

Valedictory Speech - Ian Tant

As you have just seen, I've had something of a whirlwind year, travelling the length and breadth of the UK and Ireland, visiting great examples of planning and meeting great planners and enablers. You could say it's gone by faster than a Welsh mountain on a zipwire!

What has stood out to me is the chance my year has given to explore with many of our members what contributes to success in planning and also what stands in the way in, sadly, too many parts of our nations.

So I want to use this valedictory speech to reflect on what I've seen and heard and to set out some challenges for the Institute going forward.

My Thanks

Before I start, I want to give thanks to so many people for making my Presidential year as special as it could possibly have been. On the film, I listed many of those who were involved in the nations and regions visits but there are many more who've contributed to this success. I can't list everyone so forgive me if I miss anyone out, but I do want to express my gratitude to, and admiration for, a host of people within and around the RTPI.

I want to start by thanking the membership of the Institute who honoured me by electing me to the role of Vice President for 2018 and President for 2019. You have created one of the highest points of my planning career and I only hope you feel that I have done justice to the opportunity you gave me. I did try to speak up for planning!

I want to thank the members of the Presidential team - my Vice President, Sue Manns and the Immediate Past President, John Acres. Both have provided considerable cover for me during a packed programme of activities. Amidst other events, Sue made the huge sacrifice while I was in Australia of standing in for me at a Buckingham Palace Garden Party.

John has almost certainly put in more hours and days to his role in the team than any previous Past President and I am immensely grateful to him for all he has continued to do throughout the year as an Ambassador for Planning.

I have already indicated my thanks to the Chief Executive, Victoria Hills. Victoria has driven the Institute with such incredible energy since her arrival in April 2018 and it's her enthusiasm and inspiration that has contributed to the pace of events for the whole Presidential team this year. I'm only pleased that I've managed to keep up - although, to be fair, I also did my own bit of 'driving' on a 9 kilometre walking tour of San Francisco back in April.

The team in Botolph Lane have all added enormously to the success of the past year – my thanks go to those on the Senior Executive Team and the heads of service, especially Rebecca Hildreth and Andrew Close and to Sukhpreet Bhatia and the Governance team.

I need to express my personal thanks to Josephine Davis and Beatrice Crabb for their support and to single out Renee Fok, Katie Osborne and Will Finch in the Communications team who have helped so much with processing my blogs and photographs throughout the year. I never promised to write these blogs but found myself compelled to do so as each visit left me buzzing with enthusiasm and driven to record at least a little of what I'd witnessed and experienced. If you want a fuller account of my year, look at Ian's Blogs on the President's page of the RTPI website – there is plenty to read!

I also want to single out Hannah Armstrong who, together with her colleagues, did such fantastic and unstinting work in organising and running our conferences in 2019. The RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence and the Convention were major successes but the Young Planners Conference in Newcastle and Gateshead was simply outstanding. While the North East Young Planners deserve high praise for the programme they assembled, the event simply wouldn't have worked as well as it did without the tireless efforts of Hannah, the Regional Coordinator, Kim Walker, and the team from Botolph Lane who contributed so much to keeping the machine running.

The Road Less Travelled

The thirteen Nations and Regions visits are the backbone of the Presidential programme, providing the opportunities for the President to meet members throughout the countries; to hear about the challenges and issues facing our members; and to learn about the extraordinary work being carried out by planners in so many parts of the UK and Ireland.

The poet Robert Frost supplied the inspiration for my visits so the road less travelled was the theme for the year, taking me to places the President has not visited for some time (if ever) and uncovering great examples of planning by dedicated, enthusiastic planners in so many places.

Many of these places are not wealthy towns, villages or boroughs – in so many of them, the recurring issue was the struggle to attract investment. This is not confined to any particular part of the nations – I found resonance in the challenges facing planners in Whitehaven and Whitley Bay, Worthing and Lowestoft, Caernarfon, Dundee and Limerick.

A good number of the places I visited were in coastal towns but everywhere there were town centres, streets, and neighbourhoods in urgent need of investment and renewal.

So what makes for success and what is missing in some of our planning work?

I want to reflect on three aspects that contribute to success in planning – or to failure if they are absent or overlooked. These are:

- The recognition of culture and community;
- Design and the public realm; and,
- Leadership that values planning and planners.

In terms of challenges, I then want to touch briefly on the greatest challenge of our age, something I'm sure Sue Manns will also want to say something about.

The first common thread in successful planning lies in paying regard to culture. Understanding the culture and cultural assets of a locality goes a long way to identifying the distinctiveness of place and in turn helps to make the place somewhere worthy of investment.

In a number of the places I've been, the creation or renovation of cultural assets is the piece of investment that triggers a growing sense of civic pride and flows out into the surrounding area, encouraging property owners to make their own investment. I can't help but point to the examples provided by:

- Dundee, with the V&A Museum forming an iconic centrepiece to the regeneration of the Waterfront;
- Snape Maltings, a private investment which forms a key piece in the economy and community involvement in East Suffolk;
- The Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts at Peckham; and,
- Spanish City at Whitley Bay.

But culture is not just iconic buildings and showpieces – it is the art, history, literature, education and spirit that flows from an area, most ably demonstrated by the London Borough of Waltham Forest – London's Borough of Culture for 2019. And, of course, it's shown in the investment by the Snowdonia National Park Authority in the museum at Yr Ysgwrn, celebrating the life, work and story of the poet, Hedd Wyn.

Culture is rarely capable of being imposed on a place – it is ingrained in the community – or, rather, communities – of the locality. Cultural activities draw people together and form part of the weft and weave of society. Understanding the culture of a place necessarily involves learning from communities what is happening and what has happened in the area. In essence, it offers a key route for planners into improved processes of community engagement.

We are 50 years on from the landmark Skeffington Report of 1969 which sought to draw out lessons from the planning failures of that decade and set a route map for better involvement of communities in planning. It's chastening to learn that as a profession we still have a long way to go in improving our processes and in planning with and for communities.

When I say "learn", I'm not just referring to the excellent Nathaniel Lichfield Lecture in November in which Professor Gavin Parker of the University of Reading set such a challenge to the profession. I'm also referring to a number of direct discussions I've been privileged to hold in the course of the year. The first was in Peckham where, thanks to RTPI London, I was introduced to Eileen Conn of Peckham Vision.

A retired civil servant, Eileen has a carefully considered view of where planning goes wrong and what we could do to improve. At the core, her argument is that we approach communities in a structured manner from our councils and organisations with our appointed leaders and roles. And we expect communities to follow suit. But communities are not structured bodies – they are a wide range of people and families and businesses and groups who come together for widely differing reasons and in each area form an organic cluster of communities, not a single community.

To plan well for an area, planners need to take the time to sit down with and understand the various community groups and their objectives and desires.

Eileen's arguments resonated on the other side of the world, at the Planning Institute of Australia Congress in Gold Coast. Here, cultural issues can take on a wholly wider perspective to those we encounter in the UK and Ireland. As I explained in my blog in May, the indigenous peoples of Australia were displaced from large areas of their territories by European settlement with no attempt at agreement or treaty and without any understanding of the significance of the land to these peoples. It salutary to note that the same issues are faced by our colleagues in Canada and New Zealand. It was therefore a privilege to speak to Reg Proffit, the Maori representative on the New Zealand Planning Institute, and to hear his story and experience of planning engagement.

What I learned in Australia and from Reg, is that engagement at its best is a two way process, a conversation. As a planner, you encourage people to tell you their story and you tell them your story. Allowing time for reflection, you resume the discussion, and in the process, learn about the culture, the views, the interrelationships in the local community; and, in turn, local people learn about, and help to develop, your ideas of what might be needed, what is possible and what should be done.

So one of our key challenges for the coming year - and beyond - is to markedly improve our processes of engagement and to start to mend some of the distrust of, and disrespect for, professional expertise in society. I know this is a key part of the theme for Sue Manns and I wish her well in building bridges between planners and communities throughout her Presidential term.

Public Realm, Place-making and Design

Time and again through the year, the importance of public realm has been brought home in great planning. In some cases, this overlaps with the topic of culture: at Blenau Ffestiniog, the history of slate mining has formed a key inspiration for public realm works designed to enhance the town centre and draw those arriving on the tourist railway to spend time – and money – in the shops, cafes and restaurants of the town.

My experience has shown that it is not enough to have great design ideas – delivery is essential to give encouragement to communities that their dreams can be realised and that their involvement is worthwhile. Delivery – even the start to delivery – helps drive up confidence in the local area leading private property owners to invest in refurbishment and attracting developers to contribute to lifting the local market.

In straightened times, investment in the public realm is often the cost-effective starting point for local authorities to invest and can have benefits beyond simply lifting the character and appearance of an area: at Derry/Londonderry, the Foyle Bridges project is using public realm enhancements to encourage greater footfall on the river banks and crossing the bridges – in turn contributing to a reduction in the tragically high local suicide rate as the increased footfall gives greater opportunities for passers-by to intervene.

There can be no doubt that planning has a vital role to play in both designing and delivering public realm enhancements, as it has in the wider challenge of placemaking. Planners can not only ensure that design meets the purposes of planning policy but aid delivery through identifying and tackling potential obstacles and by coordinating the delivery of infrastructure.

But there is one recurring difficulty I've encountered through my year: so much of our public realm is made up of highway land.

Planners, architects, landscape architects and transport planners all recognise the need to strike a balance between the space required for movement and the importance of good public realm. Indeed, in many cases the enhancements can contribute to the ease of active movement – walking and cycling – with wider benefits in health, improved air quality, reduced congestion and carbon neutrality. Sadly, obstacles keep being thrown in the way by highway engineering concerns over cost, safety and future maintenance liabilities.

Consequently there is a challenge for the professions to work together to find a way through these difficulties. There is a clear need for the RTPI, RIBA, Landscape Institute, Chartered Institute of Highways and Transport and Institution of Civil Engineers to join together to develop new guidance that better balances the needs of people as pedestrians, cyclists and residents with those of car drivers and hauliers.

Where great success is being created...

Make no mistake, however, great things are being achieved through planning and through collaboration with our fellow built environment professions – and there is one outstanding component that allows this to happen throughout our nations and regions. That component is leadership. Achievement sits hand in hand with the leaders of local authorities who value planning and their planners.

Sometimes that leadership comes from planners themselves: at Exeter and Whitehaven, the Chief Executives of the Councils are planners, with clear visions of what planning can do and how it can help meet the objectives of the political leaders.

Karime Hassan at Exeter City Council expresses it best by describing the roles of leaders and planners as relating to the twin questions of “What?” and “How?": it's for the political leaders to say what should be done and for the planners to say how it can be done.

Where the political leadership values planning and places planners in leading roles within the council, outstanding achievements are possible.

It's a sad fact that in too many councils, planning is not valued but is seen as a necessary obligation to regulate development rather than an opportunity to deliver real change and drive up investment. I've met planners this year who feel unvalued, almost unwanted, and in some cases where reorganisations of departments have not only removed the role of the Chief Planning Officer but relegated the role of the planner to that of “Specialist Adviser” with the planning service run by administrators. This is entirely the opposite direction to what we're seeking with the RTPI's campaign for Chief Planning Officers and for the investment of resources in Planning Departments. Only by the investment of resources can planners do the job of delivering planning policy, speeding through compliant planning applications and enforcing against flagrant breaches of control.

While recognising the many challenges facing planners in the public sector, I want to shine a light on those councils who have seen the benefits of planning and whose leadership has grasped the opportunities that strong planning can bring.

There are a good many examples of this I've encountered through the year but there is one that so thoroughly impressed me that I've found myself referring to it in subsequent visits across the UK and Ireland and internationally. It's a place that started at a low ebb with 15% unemployment, problems of traffic congestion and declining air quality, and a host of social and environmental issues. Year on year, cuts in Government grant were causing increasing difficulties in resourcing the work of the Council, reflected in many vacancies and a high proportion of temporary staff in the Planning department.

What turned things around was a political leadership who saw planning as a key tool in changing the narrative and engendering confidence. Major initiatives have led to road space being repurposed for cycling, with new cycling facilities at railway and public transport interchanges.

New, high density development is being focussed on these hubs, delivering many new homes in sustainable locations, a huge uplift in receipts to the Council and a step-change in confidence through conscious growth. Air quality has measurably improved. Significant investment has been made in green infrastructure and biodiversity.

The Planning function, with a Director of Planning and a Strategic Director overseeing Economic Growth, is almost fully staffed with permanent appointees. And it's achieved this with culture as a key focus of the Council's strategy.

That's why the President's Special Award for 2019/20 goes to the London Borough of Waltham Forest.

I'd like to welcome Jonathan Martin, Director of Inward Investment, and Jane Custance, Director of Planning, to come up to the stage to collect the Award. My thanks to all three who, together with the Cabinet Members and colleagues, took the time to show me the extraordinary things that are being achieved and delivered in the Borough.

The key challenge for the future

I want to refer to the largest challenge for the Institute, for our profession and for the world in the coming years – the urgent need for action to counter, mitigate and respond to climate change.

Climate action is written large into the RTPI's new Corporate Strategy for the coming decade and planning has a huge role to play in addressing the issues, whether in tackling rapid urbanisation across the globe or locally in ensuring that development takes place in such a way as to minimise the need to travel, maximise low-carbon, active modes of transport and deliver resilience to our coastal communities and the many towns and cities that sit in and alongside floodplains.

Of the four principal sources of carbon in our built environment, we are seeing great progress in moving to low and zero carbon modes of energy production. Industry is increasingly moving to low carbon production and indeed taking up green technologies as both processes and outputs. As planners, we can work with architects, surveyors and developers to step up the pace of low carbon forms of space heating, at least in new buildings. Much needs to be done with the existing stock but that lies beyond the scope of planning, by and large.

But it's in transport that little progress has yet been made and on which the professions, Government and society need to focus action. As planners, we need to step up the production of policies that enable and ensure housing, employment and services are co-located and that low and zero carbon forms of travel can be used between them. And we need to start implementing those policies as rapidly as possible.

Government has a critical role to play, both in producing national policies that can most rapidly deliver changes in our approach to spatial planning, and in ensuring our local planning authorities have the resources to move quickly in producing updated policies and advancing compliant, carbon-neutral developments.

And the Institute needs to maintain its role in providing members with advice on addressing climate change – something it has been doing since its first guidance on the subject in 2009; in pressing Government for support and action; and in developing its own Climate Action Plan in 2020.

So this is the challenge of our age. Armed with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and backed by the Government's Zero Net Carbon pledge, we will be working with our fellow Institutes to deliver climate action in 2020 and beyond.

As Immediate Past President, I will be taking on the role of Climate Champion for the RTPI Board of Trustees for the coming year: I would welcome your support and that of all our members in ideas for how we can most effectively rise to the challenge.

Concluding comments

And that's about that.

I want to finish on a personal note.

This has been an astonishing year for me with an amazing amount of travel and introductions to inspiring people around the world, which has hugely expanded my horizons. I couldn't have done this without the support of my wife, Elaine, to whom I owe the greatest thanks.

But in case you think that all a President does is live within the bubble of the RTPI, I want to finish with a few notes of personal achievements for my family during the year. In February, my son Alistair married his delightful wife, Harriet – and, yes, I was there!

In October, Elaine and I managed to squeeze out a few days in the Presidential programme to celebrate our 40th Wedding Anniversary.

And, as I was setting out on the final leg of my Presidential visits in November, my first grandchild made his entrance into the world.

It truly has been the most memorable of years.

But it's time for me to step down and for us to welcome in our new President, Sue Manns.

I've known Sue for longer than she probably admits to being alive. With her enthusiasm, her knowledge and her deep love for planning, she will make a great President. I wish her every success in the year ahead.

So now it's my turn to be well and truly overshadowed.

Thank you, all.