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ABSTRACT

In the United States, planning education is frequently concerned with problems and solutions associated with the physical environment rather than socioeconomic barriers and solutions, including issues of workforce/workplace, community inclusion and participation, and e-democracy. Legislation such as the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, generally place more emphasis on accessibility in the physical landscape than on social and economic barriers faced by people with disabilities. Through a longitudinal survey of selected university planning programs in the United States (in 2005 and again in 2013), this article discusses how the lack of attention to disability issues in planning literature may be linked to the education of planners and planning curricula. It also suggests possible areas of progress as an emerging group of planners have become concerned with the role of technologies such as telecommuting in facilitating the inclusion of people with disabilities into the social environment.

Keywords: Accessibility, Disability, Inclusion, Planning Education, Universal Design, United States

INTRODUCTION

Asking “what difference has the ADA made?” Szold (2002) noted the emergence of a “culture of disability” within the planning profession in the decade following the ratification of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. With the passage of the ADA and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1998, planners have been compelled to address those barriers preventing the accommodation of people with disabilities within built and virtual environments. This legislation ostensibly forced planners to engage issues of accommodation and integration in a more forthright manner. But it has remained less clear how these man-
dates shaped the role of planning education in instilling future planners with a disability mindset. Despite increasing awareness among members of the planning profession regarding issues of accessibility and inclusion for people with disabilities, some planners have expressed ambivalence about their role in promoting access. Others believe that such issues remain the province of building officials or architects. Leading authorities on planning and disability issues have observed that “regardless of their stance on accessibility, most planners now recognize, as a result of changes witnessed in the last decade, that the built environment has more provisions for those with disabilities” (Szold, 2002, p. 15).

While mandates for improving the integration of people with disabilities within the worlds of employment and public accommodations have forced planners to more openly engage these issues, it remains vital for planning programs, through their curricula, to educate these professionals on how best to achieve these goals. Planning departments are vital for cultivating a sensitivity and enthusiasm among professionals for engaging accessibility and inclusion. The rule of law may compel planners to engage the needs of people with disabilities, but only innovations within educational institutions and professional associations will ensure the development of a proactive, rather than reactive, outlook among planners regarding disability issues.

This article represents the first step of a broader project to gauge how well planning education is addressing disability issues within its curricula and how progress might be made to improve attention to disability within the education of planning professionals. The final product of this research, its authors hope, will be a set of recommendations and options for improving attention to disabilities within the context of planning education, including course syllabi and educational resources. But it is first necessary to understand something of current practices within planning departments in the United States.

BACKGROUND DISCUSSION

In order to understand the influence of planning education on disability access, it is first necessary to acknowledge the ways in which the organization of space and the built environment may exclude and, at worst, repress certain social groups. Examining the situation in the UK, Oliver (1996) contended that people with disabilities faced exclusion and marginalization in the workplace, as well as segregation in schooling and limited access to housing and public transportation. Imrie (1996) went even further to charge with planning profession with being implicit in the creation of these inequities, noting that exclusionary environments frequently are the product of interactions between policymakers, regulations, and architectural and planning practitioners. He went further to suggest that current urban planning was predicated on a “design apartheid” in which the dominant values of abled-bodied people acted to exclude people with disabilities. In assessing such arguments—most of them based on theoretical rather than empirical research—Kitchin (1998) concluded the need for appreciating how space and the built environment are “socio-spatially constructed.” Regardless of one’s school of thought, he contended, there was sufficient evidence for “spatialities of disability” that reinforced ableist/disablist practices within urban planning and policymaking.

In addition, planning practice, particularly in the US, has been strongly influenced in the past several decades by the passage of legislation mandating the removal of barriers to access within the built and social environment, beginning with the landmark Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 and culminating in the passage of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The impact of this and other policymaking on planning practices cannot be understated. For example, only 26 of the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority’s 80 key stations were wheelchair accessible in 1990. By 2002, 46 of those 80 stations were wheelchair accessible, 20 more stations were being adapted, and 12 stations were in the process of being
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