

Welcome

CORAL REEFS, FRESH STREAMS AND DEEP OCEANS IN THE FUTURE OF PLANNING RESEARCH: INTRODUCING *PLANEXT* IN THE FRAMEWORK OF AESOP POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

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I am happy to introduce the first volume of *plaNext* as one of the most challenging initiatives of our association. What is *plaNext*? *plaNext* is an open access online journal intellectually produced and managed by AESOP Young Academics. *plaNext* is published as part of the AESOP online publishing platform, *InPlanning*. It is an international peer-reviewed journal. It arises from the collective work of our community. And so, *plaNext* is many things at the same time.

plaNext is not an isolated project. Rather, it is one of the numerous initiatives taken by AESOP in order to promote excellence in planning research and education. It fits within AESOP's policy of supporting its Young Academics network as a strategic part of its mission. The Young Academics network is an important component of the wider and rapidly growing institutional network of AESOP. Without indulging in rhetoric, it really is the future of AESOP. AESOP needs cooperation and solidarity among generations, not just because most innovation comes from the future. Consequently, AESOP Young Academics have the specific mission of building a network of ideas, projects, research, and academic work among the new generation of planning researchers. This network will provide an intellectual resource for the planning academic field in the future in Europe and, thus, contribute to improving the academic capacity of the overall planning field. To reach these goals, new opportunities and spaces must be developed, adding to the already existing well established ones.

plaNext is one of these new spaces. It will combine, at the same time, an appropriate organisation, structure and resource with a cooperative and open access approach. One key principle is that the journal is the product of the work and is the intellectual responsibility of AESOP Young Academics. In our vision, *plaNext* is not just a training ground for the members of its editorial board and its contributors, but also a precondition to ensuring a relevant and appropriate environment for mutual learning and exchange in the future. In the light of our past experience and our current policy, which began in the early days of

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AESOP and which has been built up over time through a number of initiatives, the Young Academics network is an important resource for creating, in the mid- to long-term future, the next generation of planning academics. Part of this strategy is to promote, through a plurality of interests, experiences, perspectives and reflections, not just future partnerships in planning research, but also fresh streams of ideas, in a world that is changing rapidly and unpredictably.

The unpredictable nature of our future living environment forces us to develop simultaneously research using different perspectives. For example, a coral reef has to be considered at the same time as a protected environment for preserving biodiversity as well as one of the most endangered ecosystems due to climate change. To reason by analogy, the elaboration, production and dissemination of planning knowledge and research is facing different, albeit unpredictable, challenges in the global churn of the digital environment. This creates advantages, opportunities and threats all at the same time.

For all these reasons, today more than ever, innovation in research also means critical thinking, despite broader trends to uniformity in managerial performance and standards. Achieving resilience in these conditions leads us to believe that innovative planning research must be based more on diversity and plurality rather than on uniformity. As in the case of the renamed AESOP Heads of Schools Meeting, *plaNext* is also a metaphorical plaza. Its open access nature means that it is a public space which hosts free discussion and debate, benefitting from the plurality of cultures, traditions and institutional frameworks within our schools. This idea is, indeed, at the heart of many of our well established activities as well as our new projects, such as the *InPlanning* digital platform.

InPlanning is AESOP's digital platform for sharing information on spatial planning, nationally, throughout Europe and beyond. Among many other services and purposes, the platform supports the digital publishing of open access journals, with the aim of positioning AESOP at the front of the digital revolution globally. In the words of AESOP's Past President, Gert de Roo, currently Editor in Chief of *InPlanning*, for the first time a scientific community is taking the lead in developing an open network of information sharing, relating to numerous aspects of planning research and education. This has to be seen in the light of the fast changes which academic environments are being forced to make, not least with regard to publishing in an open access environment.

In terms of AESOP's mission to promote excellence in research, we believe that an open and cooperative approach between generations has been and still is a winning strategy in the midst of the deep, and turbulent, oceans of our future academic digital environment. Yet, if we look back at AESOP's first years, we can find continuity in this policy.

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Twenty years ago, Patsy Healey noted, in a different context but equally related to the role of young academics and PhD researchers, that: “Existing academic staff involved in AESOP have been trying hard to learn new skills, but some of us thought that progress could be more rapid if the next generation of academics could learn these skills in European academic exchange more quickly”. In the new digital era, the specific skills may have changed, but the overall AESOP strategy is still the same. Thus, *plaNext* is a part of that continuing AESOP strategy:

- In order to make Young Academics’ research products more visible to a wider community, enlarging the arena of the public debate about planning issues and planning research;
- In order to bring together new young academics from all over Europe (and beyond) to exchange new ideas and innovative research perspectives in the planning field, across the (institutional or market) boundaries of other academic places and spaces;
- In order to provide an open access environment for our present and future community (authors and readers) to share their experience and knowledge, improve their own capacities and develop new perspectives and research issues, while guaranteeing, at the same time, the high quality standard of published articles.

Due to the nature of the open access system and in a long term perspective, *plaNext* also aims to stimulate further debate among an even wider community, through a number of potential future interactions and connections, giving the opportunity for young academics to interact and learn from each other’s experience, but also to interact with senior academics in the field of planning as well as in other inter-disciplinary fields, in Europe and beyond. In short, the substantial aim of *plaNext* is to be one of the new opportunities for nurturing the planning research debate within a complex, even controversial, but always fascinating process of global collective learning.

At present, *plaNext* has funding from AESOP and there is, therefore, currently no fee levied on authors to publish with *plaNext*. At the same time, there are also no subscription fees, article-pay-to-view fees or any other form of access fee. I am not mentioning this aspect only to publicise this new journal and to highlight the economical advantages for authors and readers. I want to emphasize the potential of the journal for becoming a new space where critical and democratically innovative approaches to planning research can be created. Nevertheless, we are aware of all the challenges, the uncertainties, questions and even ethical dilemmas of dynamic virtual academic environments. This short introduction is not the place to discuss this at length, but the next volume of *plaNext* will. This shows another potential of *plaNext* for our debates and reflections.

plaNext is an intellectual, more than an economic, investment. Like every type of investment, there are risks and uncertainties, but also great potential. It is up to us, senior

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and younger, to meet this challenge and to develop that potential. It is an opportunity, but also a collective responsibility. About this sense of responsibility towards our community, I pose a naughty question, playing here the role of the devil's advocate. Is *plaNext* just a training space, a gym for young academics? An easier access option for intellectual and academic visibility? A nursery pool in the safest waters of the coral reef, where young fishes and turtles swim and flourish before (and in order to) moving further into the deep waters of the ocean? Well, it can be this. But *plaNext* wants to be something more and something else. It can become a free and open access space for debate, to nurture alternative ideas and perspectives; an acknowledgement of the young academics' rights to plural researches and modes of publication; a different and potentially innovative approach to contemporary and future planning research issues.

For all these reasons, we invite all the members of the AESOP community to support this initiative and to take an active part in it, according to their roles, intellectual approaches and time-work limits. Consequently:

- Heads of schools and senior researchers are welcome to promote *plaNext*, informing Young Academics in their departments.
- Senior academics are and will be invited as guest editors for special volumes of *plaNext*, as in this first issue in which Jeffrey Hou agreed to co-edit the special edition 'Cities that Talk'.
- 'Young in spirit' academics are and will be invited as referees to peer review the articles.

While, as planning academics, we have our own research interests, we all share a concern with different ways of discussing and disseminating our research results, knowledge, and ideas. All these efforts and activities require a deep sense of responsibility, individually as well as collectively, if we consider that our ethical sensitivity and research commitment are parts of a wider social practice. We must create the conditions in which the young researchers of today can become a resource for greater global networking in the future: a flow of fresh streams connecting, with unpredictable trajectories, the safe but endangered waters of the coral reef to the turbulent deep ocean. To reach this ambitious – and even utopian – goal, we have a long way to go, or – better – to swim.

In this vision, the role of *plaNext*, and Young Academics more generally, is to stimulate and promote the development of opportunities for common work and its dissemination in many waters: those of coral reefs as well as those of oceans. The realization of such a project needs time, resources, good will and, especially, collective responsibility. It is a new adventure, with lots of potentials and, inevitably, a certain degree of uncertainty. But first and foremost, meeting this challenge contributes to the wider AESOP mission of promoting a common, plural, open and democratic cultural policy in the field of planning research.