
The Future is Now! Planning in a World of Uncertainty and Ambiguity

Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting me. I am happy to be here and have enjoyed the day. I have learnt a lot. Also my German has improved a little, but I shall not inflict my poor German on you. I am sorry, but you should be glad, that I will have to speak in English. I will make sure to speak with my Danish accent, since such an accent may facilitate our mutual understanding.

I will be talking about the future which is, I suppose, just what you need to hear about at this late hour of the day. I will try not to make it too philosophical; actually I will try to make it very practical - in a sense, but only in one sense. I guess I am not concerned too much with the idea of the future as some imagined state of affairs which lies ahead. I am much more concerned about the future in the sense of a present state of mind. So, my question is really: How do we use anticipation or some other notion of the future in our present action, in the present situation? I think we all know that we invoke the future, an imagination of some pleasant future, in order to mobilize enthusiasm, passion, whatever. So we know how to use images of the future. We also know how we use images of a future which we fear in order to constrain current action, and so on.

Much of my speech is inspired by a book by Peter Berger. A long time ago he wrote a book, *Pyramids of Sacrifice*. The idea is that the aim to create a bright future will actually justify, in a short run, a number of sacrifices: things that we force people not to do, and things we force them to do, knowing that we harm their short term interests but justifying such a policy of sacrifice in the short run with the anticipation that it will actually benefit them in the long run. Peter Berger observes that historically the promised bright futures seldom happen. So, if that is the case, what is the justification for inflicting sacrifice in the short run when it is unlikely that it will be justified in the longer run?

I think there is a moral issue here. But I will share with you some quite practical ideas about the many uses of the future that I have observed in my research. I have been studying, ethnographically, what construction workers do, what architects do, what project managers do. I have been observing projects, how projects are designed, how people act within the framework of the project. And I had been observing and taking note of the ways in which people use the future in determining their current actions. The general practical concern of mine is the very many ways in which you can actually use a notion of a future in determining current action. However, my real concern is the many unfortunate ways in which we use the future to constrain current action unnecessarily. The role of planning is an important example for me. I am skeptical of the amount of planning that our fear of future failures justifies. And I wonder what the effects will be of such excessive planning in an uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world.

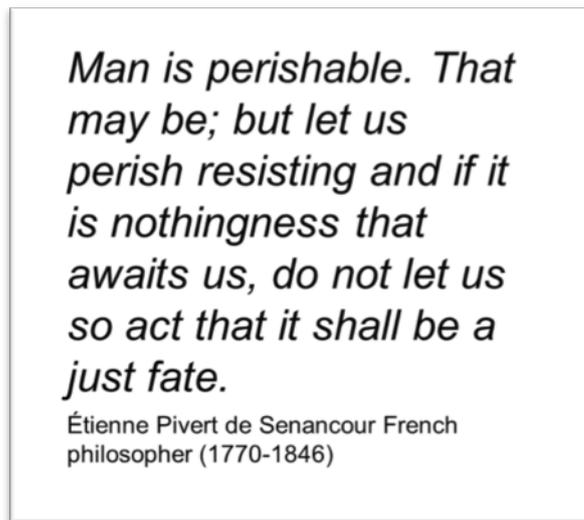


I am more critical towards the way planning is currently done than towards the idea of planning as such. I think we need a new way of understanding planning which is better fitted for the kinds of situations that very many construction and building projects face.

Of course, we cannot escape using some notion of the future. We know that we can have no facts about the future and still every policy, every plan, must make a certain assumptions about the future. This is also the premise that Peter Berger is stating from. And that is obvious, of course. We need to make some sense about the future in order to act in the present.

Abbildung 1

1 Even when we cannot control the future, the imagined future should still inform our current action.
Grafiken: Kristian Kreiner



My concern is really the ways in which we very often handle such assumptions about the future in a way that turns the imagined future into a part of the past. I will try to show you how I think this operates, and I think the keyword here is that as soon as you take your imagine future and turn it into a promise, you are in deep trouble. As soon as you turn a goal into a prediction, you are in deep trouble in the kind of complex, uncertain, and ambiguous world we live in.

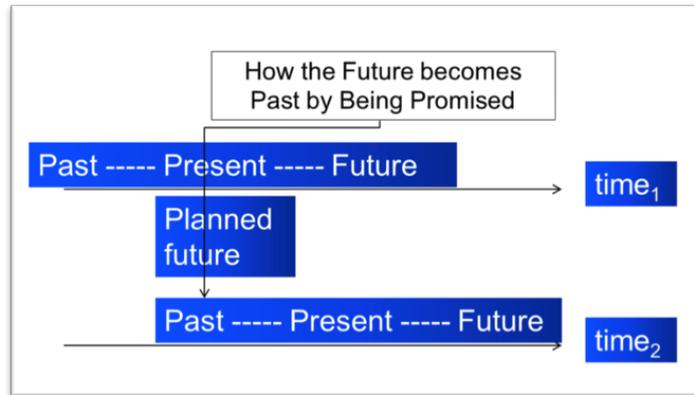
So, on a time line we can orientate past and present and future as a logical sequence. In the present, we have current images about the future. As soon as you start designing your projects, the first thing that you need to do is to specify the goals. In the context of project design, specifying goals implies making promises about future deliverables. Planned futures, in other words promised futures, become an integral part of the ways we work in projects and of the many ways we collaborate in society. But since by design we stabilize our notion of the future, as time goes by it becomes actually part of the past for the present. A promised future is something we refer back to. As soon as we stabilize our notions of the future, these stabilized notions become something which is a past decision, something which is a basis for



a current action. It's not a living conception of the future. I think that is highly problematic, and I am trying to capture my concern in this simple figure (representation) here.

Abbildung 2

2 When plans are treated as promises an imagined future comes to play the role of the past against which emergent futures are measured.



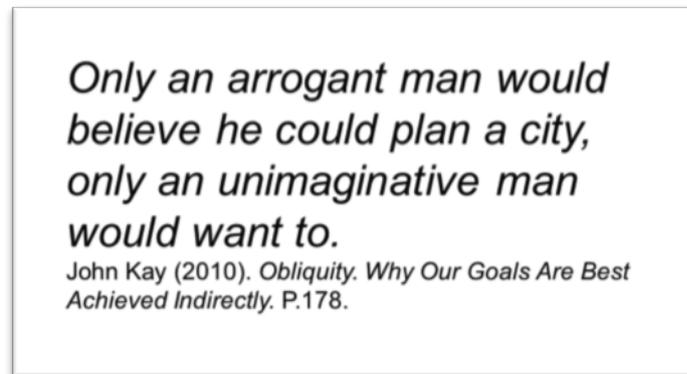
The false promise (hiding behind our decisions, contracts and plans) of an attractive future is in a sense what I going against. I will give you another quote from one of my favorite economists, John Kay, who says: “Only an arrogant man would believe he could plan a city, only an unimaginative man would want to.” This is a wonderfully provocative statement, but I think we need to understand or to interpret what it means to be arrogant and unimaginative in this context. In my view, to be arrogant is to think that you know the solution when you don't even understand the problem. In very many projects we are struggling with what we normally would describe as wicked problems – which are problems in which we constantly see new aspects and dilemmas while trying to solve them. The very nature of the problem changes in response to our efforts. To design a project, we must stabilize the conditions by defining the problem and devising rational and efficient solutions to this well-defined problem. But things are more complicated in the projects that we experience and observe. The hard way, we discover aspects of the problems that we had ignored, new constraints and new conditions that limit our solution space, etc. Projects are seldom designed as learning processes, but they often turn into exactly that. Arrogance comes from this idea that we should only focus on implementing the devised solutions, while a less arrogant person would be much more interested in developing more and better understanding of the nature of the problem itself. That is at least one possible interpretation of the arrogance. The unimaginative central planner thinks he sits outside the system for which is devising plans as if he was not part of that system himself. That has the implications that you neglect your own performance as a resource for others, and that you discount the potential learning from the ongoing experience. As soon as you set yourself apart from the system you reduce the number of resources that you can actually generate. I don't need to remind you that the resourcefulness of users has been contested. The most architects think users are disturbing their process but in a



sense they are also potential resources to be mobilized in this area. So that's my take and my understanding of the quote about the arrogant and the unimaginative planner.

Abbildung 3

3 A city is a result of macro-
behavior and cannot be controlled
by individual decisions or plans.



I think the mental problem here is to some extent that what it is we are trying to plan for is not a simple building. We always try to plan for a neighborhood or living city or a nice city, something which we normally identify with value or something like that. And we always think in terms of planning things that we can do. The planning has a tendency to reduce the complexity of reality, so that we can plan and control it. But many of the things that we are interested in are goals and values that we are presuming are better described as examples of what Thomas Schelling once called the "macro-behavior" of systems. Macro-behavior is not something that somebody can decide. It's not a decision, this type of behavior. It's the effect of millions of small decisions. If you want to plan you need to make some aspects decidable. Planning is also decision. In order to make a macro-behavior-system decidable you have to reduce its complexity. And in that process you will actually inflict many, many different problems on your project and your performance. I think it is very important to keep in mind that we believe more and more that the things that we are interested in can be described as complex, uncertain, and ambiguous. Complexity simply means that we cannot make a simple correlation between a certain effort and a future effect because so many processes interact in response to whatever we do, and they interact in such a manner that we can never predict which potential mechanisms are activated. That's complexity! That's the simple idea that we can decide to do the same thing in two different situations, and we will have completely different results or effects from such a decision. Uncertainty, of course, in general means lack of information. Many of the things that we want to have information about are simply not knowable at that point in time because the events that we want information about haven't happened. So they are fundamentally uncertainty. But ambiguity is perhaps the most dangerous aspect, because it says that even the information we have we have difficulties understanding. We have difficulties seeing what the implications of the information are.



But let me now share what I consider a very general and frightening observation. Most people, in the face of complexity and certainty and ambiguity, will blame the situation on poor planning or poor management. So, it's a management inadequacy when they leave the project in a suicidal situation of complexity. The project was not well-structured! Next time you should structure it better. You lacked information! Next time you should make sure to get the information. You see how the information was misinterpreted! Next time you better understand the situation correctly. That is the game that we are playing with ourselves and with other people. What we in my view might describe as the very foundation or conditions for management is interpreted as inadequacy. So we can fire the person, the planner and the manager. But we could also speculate what type of management, what type of planning, would be meaningful under the conditions here described as complexity and certainty and ambiguity. This we could explore rather than insisting that we should reduce reality to something that we can manage in a traditional and realistic manner. Let's try to explore whether we could actually manage in a different way, given the circumstances in which we apparently find ourselves.

I think there are two different notions of projects. I am going back to one which I like a lot, which reflects this idea. The project is not necessarily a way of coordinating (planning) collective action. A project may also be a mental framework. Many people use this idea that the project is also a mental framework rather than an organizational form. I think we could take a little inspiration from that. Gilbert Ryle and Alfred Schütz and other people are talking about projects in this sense of the mental framework. The very important distinction here is the following. It is possible to see the project and its goal as something which will determine, i.e. pre-determine and therefore constrain future action to that which has been planned. But it is also possible to see the project as a mental framework that creates flexibility in terms of future action. The idea is that when doing a project in this sense of a mental framework you do not perform any specific set of pre-determined action. It is the way in which you do whatever you have to do in a specific situation that constitutes the project. Gilbert Ryle is saying: "What do we do when we wait for the train?" So, waiting for the train (or catching the train) can be a project. But it is not a specific sort of actions, so you can read a book, you can smoke a cigarette, you can talk to friends and stuff like that. There is no limit what you can do while waiting for the train. The only thing is that if you read a book you do it sort of with an eye on the platform where the train arrives, or you smoke a cigarette close to the station. When we talk about projects in this manner, the actions do not constitute the project. There exists no limited set of specific, predetermined actions that is the project. It is what we have to or want to do that is merely framed by this idea of the project. You can do the same things with or without framing it as a project (you can smoke a cigarette without waiting for a train); you can do things that are called for in a specific situation, but as long as you do it in a specific manner it becomes part of the project. I cannot go into a long discussion of this, but I like the idea because it liberates and gives flexibility to the situations, to the ways in which we conduct projects – and freedom and flexibility, I think, is highly important if we have difficulties defining and predicting the kinds of situations we will find ourselves in the



future. Flexibility means we can do many things as long as we do them within mental frame of the project. We can be opportunity driven so we can respond to and exploit the specific situation that we happened to face, and we can mobilize the kinds of resources and ideas of that unanticipated situation. We can be non-exclusive in what we try to do as long as we actually do it within the project frame of the mind. Rather than seeing the project as the justification for limiting and predetermining action you could think about projects as a way in which we make sure that even if we respond to the specific situation and we act flexibly, we still act in an organized manner. Even if the action is flexible and underdetermined, it is still meaningful and directed by being integrated into a larger framework. That sounds very strange and difficult, of course.

The preceding reflections give me an opportunity to tell about a study of a wonderful construction project that we studied in Denmark. The client was an umbrella organization for 32 different member organizations, each representing the interests of a particular type of disability. The client decided to build a common headquarter. They wanted to exploit the synergies of having their offices close to each other, and they organized an architectural competition for designing this new headquarters. The vision was to create the world's most accessible office building. That sounds nice, of course. We can easily imagine that in a sense this is a description of the future headquarters, a future building with a particular use, with a particular value, with a specific practice that is already relatively concrete. But it is also absolutely impossible to see what implications this vision should have for the design of the building. It is very ambiguous what the success criteria would be. Because, what does it take to be the most accessible office building? In fact, it may not be very accessible and still be the most accessible building in the world.

Abbildung 4

4 The World's Most Accessible
Office Building.
Foto: [www.handicap-
organisationerneshus.dk](http://www.handicap-organisationerneshus.dk)



The design process proved to be a wonderful process which became very, very innovative. They were doing a lot of different things and they learnt a lot about the nature of problem because they soon discovered, of course, that there are at least 32 different ways in which a building can be inaccessible. The accessibility is relative to the nature or the disability. If you have to keep in mind 32 different disabilities the ways in which you will draw implications for the design suddenly become totally impossible to imagine, because e.g. what people in a wheelchair will need (in form of ramps and open spaces) will make it totally impossible for blind people to orientate themselves. You can easily imagine that whenever you find a solution for one type of disability it will actually make things worse for many of the other forms of disability. It is a wonderfully complicated task. It is also wonderfully impossible to understand, if you are not disabled yourself, how buildings are experienced as inaccessible.

I will tell you a story about how this insight influenced the design of the architectural competition. The client feared that if they were just going to do the architectural competition in the ordinary way, they might end up with the most accessible office building in the world which was not really accessible to anybody. That was the fear. Therefore they consciously tried to break all routines or conventional patterns of collaborations. In this way they created room and need for experimentation. The client actually teamed up people whom they prequalified individually, and the client formed the teams that were later to become also business teams. They did that on purpose because they wanted to break away from previous experience as a precondition for trying to do things in a different way. That succeeded immensely. We had teams of contractors, engineering firms and architects, and the role patterns in the teams were very unconventional. I will give you one little example. One contractor insisted that the architects and the engineers shared also his fee for participating in the competition because he felt that the architects and engineers had made the most effort in the team. This idea about the standard roles and the images of the respective interests were completely reversed in this situation.

The organizers of the competition also motivated the participants to explore rather than merely exploiting their existing competences. For example, it was a requirement for entering into the competition that all the participants had to take a course in accessible building design. Part of that course was to be placed in a wheelchair and asked to find your way around the building, or to be blindfolded and asked to reach a certain point in the building. This is experiential learning. They all claimed to have learned new things. In a sense, the blindfold acted as an eye opener. They were totally surprised about the impact on this new understanding of what accessibility is all about. They all acknowledged that they had the experience of being on a steep learning curve. They really understood a whole lot in a very short period of time, not about the solution, but about the nature of the problems. And they thought that this was the best benefit that they could ask for.



The motivation to explore and take risk came from this experience of becoming more knowledgeable, not about what to do, not about the solutions, but about the nature of the problem. It was a totally new world that was opened to them in that very brief moment during the training course. After that these participants were willing to take all kinds of risk.

Not everybody else was willing to take risk, however. As you can imagine, this project was surrounded by stakeholders, e.g. the foundations that gave money to the project. Such stakeholders don't like to take risks. Making the stakeholders feel safe even when the project participants were experimenting was a task for the client. They achieved this by engaging very experienced, large contractors and by choosing a very traditional contractual form. You would not expect that such a contractual form would be conducive to innovation. But it made the stakeholders feel relaxed because they knew that the contractors who were big and experienced companies would probably be able to end this project in an acceptable manner no matter what happened. The contractual form satisfied the stakeholders, but in this case it did not ruin the innovativeness because the contractors had been motivated to choose another role in the team than the conventional one.

During the competition process, and from all this working with the problems, the teams constantly interacted with a user panel. Whenever they presented an idea, e.g. how to shape the doors in the hallways or whatever, to this panel that consisted of representatives from the various disability organizations, their «bright» solutions were deconstructed on each and every occasion. They were leaving the meeting with all this feedback which said: This is not good because that will not help this or the other disability in using the facilities. The idea was that they came to this feedback session with the panel not to have their solutions and ideas vindicated; they came to these feedback sessions to become even more knowledgeable about the problems. Somehow in the end, of course, they had to make design decisions but that came very, very late in the process. For a very long time they entertained this idea about being more and more knowledgeable about the nature of the project.

I will conclude very fast. I think we very often use plans, we use ideas about the future, we use project goals as something which predicts and promises deliverables in the future. It is so nice because if you do that you can keep people accountable for their plans and performances, but it still doesn't really make sense because we don't know, in a world that changes all the time, whether it's worthwhile to live up to our plans and goal. This is the old dilemma between efficiency and relevance. If you are very efficient you will never change your goal but you will end up being efficient about things that you don't really need or want to realize. Our imaginations about the future, when we have to define the future and then later have to stick to such early imaginations, are really constraining us. Of course, we cannot escape the need to imagine futures. We have to make plans; that is inescapable in the institutional setup of society. We can treat such plans as myth and try to disconnect every practical action from the planned actions. That is just leaving the plans on the side. Or we may find other ways of making them connect to current action. My take on



it is that we need to make plans more to inspire and encourage flexibility, to explore things, rather than insisting on a role of the plan to ensure exploitation of know resources. The role of the plan in a world which is complex, uncertain and ambiguous might be to explore reality, to explore possibilities. My thinking is that we should focus more on the exploration than on the exploitation. We should insist that learning is not all about finding good solution, but it is also to becoming more knowledgeable about the nature of the problems.

I could go on and on, but I won't!

Thank you very much.





