

Open Access Journal

Foreword

I have contributed to the establishment of the AESOP Young Academics Network during the mid-2000s and I have continued to be an enthusiastic supporter ever since. Therefore, it is my pleasure to write the foreword to this important volume of the international open access journal PlaNext – Next Generation Planning, which is a compilation of the most advanced proceedings from the 15th YA conference, that took place in Tirana, Albania, in the Spring of 2021. This conference was the first YA event to take place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its topic – “Governing the Unknown: Adaptive Spatial Planning in the Age of Uncertainty” – very much reflects the uncertainty that pervaded that period. Simultaneously, it drew inspiration from a lengthy wave of crises that, in Europe and beyond, have gradually increased instability and questioned our development models over the past 15 years. The global financial crisis, the escalating climate emergency, and the energy and food crises spawned by the Russia-Ukraine war have all highlighted the need for alternative models of development that prioritize quality over quantity, society and ecology over economy, equity over growth. These phenomena have had a disproportionate impact on weakened and marginalized communities, resulting in an increase in precariousness and uncertainty. This has for the first time since the post-war reconstruction brought to the fore of planning debates new questions about the capacity of mainstream development paradigms to tackle the critical notions of inequalities, poverty, vulnerability, and marginalisation. As a matter of fact, inequality and crises have mutually reinforced each other over time, with inequality that made cities and regions more prone to decline and crises casting light on and amplifying inequalities.

These debates suggest government authorities at all levels to rethink their approach to the dynamics of territorial development and to embrace new paradigms of multilevel coordination, reflexivity, and adaptability. As I already argued elsewhere, I believe that planning and planners play a crucial role in this process by developing and experimenting with new concepts, ideas, and techniques alongside the public, civic society organizations and other actors, and by assisting in their implementation in practice (Cotella, 2023). Planners might thus contribute into the provision of new opportunities for the creation of more resilient and robust communities by encouraging local participation and promoting equity and inclusiveness. In this, a special emphasis should be directed towards reducing inequality and promoting equity in both social and spatial contexts. Concurrently, the promoted actions must concentrate on minimizing the environmental impact of human activity by implementing sustainable transportation systems, investing in renewable energy and green infrastructure, and adopting waste reduction and pollution prevention measures. Planners have, therefore, the ability and knowledge to mobilize the strengths of multiple government levels, private stakeholders, civil society organizations, and communities.

Some of these debates are explored in this volume of plaNext. The contributors, in different ways, address the intricate challenges faced by societies and some of the opportunities that societies and authorities may explore in order to create a more socially just future.

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I'm delighted to see that the YA Network has taken up the effort, with its ongoing support for the progressive consolidation of the next generation of planning academics and practitioners!

Cotella, G. (2023 - forthcoming). disP Column. Planning the postpandemic, disP – *The Planning Review*, 232, 59.1, pp 4-5.

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