

Reimagining the soul of urban planning



By Leonie Sandercock

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Leonie Sandercock's five-decade career has been instrumental in shaping and shifting the field of urban planning to recognize and incorporate feminist, indigenous and intercultural worldviews and to pursue social, cultural and environmental justice. Her World View reflects on the importance of local, community-engaged action to grow 'beloved community' with an ethos of interconnectedness.

“We need more than policy change; we need a change in worldview, from the fiction of human exceptionalism to the reality of our kinship and reciprocity with the living world... We are scientists and storytellers, we are change makers... We are each called upon to resist the forces of destruction, to give our gifts, to first imagine and then enact a world whole and healed.”

I read these [wise words](#) by Robin Wall Kimmerer, indigenous scholar and scientist, as I was putting together my own remarks for the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) conference in Chicago in October 2023. I have just retired, after fifty years working in the field of community planning. Community planning foregrounds the everyday grassroots builders and maintainers of cities and their bottom-up, interconnected, collective and ecological knowledge. Community planning pushes back on wider conventions of urban planning that take a top-down, linear, professionally exclusive, state-centric approach to urban issues. For my 'swan song' I organized an interactive session at ACSP around 'Reimagining the soul of planning'.

My remarks centred around two concepts: 'beloved community' and 'everything is one'. These five words pretty much sum up five decades of learning and unlearning for me, about what matters and what gives meaning, purpose and hope to the work of community planning. It's my worldview, I suppose, and

it is inspired by other thinkers dedicated to these concepts¹.

We live now in a time of grief that's personal, political and interconnected at an urban and planetary scale. Pre- and post-pandemic, Greta Thunberg represents the grieving of youth over planetary dis-ease. [Margaret Wheatley](#) and [Valarie Kaur](#) both talk of the need for 'warrior-sages' and 'warrior training' to protect and preserve the human spirit in the face of our current descent into war, aggression and fear. Wheatley writes about the importance of working locally, in place, even though the issues are global². Those we grieve with are ultimately those we organize with and advocate for. "When a critical mass of people come together to wonder about one another, grieve with one another and fight with and for one another, we begin to build the solidarity needed for collective liberation and transformation – a solidarity rooted in love", writes Valarie Kaur. She urges us to see no stranger: cultivate a practice of looking upon anyone who is unfamiliar and choose to say, 'You are a part of me I do not yet know'³. With such a practice, strangers can become neighbours. bell hooks embraces a spirit of neighbourliness – of fellowship, care and respect for the dignity and wellbeing of the 'beloved community' – a way of thinking and behaving that honours principles of 'inter-being and interconnectedness'⁴. Drawing on all of these wise ones, young and old, in grief and in hope, is how I want to reimagine the soul of planning: as a social and spiritual project in support of neighbourliness and the beloved community, integrating heart, mind and spirit; as connecting inner knowing with outer practice; as integrating masculine and feminine energies; as holding in tension future vision and present realities.

To be clear, urban and community planning cannot solve today's crises, at least not on a global scale. The choice we should make now is to do what we can, locally, to create possibility in the midst of global decline; islands of sanity and local community self-organization amidst the macro chaos and breakdown.

There is a broader theory of change underpinning this deceptively simple approach

of focusing on the local. Margaret Wheatley argues (based on systems thinking, chaos theory, quantum physics and more) that changes in small places also affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but through every small system participating in an unbroken wholeness: 'We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness'⁵. Activities in one part of the whole create effects that appear in distant places. According to this way of understanding systems and interconnectedness, there is potential value in working anywhere in urban and broader systems to transform them.

A major challenge for planners now is learning how to live in a process world, rather than having a single-minded focus on achieving outcomes: participating with things as they unfold, expecting to be surprised and unsettled. In a process world, sensitivity to context is everything; falling back on rote and top-down procedures or 'best practices' will not suffice. Process work demands presence, a quality of absolute attention in the moment to what is really happening for urban residents in the daily life of their cities and genuinely valuing their perspective. Process work is relational work. It depends on the skills of listening, conversation, participation, creativity and community-building. It depends on qualities such as caring, generosity, openness, curiosity, compassion and humility.

New ways of understanding often appear simultaneously in widely separated places and in different disciplines. These synchronicities are what strike me now. The same concepts are appearing in many places. These concepts are our zeitgeist, a way of thinking that characterizes a generation or a time period. The contemporary zeitgeist is linking to an awareness, both new and ancient, that 'we live in a world of exquisite interconnectedness'⁵. Patricia Wilson has argued that we must internalize and develop a felt sense of this radical interdependence⁶. Indigenous communities have understood the principle of 'everything is one' since time immemorial⁷. We live in relationship, connected to everything else – learning to work with the wholeness of life requires that

professionally trained planners, scientists and community members alike bring our whole selves to the work of community planning.

Faced with a myriad of contemporary crises, diverse **thinkers** from different faith, cultural and intellectual **traditions** ask us to act, not to withdraw. To not be defeated by a still-dominant western worldview based on competition, individualism and a mechanistic way of understanding life. All of them **believe**, as I do, that **every one of us can make a difference** in each small act of defiance or **new way of behaving**. That is how societal change happens. We do this work of community planning

because it is rich in meaning and purpose, because it is in tune with the zeitgeist, but above all, because it is worth doing. And because we don't know enough to say, 'It's too late'.

The future is not yet written.

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Competing interests

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