

RESEARCH YOU CAN USE

Brouhaha Over *JAPA* Article: Is Flawed Peer Review to Blame?

In a July 2010 Research You Can Use column, I argued that peer review can often make a good article into an even better article. But as is true of any system devised by man or woman, the peer review process can go awry. That's what happened with "Growing Cities Sustainably: Does Urban Form Really Matter?" which appeared in the spring issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*.

The article, written by Marcial Echenique, Anthony Hargreaves, Gordon Mitchell, and Anil Namdeo (all from British universities), uses a simulation model to assess "the relative performance of spatial options over the next 30 years for three distinct kinds of English city regions." The three (I count four) are compact development, sprawl, edge expansion, and new towns. The conclusion: When it comes to sustainability, the impact of urban form is "very modest" and no one urban form is "clearly superior."

When commentary about the article began to appear on PLANET, an e-mail list for academic planners, I thought of the sausage-making metaphor that critics often apply to politics. Like the political process, peer review is opaque. It can be affected by personal likes and dislikes. And it can get very personal, with each side naming names and slinging insults. Critics of the *JAPA* article accused the editor, my friend Randy Crane of UCLA, of bias and poor judgment. Randy and others shot back that the critics wanted to squelch academic debate for the sake of political correctness.

I side with the critics. While I fully support dissent, I do not support the publication of weak articles. In my view, the problem with this article started with the peer review process. What exactly went wrong? For one thing, the selection of like-minded reviewers (contrarians, in the words of one irate critic) may have led to generally favorable reviews, which would have led to publication. We all have our

biases, including reviewers. And academics love to challenge conventional wisdom. You get one point for validating convention but 10 points for challenging it.

Some of the reviewers may have had concerns about this paper, but perhaps their comments weren't strong enough to call for substantial rewriting or even rejection. We will never know because peer reviewers are anonymous and their comments are seen only by the journal editor and other reviewers.

Discrepancies

One well-reasoned negative review could have killed this article. Apparently, there wasn't one. Here is what I would have written had I been asked:

"The findings of this simulation run counter to the vast majority of empirical studies on this topic. These studies, hundreds of them, are summarized in the meta-analysis I coauthored with Robert Cervero of UC Berkeley, published in *JAPA* in 2010. The current article doesn't address the discrepancy between these empirical studies and the simulation. Yet empirical studies generally trump simulations, which can be no better than the models they are based on and the assumptions underlying them. Empirical studies can also be flawed, since they, too, depend on assumptions. But such problems are much easier for reviewers to detect.

"The findings of this simulation also contradict the dozens of scenario planning studies summarized in another meta-analysis, this one written by me and Keith Bartholomew of the University of Utah and published in *JAPA* in 2008.

"Randy Crane recently proposed that authors of empirical studies be required to submit datasets along with their papers, allowing reviewers to check for errors of omission or commission. That is a good idea, so long as the datasets are not shared beyond the reviewers. The simulation model created by Echenique et al. is the ultimate black box. We cannot challenge the assumptions made by these authors because they aren't laid out in their article, and we cannot challenge their findings because we don't have access to the models or their output."

When a journal publishes a paper that is potentially this controversial, it should be accompanied by critical commentary. That was done when Peter Gordon and Harry Richardson of the University of Southern California wrote "Are Compact Cities Desirable?" back in 1997. The *JAPA* editor at the time deemed the piece provocative but one-sided, and so he commissioned a counterpoint, my "Is Los Angeles-Style Sprawl Desirable?" Neither piece attempted to be balanced, but the two were often read together and assigned together as class readings, so there was inherent balance.

I know the anti-planning folks will jump on the Echenique article. Recall the words of Minnesota Rep. Michelle Bachman, a founder of the Tea Party Caucus: "They [smart growth advocates] want Americans to move to the urban core, live in tenements, and take light rail to their government jobs. That's their vision for America." It's comments like this that make me urge *JAPA* to be cautious when deciding what to print. ■

Reid Ewing

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JAPA'S RESPONSE

Professor Ewing considers the lead article in *JAPA*'s spring issue "weak" and speculates that the cause is a biased review process. Yet, by focusing on the subtitle, Ewing misses the article's main point. Even worse, he then misreads *JAPA*'s mission by a mile.

By "bias," Ewing implies that there are only two sides to any treatment of smart growth—itsself a rich, intricate set of anti-sprawl tradeoffs. The business of planning scholarship is to deconstruct, assess, and understand the complexity of urban development, not to celebrate the one true way.

As Ewing argues in his own work, a simulation is the most useful means of studying growth scenarios. "Growing Cities Sustainably" simulates alternative urban forms for three British cities. Its utility lies in its explicit consideration of the costs and benefits of compact development in real places.

On the benefit side, the study assumes that compact development reduces traffic. (Ewing agrees, but he wonders why the U.K. numbers differ in degree from his U.S. studies. He does not explain how using U.S. figures would change the results.)

On the cost side, the article assumes that compaction will raise land prices. Ewing takes issue with the suggestion that compact development may not always be the best idea. Yet far from being anti-smart growth, the article simply estimates that the net compaction benefits might be relatively smaller for these three cities.

A critic could reasonably take the position that costs are irrelevant in evaluating alternative urban spatial strategies. Instead, Ewing (a) questions “black box” assumptions without saying what, how, or why; (b) asserts that the conclusions are so controversial that they should be officially contested; and (c) charges that the review process is prejudiced.

Our response: (a) *JAPA* traditionally omits the minutiae of elaborate models in favor of readability. Further details are available from the authors on request. (b) We do not pick sides and then commission counterpoints. We hope that every article is provocative in its own way and that it stimulates research. I did invite letters and formal comments on this article, given its unusual exposure (second most downloaded article in the journal’s history). We especially look for more U.S.-based studies on the implications of smart growth. (c) The confidential review process is meant to ensure neutrality and candor. We received a balanced set of reviews from reliably independent experts. Ewing’s review, disputing the size of traffic benefits alone, sidesteps the pivotal cost-benefit angle and thus would not have been decisive.

In short, contrary to Ewing’s critique, the article is not meant to be anti-planning or tea party-friendly, any more than when smart growth advocates suggest that some planning is smarter than others. Its message is simply that planners should keep their eyes wide open when costs are in the mix, as they invariably are.

JAPA’s mission is to publish high-quality research in an interesting manner, thus providing our audience of scholars and practitioners with the fullest spectrum of information. By that measure, “Growing Cities Sustainably” was extraordinarily successful. ■

Randall Crane

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