Planning Practice


Reviewed by Barry Nocks, Clemson University

With *A Guide for the Idealist: Launching and Navigating Your Planning Career*, Richard Willson has written a clear, practical, and thoughtful professional development guidebook that will be extremely helpful for planners and others in similar professions who are actively seeking to apply their specialized knowledge to improve society. Willson addresses both beginning one’s career and then navigating the complexities of engaged professional work.

Many aspiring planners enter university planning programs as idealistic students who want to succeed in making a difference in their careers by helping communities be vibrant and resilient places to live, work, and play. They take classes and are exposed to great ideas, then graduate to the realities of politics, opposition to change, special interests, and other elements of the real world. It is easy to become discouraged, cynical, and challenged to maintain a positive and constructive spirit in effectively doing the work of our profession. Willson’s book helps prepare these idealists to succeed while remaining committed to their ideals.

The first half of the book discusses launching one’s career, recognizing that enthusiasm does not overcome personal doubts and external complexities. Willson’s realistic, reflective process for professional development provides a clear path for both the entering student and early to midcareer professional to think about their strengths and interests. Career options and characteristics of planning-related employment are also presented in inclusive and thought-provoking ways, which encourages readers to integrate the supply of their personal characteristics and ideas with the demand of the job market.

Succeeding is the focus of the second half of the guide. These chapters are relevant for planning professionals at all stages of their careers. We continue to be challenged in channeling our passion for doing good within political, ethical, and substantive realities. Willson provides guidance and context for being adaptable while sticking to one’s principles and navigating managers, organizations, and teams.

Several aspects of this work are particularly important. Willson constructively integrates the substance of planning with reflective questions regarding personal characteristics and job opportunities. These questions should trigger useful guidance for self-reflection as well as subjects for conversations with advisors and mentors.

Willson also incorporates planning theory in clear and useful ways. Career choice is framed in that context, as are ways of acting out of principle, doing right, and avoiding wrong. For example, his discussion of ethical behavior moves beyond the usual discussion of “What should you do in a specific situation?” to “How do you follow up and correct or improve the situation for that event and related future ones?” Such longitudinal considerations are seldom discussed in typical ethics presentations but often remain in the minds of practitioners living that troubled situation.

Mentors are presented as vital professional resources. In many cases, we each simply look around to find an experienced person from whom to seek sage advice. Willson provides concrete operational guidance for students and professionals alike in what to seek and how to do so.

*A Guide for the Idealist* is in the tradition of reflective practice, relating to the work of Argyris and Schon in planning and Parker Palmer in personal development. Operationalizing that tradition, Willson promotes reflection on both personal and professional issues through questions at the end of each of the book’s 12 chapters.

Another useful element of this guide is its focus on directing readers to understand how their individual personality and perspective affect their actions and effectiveness. Willson consistently frames questions of career choice, professional actions, and reflection in that individualized context. Other actors’ worldviews and personalities are also relevant, with individual characteristics a vital consideration in many of our choices and actions. By recognizing and integrating those personal factors in the discussion, Willson helps us direct our own developmental journey more effectively.

*A Guide for the Idealist* offers meaningful ideas to a wide audience in the planning profession. Students are given means of incorporating their personal characteristics in focusing their planning careers. Professionals in the field are given tools to guide their career trajectories. Teachers could use this book in classes on planning practice, and parts of this volume would also be extremely useful in courses on planning theory and ethics.

Planning a career and implementing our own career track are complex processes. These progressions benefit from the information gathering and reflective analytic concepts we apply in cities. Willson explains this process in an engaging, personally direct, and understandable way. This book is a
clear, hands-on, and useful guide to the personal and professional discernment basic to our success.

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Planning for Community Resilience


Reviewed by William Butler, Florida State University

Inspirational, aspirational, and grounded enough to be practical, *The Community Resilience Reader: Essential Resources for an Era of Upheaval*, edited by Daniel Lerch, is a useful text for planners who wish to strive for sustainability in the face of crises in ecological degradation, growing social inequities, the decline of cheap energy, and broken economic systems. The world’s social-ecological systems are becoming increasingly untenable, and this book describes that reality while providing pathways through the tumult to sustainability and resilience.

The book is organized around the clever approach of defining social-ecological crises on a global scale and then addressing them at the community scale. Drawing on a post–Carbon Institute framework, the book opens with leading scholars, journalists, and practitioners unpacking the E4 (energy, economy, environment, equity) crises. Leena Iyengar writes in deeply personal ways about the awe-inspiring planet we live on and the tragedies of biodiversity and habitat losses that portend further decline. Richard Heinberg writes about our energy crisis and its connections to our economic and ecological declines and offers a sobering assessment of the constraints we face in the transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Joshua Farley clarifies how accelerated economic growth will outstrip our ecological systems’ capacity and argues that our future will depend on developing an economics of cooperation rather than competition. Sarah Byrnes and Chuck Collins write of inequality that has become exacerbated by an extractive capitalist system that pulls wealth from natural resources, workers, and communities and concentrates it in an increasingly miniscule elite. William Rees delves into the human psyche to show us how our deepest failings come largely from within. We are, perhaps, too human, with cultural and social constructs that shape our understanding of reality and undermine our ability to reason our way through to sustainability.

The next part of the book provides overviews of analytical perspectives that can help understand and address the E4 crises. Howard Silverman describes systems thinking and helps make sense of complexity, feedbacks, dynamics, and change. Margaret Robertson explains the relationship between sustainability and resilience and key concepts such as carrying capacity, the Anthropocene, and common pool resources. Brian Walker and David Salt provide an accessible overview of the key concepts of resilience, adaptability, transformability, adaptive cycles, and thresholds. Succinct and clearly written, it is one of the most satisfying conceptual chapters of the book. Stephanie Mills eloquently guides us toward the loneliness of the wild and relocalization toward small communities and emphasizes courage, compassion, and equanimity as productive ways forward.

Next, the book turns to the voices of activists, advocates, and practitioners who build resilience in their own communities and beyond. Leading clean energy advocates articulate a vision of energy democracy, and a former longtime president of American Rivers writes of the need to work with nature in our quest to maintain high-quality freshwater resources. One of the authors of Vermont’s comprehensive food systems plan provides lessons and ideas for resilient and sustainable food systems, and a Vermont educator lays out a vision for integrating sustainability and resilience into our education system. The section is rounded out by discussions on reducing waste through sustainable consumption, engaging in tactical resilience for citizen-empowered city making, and reimagining the built environment. The stories here are inspirational not because they are good ideas but because these activists and advocates live the visions they share. They are undertaking projects, developing plans, and advocating for change in communities across the country.

One might expect this wide-ranging book to have trouble finding its footing. Is it an academic treatise on resilience, a set of reflections from thought-leaders and practitioners, or a chronicle of actions taken to inspire community leaders to find their own pathways to resilience? Somehow, it does all of these and still holds together. It is unified by the earnestness with which the authors invoke the concept of social-ecological resilience, recognizing adaptation as essential and transformation as difficult but probably necessary in the face of the E4 crises. The contributors share a focus on community-scale and citizen-empowered action. They also address issues of social justice and equity, a refreshing contribution because these ideas are often glossed over in sustainability and