

# Call on a revival of spirit for a modernised planning profession

Manifesto For RTPI Vice President 2020

by Wei Yang

## The challenges we face and the changing societies where we live

It has been more than one hundred years since the RTPI was founded in 1914. Such timeless issues as identity and belonging, social justice and inclusivity are still high on the agenda, but pressing contemporary issues as climate change, biodiversity decline, the digital revolution, and the changing nature of work are affecting the way our towns and communities function.

The next 10 years will be critical to control climate change within the 'safe' limit below 1.5 °C (rather than previous suggested 2 °C) to avoid the worst impacts by the end of this century. However, the UN has warned that the goal of limiting global warming to 'well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels' is in danger because major economies are falling short of their pledges, and because many countries' pledges are not sufficient in the first place.

The world has been rapidly urbanising in the last few decades. In the past 10 years, the urban population in the developing world grew an average 1.2 million people per week. The UN-Habitat study shows that a predominant focus on purely financial prosperity has led to growing inequalities between rich and poor, generated serious distortions in the form and functionality of cities, also causing serious damage to the environment, as well as unsustainable short term focused financial systems.

In addition, the UN has also warned that nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history – and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating. However, the current global economic and development model does not account for natural capital and the ecosystem services provided by biodiversity. We must remember that our economic growth is restricted by the 'planetary boundaries' – the ecological limits of the planet. The limits have fundamental impacts on our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.

This is indeed a time of crises, but is also a time for solutions. There is no time to waste by carrying on business as usual, 'transformative changes' are needed NOW by any profession and by everyone in the world.

## Why the planning profession, and who will plan our communities in 2030?

Currently, there is a global vacuum to be filled by a profession taking the lead and enabling the built environment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The importance of 'urban planning and design' is highlighted in the New Urban Agenda, which recognises that planning can formulate medium and long-term objectives that reconcile a collective vision with the rational organisation of resources to achieve it. However, while this may sound easy in theory, in reality it is ever harder for planners' independent long-term and strategic advice to be adopted.

In many countries, urban planning has been instrumentalised by politicians and developers. Planners seem to have become invisible and voiceless to the public. Technology giants take smart-city contracts for a whole city without involving planners; planners have been bypassed at corporate strategic level in local authorities; in some countries, strategic infrastructure deliveries are driven by engineering solutions without fully exploring potential socio-economic consequences, as well as environmental and cultural impacts.

I believe the fundamental objective of the planning profession is to create a balanced system for People, Nature and Society to co-exist in harmony. We are the only profession dealing with all of them in a strategic and systematic way. It is time that the planning profession takes a leadership and enabling role, with a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach towards delivering inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable places. If we fail to take this responsibility and to bring ourselves 'up-to-speed', the planning profession will be even more marginalised in ten years' time.

## The spirit of our pioneers and the purpose of the planning profession

It is easy to forget that the science and art of modern planning was an invention not by government, but by people like Sir Ebenezer Howard, Sir Raymond Unwin, and others with social justice and a long-term vision of communities in their hearts. More than 100 years ago, our pioneers took the lead to change the world they lived in to a better place.

The spirit of the planning profession is fixed on service to the community. Ebenezer Howard once said: "I realised, as never before, the splendid possibilities of a new civilisation based on service to the community and not on self-interest, at present the dominant motive. Then I determined to take such a part as I could, however small it might be, in helping to bring a new civilisation into being."

If Howard's 'small' part created the global Garden City movement in the past, what would stop our profession from regaining the leadership role now?

## Call on a revival of spirit for a modernised planning profession

The RTPI was the first professional planning institute founded in the world. Now it is our generation's responsibility to carry forth our founders' spirit and take the lead to set 'the new professional standard for planning' to be a 'global force for good'.

On the one hand, we need to advocate the value and purpose of the planning profession to the wider public. On the other hand, we must accelerate the modernisation of our profession with skills required in the 21st Century. It is crucial to ensure the planning profession is future proofed to cultivate interdisciplinary leaders and enablers, and continually attract talent from future generations.

The RTPI is a member-owned organisation. To engage, inspire, and empower our members are some of the institute's primary functions. I would like to see more people, particularly 'Millennials' and 'Generation Z', joining and engaging with the RTPI, because of our national and international influence on championing transformative changes.

The attributes I believe a modernised planning profession should have are:

- **Global vision:** being able to evaluate local issues in a global context, see the bigger picture, and have a long-term vision
- **Skills:** interdisciplinary and digital skills to make connections between plan-making and place-making, ability to create innovative mechanisms to resolve complex socio-economic issues, and state-of-the-art knowledge to contribute to immediate actions on the climate and biodiversity emergency
- **Trust:** be a diverse and representative profession of our community, build connections with the wider public through strategic two-way communications, and be an effective facilitator to enable communities in shaping places where they live, work and enjoy
- **Leadership:** proactive and strong leadership in shaping sustainable, smart, resilient and beautiful places for the common good
- **Pride:** professional integrity empowered by the RTPI to protect public interests, and to champion social equity and inclusivity

**What is demanded from us all is something more than self-promotion. We need a revival of spirit; a genuine modernisation of our profession and its education to serve the world for now and the future!**

This is my vision of a modernised planning profession. If you are a RTPI member eligible to vote, please vote Wei Yang by 26th September to support me in realising the vision.



August 2019