RESEARCH YOU CAN USE

Translational Research in Action

I thought I would try something different in this column. In the "Research You Can Use" pieces that regularly appear in this space, I talk about peer-reviewed articles written by leading planning academics. These articles illustrate principles of research design that give practitioners some insight into the arcane world of academic research. The idea is to make practitioners more critical consumers when they look for research that they can apply to current projects.

In contrast, this month's column features the work of a planning practitioner who has found ways to integrate research into his consulting practice. Uri Avin, FAICP, is part of the PlaceMaking group at the huge international firm of Parsons Brinckerhoff. His resume also includes a stint as planning director of Howard County, Maryland, and teaching appointments at Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland. He is well-known by both academics and practitioners, as likely to be seen at the annual conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning as at APA's National Planning Conference. I have had the pleasure of working with him on several projects and for this reason have some familiarity with his work.

In my October column, I talked about "translational research," a term used to describe studies that translate findings from basic research quickly and efficiently into practice. This sort of research bridge has come to be seen as the key to cost-effectiveness in the natural, behavioral, and social sciences—the missing component that can justify the huge amounts spent on basic research. That's particularly true in medicine, where government funders often find that the return on investment in basic pharmaceutical research is significantly less than anticipated.

The following projects are all examples of translational research. They were all headed by Uri Avin, and they all make use of tools he developed.

CarbonFIT GHG Tool. Avin contributed to the development and beta-testing of this sketch planning tool, which is used to build development scenarios and to evaluate the greenhouse gas impacts of buildings and transportation facilities. The tool uses CommunityViz as a platform and provides default values or user-determined options.

Scenario-Building Tool. Adapting leading-edge work from the world of business management, he created a new conceptual framework for the development of urban planning scenarios.

Street Connectivity-Density Tool. Avin modified several research products to create sketch planning tools for the Houston-Galveston Area Council. His aim was to assess street network needs against residential density, accounting for important nuances of travel behavior in an online tool.

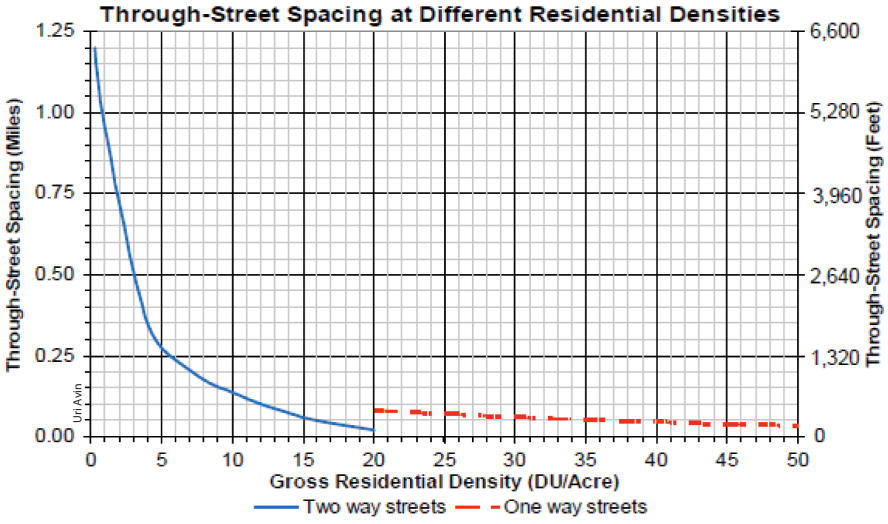
MXD Internal Trip Capture Study. In this case, he synthesized current research to provide guidelines for the Maine Department of Transportation on trip generation rates. This work was done as part of the drafting of the department's proposed rule on traffic movement permits.

Land-Use Forecasting Methods. Avin led a national research study seeking to improve land-use forecasting methods and to develop guidance for practitioners dealing with the indirect impacts of highway and transit projects.

Smart Growth Audit. Working in Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, Avin developed a pioneering smart growth audit. The local government followed up by incorporating smart growth concepts into its planning policies and ordinances.

What's his secret?

How has Avin managed to produce so much translational research? In the terminology of Malcolm Gladwell's recent book, *The Tipping Point*, Avin is a natural "connector." I have already referred to his participation in academic conferences and his adjunct teaching. He has also connected with academics on many of his projects. He involved Robert Cervero of the University of California–Berkeley in the land-use forecasting project. He involved Dave Godschalk, FAICP, of the University of North Carolina in his smart growth audit. He involved me in his street connectivity study.



Avin's simple sketch tool balances density and road spacing (assuming a grid of alternating four-lane arterials and two-lane collectors).

I hope occasionally to feature the work of other planning practitioners in this column. Practitioners, please let me know what you are up to.

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Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah and an associate editor of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. Past columns are available at http://cmpweb.arch.utah.edu/research_projects/research-you-can-use. Uri Avin's e-mail is avin@pbworld.com.