

Think Centennially, Act Daily

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This year, 2013, is the centennial of planning education at the University of Illinois. We mark these 100 years from the appointment of Charles Mulford Robinson as Professor of Civic Design in 1913. It was the first appointment of its kind in the United States.

I will not recount the illustrious story of planning at Illinois, or the significant accomplishments of our alumni, your predecessors. We have begun posting these stories on the department website. So, go check them out there.

Rather, for today, 100 years prompts three ideas related to time, each tweaking a familiar phrase about space so that we are talking instead about TIME

20/20 is NOT good vision

I know WHEN you live

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20/20 is NOT good vision

Speaking here to the graduates, many of you are in your 20s with 20 years of hindsight. And the conventional forecasting and plan making in our profession is to use 20 years of hindsight to yield 20 years of foresight.

This does not work—an example:

A 1962 *Urbana Courier* article reported a forecast of population for 1980 (approximately 20 years later). For Champaign-Urbana the forecast was 140,000; for university of Illinois students, the forecast was 45,000. Without being precise about definitions, actual population in 1980 was more like 100,000 and actual students in 1980 more like 35,000. We have reached approximately these forecasted levels, but 50 years later.

One reaction to our inability to forecast 20 years is to shorten our horizons in hopes of forecasting better. But, it is usually HARDER, not easier, to predict population for smaller areas and smaller increments of time.

The “Illinois School” of planning, as some have started calling it, suggests doing the opposite: First look to longer histories and longer futures. Second look to uncertainty, to more than one possible future—more than one future not only because we CANNOT be certain what will happen, but also because we CAN intentionally shape the future. These ideas go back to Charles Mulford Robinson, Harland Bartholomew, Karl Lohmann, Lou Wetmore, and others. The limitations of forecasting and the importance of shaping the future, not just forecasting it, were most eloquently expressed in Andy Isserman’s 1985 essay, “Dare to Plan” (which is on the department website)

We can’t get 20 years right. Nor can we get done in 20 years what should be done. So we should think in terms more like 100 years. What is possible? What CAN happen—on purpose? What can YOU make possible? We can address issues of race or women’s rights or environmental quality or job opportunity, but we may have to work on these issues for hundreds of years.

-----20/20 is not good vision

I know WHEN you live

This is a takeoff on I know WHERE you live. It suggests some kind of familiarity sufficient to make you accountable because I know where to find you.

Especially those of you in your 20s may find it hard to imagine being accountable for 100 years, but familiarity over 100 years is NOT a long time.

I have been here at Illinois for 40 years; some of you in your 20s know this place now and will likely live another 60 years— 40 plus 60 equals 100 years. I know WHEN you live, and YOU know when I live. 100 years is NOT anonymous, unimaginable, people who do not know you. I knew my grandmother; she knew her grandmother; that takes us back to 1818, almost 200 years.

I took a class at the University of Pennsylvania in 1970 from Robert Mitchell who graduated from Illinois in 1930 and taught at Illinois for two years. He knew Lohmann and Bartholomew, who joined the faculty in 1920, and would have known Robinson except for Robinson's early death in the 1918 flu epidemic. So you are three or four degrees of separation from Robinson.

People adapting to climate change in 100 years will know WHEN you live—will know you.

-----We ARE accountable because our predecessors and successors know WHEN we live, even over centuries.

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As we have learned from the conventional focus on 20/20 vision, we can get the forecast we want, by choosing the 20 years of history from which to project a future. Or, we can be energized, or despair of the possibility of change, depending on the 20 years from which we imagine possible change. This insight still applies to chunks of 100 years.

We should think in multiples of 100 years, not just one 100. People frequently say that “We face tougher challenges today because change is occurring at an INCREASING rate.”

Here is an alternative narrative.

In 1813, the first steam locomotive went into service. Prior to that, transport of anything, including information, beyond human hearing or eyesight, was by wind or movement of animals, including humans. 100 years later, by 1913 when planning education began at Illinois, we had electricity, internal combustion engines, telephone, radio, sound recording, photography, movies, genetics, germ theory, vaccines, water carried sewage, industrial use of coal and oil (fossil fuels), steel building construction, heavier than air flight, and the Model T Ford was in mass production. In 100 years since then we have mostly made these things go farther, faster, and smaller and be more widely distributed. The changes in my great-great grandmother’s lifetime were arguably greater than in my father’s lifetime.

We could argue about other types of changes. My point is not to claim that change is slowing down, but that we need to think in terms of more than one chunk of the past when trying to imagine the future we face or the future we CAN shape.

This is true even if we think back 100 years, if we think centennially. It matters that we not assume one century is like another or limited by another. What will energy look like in 100 years? We have only relied heavily on fossil fuels for a little over 100 years.

-----And a century of change starts by the acts of a single day.

To recap:

In my 20s, I was only beginning to understand the extent to which my future, which has been longer than 20 years, was going to be influenced by and enabled not just by MY preceding 20 years, but the preceding hundreds of years of who my predecessors were and what they did. 20/20 vision was not sufficient for imagining or shaping a life either.

I know WHEN you live: I expect you to sustain, even better than we have, the good things and change the things that need to be changed about planning at Illinois and about the world more broadly. Your grandchildren, your constituents or clients grandchildren, will know WHEN you live: Will they credit you with thinking and acting smartly with respect to social justice? climate change? freedom of expression?

In 1913, J. C. Blair, the head of horticulture at the University of Illinois, dared to plan, to imagine something new, educating students in planning, something that we are celebrating 100 years later as a bold idea. He was not only thinking centennially, he was acting daily. His passion to act, to shape the future, shows in this excerpt from one of his letters to Charles Mulford Robinson in 1913:

“Your letter of January 3 was just what I needed to help me in carrying out the plan which we had talked of and which had the hearty approval of Dean Davenport. President James had not been entirely convinced of the wisdom of our proposition when he was taken sick and removed to a hospital in Chicago.

I am satisfied that, when I have a talk with President James more in detail than heretofore, has been possible, he will agree with our project. I will certainly put it to him in a few days and if he does not return by the end of the week, I will make a trip to Chicago in hopes that I may see him. In the meantime, I am quite positive that you can plan as though the project will be carried through.”

100 years of planning education was launched by the passion to act on a single day.

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And our act today is to celebrate your graduation. Let's do it.