners, and their related practical judgments, to shape their attention to those issues that matter and have political importance. According to Warren (1996: 58) “to the extent that authoritative decision making frees deliberative resources for those issues most relevant to individuals, authority will be supportive of deliberative participation.” Nevertheless, we emphasised that planners' use of power is only legitimate if their positions are institutionally grounded in a democratic system where their power use is subjected to public scrutiny (Mäntysalo et al., 2023). Notably, there are interesting links between this assertion and Forester's work on the intersection of planning with community organizing (Reardon and Forester, 2015), and of planning with street-level democracy (Laws and Forester, 2015).

Continuing this conceptual work, I have recently, with colleagues, conducted conversation analysis to understand how planners perform as authorities in interactions with other

planning actors (Westin et al., 2023; Westin & Montgomerie, 2024). We observed and analysed the interactions between actors in two Swedish collaborative governance processes within wildlife management and forestry.

Through examples from these processes, we developed a conceptual framework for describing planners' use of power. We found that planners, when facilitating communication between planning actors, tack back and forth between being in authority and opening up for argumentation.

By analysing sequences of interaction in collaborative governance, we learned how authority is socially negotiated and performed through relations between planners as facilitators and participants. The planners interpret and anticipate responses from participants and act in a manner that they, often intuitively, think is in accordance with participants' views about how facilitators ought to act. The planners make situated judgments about when they can assume that participants do not need arguments and when they might require space for argumentation. This way of understanding planners' authority is very much in line with Forester's (2019, 2022) work on "ecological wisdom" and "context-responsiveness". Our framework describes how facilitators perform differently depending on how the interactions with participants play out, moving back and forth on a continuum between authority and argumentation. Importantly, it is not only the facilitators' attempts to perform as authorities that matters, but even more so the participants' assessments and responses to these attempts (Warren, 1996). In our study, we found that planners when acting as facilitators must, after sequences of argumentation, return to a position of authority in order to be capable of performing their task of structuring interactions in collaborative and participatory planning.

What's next?

Reflecting upon the lessons learned along this path, I have found some key points that have contributed to the development of my work. I came across Forester's work at a formative moment in my career, when I entered PhD studies. I was inspired by the way that he had paid attention to planners' experiences in view of theorizing planning as well as to improving planning practice. Engaging with Forester's work has been of importance when I have started to address the problem of *legitimate power over* in planning.

In my continued work I am interested in further pursuing the inquiry into *legitimate power over* in planning. I want to learn more about how authority is constituted through interactions between planners, politicians, citizens and other planning actors. When I continue this inquiry, John Forester's work will no doubt be a rich source of inspiration.

6.3 Giusy's reflections on Forester's work

“Would you like to be interviewed by colleagues and friends John and Daniela, about our action research work in Sicily? They are investigating several planners' stories, and we can say something about ours, can't we?”

With these words, in 2015, Laura Saija, who was one of my mentors in my academic journey, introduced me to the research project that John Forester and Daniela De Leo were developing at the time, and that, a few years later, would emerge in book form (De Leo & Forester, 2017, 2018). Daniela and John were investigating the stories and profiles of Italian planners behind the mainstream, revealing a diversity of practices concerned with community planning and institutional processes at different scales and with different foci, but connected by similar aspirations towards social and ecological justice.

With Laura and other colleagues from the Laboratory for Environmental and Ecological Design of the Territory (LabPEAT) at the University of Catania, Sicily (IT), we had long been committed to action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) as an inquiry strategy to try to deeply understand and—when possible—to challenge some of the most pressing issues of our native context (Saija & Gravagno, 2009; Saija & Pappalardo, 2018; Pappalardo & Gravagno, 2018).

Albeit located in the so-called Global North, Sicily can be viewed as a southern context (Yiftachel and Mammon, 2022) where a variety of “stubborn realities” (Watson, 2013) emerge, both on the streets and within institutional rooms. Here, the lens of insurgent and radical planning (Sandercock, 1998; Miraftab, 2009; Huq, 2020; Sletto, 2023) can help to frame the context of operation in which our action-research group was immersed.

Differing from Westin's context of inquiry (Sweden), in Sicily (Italy) deliberative planning processes are not usually a priority for the public institutions in place, as institutional systems are weak and, in many cases, broken (Saija and Pappalardo, 2020). I come from a city, Catania, where the last comprehensive plan had been approved in the 1960s and the attempts to update it had failed many times²⁵; where the few opportunities of public meetings and focus groups with planners seem to remain confined to the lowest rungs of *Arnstein's Ladder of Participation* (1969).

²⁵ While we are writing the final parts of this booklet, the current administration of the Municipality of Catania is in the process of proposing a Comprehensive Plan for the city, in accordance with the new Regional Law (L.R. 19/2020), which mandates public participation as an essential part of the procedure. I am not directly involved in this process, and—due to the precarious nature of academic life—I currently find myself far from it, both geographically and institutionally. However, as a possible next step following this booklet, I do not rule out the possibility of studying the plan's development and assessing whether, and how, it has offered, or not, the city a genuine opportunity to be shaped by a plurality of voices, including those of its most marginalized neighborhoods.

In such a context that downplays the role of deliberative planners, very few opportunities appear to enact their role and authority (recalling Martin Westin's reflections): more realistically, in the context where we operate, deliberative planning barely exists as a public institution's commitment.

In this scenario, nevertheless, with LabPEAT we have been involved in a variety of community-based processes, sometimes attempting a co-production approach (Albrechts, 2013) where several windows of opportunities opened inside public institutions.

Our action research, conducted in partnership with several communities—and at times with progressive allies within public institutions—offered us a privileged vantage point to observe and experience power dynamics both from the ground and within the administrative machinery, immersed in the same arena as some of the practice stories Forester has explored over the years.

Our immersed, situated (Haraway, 2013), and practice-based way of doing research gave us some food for thought to nourish our theoretical reflections on the possibilities of using community planning as an emancipatory process, inspired by the same lessons of Paulo Freire that Forester had put at the centre of many of his reflections, as previous chapters have shown (Sartorio and Thomas, 2019; Tomas, 2019).

Notably, we have been deeply moved by the experience of Danilo Dolci, a sociologist who worked for many years with peasants and low-income families in rural Sicily in the 1960s, using the same emancipatory approach as Freire (Dolci, 1973), and this has shaped our planning research strategies blended with the approach of community organizing as a way to empower the powerless (Reardon, 2005).

Connecting the dots of our key references with Forester's, the thinking of Martha Nussbaum has also been pivotal in the community-based process we have been engaged in, with LabPEAT's colleagues and friends, more specifically regarding her reflections on justice and capabilities (Nussbaum, 2002).

Despite my intense and rewarding action research experiences with LabPEAT and the community leaders, activists, and fellows with whom I've been lucky to work over the years (Pappalardo, 2017), when John and Daniela interviewed me in 2015, I was full of doubts about the value of what I was doing.

At that the time LabPEAT was asked to assist in the community-planning process within an Area of National Significance for the Italian Strategy for Inner Areas (Barca, 2019). In this scenario, I was experiencing conflicts as an everyday task, I was concretely "dealing with differences" as a necessary attitude to get things done, I was witnessing several types of dynamics of power, including those embedded in the fine grain of daily interactions amongst a variety of actors operating at multiple levels of government and from the grassroots, sometimes with divergent interests, contrasting values, and very different backgrounds.

“We need to close this school as it has very few students, as very few people live in this town, and we do not have the money to maintain it open and safe”, says the officer from the Regional Board of Education. “If you close the school, our children need to travel for kilometres through streets that someone else in some other regional board decides to close every time that it rains because the streets are crumbling”, says the young single mother concerned for the future of her kids. “We’ll find the resources and the way to meet both concerns, let’s work on that”, says the planner who tries to keep all the pieces of the picture stuck together, slaloming across bureaucratic barriers and people’s fears.

In a nutshell, at the time of the interview for my profile, I was a living witness to how engaged planning scholars were required to learn to become mediators as a survival strategy in the challenging environments they inhabited.

Despite the difficulties embedded in the choice of conducting action research and being an engaged planning scholar in Sicily, De Leo, Forester, and the commentators who contributed to the *Planning Theory and Practice Interface* on my profile (Saija et al., 2017) helped me to see my work in perspective (Pappalardo, 2017): in a way they empowered me, as they gave me the theoretical lens to interpret and reflect on what we were doing in our local context, connecting it to a broader debate and giving it new meanings and usefulness (Forester, 2019).

I understood in my bones how powerful John’s work could be in so many ways, including its impact on the same planners, academics, practitioners and community leaders he had placed at the centre of his theoretical reflections, giving them, or us, the opportunity to reflect upon the transformative potential of planning rather than remaining trapped in a sense of impotence.

What’s next?

Forester confirmed and reinforced—then, and even more so after writing this booklet—the same intuitions I had in the field: practice matters, stories matter, details matter. The fine grain of everyday power dynamics matters, for reflecting on and advancing knowledge grounded in what is concretely present beyond academic walls, on the ground.

This is also central to informing how planning education could be shaped differently: exposing students to the stories that come from practice and inviting them to step into the shoes of others is certainly an interesting terrain for rethinking how planning theory can be taught.

Finally, in the attempt to contribute to the improvement of those contexts where public institutions are weak, as in Sicily, the way Forester has conducted ethnographies inside the public offices can offer some elements in a line of inquiry I am currently exploring (Ostanel & Pappalardo, 2022), which is now concerned with putting public institutions under the spotlight of everyday, situated, engaged research, in order to make them useful again for the people –

the “street people” I have been working with for years—who those same public institutions are supposed to serve.

Building on my ongoing research into institutional strengthening and the forms of learning that requires, and considering the commentaries on Forester’s engagement with institutions in the previous chapter, I invited Forester to reflect on how institutional dynamics show up in his work and how working institutionally has developed across the four periods. His response is presented in Box 4.

Box 4. John Forester on Institutions

Throughout my work I have always been concerned about diverse institutions and their norms. In particular, these were institutions of: 1) technocracy/scientism (characterized by presumptions of technical fixes), 2) ordinary conversation embodying language use, shared conventions, mutuality and turn-taking, even (dis)agreement; 3) debate: the institutional form of argumentation that may, when formalize, involved explicit rules and moderators; 4) negotiation: a quasi-economic form of deliberate (but not deliberative) exchange governed by norms that enable actors to make offers, counteroffers, bluffs, warnings, compromises, linkages to additional issues and so on; 5) public processes such as public hearings which might encourage perverse norms of “decide, announce, defend”, which are notoriously frustrating to public parties who distrust that authorities actually listen to their voices; 6) public representatives who invoke authority to make supposedly legitimate decisions in settings like neighborhood meetings, city council meetings, public comment sessions, even coffee klatches in which officials meet and talk with citizens; 7) regulatory processes which spur both consent and public objection, and so on. I believe all of these types of institutions have been regularly invoked as the always contingent, norm-structured settings and institutional contexts of the planning practices I have analyzed.

Through this detailed breakdown of the types of institutions with which Forester has deeply engaged—drawing on an ethnographic approach that, as we saw in previous chapters, he has specifically tailored and crafted for the field of urban planning—it becomes clear that concerns about norm structured settings were never absent from his work; rather, they were addressed pragmatically. Working at the micro level of practice and the macro level of institutional structures should not be understood as mutually exclusive, but as interconnected, with the micro level functioning as a precondition for broader structural change. From my perspective, this reading of Forester’s work opens productive avenues for what my colleagues and I are currently exploring under the framework of institutional learning: the capacity of institutions to modify both their practices and their structures by interrogating these dimensions as interrelated. This involves examining the biographies of those who contribute in different ways to the functioning of the institutional machinery, as well as the organizational arrangements and governance configurations that persist or evolve over time—seeking (and acting toward!) their improvement in order to fulfil democratic potentials.

On another line of research—where urban planning intersects with other fields of knowledge in an effort to address the current socio-ecological crisis (Armiero, 2021) – Forester’s reflections on the significance of *telling stories*, and the ethical dimensions of that practice (as explored in Nussbaum’s thought), resonate with the idea that an intersectional and decolonized approach to storytelling can open new possibilities for how planning is conceived and enacted (Ortiz, 2023).

In this sense, Forester’s more recent work on kindness—as a practical response to others’ suffering and vulnerability—along with his emphasis on empathy and the ethics of care (Forester, 2020), offers a compelling inspiration for younger generations of scholars.

His call “to repair the world, to do better for our neighbours and strangers alike, to improve spaces and places” (Forester, 2021) underscores the transformative potential of critical pragmatism and of the narratives that help shape it, that I think will require further investigation and practical commitment inside and outside the academic walls.

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Authors' Bios

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Giusy Pappalardo is a scholar based at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, where she conducts postdoctoral research on living heritage and climate change within the Belmont Forum–funded project WRENCH—Whispers of Time. Heritage as Narratives of Climate Change, with a specific focus on the Matanza–Riachuelo basin in Argentina. Her work bridges community-based planning, social museology, and the environmental humanities. She earned a PhD in ecological planning from the University of Catania in 2014, following a Fulbright-funded research stay in the United States, and subsequently served as a researcher there from 2016 to 2024, continuing to teach Landscape Planning and Qualitative Methods. Between 2019 and 2022, she was a visiting researcher at several European universities. She has also served as the local Principal Investigator of the Project of National Interest *Resisting. Reconnecting Social Innovation with Institutions in Urban Planning*, funded by the Italian Ministry of Research, between 2023 and 2024.



Martin Westin

Martin Westin is associate professor in environmental communication. His research interests focus on collaboration and learning in response to complex and contested sustainability challenges—often referred to as "wicked problems."

His work explores citizen participation and collaborative governance in sustainability transformations, with a focus on communicative processes across diverging interests and worldviews. Martin conducts research in close collaboration with civil society, businesses, and public sector actors, which allows him to contribute to governance theory as well as practice.

He has contributed both theoretically and methodologically to the fields of planning and governance, particularly through research on power relations in participatory practices and the development of practical tools such as The Sustainability Walk and The Reflection Cycle. He currently leads and contribute to several research and development projects that investigate democratic dialogue in polarized contexts, trust and knowledge coordination in environmental governance, and the role of collaboration in navigating resistance to sustainability initiatives.



John Forester



John F. Forester (1948) was educated at the University of California, Berkeley, receiving a BS in 1970 and an MS in 1971, both in Mechanical Engineering. He completed a Master of City Planning in 1974, and a PhD in 1977, also at the University of California. In 1998 Forester was appointed chair of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, a position he held until 2001. He has remained with the college as an academic, and has served as associate dean of the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning.

He served for 20 years as a mediator for the Community Dispute Resolution Centre of Tompkins County, has consulted for the Consensus Building Institute, and has lectured in Seattle, Chapel Hill, Sydney, Melbourne, Helsinki, Palermo, Johannesburg, Brisbane and Aix en Provence, Rome, Naples, Venice.

“Born into a Viennese Jewish refugee family, I grew up in San Francisco as a high school and college student in the 1960s. Both my family’s escape from fascism and the civil rights and feminist movements shaped my left-liberal politics, but my aptitude for math and science (and low English scores) led me to study engineering at UC Berkeley. I would get bachelor of science and master’s degrees in mechanical engineering (1970, 1971), even though from my sophomore year onwards I was deeply involved in community work and campus organising. Hardly attracted to the engineering of the defence industry, my family’s experience, ’60 sensibility, and community work fed my curiosity when I discovered, the year after my master’s degree, that Berkeley had a vibrant city planning graduate program.

In Berkeley I found no shortage of self-assured technocrats here or equally self-righteous ideologues there, and I was always unsure about the ground between the two (who sometimes, of course, were identical). I had studied enough engineering to appreciate the deep appeal of systems, the alluring elegance of mathematical solutions, the heady power of mastering techniques to get answers that worked. But what if my equations didn’t do much justice to the social and political world?” (Forester, 2017, p. 281).

AESOP YA Conversations in the Planning Booklet Series

John Forester, Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin

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This booklet traces over four decades of scholarly debate and planning practice through the evolution of John Forester’s formulation of a critical pragmatism. Drawing on Forester’s writings, autobiographical reflections, and intergenerational dialogues with planners—as fostered by the AESOP Young Academic Booklet Series Conversations in Planning Theory and Practice—the volume examines how critical pragmatism has developed across time. Structured around four analytical phases of Forester’s work, it explores: (1) the late 1970s–1980s focus on power and communicative action; (2) the 1990s–early 2000s emphasis on learning from practice through stories; (3) the 2000s engagement with conflict mediation and democratic deliberation; and (4) the 2010s attention to improvisation, context responsiveness, and the practical judgment required in planning environments. These phases—described by Forester as “the hidden bones” of his intellectual trajectory—reveal a sustained effort to refine and extend insights from Habermas, Freire, Nussbaum, and others. The booklet also reflects on the post 2020 global landscape shaped by the COVID 19 pandemic, socioecological movements, and renewed struggles against racialized violence and wars. In this context, Forester’s recent work underscores two increasingly vital skills for planners: improvising wisely and listening care fully. These commitments resonate with broader scholarship on the ethics of care, suggesting that planning with care may represent a further evolution of critical pragmatism. The volume concludes with various scholarly contributions and reflections by the co authors, Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin, offering a multifaceted perspective on Forester’s enduring influence on planning theory and practice.

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