

Urban Development on Basis of Urban Planning

---An interview with Professor Elliott Sclar

Following the current pace of urbanization, it is expected that three quarters of world population will live in some type of urban areas by the mid-2000s. At the same time of being advantaged by various public services emerging from this process, people have encountered increasing problems in traffic, natural environment, housing, etc. How to derive better lives from urbanization, and how to make urban development sustainable, urban planning, both the discipline and practices, is to play a vital role in solving these questions. Dr. Lei Wang from Institute for the Development of Central China (IDCC) at Wuhan University recently discussed this topic through an interview with Professor Elliott Sclar, who is the founder and director of Center for Sustainable Urban Development at Columbia University.

Center for Sustainable Urban Development (CSUD)

As a unit of the Earth Institute of Columbia University, Center for Sustainable Urban Development was founded in 2005 by its current director Elliott Sclar, who is Professor of Urban Planning and International Affairs at Columbia University. The center is aimed to improve the lives of the poorest people living in urban places by means of looking into intersection between urban transportation and urban land use and then creating pro-poor urban policies.

The center chooses to work on the ground. The first project was in Nairobi, Kenya, which is one of the fastest urbanizing places in the world as other places in Africa, and of which the fastest urbanizing parts are the fringes around the city. The center's work started in a small town right next to Nairobi called Ruiru. Ruiru is experiencing all the spillover pressure of urbanization and all the problems of inadequate infrastructure: inadequate transport, lack of land use plan. Working in Ruiru provided a very good way to begin to raise the issues of metropolitan planning and metropolitan land use and transportation planning in the context of sustainability and in the context of improving the lives of the poorest people. Currently, the center is expanding its work to Accra, Ghana on the other side of the continent. It will not merely be another on-the-ground work. It also is seen as "action research" in order to provide larger lessons that can be taken to the rest of the world on how to deal with the challenges of urbanization. While working rigorously with local partners in every incidence on the ground, the center will try to understand what works and what doesn't work in the hope of helping nations through better economically, as cities are drivers of the national economic prosperity in the end.

1. Increasing Recognition of Sustainable Development

Wang: Since CSUD's establishment in 2005, has there been any change in the concept of "sustainability" or in the society's concerns about the issue? How have these changes influenced your approaches of answering relevant questions?

Sclar: I think they are still spreading. Most people in the world seem to understand the need for strategies toward sustainable development. For the first time in history, Columbia has an undergraduate major in sustainable development this semester. I teach the class on sustainable urban development. I have not taught in undergraduate since years but it has been a lot of fun. We now give degrees from undergraduate degrees to PhDs in sustainable development. The field

is going and we don't lack for students who are interested in the subject. The challenge has really been to change people's understanding that sustainable development is not an alternative to development. Often the way the question used to be posed earlier was if you want sustainability you have to give up economic development. And we would argue no-it is not the choice. The choice is between the types of economic development you choose to have. Right now, what we had were forms of economic development that urban development that essentially have depleted natural resources rather than balanced natural resources with man-made. We focus so much on what we could put market price on and increasingly looking at financial returns and not a lot at social returns. So a lot of the work we have to do is we have to change the mental model in people's heads about what they should be accounting for when they look at development, because in the end what you look for is better live people, not more energy. People don't want more energy; they want the things they use energy for. People don't want mobility, they want access. So you can give them access by designing a city so they can walk, they can use bicycle too. Those are the kinds of values that we have to begin to bring to the global challenge of urbanization and economic development.

Wang: How do you see the relationship between socially and physically sustainable developments in urban areas?

Sclar: The issue for me has always been that you cannot separate the spatial and physical from the social because it is only the social that gives meaning to the spatial and physical. We use the space in different ways. Ultimately, no matter what school of economic thoughts you believe in, every school of economic thoughts believes that accumulation is really about building physical resources plant and equipment and so on. The question becomes which plant of equipment and to what end. My believe is that the way people begin to understand and change the way they think about things has a lot to do with the way in which they experience the world. So if we begin to build cities in which transportation and land use more enriched, that experience then changes what people would do with those things. I've never been able to think of the economy appear as extraction. To me the economy is a study of social relationships that people play out in physical space. That's the connection.

2. From Procedural Planning to Collaboration and Consultation

Wang: Your planning practice outside U.S. is a good example of successful international planning. How do you apply planning principles to different contexts? What do you find are the most interesting and most challenging parts?

Sclar: That has been a challenge because urban planning if you go back into its history, urban planning was initially a very physically strong subject. And then at some point it gave up being physical and became like applied social science. When people like me came back into the field we said no it got to be physical but with social understanding things. And then the question is how does planning actually work. What began to happen in planning schools was initially they taught students what we call "procedural planning" that the planning commission, it reviews data, it then comes up with the plan, it passes it on. It was very technically-taught subject. Then the reaction to that is "no, no, no, planning needs to be about consultation and collaboration with people." One of the lessons we learned in Nairobi was when we began to do the plan we got a lot of collaboration and consultation, but there was no procedures in place to put planning in place.

So you need to be concerned about how procedures work and they have to work fairly for everybody.

Wang: In your opinion, what is the special meaning for the cities in developing countries to receive international planning assistance? What is the effect of such activities on the globalization progress?

Sclar: It is really a problem because increasingly, things that happen at the highest levels and international levels are almost disconnected from what people on the ground are working on. We who do sustainable urban planning believe very much that we shouldn't be building 21st century cities around automobile. Very often the international help that these countries receive are funding to build roads and not funding to build walkable cities necessarily. So we find ourselves pushing to change the dialogue to say you have to think about this differently. But the problem very often is very hard for poor countries which in fact have bad roads and they need better roads. All the sudden they have a chance to have better roads, and nothing ever gets done all the sudden somebody is going to come in and actually do something that is going to make a difference. How do you say in that situation "yes, you want the help, but let's talk about a better way to do it, because at the same time we are building roads in these places, cities like New York are trying to take the streets away from cars. If you go to Times Square, you can sit on a chair in a place used to be a lane for cars in the middle of the street. That's the way things are changing and there is no reason why it shouldn't be happening everywhere. In your country, nobody thinks about building without having a transit-oriented-development, having a transit connection between a residential neighborhood and an employment center. That is understood. China as a developing country needs more mobility and should have more mobility. Government also understands that it is not going to become the United States. It is not going to do the same things. It is going to develop in a more sustainable way. What we are trying to do in Africa and in developing world is bringing those same ideas into the context in which they are dealing with problems.

3. Urban Planning in the Context of Global Warming

Wang: In your view, what are the most important and most urgent issues in the field of urban planning? To what degree do we possess the solutions for those problems? What unpredictability still exists?

Sclar: I think the most important issue is climate change. Whether we get to 500 parts per million of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and what we begin to do to change that. That is a global problem. One level we can do a lot to reduce it just by changing the way we do. I have to come back to transportation. If thirty percent of the greenhouse gas emissions are mobile source transportation and the world is becoming very urbanized, it is going to be three out of four people will be urban by the middle of the century. If we can do something to minimize that, we can do a lot to slow the accumulation of these gases. We still have to deal with the adaptation problem that is very urgent. So we have the mitigation problem and adaptation problem. But it means really thinking very differently about the future. One of things I worry about is, as I said earlier institutions change slowly, but Mother Nature has a different time clock which she's working. My concern very much is whether or not we can work on that adaptation and mitigation at the pace that we have to. It's a huge international issue too. Often United States says to China "you are polluting", but we are buying your products. It doesn't matter as we are in a world. We

have to figure it out as a global issue because we are all sharing it. You can't say you have to do something and we don't have to do anything.

Wang: As a developing country, China is on the junction of domestic transition via significant reforms and external pressures associated with globalization, which makes the nature of its urban development a highly complex process distinguishable from that in developed countries in many aspects. Unfortunately, imitation of the physical features or straightforward "institutional borrowing" from western cities is becoming increasingly pervasive in its urban practice. What would you like to suggest for urban development practice in China in this regard?

Sclar: As I said earlier, China does understand the needs for things like transit-oriented-development and bus rapid transit. China is expending an enormous amount of money on building good high speed public transportation. There is a strong understanding on the relationship between land use and transportation. Those are the things I admire. What I fear is, to the extent that a lot of it is centrally directed, when you make mistake, it will be horrible. My concern would be to make sure the institutions develops. So there is more of local input and local dialogue takes place. Because every place is unique so the same solution in one city may not be the same for another city. My institutional concern would be that. Those are my senses about China. But as I said, the extraordinary of 21st Century would be the extraordinary of China.

4. Equal Importance of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

Wang: As a leader in planning education, how do you define the characteristics of American planning education as compared to those in other parts of the world?

Sclar: Let me go back to what I said earlier. I am convinced that all these efforts we've been putting into teaching people about collaborative planning and communicative planning. I think it is all very nice. And I believe it is very important. I very much believe we have to get back to understanding how to have good procedures too. How to make planning also work procedurally? Because my training was in social science and all my degrees are economics. I moved into planning in my career and I've learned it that way but I have these spaces and social sciences. I very much believe, having said that "we then have to envision institutions that both incorporate collaboration in a meaningful way, meaningful collaboration, with very clear procedures to make things happen. Not a mistake won't be made, but it is my belief that the more information that we can get into the decision process, which is why collaboration is important-you get more information, the less chance that you make very serious mistakes. What happens sometimes for officials are they are very suspicious especially in places I wore all this talk in collaboration because nothing gets done. We talk, we talk, we talk and nothing gets done. So the question becomes how to get the best of talk with the best of decision making. That's why we use this policy network strategic, we call it strategic policy networks we attempt to build.

Wang: Urban planning is concerned with different issues throughout different stages of urban development process. What is the evolutionary path of urban planning in U.S.? How has this impacted planning education?

Sclar: I think what will happen in the U.S. is you have distinguish the cities in the U.S. There are cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Philadelphia that developed before the

automobile and then retrofit to the automobile and then have to reinvest in their public transport system. You then have cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Houston that really came with the age after automobile and mobile around the dispersion of automobile. For them, we have to begin to retrofit and bring in transportation systems that begin to minimize the need to travel. We change land use as we want to give people access. But change is always hard because institutions develop slowly over a long period of time and they will not change overnight very easily. Engaging in these dialogues and engaging in these discussions becomes a very important thing we have to teach planning students. Years ago, I have a planning student who came back to me and said “we can’t plan.” And I say “why?” He said “everything is politics.” And I say “but when you succeed, it is politics, too.” What we have to be teaching you is how to behave in the political process as a planner. You are not just a technician. You are a technician, but you are a social scientist. So you have to understand how people take in information and how they are going to use this information. How you present information and how you structure dialogues just becomes a very important part of planning education.

Wang: Quantitative methods are increasingly applied in today’s social science in general and urban studies in particular, which China is not an exception to, or even a more outstanding illustration of. How would you see the use of qualitative studies and its particular significance for urban studies in developing countries where orthodox market-based theories often lose their explanatory strength? What’s the implication for planning education?

Sclar: What happened in social sciences has been a great fascination with modeling, with quantitative model and variations of linear regression and to come up with parameter and estimates. The problem is those are just facts toy. They are just facts and they need to be interpreted. So the qualitative research, to understanding problems, they are use cases. Examples become very important because I think a lot of what we learn, we learn inductively. Then you are on a position to begin to translate and understand what the sophisticated quantitative model is saying or not saying about the subject. In terms of the planning methods, teaching people how to use the case method, the end of one to get information is very important. And then I do think we need to train people to use models, certainly you need not to be model builders, they have to be articulate and they have to understand the language of the models because increasingly, that would go into the decision making. So unless they understand it, they are not on a position to say “no, I think that is a mistake” (or) “that makes sense to me”. I really want planning education to go in terms of methods in both of those directions. I want a core score qualitative methods, and I want a core score quantitative methods that includes modeling.

Wang: How do you expect the future direction of planning education?

Sclar: I see it going through it. One is institutions understanding. I am an institution of economist anyway. I am very glad to see almost (in) all the social science the study of institutions has become much more prominent. Two, at the same time we roll down and look at the local we have to look up and think about global governments too. So a well-educated planner has to understand where their practice sits in relation to global forces and local forces and be mindful of both at the same time they go about their work.