

3. DO PLANNERS HAVE HEROES?

Script of the lecture given on Friday 27th January 2012 at TU Dortmund
27 January 2012

by Benjamin Davy

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

[Salutation/Introduction/Acknowledgments]

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The beautiful new AESOP website announces the 2012 AESOP Silver Jubilee. Tomorrow, the delegates to the AESOP Birthday Meeting in Schloß Cappenberg will celebrate the “birth” of the Association of European Schools of Planning.

The AESOP leadership chose a very evocative photograph to illustrate the happy occasion. Thirteen persons who have shaped AESOP’s destiny in different ways through their contributions to the theory and practice of planning.

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The birth of AESOP certainly has deeply influenced the development of the European planning academy. But looking at the photograph, I do not merely see a historic moment. I see a heroic moment, and that makes me ask myself what the community of European planning academics thinks about heroes.

Do planners have heroes?

I am in absolutely no position to answer this question based upon thorough research. But I am willing to take a guess, uneducated as it may be, because I reckon that a mature organization like AESOP needs to know where it stands regarding its past and, consequently, its future.

As a planner, I have learned that when you don’t have good research, say something personal. I gladly admit that I have been inspired by wonderful planners. So I start by naming three of them.

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At the TU Wien, School of Spatial Planning and Architecture, where Professor Kunzmann had worked with Professor Wurzer and I held my first job, Professor Kunzmann was a legend. His name was mentioned either with great disdain or deep admiration.



We first met in the late 1990s, but did not have any meaningful conversations before my arrival in Dortmund. Professor Kunzmann became my personal hero when he explained the Dortmund version of studio work — Projektstudium — to me: “One place, one problem!” he advised me, “Let the students do the rest.”

At the AESOP conference in Aveiro, John Forester was one of the keynote speakers. I had read his *Planning In The Face Of Power*, and was sad to learn that his family had to flee from the Nazis in Vienna. John has inspired me — and hundreds of planners in the US and Europe — not to compromise out of fear or boredom, but to listen carefully.

During the time I moved from constitutional law to land policy and from legal theory to planning, I met Rachele Alterman (I think it was at the AESOP conference in Bergen). Together with Willem Salet, Philip Booth and others, she started AESOP’s Law Track and, eventually, Rachele became founding president of the International Academic Association of Planning, Law, and Property Rights (PLPR). Right in the beginning her advice for me was: “Stay with the law! Planning is nothing without it.”

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Now that I could share my personal planning heroes, I think I should add an advisory.

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I was born in Vienna where I also graduated from law school. In the town center of Vienna, there is a square, called Heldenplatz, the Square of Heroes. Heldenplatz is part of the Habsburg winter residence, the Hofburg.

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The heroes for which the square has been baptized Heldenplatz are Prince Eugene of Savoy, who fought the Ottoman army, and Archduke Charles of Austria, who was the first commander to defeat Napoleon.

Heldenplatz is a place full of ambiguity and painful memories.

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On 15 March, 1938, Adolf Hitler celebrated the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria to the German Reich, on this square. The cheering crowd inspired Thomas Bernhard to write *Heldenplatz* for the 100th anniversary of the Burgtheater. When the play opened in 1988, it caused an enormous scandal. Thomas Bernhard and Claus Peymann, then the director of Burgtheater,



were exposed to caustic censure from high-ranking politicians for “soiling the nest.” The play, set in 1988, is about a Jewish professor who commits suicide and whose wife suffers from hallucinations: she constantly hears the crowd on Heldenplatz cheering Sieg Heil!

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I start on this somber note because I want to explain why I feel very ambiguous about heroes. I cannot think about heroes without remembering the shame of Heldenplatz. But I also cannot think about Heldenplatz without remembering Thomas Bernhard, a brilliant author who passed away shortly after the world premiere of his controversial play.

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Now, with the personal memories out of the way, I want to address planning and heroes more broadly. This also is delicate and dangerous. Therefore, let me stay with monuments or, to be more precise, with monuments I saw while taking walks during AESOP conferences.

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No delegate to the 2007 conference can forget the splendid piazza in Naples. Impressive figures decorated a palace. The classic posture of heroes include the air of pomposity and false humility. Still, I admit that I find this hero also quite impressive and elegant — and I’m envious of the hat.

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I also have to mention the wonderful museum in Napoli, exhibiting ancient statues. Romans had a keen interest in the beauty of the human body. Heroic sculptures reflect upon our imaginations of power through physical strength. We watch them, and we compare ourselves.

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Do we feel daunted or elevated by signs of superiority?

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Heroic monuments, displayed in public spaces, are under constant threat from wildlife and misunderstanding.

Toni Polster, a greatly admired Austrian soccer star, who declined to have a monument in his name, is quoted as saying “I never want a monument because monuments are where pigeons misbehave.”

Actually, Toni used a different expression.



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Another monument I found impressive in Manchester was about war heroes. I forgot which war (but chances are Germans were the enemy). Heroic monuments have no meaning unless there is an audience that views, is amazed by, comments on, admires the heroes or heroines. Nobody is a hero by themselves, but achieves the status of hero only through communication. A theory of heroes and heroines needs to examine the audience that reveres their heroes through possessive imitation.

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Heroes, idols, and celebrities emerge from communicative acts. Nobody can be a hero, an idol, or a celebrity outside of society. Heroes, idols, and celebrities can exist only in the presence of ordinary people — the gray mice, so to speak, that feed the cat.

»To have a hero« is a complex communicative act of creating, modifying, or destroying meaning. »To have a hero« implies possessive imitation: Anyone, who »has a hero«, re-produces and appropriates heroic meaning.

Possessive imitation is an act of inclusion and exclusion. The followers and fans, the disciples and admirers, include each other through hero worship, idolization, or displaying the right scarf. All others are excluded.

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What would possessive imitation look like for planners?

In planning, possessive imitation may include
reference to key concepts (e.g. sustainable development, climate change mitigation, urban renaissance, social justice),
the quoting of persons whose authority is undisputed (e.g., Jane Jacobs), or
the use of well-established rituals (e.g., using colorful maps drawn by GIS or CAD, collaborative planning, consensus building).
Let me give you an example.

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Planetizen — the Urban Planning, Design, and Development Network — display on their website a list of the top 100 urban thinkers and of top books. Planners, like rock musicians or baseball players, are exhibited in a Hall of Fame.

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100 planning heroes, put next to each other, are impressive. The Planetizen website adds a short bio to each name. Planning educators can advise their students to visit the website and browse. Timothy Beatley sits next to Georg Simmel, Patrick Geddes next to Dan Burden, Henri Lefebvre next to Richard Florida. Hopefully, Georg, Patrick, and Henri do not mind.

Please recognize the envy in my voice. Why did Planetizen have an idea that AESOP could also have had a long time ago? And maybe had, and I do not know about it?

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Planetizen's book selection is even more American. No Georg or Henri there. Let me confess: I love *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs (1961). But what about books on planning that have been published in Norwegian, Italian, Polish, or French? Or even, if I may, in German? The obvious gap between Planetizen's list of top urban thinkers and top urban planning books clearly demonstrates the presence of hegemony and colonialism in planning hero worship.

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In European planning, hero worship is not obvious. Visitors to the AESOP website learn that AESOP has four honorary members: Patsy Healey, Andreas Faludi, Louis Albrechts, and Klaus R. Kunzmann. Nothing on the AESOP website could be possibly accused of hero worship or idolatry.

A communicative theory of heroes perhaps explains the absence of heroes in European planning.

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Having a hero implies possessive imitation. Heroes and hero worshippers are not neutral, but take sides. The strongest consequence of possessive imitation is the inclusion of all hero worshippers and the exclusion of anyone who does not join the act of possessive imitation.

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Consider, for example, the heroic act of the Polish people who sustained the geopolitical will to national independence through the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772–1918). In 1910, a monument was unveiled in Kraków: the Grunwald monument.



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500 years earlier, in the Battle of Grunwald, an alliance of Polish and Lithuanian forces defeated the teutonic knights. As Galicia was occupied by Austria at this time, the permission of the Habsburg government reflects on the pre-war Austrian-Prussian relationship.

The Nazis dismantled the Grunwald monument. The monument was rebuilt in the 1970s and was site of the 600 years celebration of the Battle of Grunwald.

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The monument comprises several bronze sculptures: The Polish King Władysław Jagiełło, the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas (Witold), the liberated peasant, and Ulrich von Jungingen, Grand Master of the defeated Teutonic Knights.

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The Grunwald monument illustrates the first explanation of the communicative theory of heroes as to why planners do not have heroes: Heroes take sides, planners prefer balance. Where some audiences admire the Grunwald monument and the stamina of the Polish people, others are shocked by or despise Polish nationalism.

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Would architects take issue if a hero of architecture were worshipped like King Jagiełło? I do not think so. But architecture — good architecture — is just a form of spatial extremism. Planning is about balance.

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This leads me to my second explanation. My favorite theory of heroes and heroines is by Quentin Tarantino. His 2004 movie “Kill Bill Volume Two” includes a scene where Bill — the movie’s villain — explains his fondness of superheroes. Please allow me to quote Bill.

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“BILL: As you know ... I’m quite keen on comic books. Especially the ones about superheroes. I find the whole mythology surrounding superheroes fascinating. Take my favorite superhero, Superman. Not a great comic book. Not particularly well-drawn.

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But the mythology... The mythology is not only great, it’s unique...



Now, a staple of the superhero mythology is, there's the superhero and there's the alter ego. Batman is actually Bruce Wayne, Spider-Man is actually Peter Parker.

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When that character wakes up in the morning, he's Peter Parker. He has to put on a costume to become Spider-Man.

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And it is in that characteristic Superman stands alone. Superman didn't become Superman. Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he's Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent.

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His outfit with the big red "S" – that's the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby when the Kents found him. Those are his clothes.

What Kent wears – the glasses, the business suit – that's the costume. That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us.

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Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He's weak ... he's unsure of himself ... he's a coward.

Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race." UNQUOTE

Tarantino's brilliant analysis of the most super of superheroes implies an enormous insult. The presence of true heroes requires the presence of gray mice. The fat cat — the hero or heroine — feeds on the gray mice.

Architects and Americans do not get this. But European planners do. While heroes are super, planners prefer moderation. Planners may be gray mice, yet they are not stupid.

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So far, I have suggested two explanations of the communicative theory of heroes as to why planners do not have heroes.

Heroes take sides, planners prefer balance.

Heroes are super, planners prefer moderation.

So, here is the third explanation:

Heroes are center, planners consider the margins.

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In Vienna, between Heldenplatz and the ballroom where I took



dancing lessons, there is another monument (Michaeler Platz). I always found this monument quite mesmerizing (this was before I studied law, and long before I became a planner).

I always found “the hero” quite uninteresting. Yet, I found another character in this sculpture very charismatic. Is he a villain? Or is he a victim? Or perhaps he is just a gray mouse.

Miraculously, the artist created a polyrational vision that very well can be perceived as all of the above. The anonymous villain/victim/gray mouse epitomizes the marginal man. I think that planners are much more interested in the marginal man than in the “heroic” big man.

I understand that I leave many questions unanswered. A few of them I wish to mention because perhaps somebody has an idea they want to share during discussion.

Is it really true that European planners have no heroes? Maybe I just got it all wrong because I feel ambiguous about heroes.

Do European planners have no heroes because of language barriers? Possessive imitation is more difficult in a community that shares English as working language, but feels in many different languages.

Do planners need to have heroes? Other professions — accountants or nephrologists — also have no heroes (at least I could find any trace on the internet).

This takes me back to the heroic photograph.

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25 years ago, the Cappenberg group commenced an experiment that helped many planners — not only from Europe — to engage in meaningful deliberations on spatial planning. On the evening before the AESOP Birthday Meeting, I want to acknowledge the heroism of this act. So, as far as planners have heroes, you certainly are among them.

THANK YOU!

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