

Closing the Gap: Decolonisation, ANT and a Bridge Between Practitioners and Academics

Eric Keys (RMIT University) and David Week (University of Melbourne; Aarnja Ltd)

Introduction

Indigenous Australians continue to suffer under the colonial legacy of European settlement. There is now a political and popular consensus to make further, and perhaps radical, change. This change holds implications for all Australians.

So why has the planning profession made so little progress? What might professionals do about it? In this paper we discuss the gap in communication and collaboration between planning academics and practitioners. We argue that bridging this gap is an important step for a more just form of planning.

The Planning Profession's role in Indigenous-settler Reconciliation

The 1992 Mabo decision marked a turning point in Indigenous-settler relationships. Mabo noted that the process of colonisation had "extinguished" Native Title in many areas, but such extinction relates only to the settler cultural construct of land. Settler "ownership" does not represent Indigenous people's ongoing relationship to Country.

Most, if not all, of Australia is occupied by two peoples intermingled with two overlapping systems relating to land: Crown title and Country. This is a complex challenge for planners who should now address both systems in their daily practices.

Decolonisation within Reconciliation?

In Australia, "reconciliation" is a program initiated and led by Indigenous people, aimed at healing the effects of colonisation. We see the decolonisation of settler institutions as part of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the larger, overarching project, and decolonisation the subordinate part. Decolonisation in Indigenous interests is whatever they require of settlers as key to undoing the harm done. Decolonisation of settler minds and settler institutions is a subsidiary and separate issue.

On the road to reconciliation

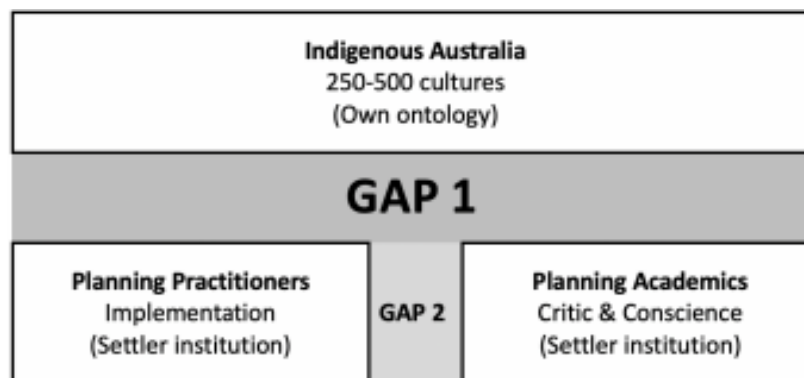
The reconciliation project itself was instituted in 1991. It is now 2021, and so this process has been afoot for more than thirty years. However, a scan of evidence suggests that the planning profession's engagement with reconciliation has been slow. For example, a broad survey of the profession in Australia and New Zealand conducted in 2017 showed that from a list of eight planning challenges Indigenous issues ranked the least important. The planning profession—charged with helping guide the future—may be 30 years behind the future now sought by Indigenous

people. It seems the planning profession is catching up rather than helping to lead.

Planning as a Community Divided

A recent edition of *Planning Theory and Practice* was dedicated to the question of decolonising planning and opened by asking the rhetorical question of “who needs to hear this”? The title of an earlier paper provided a punchy summary of the current situation: “Indigenous People and the Miserable Failure of Australian Planning.”

We diagram the current relationships between the three parties—planning practitioners, planning academics, and Indigenous peoples, as follows:



Our focus is Gap 2. Gap 2 sits within the domain of planning, within three colonial institutions: the public sector, the private sector, and the university sector. It is not the purpose of this paper to address Gap 1, which can only be addressed in close collaboration with our Indigenous counterparts.

Causes of Gap 2

The relationship between practitioners and academics is historically fraught, not just within planning, but across many disciplines. Practitioners often complain that graduates lack skills necessary to practice, and that academic research is often difficult to implement within social reality. Academics often complain that practitioners are insufficiently progressive in making changes to practice, and too compliant with historical norms, client demands, or business constraints.

Gap 2 can be understood through the fact that these actants are enrolled in two very different institutions: the academy, and the private and public sector organisations that constitute practice. Drawing on our experience we highlight pressures that influence thought and action within the actor-networks. These pressures pose a barrier for communication and collaboration between academics and practitioners.

For academics, these include the “publish or perish” system, the privatised journal system, the development of Academic English, increased managerialism, siloisation, and the university’s business model. For practitioners, obstacles include

obligations to clients, the legal definition of negligence, demands for operational efficiency, and competitive pressures.

Gap 2 prevents new planning knowledge from reaching those outside the academy. It prevents the workers within the academy from getting the satisfaction of seeing their work change the world. It restricts practitioners to the demands of past and current practice, while limiting avenues for fresh perspectives from outside practice.

Narrowing the Gaps

The process that Latour puts forward for the construction of a new social reality is enrolment. Actants become involved and mutually supporting in favour of the new, until the new reality becomes difficult to shake, and ultimately more solid than the old. The “new reality” that awaits construction is one in which the planning profession reconciles Australia’s two forms of sovereignty: the Indigenous relationship to Country, and the settler-colonial legal.

One way to collaborate in this act of construction is engage in collaborations such as: The Treaty, the Planning Institute of Australia’s Reconciliation Action Plan, and further development of engagement practices for transport projects.

Conclusions

Progress towards reconciliation is happening in other spheres, it’s our responsibility to take practical steps within the planning profession. We call on interested innovators and early adopters in practice and in the academy to come together as a group (or a small network, to stay within language of ANT). This network, together with any of the non-human actants it develops or enrolls, can grow into the bridge between practice and the academy.