

CONVERSATIONS IN PLANNING THEORY AND PRACTICE BOOKLET PROJECT



PLANNING FOR POSSIBILITIES THROUGH CRITICAL PRAGMATISM

JOHN FORESTER IN CONVERSATION WITH
GIUSY PAPPALARDO AND MARTIN WESTIN



AESOP Young Academics Booklet Project
Conversations in Planning

Booklet 12

John Forester, Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin

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Table of Contents

Editorial, by Mario Paris.....	03
Introduction.....	05
1. In the Face of Power: Questions that matter for planners	
First Period: 1978-1990	12
2. Stories count	
Second Period: 1990-2000	24
3. Conflict, mediated-negotiations, and surprising possibilities	
Third Period: 2000-2010	41
4. Listen for significance, leverage expertise, and act!	
Fourth Period: 2010-today	53
5. Other scholars' perspectives upon John Forester's work	
Contributions from: Larry Susskind, Charles Hoch, Hendrick Wagenaar, Howell Baum, Heather Campbell, Kenneth M. Reardon, Daniela De Leo and Giovanni Laino	70
6. Continuing the dialogue	
Reflections and perspectives of Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin.....	88
Acknowledgments	98
References	99
Authors' Bios	109

Editorial

The “Conversations in Planning” YA-AESOP booklet series is a Young Academics initiative aimed at documenting conversations between scholars on theories, ideas, concepts, and practices that matter in spatial planning. The series provides an interactive platform for YAs to develop their academic and intellectual skills through their involvement in the production and publication of these booklets.

I consider this an especially valuable tool for the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experience. I have contributed to the series both as an author (with Prof. Alessandro Balducci in 2019) and as an editor (of the booklet “In the Mirror of Urban Landscapes: Sharing Experiences and Grounding”, written by Ana Ruiz Varona, Federico Camerin, and Prof. Juan Luis de las Rivas Sanz). In 2022, I was appointed as a member of the editorial board of the series, and since 2024 I have served as Editor-in-Chief. Throughout this time, this booklet has been in the pipeline and is now finally completed, thanks to the efforts of Giusy and Martin and the support of Prof. John Forester, bringing a long-standing process to a close.

In every role, and in supporting the work of all the authors involved in the development of each booklet, I have had the opportunity to encounter diverse perspectives and sensitivities. This experience has allowed my understanding of planning themes and approaches to evolve, becoming progressively richer and broader.

For me, this is precisely the purpose and mission of these booklets, their cultural role. They offer those engaging with the field of planning, in all its complexity and multiple dimensions, the opportunity to learn from already developed trajectories and to grasp insights, knowledge, and reflections.

This becomes possible thanks to the efforts of the authors and senior academics who actively engage in this process, creating spaces of exchange and interaction. At the same time, this work builds upon the long, complex, and structured trajectories of those who have contributed to the field over time and who now place their experience at the service of others.

It is, fundamentally, a work of “putting into perspective”: one that does not simply look back at past experiences or isolated cases, but uses them as a starting point to reconnect individual trajectories with the broader international academic debate, while also building bridges towards the future in two directions. On the one hand, it extracts key elements from personal intellectual journeys to develop more general reflections and shared learning. On the other, it pushes the horizon forward, opening up new lines of inquiry grounded in solid and well-structured foundations.

Following this consolidated tradition, the booklet presents a dialogue with a senior scholar while also incorporating a variety of materials, contributions, and essays. The result is a complex scientific product that readers can approach in different ways, using it both as a

reference and as a guide to a specific and relevant topic, as well as a starting point for future research. The booklet addresses five key aspects of planning studies and practices.

First, planning is always political. At its core, planning is not a neutral or purely technical activity. It unfolds “in the face of power,” where decisions shape whose voices are heard, which issues matter, and what futures become possible. Forester’s work reminds us that planners cannot stand outside politics; they are inevitably part of it and must act critically within it.

Second, the booklet highlights the importance of learning from stories and practice. Rather than treating practice as a simple illustration of theory, the dialogue shows how planners’ stories and their real experiences, dilemmas, and judgments are themselves sources of knowledge. This shifts the focus from abstract models to situated learning.

Third, from the various accounts presented in the booklet, it emerges that conflict is not a problem to eliminate, but the terrain in which planners operate. More than that, conflict is an inherent condition of planning, and it can become productive when approached through mediation, dialogue, and the search for workable agreements. This perspective is particularly relevant in today’s context of increasingly polarized debates.

Fourth, planning is not only about methods and instruments, but about what practitioners actually do: listening carefully, facilitating dialogue, working across differences, and improvising in uncertain situations. This reframes planning as a craft grounded in relational and practical skills, developed through experience as much as through formal training.

Finally, the booklet highlights the importance of critical pragmatism as a way of acting with purpose. Across all these insights runs a common thread: planning is not only a theoretical stance, but a way of working that connects critical awareness of power and inequality with the practical need to act and make things happen. In this sense, planning becomes less about perfect solutions and more about creating possibilities, may imperfect, negotiated, but meaningful.

In my view, the final result of the authors’ efforts is a strong contribution to the academic dialogue and to the advancement of knowledge in planning theory and practice. This booklet offers more than a retrospective on John Forester’s work: it provides a grounded reflection on what it means to practice planning in complex, unequal, and often conflictual contexts. Moving across four decades of theory and practice, it reminds us that planning is not simply about designing solutions, but about engaging with people, power, and possibilities.

In this light, the booklet invites us to rethink planning as a practice of engagement: a continuous effort to listen, to learn, and to act in the face of uncertainty and difference, not a search for definitive answers, but a commitment to shaping better questions and more inclusive futures.

Mario Paris

AESOP YA Conversations in the Planning Booklet Series

John Forester, Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin

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This booklet traces over four decades of scholarly debate and planning practice through the evolution of John Forester's formulation of a critical pragmatism. Drawing on Forester's writings, autobiographical reflections, and intergenerational dialogues with planners—as fostered by the AESOP Young Academic Booklet Series Conversations in Planning Theory and Practice—the volume examines how critical pragmatism has developed across time. Structured around four analytical phases of Forester's work, it explores: (1) the late 1970s–1980s focus on power and communicative action; (2) the 1990s–early 2000s emphasis on learning from practice through stories; (3) the 2000s engagement with conflict mediation and democratic deliberation; and (4) the 2010s attention to improvisation, context responsiveness, and the practical judgment required in planning environments. These phases—described by Forester as “the hidden bones” of his intellectual trajectory—reveal a sustained effort to refine and extend insights from Habermas, Freire, Nussbaum, and others. The booklet also reflects on the post 2020 global landscape shaped by the COVID 19 pandemic, socioecological movements, and renewed struggles against racialized violence and wars. In this context, Forester's recent work underscores two increasingly vital skills for planners: improvising wisely and listening care fully. These commitments resonate with broader scholarship on the ethics of care, suggesting that planning with care may represent a further evolution of critical pragmatism. The volume concludes with various scholarly contributions and reflections by the co authors, Giusy Pappalardo and Martin Westin, offering a multifaceted perspective on Forester's enduring influence on planning theory and practice.

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